

The Formation Mechanism and Resolution Strategy of the Disorderly Phenomena within “Fan Community”

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Abstract: In the digital age, where social media and the entertainment industry are deeply integrated, the structural embedding of new media technologies has profoundly reshaped the digital practices of teenagers. This process not only deconstructs traditional cognitive models but also drives the transformation of teenagers’ star-chasing behavior from individual spiritual worship to organized “fan community behavior,” presenting typical characteristics of irrational socialization. As an important manifestation of youth subculture, the influence of such phenomena has transcended the entertainment realm and permeated into the construction of socialist core values, even giving rise to an informal economic ecosystem that disrupts the normal governance order of society. Based on this, this article provides a new theoretical perspective for the governance of online subcultures and offers operational, practical paths for the cultivation of teenagers’ digital literacy and the construction of online civilization.

Keywords: Fan community; Digital labor; Alienation of capital logic

Online publication: April 26, 2025

1. Introduction

In the macro context of digital social transformation, the structural embedding of Internet technology has constructed a cultural education environment for online youth subculture in the form of an implicit carrier. According to the “Blue Book of Youth: Report on Internet Use by Chinese Minors (2024),” the age of first internet access by minors in China has been continuously decreasing, their information retrieval capabilities have significantly improved, and the window period for acquiring digital cognitive skills has shown a significant forward trend. However, while technology empowers, it also brings many potential risks. In highly organized online communities, teenagers are easily influenced by online subcultures such as “fan community,” and thus get involved in irrational collective social practices. This influence is no longer limited to the field of entertainment consumption but has evolved into a multi-dimensional social issue involving the socialization process of teenagers, value formation, and the governance of the online ecosystem. In the face of this predicament, it is urgent to provide theoretical support and practical paths for the cultivation of digital literacy among teenagers and the construction of a benign online ecosystem.

2. Extreme manifestations of fan community

Under the dual drive of technological empowerment and capital logic, “fan community” has shown a significant trend of extreme development.

2.1. Irrational consumption

In regular consumption scenarios, consumers usually make decisions based on practical functions and emotional experiences. In contrast, fans tend to make repetitive and even wasteful purchases driven by emotional needs, which clearly demonstrates irrational characteristics. By symbolizing idol products, more fans who are willing to pursue and worship their idols are encouraged to make purchases. This creates a social phenomenon where idols output symbolic information value to satisfy the desires and fantasies of their fans. Fans develop a psychological illusion of being close to their idols by purchasing products endorsed by them, thereby driving consumption ^[1].

Fan consumption behavior is essentially an emotional labor process achieved through material investment and symbolic practice. It not only satisfies fans’ emotional attachment to their idols but also enables them to gain a sense of participation and achievement by engaging in collaborative data production. The systematic guidance of capital towards fans’ consumption stickiness further intensifies the irrationality of star-chasing behavior. In this process, individual and collective identities within the “fan community” are distorted into a single consumption identity, showing obvious signs of narrow-mindedness and vulgarity. Some even equate the degree of support for an idol with the amount of consumption and support funds. In this system, the amount of consumption becomes the core indicator of fan loyalty, and fans must prove their support for their idols through high consumption and support. When selecting celebrity endorsers, brands conduct thorough assessments of the celebrity’s fan base characteristics, market influence, and the alignment between the celebrity’s image and the brand’s ethos, forming a precise positioning ^[2]. Therefore, fans will showcase the commercial value and market appeal of their idols by purchasing products and related goods endorsed by them.

2.2. Excessive emotional reliance

With the transformation and development of the socioeconomic structure, the emotional support model for contemporary teenagers is undergoing profound changes. The emotional support function in traditional family relationships is gradually weakening, and the widespread sense of loneliness prompts teenagers to seek new emotional anchors. Against this backdrop, idol worship has emerged as a psychological compensation mechanism. The community formed by fans in the process of chasing stars has strengthened their social connections and identity recognition. Specifically, common identity attachment implies that members feel a commitment to an online community’s purpose, whereas common bond attachment implies that members feel socially and emotionally attached to specific community members ^[3]. The unique emotional appeal and spiritual resonance of idol worship effectively fill the emotional and sense of belonging voids in teenagers’ growth process. Meanwhile, idols, as the projection carriers of the ideal self, also become important references for teenagers’ identity construction. However, if this psychological mechanism operates improperly, it may lead to cognitive narrowing. Fans deify their idols, fall into one-sided emotional investment, and eventually form a vicious psychological cycle.

2.3. Cyber violence behaviors

The operation of cyber violence in “fan communities” is a multi-level and systematic process. Cass Sunstein, a sociologist, said: “In the field of the Internet and new communication technologies, like-minded groups exchange and discuss with each other. Eventually, their ideas remain unchanged but become more extreme in form.” This theory accurately explains the behavioral characteristics of the “fan community” group ^[4]. Since online community users tend to have a common identity and purpose, they feel a bond with the other members ^[5]. When fan groups participate in online discussions, they are easily influenced by the thinking of other members and may fall into predicaments such as distorted rational thinking, information cognitive biases, and polarized viewpoints. Under the emotional guidance of opinion leaders, they transform public issues into emotional “moral judgments.” Cyber violence has become one of the factors of social instability ^[6]. They

create online public opinions to impact the mainstream value system, ultimately leading to the chaos of ethical order in cyberspace.

3. Causes of fan community frenzy

The spread of chaos within the current “fan circle” is not only due to the relative absence of social supervision mechanisms, but also deeply rooted in underlying social structural contradictions. This requires a systematic thinking approach to address.

3.1. Social transformation and conceptual renewal

China has undergone tremendous social changes. On one hand, the rapid social transformation has led to significant generational differences, with the generation gap between parents and children evolving from a “crevice” to a “chasm.” The life wisdom accumulated by the elders is significantly out of sync with the current social environment, directly weakening the younger generation’s emotional attachment to the family. At the same time, the acceleration of the modernization process has led to the reconstruction of social relationships, with traditional social networks based on blood ties and geographical proximity gradually disintegrating. They have been replaced by looser forms of connection. This reorganization of social relationships, combined with the characteristics of the times, such as the miniaturization of family structures and the digitalization of social interaction patterns, has led to a general weakening of the emotional support system for contemporary young people. This feature of the social transition period is not only reflected at the structural level but also profoundly influences social psychology. The current society exhibits a distinct tendency towards short-termism, with the pursuit of quick success and material wealth becoming a common mindset. This social atmosphere profoundly shapes the values of young people, leading to a strong sense of achievement anxiety. At the same time, the trend of solidification in the distribution of social resources is becoming increasingly evident, and the window of opportunity for social mobility is gradually narrowing. The huge gap between ideals and reality prompts young people to turn to idol worship as an alternative satisfaction mechanism. The desire for success and confusion about striving make it easy for young people to indulge in fantasies about their idols to escape the sense of powerlessness towards reality. Through the construction of virtual emotional connections, they can temporarily escape from real-life predicaments and fulfill their aspirations for social mobility in their imagination.

3.2. Lagging education system

The current education system still has obvious structural imbalances, mainly manifested in four aspects: the disconnection between knowledge imparting and humanistic quality cultivation, the separation between examination-oriented ability and comprehensive quality development, the contradiction between the orientation of further education and employment and personality growth, and the opposition between rote learning and heuristic education. This imbalance has led to teenagers being in a long-term high-pressure learning state, resulting in significant psychological depression, which in turn prompts them to seek emotional release and spiritual comfort through idol worship. The utilitarian educational orientation has a profound impact on teenagers’ value judgments, making them overly focus on external achievements while neglecting internal cultivation. This tendency is reflected in their idol choices, showing a preference for superficially glamorous “successful idols” rather than considering inner qualities.

In the context of diversified social values, the existing role model education system has exposed three major predicaments: the lack of interaction between the educational subject and object, the disconnection between educational content and real life, and the rigidity and singularity of educational methods. These structural deficiencies have seriously weakened the appeal of role model education, making it difficult to play its due guiding role. Although the education field has attempted to reconstruct the role model education paradigm in the context of subculture, due to insufficient practical advancement, this concept has not yet effectively improved the decline of traditional role model education. The gap

between the renewal of educational concepts and the transformation of practices has objectively provided a survival space for blind idol worship.

3.3. Permissiveness of the idol industry mechanism

In the contemporary consumer culture-dominated social environment, the idol industry has formed a complete industrialized production system. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard once pointed out that the purpose of consumption is not to satisfy actual needs, but to constantly pursue the satisfaction of desires that have been created and stimulated. This theory profoundly reveals the essence of the idol consumption phenomenon: the entertainment industry, through systematic commercial operations, packages idols as cultural commodities available for consumption. The core purpose is not spiritual guidance, but the maximization of commercial value. Idols are objectified as standardized products on the cultural industry assembly line, with their core value simplified to commercial monetization ability rather than spiritual connotation or social significance. The spiritual connotation of idols is dissolved by commercial logic, replaced by quantifiable market value and monetization ability. This symbolic production model further intensifies the opposition between cultural value and commercial value. Under the influence of consumerism, teenagers gradually equate the success of idols with materialized symbols rather than inner qualities or spiritual pursuits.

4. Resolute measures

The behavior and activities of fan groups have a dual nature. In the process of dealing with them, it is necessary to fully explore their educational potential as a carrier of youth subculture. Through institutionalized guidance, transform idol worship from a simple consumption behavior into a cultural practice that promotes the socialization and development of teenagers.

4.1. Educational constraint

As an important stage in life development, teenagers are still immature in terms of cognition and emotion, and have weak self-regulation ability, thus requiring correct guidance from the outside world. From the perspective of previous studies, the cultural practices carried out by fan groups are usually regarded as part of the youth subculture in contrast to the mainstream culture^[7]. Youth subculture is an independent cultural system shared by young people, which has various relationships with the mainstream culture of society, including convergence, contradiction, and even confrontation^[8]. To effectively guide “fan community” culture, multiple measures should be taken. First, educational entities need to change their cognitive approach and understand the diverse needs of teenagers with a rational and inclusive attitude. Schools and families should avoid simply denying them and instead build an effective two-way communication mechanism by deeply analyzing the emotional needs and social motivations of teenagers. Second, a responsibility mechanism centered on idols should be established. As public figures with wide social influence, idol artists should consciously practice the core socialist values and play a leading role. Finally, it is necessary to guide teenagers to rationally understand the commercial logic behind “fan community.” They should be helped to clearly recognize the relationship between fans and idols, learn to rationally control their emotions, and avoid becoming passive participants in capital operations.

4.2. Institutional constraints

To manage social group negative incidents and regulate fan star-chasing behaviors, it is urgent to establish a rapid response mechanism involving multiple stakeholders. Since the implementation of the “Notice on Further Strengthening the Governance of ‘fan community’ Chaos” by the Cyberspace Administration of China in 2021, although the “Clear and Bright” series of special actions has achieved phased results, the governance work still faces the challenge of insufficient long-term mechanisms. The current top priority is to accelerate the legislative process in the cultural field and provide institutional guarantees for the entertainment culture market through a sound legal and regulatory system. Research

has found that the idol economy and entertainment capital are the fundamental reasons for the extreme nature of “fan community” culture^[9]. Capital operations rely on the organized characteristics of online fan groups and often follow the dominant logic of maximizing economic interests. Under the socialist market economy conditions, the principle of giving priority to social benefits must be adhered to. Given the inherent profit-seeking nature of capital, a regulatory system for capital should be established, including access restrictions, negative behavior lists, and accountability mechanisms, to achieve effective constraints through institutional design. In terms of social co-governance, an incentive-compatible participation mechanism should be established: through systems such as reward for reporting and credit points, users’ sense of responsibility should be cultivated; the real-name reporting and credit evaluation mechanisms should be improved to ensure the smoothness of supervision channels while preventing abuse of rights. This collaborative governance model, led by the government, with platforms fulfilling their responsibilities, and users participating, provides a systematic solution for the governance of the chaos in the “fan community.”

4.3. Better aligned with the academic context

The aim of governing “fan community” culture is to seek a dynamic balance between the autonomy of subculture and social normativity. A comprehensive governance strategy should be adopted that prioritizes guidance over control. In the digital media era, circle layers are often in a state of flux, and there is a certain tension between the group identity of online circle layers and the individual’s own action logic^[10]. Considering the reality that the online space has become an important field for the socialization of young people, it is urgent to build a three-dimensional governance system with the collaborative participation of multiple subjects. First, the operators of online platforms should optimize the community ecological environment by establishing differentiated communication norms, improving multi-level content review mechanisms, and developing interactive feedback systems based on artificial intelligence to achieve intelligent governance of the community ecosystem. Second, the education authorities need to innovate ideological and political education models. They should organically integrate the core socialist values into the creation of youth subculture products, develop ideological and political education courses that suit the cognitive characteristics of young people, and at the same time, focus on cultivating professional teachers with network thinking. Third, the government should formulate normative documents for the governance of “fan community” culture and establish a scientific “virtual-real integration” mechanism. By carrying out offline cultural practice activities and community volunteer service projects, and other physical carriers, it promotes the positive interaction between young people’s virtual socialization and real life. At the same time, it uses big data analysis technology to monitor and warn of the dynamics of “fan community” culture in real time, promptly identify and intervene in potential group polarization risks, and thus build a healthy, orderly, and sustainable network cultural ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

This study takes “fan community” culture as the entry point and systematically examines the evolution mechanism and social impact of youth subculture in the new media era. The research finds that under the dual drive of technological empowerment and capital logic, “fan community” has evolved from a simple entertainment consumption behavior into a highly organized and emotional digital community practice. This phenomenon not only reflects the structural contradictions in the process of contemporary youth value socialization, but also exposes the problem of alienation of digital labor under platform capitalism. Overall, to govern the chaos in the “fan community,” it is not only necessary to strengthen legal regulation and platform responsibility, but also to attach importance to the positive guidance of youth values. By optimizing the online ecological environment and improving digital literacy education, we can promote the transformation of “fan community” culture from disorder to order, and enable it to develop healthily within the framework of socialist core values, ultimately achieving a positive interaction between technological empowerment and cultural education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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