

# Analysis of the Social Impact of Fandom Culture in “Idol” Context

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## Abstract

With the development of the economy, social progress and the rapid change of high and new technology, mass media has a faster speed and broader range of communication than in the past. Simultaneously, with the popularity of various talent shows, more artists have emerged from the talent shows and are favoured by a broader range of audiences, thus creating a new social group called “fan groups”. Conceptually, “fan groups” belong to a new culture that is emerging in Chinese society, and a new term like “fan culture” has also emerged. This article explores fan culture’s background and influence from a sociological perspective. Some scholars have noted the social influence of the entertainment industry, dominated by idol stars and the mass media, as the basis of communication. However, this cultural association between idols and fans has not received sufficient academic attention. In this paper, I take the development of idol and fan culture in East Asian cultures as the starting point of my study and analyze the emotional connection between idols and fans based on theories of mass culture and mass communication. I also try to analyze how fan culture has further developed based on the concept of idols. On this basis, I also focused on how idols use new media and mass media platforms to spread their culture after their professionalization. The results of the study show that there is indeed an inseparable and complementary relationship between idol culture, fan culture and mass media platforms. This result benefits mass culture’s development and its impact on society. At the same time, the findings also indicate that toxic fan culture can produce incorrect values.

## Keywords

Idol Culture, Fandom, Social Media, Mass Media, Public Culture, K-Pop Culture

## 1. Introduction

The word idol is unique existence in the context of East Asian culture. With the advent of the Web 2.0 era and the spread of social media, idol culture and the entertainment industry have entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. Moreover, not only in East Asia, idols are entering the European and American markets as well. Taking the Korean entertainment industry as an example, a large part of Korean pop music's colossal success is attributed to Korean idols' fan groups, as fans can contribute to the idols' development in various ways, either spontaneously or in an organized manner. For example, fans can make their voices heard by posting tweets on social media to influence institutional decisions. They can also do so by initiating online and offline voting campaigns and stimulating consumption campaigns to significantly move their favorite idols' albums up the charts. In addition, fan groups have been organized to vote for idols in large and small annual music awards in Korea (Kang et al., 2019).

With the development of the entertainment industry, a massive number of fan groups have gradually entered the public eye. This situation has led to the development of a unique fan culture and a "fan economy." Traditional media mainly use a more traditional yet persistent format, such as television programs, for relevant publicity. However, the constant emergence of artists and fan groups is no longer enough to satisfy the influence and appeal of traditional media. Idols and fans are now seeking newer, faster and more efficient ways to target audiences using online media. Because of the timeliness of the Internet and the good human interaction, both provide great mediums for the fan base to have an emotional connection with their idols that is "engaging" and "companionable". In contrast, such an emotional connection is crucial for brands and advertising, as fans will buy like crazy for the products endorsed by their idols, which is the most desirable situation for brands. However, emotional connections do not generate new value but transfer value from some goods to others.

Comparing the two forms of media, traditional and new media, media influence in the traditional mode works by linearly conveying meaning to a passive audience, a homogenous and uncritical group (Livingstone, 1998: p. 240). In contrast, new media communication has made audiences less tolerant of the cultural and entertainment industries, and audiences are instead able to become more active participants and producers of content in commercial activities or communication processes. As a result, new media is more focused on individuals and more likely to highlight personal characteristics. Fans can naturally establish a seemingly closer connection with idols unilaterally, so this is a significant factor that makes new media an essential part of fan culture.

In this paper, regardless of the label of the idol, the concept of idol specialization in East Asia is the main stepstone to exploring how idols and fans complement each other and develop together in the Internet era. The analysis contains analyzing the interaction between idols and fans, the development pattern of fan groups, and the dramatically toxic fan culture. In addition, the influence of fan

culture on society cannot be ignored. The study also analyzes the impact of this fan culture on real society and provides reference implications for how we can deal with this phenomenon. The article also concludes with suggestions to correct this phenomenon of drastic and toxic fan culture, seeking to make fan culture develop in a positive and healthy direction, avoiding possible risks and providing some impetus to the development of society and healthy development of business.

## **2. The Connection between Love Beans and Idols**

### **2.1. The Development of the Word “Idol”**

The word idol has a special meaning in East Asian cultural circles, which is different from the definition of an idol in European and American pop culture circles. In European and American culture, an idol has a more abstract meaning; an idol can be someone you like or admire, and he can even be an ordinary person around you. In East Asian culture, besides the above meaning, the idol is also a profession, different from a singer, actor, or host. It, therefore, inevitably gives birth to idol-related industries and economies. From an economic and sociological point of view, idols are tools created by capital, products driven by the fan economy, and the root of fan culture. The Japanese media system is organized around a general fascination with idols and the ideal consumer products used to satisfy its audience’s most common desires and aspirations. In this sense, becoming a fan means becoming a loyal consumer of idol-related products. This phenomenon began to develop in Japan around the 1970s and later spread to Korea and China (Corgi, 2022). While the public measures idol groups in terms of the industry and the sectors that build the market, the audience lie somewhere in between (Livingstone, 1998).

### **2.2. Idols and Fans Progress Together**

However, understanding idols in this way alone may not be sufficient to capture the social attributes that an idol has in itself and his social influence and appeal. An idol group requires a blend of psychology, culture, music, aesthetics, and technology. Emotional connection is an essential and crucial point in fan culture. While singers and actors use their works to create an emotional connection, idols create an emotional connection based on the person himself, making this emotional connection even more essential and inseparable. In other words, the more affluent and robust an idol’s emotional connection with its audience and fan base, the better it is for the long-term development of the idol group and the business organization behind it. The more positive impact an idol group that represents the positive side of society will have on the fans with which they have an emotional connection. Previously, studies have been conducted on fan-related activities, and results have shown that the expressive activities of idols allow fans to gain cultural capital. It is a brand-new way to build social connections with celebrities, make fans feel close to their idols, and impart knowledge to fans through “collective wisdom” (Mansor et al., 2020).

One of the more typical examples is the star-making process of the Chinese idol Lee. Throughout the process, fans engaged in a relatively diverse and intense activity by becoming active promoters of Li. Li worked hard to prepare for her performances, creating a personal image of a person who strives to improve her dreams, progress, and achieve her dreams beyond herself. She enters competitions, and her fans go crazy canvassing for votes at every show. She goes on tour around the country and interacts with her fans in a friendly manner during her performances. Her fans promote albums in different ways, take the initiative to buy several other albums, and even call on those around her to do so. This emotional connection not only brings good commercial value and economic benefits. From a pop culture perspective, the emotional connection between fans and idols is equivalent to fans identifying with the values of their idols. In contrast, the image of a promising idol, in turn, shapes the values of the fans, and both sides can grow together.

However, a sociological theory is also behind the fan's crazy obsession with idols. Social exchange theory has two essential orientations: first, individual psychological orientation, i.e. social exchange is attributed to individual utilitarian calculations and intrinsic motivations; second, structural collective orientation, i.e., social exchange is attributed to the constraints of social structure and the guidance of social norms. The fans' crazy love and devotion to idols is mainly the first type of social exchange theory-psychological orientation. Fans are loyal to their idols mainly because they can resonate with ordinary people mentally and emotionally. In other words, fans gain a tremendous sense of identification when they follow their idols, and identification as an emotional mechanism makes fans feel involved, as if everything is happening around them. Fans or viewers accept the idol's goals and the state of their identity. A satisfactory definition of identity should explain the relationship between identification and other ways viewers relate to the character, such as attitudes and emotions (Cohen, 2001). Moreover, with good manners, hobbies and life values, there is identity; the inner interaction of the fan base can find a foothold for the soul through good manners, shared hobbies and life values as the fans follow in their self-idol.

### **2.3. The Influence of "Fan" Culture on Society**

Then again, it is sometimes inaccurate to use psychology to explain all the content of communication theory. So, although fans also play a crucial role in the collective orientation of the social action structure, sometimes, without a clear code of conduct as a guide, human interaction, with all its inequalities and imbalances, cannot continue, and the interaction inevitably leads to the dysfunctional development of society.

## **3. The Fandom Model in the Web 2.0 Age**

### **3.1. The Rise of Fan Culture**

Every cultural era is constantly driven by technological innovation. With the

rapid development of technology and constant innovation in the media industry, fan culture has been diversified by the influence of media. The natural rise of fan culture is in the media Web 2.0 era, where social media, live streaming and interactive video sites allow information to spread rapidly, providing plenty of platforms for developing fan culture. With the increasing amount of information and communication platforms, the communication structure has become flat, popular and interactive. Hence, a wider audience gradually accepts fan culture, and the influence of fan culture has become more widespread and far-reaching, involving the business, entertainment and education industries.

Since the launch of Supergirl in 2005, China's idol industry has been booming. It was closely followed by Superboy, the Voice of China, and X-Men, all of which were broadcast on traditional media television. Moreover, since 2018, the boom in mobile Internet devices and the rise of mobile media have enabled people to quickly learn about entertainment news and watch infotainment programs on mobile devices anytime and anywhere (Chen, 2021). China's online talent show entered the "Genesis", with "Youth Have You" becoming one of the most popular talent shows in the same year. The TV program was distributed through the Internet. Fans can interact with the broadcast platform in real-time and buy sponsored products to vote. Instead of passively receiving information, fans actively participated and voted for their idols in real-time. In this participation process, fans have more of an initiative, and their votes determine the idols' achievements and give fans the initial exposure and awareness of being "producers". By creating a closer relationship between production, consumption and narrative space, multiplatform reshapes the relationship between industry, audience and text (Johnson, 2007). Such a model also creates a valuable connection between fans and idols.

However, the new media has made the way of communication between fans and idols more convenient, blurred the boundaries between idols' value choices and fans' power, and alienated their relationship. In the Web 2.0 era, data has become an essential indicator of idols' influence, directly affecting the ecology and order of the entire fan culture and entertainment landscape. In the Web 2.0 era, data has become an essential indicator of idols' influence. In the traditional media era, idols could only achieve exposure through record collections, music videos, TV stage performances, concerts and fan meetings. In the Web 2.0 era, however, idols have broken the limitations by creating personal Youtube accounts, social media accounts and live streaming. Social media platforms created a stronger connection between idols and fans because of the ability to update and interact frequently—a new era of data economy for fans. Online fans are seen as an emerging algorithmic culture in which the ongoing interaction between emotions, fan subjectivity, and algorithms continues to shape and reshape fans' daily practices regarding action sequences, norms, and ways of thinking.

"Fan communities" are communities of imagination, emotion, and interest relations. The economic self-employment model generated by fans becomes more systematic, structured, organized, and hierarchical. In this mode of operation,

communication among fans is more accessible. They can express their opinions on Twitter and make suggestions for the common good. For example, fans can suggest that their fan groups buy concert tickets collectively to get cheaper tickets. In addition, they can make friends through group chats because they have common interests. The intersection of fan culture and business culture helps maintain both communities by negotiating this balance (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012).

### **3.2. Pull the Financial Connection between Fans and Idols**

Therefore, in the context of the Web 2.0 era, if we want the economic and other ties between fans and idols to be closer and healthier, then we need to use the power of new media and make reasonable use of the communication value and influence of new media. On the one hand, since the new media is a platform for everyone to speak freely, idols should always pay attention to their words and actions in the new media era. They should focus on establishing a good personal image, bringing positive influence to their fans and guiding them to live a positive and healthy life. On the other hand, fans should take the initiative to screen and distinguish right from wrong, not blindly follow the idol. To worship an idol should first look at his character and the value he brings to society, and stop in time, away from idols who may use fans to create momentum to protect themselves and society. Social media also need to strengthen the monitoring of fans and idols, timely blocking and deleting unhealthy information, and creating a platform for our society and entertainment industry where people can speak freely but need strict rules. In this way, the whole industry could promote better interaction between fans and idols to a certain extent, forming more positive value guidance.

## **4. Toxic Fandom Culture**

Fan culture is a comprehensive cultural medium and socio-cultural phenomenon in which individuals or groups can consume culturally and economically. Due to the fans' psychology of worship and pursuit of virtual or natural objects that exist within them, they are more willing to over-consume and give unpaid time to what they like. When the fandom culture becomes radical, it becomes a toxic fandom culture. Furthermore, in the Web 2.0 era, this phenomenon of toxic fetish culture is even more severe. As media channels have expanded and idols have become more exposed, so has the search for an audience, and what was once a media frame has become a target audience. In other words, communication methods have also changed from point-to-point communication to peer-to-peer communication.

### **4.1. The Toxicity of Fan Culture**

#### **4.1.1. The Influence of Fans**

Moreover, while this type of communication brings many points, there are also apparent drawbacks. Since the millennium, the "mainstreaming" of fan culture

has brought new possibilities and revelations, making mass media more attentive to the broader discursive and ideological conflicts within audiences and fan groups, especially on social media and other user-generated platforms. Battles between subcultures are no longer confined to the fringes but are readily available for public consumption through news coverage (Proctor & Bridget, 2018). The degree of influence that fans can bring is increasingly evident. The peer-to-peer mode of communication inevitably creates a cocoon of information and, as a result, a small community of fans only. Many celebrities encourage their fans to improve through good lifestyles and behaviours. For example, Chinese actors have created charitable organizations that preach walking is an easy way to improve health and mental well-being.

On the negative side, fan communities are not considered a social relationship and are associated with pathologies such as mob hysteria, irrational crowds, or isolated over-attachment (O'Neill et al., 2013). This view may be too absolute, but the harmful effects of fan groups are well documented. For example, the “wild growth” of these groups has also increased fan involvement in bullying, fraud, and other incidents. One of the most typical examples of fan frenzy is what happened to the star of a hit drama in February 2020. At the time, stories appeared online written by fans who found the post insulting and complained to officials about similar content on the site. This series of actions left many readers feeling bullied by the idol's fans because it was because of these people that readers lost access to their favourite websites.

#### **4.1.2. Irrational Fan Behavior**

Another similar situation happened in May this year. The popular web show “Youth with You 3” was suspended for wasting food. The cause was a unique hit list voting system that caught the attention of authorities: fans could vote for their favourite contestants by buying bottles of dairy drinks and scanning the QR codes inside the bottle caps. As a result, fans bought cases and milk to get the caps, but the bottles were dumped into the gutter. After several similar incidents, the Internet Information Office announced that it was taking action against the “rice circle” that was so harmful to the psyche of China's youth. Because of the negative Internet phenomenon of bullying, manipulation, fraud and even illegal dissemination of personal information among these fan groups.

Fans form organizations based on social media platforms to support their favourite idols. However, when some fans have power over other fans, they become digital gatekeepers. These fans gain unlimited social capital and control what other community members see, much like traditional news gatekeepers (Lynch, 2022). People are trapped in “information cocoons” and immersed in fast-food, entertaining online cultural goods without depth or method. In reality, people are only at the level of feeling, not the height and depth of reason. They find it challenging to respond substantively to the anxieties of the times, lose focus on society and reality, and become addicted to their closed world, leading to a spiral of silence (Liu, 2020).

## 4.2. The Increasing Commodification of Fan Behavior

The increasing commodification of fan practices threatens to erode the relationships and communities that have long been at their core. Youth with You has been the subject of fan-infighting-induced online violence, which, combined with grossly irrational fan behaviour, led to the indefinite suspension of the program in China. Young people's addiction to following stars may also be due to their desire to be good and liked but their unwillingness to put in the effort. Through the planning and mobilization of the "rice circle", it is easy to create topics that quickly become "hot" through online social media platforms, forming online public opinion events and guiding and manipulating the direction of online public opinion.

## 5. Conclusion

This era has witnessed the constant updating and progress of Internet technology and social networking services. New media has brought fans and idols closer and provided convenient and diversified interactive entrances for fan groups' activities, becoming an essential foundation for the development of the idol industry. The Internet era has brought idols and fans closer together emotionally. The development of new media has diversified the means of communication and increased the exposure of idols on various platforms. Secondly, the interactive nature of online video variety shows. Viewers are connected not only through the production of meaning, but also through the production of content.

A peer-to-peer mode of communication is opened for fans and idols. A new model of idol-fan relationships has emerged on various social media platforms in China, where fans have risen from simply worshipping idols to being able to nurture them together. Toxic fan culture has become more severe in the Internet era and has a powerful impact on the healthy development of fan culture. Properly guiding the development of fan culture is a topic that requires long-term attention. It is urgent to manage the many disorders of fan culture and fan economy. The fan culture and economy in the Internet era have long surpassed the traditional star culture and star system of performing arts activities. New cultural and entertainment consumption phenomena, such as fan support, have emerged. Government agencies need precise governance in supervision and law enforcement.

For blustery fans, early into the size of the fan culture, while others question, some people do not agree. Still, we cannot ignore its existence, the generation and development of fan culture and its long time prolongs the reason. It took a specific social function, and its existence has its rationality and will play certain social functions. In particular, in today's science and technology changes with each passing day, we advocate the pluralism of culture and innovation. As a kind of subculture, fan culture plays an essential role in people's daily life, so we should actively develop its advantage.

On the one hand, to promote social integration and social development, and

avoid the negative aspects at the same time, its harm to humans is reduced to a minimum. Also, should actively use network media on this big stage, play a positive role, set an excellent example for people, and set up the correct values. Furthermore, he simultaneously made a broad media audience to satisfy his physical and mental spirit and the leading socialist spiritual civilization construction of the contribution. From the above phenomenon, all kinds of fans in the innovation of mass culture, rich in the trend of urban culture, the fan is the main force of leading the masses to participate in cultural activities. So, in today's multicultural society, we should not kill this rise in civilian culture fans and fan clubs.

Therefore, the behaviour of fans has a tsunami-like impact on society to a large extent. The government should take some measures to actively guide the direction of public opinion caused by this phenomenon, such as formulating relevant laws to make people realize that they will pay the price for expressing opinions and creating a public opinion on the Internet. In a word, fan culture has become an impossible part of today's society, and both the government and the public should pay attention to it.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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