The Guiding Role of Social Media in the Socialization of Celebrity Fans

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of social media in guiding the socialization of celebrity fans through qualitative research. Specifically, we explore fans' choices of social media platforms and the navigating role of fan communities on fans' personal identity, group identity and emotional labor. Through the analysis of social media platforms as well as in-depth interviews with fans, we find that the various features and functions of social media platforms have different impacts on the socialization of fans in China. At the same time, fan communities can also provide a place for fans to communicate and identify with each other, promote interaction and emotional exchange among them, and enhance the sense of belonging and pride. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications for understanding the role of social media in guiding the socialization of celebrity fans.

1. Introduction

China's social media market is showing a trend of diversification and fierce competition. The major social media platforms include Weibo, WeChat, TikTok, etc. Weibo is one of the earliest microblogging platforms in China, where users can post texts, images, and videos and other content as well as interact with other users. WeChat is the largest instant massager in China, and its Moments feature has become a platform for users to express their emotions and share their lives. Tiktok is a short video sharing app that has gained a large user base and influence in a short period of time by recommending content of interest to users through an intelligent recommendation algorithm.

The rise and popularity of social media has a profound impact on celebrity fans. In the past few years, more and more fans have adopted social media platforms as the main channel to demonstrate their support for celebrities and participate in fan activities. The activities of fans' stargazing have taken on new features in the new media era. Today's fans are more focused on expression and action, on collective identity and collective participation. The individual members of the community are linked together by common preferences, forming closer social relationships (Mastromartino et al., 2020). With the development of the idol industry, the role of the fan community in the star-making process is becoming increasingly important, and even plays the role of a civilian operation team. At the same time, the communication distance with idols has gradually narrowed. The relationship between fans and idols has transcended the original one-way emotional relationship between fans, and is no longer a simple expressing of emotion, but a common expression of identity as a collective (Barber & Callaghan, 2010). The function and discourse power of the fan communities are expressed through the collective form, which becomes a powerful force to influence commercial capital and the public. From this perspective, it can also be seen that the formation of the fan communities and the development of media technology under the advancement of the Internet have enabled individual fans to get rid of the state of passive acceptance and one-way emotional worship in the era of traditional media. In the increasingly perfect entertainment and cultural industry market, the celebrity fan community, the smallest unit is reassembled into a collective existence, becoming a more active and more powerful group.

Scholars in celebrity studies have begun to focus on the role of social media among the fans. However, most studies have focused on the impact of social media on celebrity publicity, with relatively few researches on its guiding role in fan socialization (Plante et al., 2014). Accompanied by the progress of digital media, social media has fundamentally changed the way people interact with each other, providing fans with diversified communication platforms and stargazing platforms, and bringing free participation and equal discourse rights to the development of fans. It has not only changed the way and behavior of fans' stargazing in that is, from the previous loose fan alliance to an organized, large-scale, and efficient fan group with social media platforms as boosters, but also has a leading role in the development of fans' communications, perceptions, emotions and behaviors (Han & Huang, 2020). Therefore, this study utilize qualitative research methods and in-depth interviews to explore fans' choices of social media platforms as well as the role of fan communities in guiding fans' personal identity, group identity and emotional labor.

2. Relevant Literature

This paper aims to explore the guiding role of social media in the socialization process of celebrity fans, and analyze its impact on fans' behaviors, perceptions and emotions. In order to investigate the above issues in depth, this paper conducted a relevant literature study on the formation and development of fan communities, identity construction and collective identity.

2.1 Development and Evolution of Fan Communities

Fans are a common cultural consumption mode in Western society and the most active part of the consumer group (Fiske, 2011). The development of traditional entertainment and cultural industries has strong dominance. Even though fans have been trying to exert influence on the media entertainment industry and change their passive position in the production and dissemination of information, fans have always been on the side of passive acceptance in the relationship between the two parties (Kim & Kim, 2017).

The earliest organized group action by fans can be traced back to the late 1960s, when the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) was cancelling its broadcasting of the science fiction TV series "Star Trek" (Ohno, 2007). Fans of "Star Trek" launched a large-scale and organized rebellion against this, and a large number of loyal fans of the series wrote letters calling for a fight against NBC's decision to suspend broadcasting, the grassroots protest among fans of this drama ultimately ended with NBC canceling its decision to continue broadcasting, and also declared a victory for the fan group activity (Rufer, 2019). The letter writing movement initiated by fans of the TV series "Star Trek" provided a model for a series of fan protests in the future. In several subsequent controversies over the broadcast of TV dramas, the fan community also achieved "victory in the struggle" by launching a "defense movement" (Shermak, 2018).

Since the 1990s, the Western entertainment industry system has undergone changes, and the identity of fan groups has been recognized by commercial capital, increasing the voice of fans and enhancing their influence in industry development (Jenkins, 2006). The fan base is no longer the passive audience who originally needed to gather and write letters to the television station to express their objections (Moriggi, 2015). They have transformed into the main consumers and market customers of the television station. When selecting programs to broadcast, cable television stations will prioritize the most popular television programs with loyal fans.

The development of the entertainment culture industry has made the industry take on a more diversified form. The star making industry is accompanied by the power of fans (Lundqvist, 2015). Through the process of collective activities, fan groups have formed a huge joint force. They can not only freely choose idols in the rich entertainment culture, express their feelings for the idols, but also find individual converts in the increasingly strong group power and obtain group support, obtain emotional resonance in the process of organizational communication in pursuit of stars (Mallon, 2014). It can be said that the development of the industry has made it inevitable for the fan community to gradually grow in strength and has also become an essential part of the industry's operation.

The traditional path of star-making from the point of view of the entertainment system is in accordance with "work presentation - media attention - topic marketing" (Edlom & Jessica, 2014). The main body of the entertainment industry manufacturing and the mass media communication orientation determine the type of idol worshipping object provided for the fans. A highly representative model of the entertainment industry is the Hong Kong, China, entertainment market in the 1990s. Entertainment companies have molded representative characters for the audience, such as the "Four Heavenly Kings" that appeared in Hong Kong, and Chow Yun-fat's portrayal of "Fage" is well known to the audience because of his role as a "wandering hero" (Pulos, 2014). This kind of characterization is a star character image designed and provided by the media on its own initiative for the audience. Fans with strong emotions towards celebrities develop a unilateral dependence and adoration for their idols through the dissemination of media content. The emotional construction of fans is completely dependent on the image delivered by the entertainment industry and the media, as well as on the final recipients and consumers in the entire entertainment and cultural industry chain. This production path presents unidirectionality and is dominated by the industrial system and the media.

What role does media play in promoting fans development? In the era of traditional media, mass media is a one-way, mandatory form of information dissemination. Fans, as passive audiences, lack the right to make choices in the real sense, and tend to be independent and dispersed individuals who face idols unilaterally (Blodgett, 2019). On the one hand, in the era of traditional media, there is a lack of a clear concept of fan community. Fans present an independent and decentralized state, and it is difficult to have the opportunity to carry out extensive information dissemination and communication as a group. On the other hand, the characteristics of media platforms make it difficult to unify the dissemination and regulate the management of the fan base, and it is impossible to form a large-scale organization for effective overall expression and voice.

With the arrival of the Internet era, social media connects originally dispersed individuals, providing an open and shared platform for communication and creation. Unlike traditional media, the Internet has broadened the channels for fans to access information. At the same time, the network also provides richer forms of information distribution and communication, allowing fans to share and express themselves freely. If the reform of the entertainment industry system is a prerequisite for the development and growth of fan communities, the advancement of the Internet has provided an opportunity for fans to enter the media market. With the maturity of technology, the ubiquitous social media have enabled fans to leave isolation and dispersion behind and establish an intertextual network, realizing interpersonal communication and information dissemination in virtual space (Schwarz, 2011). With the deepening participation of the fan community, the process of media consumption has also transformed into a process of text production and cultural creation actively carried out by the fan community. The Internet provides a space for fans to discuss the media content about idol together. Fans from different regions, genders, ages and educational levels can participate in communication through the Internet, and individual fans with the same values are gathered in the form of communities.

In addition to relying on social media to form fan communities, fans also build public platforms through online media to expand the influence of their fan communities, so that more netizens have the opportunity to access information about their idols and be influenced by fan culture. In the case of a fan website independently established by fans, it provides information about the idol. Ordinary fans can get quick access to the idol's news by following the websites and communicate with each other within the websites to create emotional resonance. Through the establishment of the website, the individual identity of the fan is clarified and a connection to the idol is forged indirectly through the identity of the fan community (Shermak, 2020). There are influential and large websites where one can get first-hand information from the officials and even have the opportunity to get up close and personal with the idols. Non-fans can also search and browse similar information, turning it from a relatively closed to an open information platform. It can be said that the openness of the Internet has gradually brought fans and idols closer, and the communal nature of the Internet has gradually driven the popularity of fan identity.

2.2 Identity Construction of Fan Communities

2.2.1 Identity construction using symbols

Fan communities have their own system of symbol representation, including logos, representative colors, special names, etc., and only people within the community can quickly identify and correctly interpret them (Korobkova & Blac, 2014).

Previous research has used Goffman's dramaturgical theory to reveal the nature of celebrities being commercially packaged into perfect characters (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Cai, 2012; Goffman, 1959; John & Viswamohan, 2015). Indeed, this theory is applicable to fans' identity performance behaviors as well. Whether it is image construction on social media or real-life behavior such as purchasing the same product or using peripheral products, fans are constructing their own image in the minds of others, with the aim of telling everyone "I am a fan of the certain star" (Asada, 2019). According to Goffman (1959), when people know that others are watching, they engage in "front stage" behaviors that reflect internalized behavioral norms and expectations. Fans construct their identities through certain clear, iconic self-traits and the recognition of their own identity. Identity and declarative behaviors are used to shape the digital self, thereby creating a clear distinction between themselves and others. This includes both the use of star association symbols such as IDs, avatars, signatures, post prefixes, eta., as well as the use of identity labels such as logos, representative colors, and special names, etc., to help community members quickly identify their peers and exclude non-fans and fans of other idols. Various identity symbols eliminate individual differences, emphasize group characteristics, thus confirm and maintain their recognized iconic meanings.

2.2.2 Identity strengthening through interaction

Fan community is a relatively stable community formed by fans gathering together through emotional ties and relationship precipitation (Hagan, 2018). Cultural dissemination, emotional exchange and value recognition are the keys to sustaining the community, while the dissemination of emotional value is the core of community operation. Emotional interaction between fans can be divided into two kinds according to the subject, between fans and between fans and

idols. The emotional interaction between fans is a relatively effective form of communication, with both positive emotions such as praise, love and touching, as well as negative emotions such as dissatisfaction, complaint and disappointment. Fans communicate instantly and give effective feedback through comments, private chats, group chats, etc., with transmission and reception behaviors occurring simultaneously. Fans express their inner emotions through communication and interaction, search for fans with similar feelings and experiences, relieve their loneliness, and further strengthening their identity. Take Luhan as an example, he is one of the most influential entertainment stars in China. In December 2017, Weibo and Luhan Tieba (a Baidu Tieba discussion forum related to Luhan) to launch the # 30 Days of Recommend Luhan for 30 Days # campaign, with a different interactive theme every day, aiming to jointly record interesting stories with Luhan. The themes include "The Most Memorable Day", "The Warmth Interaction with Fans", "What Do You Want to Do for Luhan Next Year", etc. Fans use the interactive topics as a carrier to tell stories with themselves as the main subject, and share their stargazing experiences with other fans. In this process, a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the idol is gained, and they become more certain that the idol they follow is a person worth liking.

An obvious problem, however, is that most interactions exist between fans, especially those at the same level. Idols themselves and big fans in the community rarely respond to comments and private messages from other fans. Social media only provides a place for ordinary fans to communicate without really achieving two-way interaction. The relationship between idols and fans is a "quasi-social interaction", in which fans can keep up with their idols' daily updates by following accounts. Through reposting, commenting, and private messaging, fans can directly express their true feelings and satisfy their need for intimacy with their idols. However, most of the time it is fans talking to themselves and there is no normal two-way communication with their idols (Wang, 2017). Fortunately, fans are able to recognize the nature of this interactive relationship and do not force idols to respond. However, if some idols do not interact with their fans for a long period of time, their image may be proud, arrogant and fastidious, it can also lead to a widening of the distance between them and their fans, affecting fan loyalty.

2.2.3 Identity preservation through transmission and reception of information

The identity of fans is first constructed through symbols, then strengthened by communication and interaction with fans within the community, and maintained via the transmission and reception of information on social platforms. The combination of Internet media and various modes of communication provides the conditions for large-scale information dissemination (Walker, 2017). Various types of information are constantly flowing through the online fan community, and the information flows are cross-linked with each other. The information flow connects individual fans and also the community with the outside world. In terms of the direction of information flow, there are both unidirectional and bidirectional or multidirectional disseminations of information. There is both vertical top-down dissemination and horizontal peer-to-peer dissemination. There is both simple primary dissemination and more complex secondary or multi-level dissemination. Every fan is a source of information, and every content post and interaction is spreading information to others. Every fan is a receiver, constantly receiving information from others. Each fan is also a transit station, acting on the information they receive, and their actions and thoughts are expressed in certain information that is disseminated and received by other fans. Each fan combines all the above three identities, creating a circular system of information within the fan community.

The focus of information transmission by fans is not only on transmission, but also on the meaning presented and generated during the process. That is, while the information itself is important, it is the interaction and sharing, as well as the construction and confirmation of identities that result from the act of dissemination and reception that are truly significant. In a community, fans identify their sources of information through the mechanism of following. They selectively follow idols, support clubs, fan organizations, loyal fans, endorsed brands, participating works, collaborating artists, entertainment media, etc., with the aim of constructing their own information network. They try their best to find information related to their idols through information networks, and their willingness to share with others is strong. Compared with ordinary Internet users, fans have a larger blog capacity and more frequent behaviors such as commenting and private chatting. Therefore, we often see tons of messages and comments from fans. For fans, simply identifying themselves as fans is not enough. Only constant interaction can enhance emotions with community members. Only by continuously transmitting information can fans increase their stickiness and maintain their fan identity.

2.3 Identity Recognition of Fan Communities

2.3.1 Idol identification

Idol identity refers to fans who agree, appreciate, or even become infatuated with an idol's appearance, way of life, personality traits, and values (Wu, 2021). They believe that an idol is outstanding in appearance or ability, humble and low-key, or has a good personality, and has unique and outstanding qualities. Idol identification includes both superficial appreciation and internalized appreciation. Surface appreciation, as we often say, "starts with appearance".

This kind of affection based solely on appearance is difficult to penetrate and last. The internal recognition of idols is the condition for them to become loyal fans, which is "trapped in talent and loyal to character" (Tai, 2018).

Idols are not only the ideal selves and role models of fans, but also the emotional comfort and spiritual sustenance of fans. At the same time, as a perfect benchmark, they also affect fans' evaluation criteria and even their mate selection criteria for others. Idols are the power that fans use to shape their psychology and personality. Fans are committed to projecting and identifying with the beautiful aspects of their idols, and using these beautiful objects to shape their ideal selves. Fans also view idols as spiritual pillars, drawing from them the belief and courage to surpass themselves and overcome difficulties, and using the pupation of idols as a driving force for their pursuit of success (Gui, Tsai & Carrolljohn, 2022). All the words and symbols surrounding idols are the food for thought for fans. They unreservedly invest their time and energy, deeply immerse themselves in it, and run for the reputation and future of idols. They uphold the creed of "even if the whole world deviates from you, I will still be by your side". In the fan lexicons, "light", "gold", "treasure", "the best person in the world", and "little prince/princess" are commonly used to describe idols (Tai, 2018).

However, it should be noted that fans may not necessarily like the actual personalities of their idols, and they might not fully grasp the "True Face of Mt. Lu" (Chinese idiom referring to a person's true character or real appearance). Fans are drawn to idols who embody a blend of reality and illusion, encompassing elements of identification with the idol's character and fantasy beautifications. Fans willingly enhance and embellish their idol's image through brainstorming and interpretation, and spontaneously shaping their direction of image interpretation. Consequently, if the idol loses control or fails to meet their expectations, the entire fan base may experience profound confusion and disappointment, potentially resulting in diminished loyalty or detachment. Nevertheless, fans are not solely impassioned "fantasists". They possess an awareness of the core nature of idol entertainment industry as a consumer goods, engage in a meticulous scrutiny of idol texts and self reflections, and also have their own criteria for moral judgment and quality standards. Essentially, they recognize the imperfections of their idols and are willing to accept them within certain limits, maintaining the belief that idols possess admirable qualities worth emulating (Black, 2008).

2.3.2 Individual identification

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, fans' idolatry meets their physiological, social, respect and self-actualization needs. Specifically, fans obtain physiological satisfaction through visual gaze and gender consumption. They establish their own social network in the community, form close ties with others, thus meet social needs. Feel the value of their own existence through idols and their communities, and gain recognition and respect. Maximize one's personal abilities, achieve self-shaping and perfection, for a sense of satisfaction and achievement. The fulfilment of these spiritual and psychological needs is conducive to the formation and enhancement of fans' self-identity, making fans feel that what they do is meaningful (Lianopoulos et al., 2020).

Sheila (2009) conducted an experiment on celebrity worship and the results showed that moderate star chasing can improve self-identification and self-confidence. Some fans stated that chasing stars has brought unexpected gains, for example, "I have met many like-minded friends", "He has taught me to become a resilient and brave person", "Because of this, I have learnt dancing, photography and foreign languages, which has made me better". It is easy to see from the personal experiences of these fans that the right kind of stargazing will lead to a more positive direction. The more pronounced the positive changes in the fans, the stronger their self-identity is likely to be.

2.3.3 Collective identification

As fans' active time and community experience in the accumulate to a certain extent, similarities between members gradually increase and collective identity gradually be formed. Self-categorization and group comparison take place unconsciously, which is the main indication of fans' collective identity. Fans are willing to belong to a certain fan group, believing that they have the common characteristics with the group members and that their group is superior to others. Over time, similarity to members within the group increases, and dissimilarity to those outside the group increases.

The collective identity of fans mainly comes from the emotions accumulated in collective activities. Fans imitate each other in behavior and motivate each other emotionally. For the same action goal, they carry out large-scale collective actions with clear aims and clear division of labor under the call of group members. This invisibly forms deep collective feelings and collective memories, and shapes the collective spirit and perpetuates the collective culture through narration, transmission and preservation. This collective spirit and culture are important parts of the fandom, and is the power support of the fan community.

An important manifestation of fans' collective identity is the formation of a sense of family. Fans have built a group of people who can share, confide in, appreciate, care for and unite with each other, which they affectionately calling it "big family". They share common group experiences and values, common partners and enemies, the same personality, strong

empathy, and therefore can empathize with each other's fervor. In collective actions, they fight together and win honors, with a growing sense of identity and belonging, and a greater appreciation of the warmth and loveliness of families.

3. Method

3.1 Research Method

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the guiding role of celebrity fan communities. The qualitative method is to explore social phenomenon through interviews, case study, literature analysis, group discussions and other methods. These methods study open-ended questions without direct conclusions about the answers, and are conducted through a small sample of specific populations. This article uses semi-structured in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are one of the most effective methods of collecting primary data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Unlike simple questionnaires or rating scales, in-depth interviews are designed to dig deeper into a respondent's experiences and perceptions of the topic. By conducting interviews, the researcher learns about the views, experiences, opinions and feelings of fans.

Meanwhile, there are three common types of interviews that can be found in the social science literature: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010). Since the research questions in this study are exploratory and aim to listen to the voices and viewpoints of the interviewees, semi-structured interviews are suitable for collecting information from the target fans of this study about their experiences with social media. Semi-structured interviews are a common type of interview used in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It is a formal interview and a qualitative method of inquiry that incorporates a set of predetermined open-ended questions (Belk et al., 2012). The interviewer can ensure that all elements are covered while maintaining flexibility.

3.2 Participants

The sample of participants were young Chinese female fans (e.g., college students or newcomers to the workplace) between the ages of 18 and 25. Participants used Chinese social media and express admiration for female celebrities. The reason why female fans in China were chosen for this study is that female fans are still underrepresented in many fan bases, and are regarded as a minority group that is excluded from the community's meaning construction process (Brown, 1997; Nyberg, 1995; Linden & Linden, 2016; Orme, 2016; Salter & Blodgett, 2017; Stanfill, 2018). Moreover, on the one hand, fan communities in China have unique cultural, political, and economic backgrounds based on the local context, and there is a strict social structure in fandoms (Guo et al., 2014). On the other hand, fan culture has also led to changes in Chinese women's gender identity perceptions, with many young women struggling for social status (Jenkins et al., 2023). Therefore, in this study, I chose to provide young women in China with the opportunity to create their own narratives and shares regarding their identity as fans.

The snowball sampling method was used for sample selection. This is because this method is particularly suitable for situations where the population of interest is difficult to reach and where compiling a list of the population poses difficulties for the researcher. Common examples of the use of snowball sampling methods include sociological studies of hidden populations that may be involved in sensitive issues (Oisin, 2007).

At first, the researcher identifies eligible initial subjects through the active participation of fans in social media; the initial fans serve as "seeds" through which the 1st wave of subjects are recruited; the 1st wave of fans in turn recruits the 2nd wave of fans. The sample thus expands gradually, just as a snowball gets bigger as it rolls down a hill (Heckathorn, 2011). Through the snowball sampling method, researchers were able to reach hard-to-reach Chinese fanbases and previously unheard voices. Ultimately, after nine months of in-depth interviews, this study reaped data saturation. In qualitative research, as in quantitative research, sample adequacy is essential for research validity (Curtis et al., 2000). Insufficient sample size will affect the quality of the study, while too large a sample size will waste research resources. Data saturation is a sign of appropriate sample size in qualitative research. The sample saturation number for this research was 32. All participants used pseudonyms to ensure that their private information was protected.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis, which is a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting on themes in a data set. Thematic analysis was used because it was the best way to conduct a qualitative study, allowing participants to explain the role of social media in guiding the fan community from different perspectives to obtain in-depth and detailed data. Inductive analysis was conducted to code the data obtained from the interviews rather than relying on theory to do so.

Braun and Clarke (2006) present a six-stage guide that is a very useful framework for conducting this type of analysis. Firstly, become familiar with the data, the first step in any qualitative analysis is to read and re-read the transcripts. The purpose of doing so is to make the researcher very familiar with the data; after that, generate initial codes, at this stage

the researcher begins to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way; the third step, search for themes, in this case the researcher examines the codes and captures important or interesting content about the data and/or the research question; the fourth step, review themes, in this phase, the researchers of this study reviewed, modified, and developed the initial themes we identified in the third step; then the fifth step: define themes, which is the final refinement of the themes to determine the nature of each theme, what the theme is stating, and how the themes relate to each other; and finally the sixth step, write-up.

In addition, this study uses NVivo for coding. NVivo can help organize, classify and structure complex data to extract meaningful information and patterns. In NVivo, coding is the process of segmenting data and assigning specific labels or codes for subsequent analysis and interpretation. Users can create self-defined coding schemes based on the objectives and questions of their research.

4. Social Media Choices for Fan Socialization

Social media plays a crucial role in building fan communities. To begin with, social media platforms provide a space for fans to interact and share, and users can easily post content, share information, make comments, and interact with other fans. In the second place, social media can promote community cohesion and a sense of belonging. Additionally, social media provides a broader communication channel for the fandom. Through social media platforms, fans can more easily spread their interests to more people, and it is also easier to be informed of the updates and activities of the idols and other fans. Due to the unique context of China, localized social media platforms have certain differences in terms of user group characteristics, content forms, and information ecology. Then, on which social media platforms do fans prefer to build fan communities? The results of our semi-structured interviews with 32 fans show that the social media platform most mentioned and used by fans is Weibo. It can be seen that in China, the most commonly selected community-building social media platforms used by fans include Weibo, Tieba, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu, and so on. Almost all fans chose Weibo as their preferred social media platform, while the other platforms were used as auxiliary.

4.1 Weibo – A Free and Open Public Space

Weibo is the most active online community for fan activities. It has gained recognition of the fan community with the advantages of easy operation, wide dissemination and strong inclusiveness. Firstly, idols register on Weibo and join the fan group chats. Fans can contact idols directly. Fans often interact with idols on Weibo:

> "I think Weibo is the most direct platform to better interact with Fan Bingbing, and I have also joined her fan group on Weibo. We often @ each other to get first-hand information about her." (Fan 2)

Secondly, the platform is rich in content, including texts, images, videos, comics, etc. Fans can get enormous amounts of high-quality contents here. Some fans said that they are very happy to see all kinds of information posted by their idols at the first time:

> "Weibo is very convenient and fast, we can be the first to see all kinds of news and information about our idols." (Fan 3)

Thirdly, Weibo can algorithmically push more relevant information:

> "Every time I read Fan Bingbing's news on Weibo or Xiaohongshu, when I log in again, I will be pushed more photos and videos about her." (Fan 2)

Furthermore, the platform is highly interactive. Through comments, likes, forwarding and follows, fans can quickly gather and carry out communication activities to find fans of the same idol:

> "Weibo makes it easy for people to forward, @ each other, give comments and likes to each other, with more instant interaction." (Fan 4)

Finally, as an authoritative media platform, Weibo publishes more truthful and credible information, thus gaining the confidence of many fans:

> "I usually follow Jessica on Weibo because I think it has the widest reach, quickest news, and most official." (Fan 29)

In addition, Weibo's Super Topic is also popular among fans. It is an interest community based on sustainable discussion topics and is a public community space. Users can post related content in the Super Topic, and other fans can follow the Super Topic and see all the content under that topic. Moreover, there are many lists set up in Super Topic, and discourse rules for sharing idol content are established in the topic community. Keeping idols at the top of the list is the daily work of core fans. The Super Topic list is evaluated based on the activity level of the topic and the number of new fans. Besides, sub topics related to idols can be associated under the general topic to achieve full coverage of relevant information. A considerable number of fans are active in Weibo Super Topic because of good interaction with the fan community:

> *"After becoming a fan of Tan Songyun, I have met other fans on Weibo and I am very delighted to know them. We often communicate and interact in Weibo Super* Topic*, as well as @ each other to discuss some of her latest updates." (Fan 19)*

As can be seen, as one of the largest social media platforms in China, Weibo is an important platform for fans to follow celebrities. On Weibo, idols maintain their relationship with fans by posting their personal moods, work schedules and recent updates on their lives, while fans interact with their idols in real time through comments and private messages. The zero-threshold and low-cost characteristics of Weibo have helped fans obtain information about their idols anytime and anywhere, allowing the originally loose fan community to find a gathering place. This not only maintains the interactive relationship between fans and idols and realizes the participation of fans who fantasize about being with their idols, but also provides a platform for diversified fan-to-fan interactions and consolidates the emotional foundation between members of the fan community.

4.2 Tieba - Strictly Managed Gated Communities

Baidu Tieba is an online communication platform for fans that predates Weibo and was founded in 2003. Users can search for keywords to find discussion forums they are interested in, making it convenient for users interested in the same topic to communicate and discuss with each other. After 20 years of development, Baidu Tieba continues to improve its page settings and enrich its content production based on user feedback. Compared with Weibo, Baidu Tieba has very clear characteristics and positioning. It provides a semi-closed social circle for people with common interests, and the members of the circle work together to formulate rules and regulate the activities in Tieba, and are committed to promoting its long-term and healthy development. In addition, Tieba has no limit on the number of people, and the more people participate in the discussion, the more active Tieba will be. Most Tieba, especially celebrity Tieba, have their own Tieba masters, Tieba rules and staff, forming a series of relatively perfect management mechanisms and culture. Similar to Weibo, the wide audience and large number of users is one of the key reasons why fans choose Tieba:

> *"I most often use Weibo and Tieba to follow Li Qin because these platforms have more users and more timely news updates." (Fan 9)*

> *"I follow Yang most often on Weibo and Tieba because on these two platforms she has the largest number of followers, so I can get a more comprehensive picture of her." (Fan 12)*

Baidu Tieba has highly segmented its content so that users can find exactly the areas and topics of interest. This segmentation also enhances the targeting of content and groups. Tieba has a relatively active commenting system that allows users to communicate, share and discuss topics of interest with other fans. However, Tieba has some disadvantages compared to other social media platforms. On the one hand, since the content in Tieba is mainly released by fans, there may be some inaccurate or unreliable information, and the authenticity needs to be screened. On the other hand, unlike other fan communities, Tieba is a relatively closed space with a single theme. In addition, each Tieba has strict organizational rules, while avoiding the dissemination of some low-quality information, also limits the dissemination of idol-related information to a certain extent.

4.3 WeChat - Close Relationships and Interaction Needs

WeChat is currently the most popular social software with over 1.2 billion users in China. WeChat has a strong social attribute, which makes the fan community built on WeChat has its uniqueness. Firstly, WeChat fan communities have closer member relationships. On the one hand, WeChat groups can establish flexible communities in different regions based on geography and activity objectives. On the other hand, new members are invited through personal social relationships, reflecting the familiarity of community members with the community.

> *"We met other fans, added their WeChat accounts, and created chat groups. We greet each other through WeChat every day." (Fan 4)*

Secondly, the purpose of fans joining the community has changed from obtaining information to online interaction. WeChat's convenient chat function allows fans to share more personal emotions in the community, and even creates small groups within the original community to meet their social needs. In addition, before conducting collective activities, fans with different responsibilities within the community will discuss, communicate and make decisions in the corresponding chat groups. Mutual concern and greetings with other fans in WeChat groups have become a regular thing for some fans.

4.4 Xiaohongshu – A Life-sharing Platform Primarily for Female Users

Xiaohongshu is a social media platform that focuses on lifestyle. Users can post content such as videos and images, they can also communicate with others through comments and following. In addition, Xiaohongshu's user base is distinctive, dominated by young female users who have a strong interest in fashion, beauty, travel and other fields. Xiaohongshu

focuses on user-generated content, where users can share their life experiences, shopping tips, product reviews, etc. Compared with platforms such as Weibo and Tieba, Xiaohongshu is more convenient for celebrities to show their daily life. More and more celebrities are joining Xiaohongshu to share their life updates and interact with their fans. The Xiaohongshu accounts of celebrities such as Kelly Yu, Jessica, Zhou Yutong, etc., mostly record their daily socializing, food, selfies, scenery, and are full of enthusiasm and love for the better life.

Xiaohongshu emphasizes interaction and socialization among users, and users can express their love and feedback on the content through comments, likes, favorites, and other means. Stars establish a fan community on Xiaohongshu, which allows for direct interaction and communication with fans, enhancing their sense of participation and loyalty. Several participants stated that they often interact with their idol using Xiaohongshu:

> *"I use Xiaohongshu and Weibo most often to follow my idol, which is the most direct. Because my idol has registered official accounts on these two platforms, sometimes we leave her messages on these platforms and she replies to us when she is not busy."(Fan 30)*

> *"A Jiao would often post some videos of herself on Xiaohongshu, sharing some of her own life experiences, and it's amazing."(Fan 23)*

Besides, Xiaohongshu also provides users with personalized customization features. Based on the user's interests and preferences, it analyses the user's browsing history and behavior and recommends content that the user is interested in. Users no longer need to spend a lot of time searching and filtering content, but can directly obtain relevant information that matches their interests. This not only saves users' time and energy, but also allows them to explore and discover new content more enjoyably. Two interviewees mentioned this feature:

> *"Every time I have browsed Fan Bingbing on Weibo or Xiaohongshu, when I log in again, more information about her photos and videos will be pushed. Most of these photos and videos are related to beauty, make-up, fashion, skincare, movies, etc."(Fan 2)*

> *"Xiaohongshu has a 'personalized' feature that pushes more relevant information based on the content I usually browse more." (Fan 11)*

It can be seen that compared with Weibo and Tieba, the advantage of Xiaohongshu lies in its strong social features, high user stickiness and great interactivity. Moreover, Xiaohongshu has a user-created content sharing community, which is one of the key reasons for its success.

5. Thematic Analysis

5.1 Individual Identification

Unlike traditional stargazers, today's Chinese fans are more focused on collective expression and action. Fan communities is a cohesive and highly mobile group formed to support idols. Through participation in community activities, fans develop a strong sense of identity and group consensus in mutual communication and participation. As an individual fan, it fulfils the need for companionship and group building, strengthens the sense of identity and belonging to the community, and lays the foundation for the construction of intimate relationships within the fan community. The identification with the "fan" is an important prerequisite for the formation of close relationships within the community, which includes both self- identity and collective-identity.

Self-identity refers to the gradual formation of a sense of identification, confirmation, and recognition of the subject through self-reflection and interaction with others in a certain social environment. The core of self-reflection is to shape an idealized self. There is a certain trait in the idol that they lack, which can make up for their own deficiencies, and subconsciously there exists a desire to turn this trait into reality. This expresses the individual fan's expectation of the completeness of their ideal self and their strong identification with their idol. As expressed by the fans:

> *"In the past, I did not have a fixed concept of beauty, but now Jing Tian is my reference, and liking her has made my own aesthetic vision higher and higher." (Fan 6)*

> *"Yang's existence and debut is the embodiment of my heart's desire for stardom. When I was a kid, I had a dream of becoming a superstar standing on stage when I grew up" (Fan 13)*

> *"I have a lot of similarities with Zhao. We are both rural girls who came to the big city alone after graduating from high school to work hard. I hope to realize the value of my life through my own efforts, just like my idol, Zhao." (Fan 21)*

It is the individual female fan's imagination of an idealized self through identification with her idols. Not only is this a real psychological need, it is also part of an individual's sense of self and can contribute to the construction of an individual's self-identity. In Freud's view, when we see uniqueness in the behavior of others, we tend to exhibit that

uniqueness as well (Freud, 1938). This is a psychological defense mechanism of seeing one's own emotions or desires in others, also known as "emotional projection". In this emotional projection, the individual female fan achieves the construction of her self-identity. The special emotions for the idols and fan activities centered on support help fans maintain a "protective barrier", its ability to clear their own risks and anxieties, and thus form a self-identity based on trust (Newson et al., 2021). In other words, for Chinese female fans, individuals see a "mirror self" in their idols, and thus fans' identification with their idols is to some extent an extension of their self-identification.

> *"I want to be like Ju Jingyi and Yang Mi. They are beautiful, optimistic, positive, brave, and they are my idols. They have influenced my life and meeting them has made my life much better." (Fan 4)*

> *"I wish I could be strong, brave and independent as Baby Yang. Whenever I encounter difficulties, I will fantasize that if I were Baby, she would face everything bravely and optimistically." (Fan 8)*

It can be seen from the interviewees' responses that for female fans, the reason why they become loyal supporters of a particular same-gender idol is more out of recognition and appreciation of the idol's personality. This deep identification also represents, to a certain extent, the individual fan's pursuit and identification with fan's ideal self. In the process of participating in the creation of idols, individuals complete the construction of their own fan identity through the imagined relationship with idols. In this collective carnival atmosphere, individuals release pressure and temporarily escape reality. More importantly, individuals also achieve self-improvement in the process of stargazing. Therefore, for female fans, these mental relaxation and ability enhancement are achieved through stargazing. Above all, stargazing promotes female fans' self-satisfaction, that is, it promotes individual self-actualization.

5.2 Collective Identification

The most important prerequisite for any group to form intimate relationships is to recognize each other's identity (Shi, 2018). The same holds true for fan groups. Social identity theory believes that individuals will define themselves as members of a specific group through social categorization based on the need to improve self-esteem, and that social comparisons will strengthen their identification with their own group, as well as their hostile attitudes towards other groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). Group aggregation and formation not only provide a personalized sense of identity or style for individuals, but also a sense of belonging and identity for the group. The emotional power of idol-based feelings is the foundation of collective identity, creating a strong sense of belonging and spiritual attachment through participation in a series of idol-related activities. Furthermore, the consistent emotional tendency of fan communities comes from value beliefs based on idolatry. The members of the fan community win emotional collective identity because of their concern and interest in a common idol.

> *"When Yang participated in the talent show, we organized Weibo Super Topic fan groups and worked together to fight for our idol, voting and liking for Yang…Joining the organization to chase stars has made me appreciate the significance of being outnumbered and united." (Fan 13)*

> *"I joined Jing Tian's Weibo fan group, and after this, I feel more like I belong. I found that there are so many fans in the world who love Jing Tian as much as I do!" (Fan 16)*

In China, the highly cohesive emotional drive within fan communities enhances the calling power of the leading fans, and the cohesion of the entire community gathers. For example, before celebrities hold a concert, fans often urge each other to snap up the tickets in an orderly manner through social media, informing fans in advance of the rules of the event within the fan community and set up QQ groups to gather and snap up the tickets. Fans have enthusiastically forwarded the ticket snapping up information in QQ, Weibo and WeChat groups. In response to the call for the content of the ticket-snapping up blogging, individuals within each group expressed their anticipation and their desire for other fans in their fan groups to be there to support their idols as much as possible. This is a core practice in the construction of collective identity.

> *"I told my story to everyone in the fan group, and every single one of A Jiao's fan was very kind and sweet. They would enlighten me, help me, and leave me messages of encouragement. I am very grateful to A Jiao and her fans, and I am lucky to know them." (Fan 24)*

For female fans in China, fan group identity not only deepens individual fans' sense of identity, but also allows them to find a sense of belonging. In the interactive process of supporting idols, a sense of closeness is created between fans from different regions as the common group identity transcends geographical boundaries. The way young people enthusiastically engage with this modern pop culture is in a way a serious and complex dialectical activity of their own. The "empathy space" generated by such raves is not only a place for friends to meet and support their idols, but also a space where young people to legitimately express their individual and collective cultural identities (Velten, 2017).

5.3 Emotional Labor

The fan community gathers as an emotional society due to the admiration of idols. Therefore, awakening fans in emotional labor is one of the important mobilization strategies. The leader of the fan community often uses words such as "together", "we", "go for it", "cheer up", etc. when assigning tasks. This evokes a sense of identity and belonging in fans and lead to positive feedback in emotional labor. Further, fans are in the same boat, in the same mind, and in unison in their emotional labor, effectively dissolving the dullness of repetitive mechanical labor.

The most common form of emotional labor in fan communities is "control comment with anti-hate". Generally when a star's negative information is exposed or his/her rating turns bad, his/her team or professional public relations company will dispel rumors and restore the star's image. Anti-hate, is a self-organized collective action by fans, which mainly includes purifying comments, reporting malicious or defamatory content against idols in social media, and spreading positive information about idols.

> *"Joining a community group can better help us Yang's fans to resist some of the nasty anti-fans slanders and provocations." (Fan 13)*

> *"When someone insults our idol or mentions something negative, we defend our idol on social media and struggle against those anti-fans." (Fan 22)*

> *"What impressed me most was when someone commented under Shu Xin's social media saying that he couldn't get her beauty, and sarcasm her., Members of the fan group saw it and sent the screenshot to the WeChat fan group, and all of us fans started to fight back against the comment in defense of our idol, and we would never allow anyone to say that."(Fan 30)*

In addition, "voting for stars" and "spending money" are other forms of emotional labor for Chinese female fans. "Voting for stars" is a form of fan support for celebrities, in which fans vote to try to get a star to the top of major music, variety show, award and other lists. The top of the list represents a star's popularity, favorability and commercial value. Many fans take the initiative to like and comment on the updates posted by their idols and forward the idol's news to the fan community in the hope that other fans support them together.

> *"I always follow Ju and Fan's Weibo and Xiaohongshu, and I'm the first to like and repost every update they post, and I especially like to see them share their daily lives." (Fan 3)*

> *"Together with other fans in my class who love Liu Shishi, I joined her Weibo fan support club. We are very active in the fan group and are often the first to post comments." (Fan 7).*

> *"When my idol Yang participated in the reality show, I went crazy canvassing, liking and voting for her. In order to support her, I also invited my friends and family around me to vote for her together. During normal times, I would support her through social media by liking and commenting on her, @ more friends around me, as well as reposting her updates." (Fan 13)*

Moreover, in our research, we found that some Chinese female fans were even willing to spend plenty of money to support her idol, although some of them were still students in school.

> *"I think the criteria for a fan is to support their idol with the money they save, browse the lists, and help their idol get popular searches." (Fan 18)*

> *"We also especially enjoyed watching Bingbing recommend the skincare products she commonly uses, and our fans often come together to buy those beauty products and cosmetics." (Fan 3)*

Although fans have always been regarded as "fanatical consumers", most female fans do find joy in this kind of consumption. For those who really like their idols, spending money on them brings great joy and satisfaction, and this is one of the ways they support their idols. However, blindly spending for idols is not a healthy behavior. Fans need to consume rationally and not to go overboard in pursuing the so-called "sought" while neglecting their own living and economic conditions. Overall, members of the fan community satisfy their desire for ritual performances through acts of "anti-hate", and the development of media technology allows them to expand their communication influence, ultimately completing the construction of the self-aspire to a dominant position in collective action. The product by emotional labor is emotion itself. Fans can obtain emotional satisfaction and emotional compensation after their labor. Besides, as an emotional society, the fan group becomes more stable as a result of labor.

6. Conclusions

This research focuses on the guiding role of social media in socializing celebrity fans in China. Through qualitative research methods, it highlights fans' choice of social media platforms and the role of fan communities in guiding fans' personal identity, group identity and emotional labor.

On the one hand, this paper analyzes the characteristics and functions of different social media platforms and explores

their impact on celebrity fan socialization. Comparative analyses revealed that the platforms of Weibo, Tieba and WeChat differ in terms of communication methods, user groups, and information flow, which have varying impacts on fan socialization. The results of semi-structured interviews indicate that fans prioritize the information richness and timeliness when choosing a social media platform, while also consider their own interests, usage habits and social needs.

On the other hand, this paper clarifies the influence of fan community on fans' personal identity, group identity and emotional labor through thematic analysis of the interview results. After joining the fan community, fans gradually form personal and group identities related to celebrities through interaction and communication with other fans. They associate their identities with the celebrities and fan communities, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and identification with both. In addition, the study found that the emotional labor of fans on social media platforms is very important. Fans put in a lot of effort and emotion in order to maintain and promote the relationships in the fan community. They post for celebrities through various ways, such as writing scripts, creating photography and video works, and post-editing, to gain more popularity. This emotional labor not only strengthens the bond between fans, but also brings more satisfaction and achievement to individual fans.

Social media has provided Chinese female fans with a large amount of content related to their idols, provided a platform for two-way communication between female fans and their idols, and changed the way they follow their stars and what they buy. Fans' daily lives are filled with a plethora of activities related to the celebrity they admire. For example, buying albums, watching films, listening to live concerts, voting, boosting popularity, visiting trendy shops, eating, travelling and buying peripheral products, etc. Nowadays, female fans have more freedom and ability to consume, as well as more channels to support their idols. Female fans are a special group of consumers and producers, who possess cognitive power, action power, purchase power and productivity different from that of ordinary audiences. They gather together because of the same interests and hobbies, and voluntarily spend time, money and effort for their idols by love, faith and devotion to their idols. As a mainstay, Chinese female fans have more obvious fan characteristics than male fans.

In conclusion, the findings of this paper provide important insights for a better understanding of fandom formation and development. Further, it also provides suggestions and strategies on how to use social media platforms to promote fan participation and interaction.

Authors contributions

Sample: Dr. AAA and Dr. BBB were responsible for study design and revising. Prof. CCC was responsible for data collection. Prof. DDD drafted the manuscript and Prof. CCC revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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