

Governance, Participation and Resistance in Chinese Fan Culture under Digital Platforms

Liting Zhang^{1, a}

¹Faculty of Arts, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology, Guangdong, 519041, Zhuhai, China

^a2335708179@qq.com

Abstract

With the rapid development of social media platforms and the high degree of marketization of the idol industry, Chinese fan culture has expanded rapidly and become a youth subculture with high organization, emotional investment and action mobilization capabilities. Based on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Jenkins's theory of participatory culture and De Certeau's theory of everyday resistance, this study explores the structural tension between participation and control in contemporary Chinese fan culture, combined with typical fan practice cases. The study found that fan support behavior is centered on "Zhanjie", forming a highly institutionalized self-discipline mobilization model; fan voting behavior is deeply rooted in the logic of capital, transforming emotional labor into economic capital, so that fans gain power and suffer alienation. At the same time, fans circumvent censorship by creatively using coded language, opening up a micro-resistance space under the dual supervision of the state and the platform. National discourse and policies actively shape the normative boundaries of fan culture, platform algorithms as invisible governance tools drive fan behavior, and idol economy institutionalizes fan consumption and strengthens its dual identity as cultural producers and consumers. The study reveals the profound impact of digital governance logic on youth subcultures and provides theoretical inspiration for digital power relations and cultural production mechanisms. However, the research is limited to secondary data and case analysis. In the future, field and longitudinal research should be strengthened and cross-national comparisons should be expanded to deepen the understanding of the dynamics of fan circle culture under different governance environments.

Keywords

Fan culture, digital governance, participatory culture, disciplinary power.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of social media platforms and the high marketization of the idol industry, China's "fan circle culture" has expanded rapidly and become a youth subculture with high organization, emotional investment and action mobilization. The core characteristics of fan circle culture include not only the emotional support and material investment of fans for idols, but also the collective participation behaviors such as community construction, spontaneous support, public opinion guidance and content production among fans [1]. In this process, fans are not only consumers of cultural content, but also producers of meaning and managers of the community. As fan circle behavior evolves into a digital practice with strong social mobilization capabilities, the conflicts of speech, blind consumption, group polarization and other problems it has caused have gradually attracted widespread attention from the government, the media and the public. Since 2020, the Chinese government has successively introduced a number of policies to rectify the chaos in fan circles. In particular,

under the national network governance strategies such as the "Qinglang" [2], the discourse space, organizational structure and action mechanism of fan circles have been significantly disciplined [2]. The tension between cultural participation and state control is becoming an important entry point for understanding the contemporary Chinese digital cultural ecology.

Against this background, this study explores the structural dynamics between cultural control and participatory practices within fan culture. While fan communities actively construct shared identities and engage in cultural reproduction, their practices are simultaneously shaped and constrained by multiple layers of disciplinary power. This paper will construct an analytical framework based on Foucault's disciplinary theory, Jenkins' participatory culture theory, and de Certeau's everyday tactics theory, combined with an analysis of representative fan practice cases, to explore the structural tension of coexistence of control and participation in contemporary Chinese digital culture. This study aims to uncover the profound influence of China's digital governance logic on youth subcultures, while contributing theoretical insights into digital power relations and the mechanisms of cultural production.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article draws on the contemporary expressions of the three key concepts of "disciplinary power", "participatory culture" and "everyday resistance" in recent digital media research [3], and uses them to explain how fan behavior is influenced by the interweaving of multiple forces such as national governance, platform mechanisms and commercial logic, and how fans respond and negotiate in this process.

First, the concept of disciplinary power originates from Foucault's explanation of "normalizing surveillance" and "internalized governance" in modern society [4]. From this perspective, power is no longer direct repression, but rather invisible control achieved through institutions, discourse and individual self-regulation. Although Foucault's theory originated from the power analysis of the 20th century, some scholars have pointed out that in China's digital environment, this power is manifested in new ways. For example, state-led public opinion regulation such as the "Clear and Bright Action" not only shapes the platform algorithm rules, but also promotes ideological self-censorship, content discipline and behavior internalization among fan groups, forming a new cultural control mechanism [2].

Secondly, participatory culture is a concept proposed by Henry Jenkins. It was originally used to describe how users break the one-way communication of traditional media in the context of Web 2.0, actively create content, participate in community interaction, and show strong cultural initiative [5]. However, this concept has undergone a major change in China's highly regulated and deeply commercialized digital platforms. More and more studies have pointed out that although fans show a high level of creativity and collective action, their expression and participation methods are increasingly subject to platform algorithms, policy review and capital orientation [2]. For example, Weibo and Douyin will give priority to recommending content that conforms to mainstream ideology or commercial goals, thereby transforming "participation" into a practice of being screened and manipulated, deviating from its original bottom-up liberating nature.

Finally, in order to understand the active performance of fans in a highly disciplinary environment, this article introduces the concept of everyday resistance. This theory was first proposed by Michel de Certeau to describe how ordinary people fight for autonomous space in a dominated structure through micro-level and non-frontal confrontation. In recent years, researchers have re-examined this theory, pointing out that Chinese fans often use implicit expression, symbolic disguise, and strategic adaptation to cope with censorship and discipline [6]. For example, they use abbreviations, code words, or puns to circumvent content censorship and create a space for "micro-resistance" on mainstream platforms. Although these behaviors

cannot directly confront the governance system, they embody a complex and creative form of interaction between obedience and resistance.

3. Autonomy, Capitalization, and Resistance in Contemporary Fan Cultures

3.1. “Zhanjie” and Self-Disciplinary Mechanisms in Institutionalized Fan Support

Fan support has long surpassed simple emotional expression and evolved into a highly organized and standardized collective action model. Among the many support actions, the support system with "fan sites" as the core is particularly critical, and "zhanjie" (site administrator) plays the dual role of commander and executor [7]. They are not only responsible for shooting and publishing high-definition images of idols and shaping their public image, but also leading complex matters such as the preparation of support materials, fund management and data statistics. The organizational system around Zhanjie, such as the "data group" and "comment control group", has a strict operating process and clear division of labor [7]. Its efficiency is even comparable to that of the formal organizational structure, showing a highly "autonomous" fan mobilization ability. However, behind this superficial autonomy, there is often a "self-discipline" logic driven by external pressure and internal competition. In order to improve the visibility of idols in the public opinion field and platform algorithms, fans need to continue to invest time, energy and money to meet the "data performance" behavior standard jointly constructed by platform rules and fan circle norms. In this process, the so-called "rational star-chasing" has gradually been simplified into quantitative performance indicators, and the standards of "qualified fans" have been increasingly internalized as community consensus, causing individuals to constantly fall into an involutionary state of repeated competition and excessive mobilization. The behavior of supporting has thus been alienated into the active catering to and reproduction of external disciplinary logic.

3.2. Fans' voting behavior and capital logic

"Fan voting" refers to the collective efforts by fans to mobilize resources and cast votes through various means in order to improve their idols' rankings in talent competitions, reality shows, or online popularity contests. Usually, fans need to purchase designated goods or services to obtain voting qualifications. This "consumption is voting" mechanism directly links fans' economic behavior with the competition of idols. Voting is not just a simple support action, but a complex system that integrates a large amount of organization, coordination, fund raising and data management [8]. The 2021 Youth With You 3 milk dumping incident, in which fans bought a large amount of undrinkable milk in exchange for votes, resulted in resource waste and public condemnation, becoming a landmark case of fan enthusiasm being alienated by capital logic [8]. This phenomenon reveals that fans' "emotional labor" is both cultural participation and passive embedding in a commercial interest network. Platforms and brands use fans' consumption enthusiasm to achieve simultaneous growth of data and economy. Fans' emotional driving force is transformed into measurable market capital. Similarly, there are also obvious economic benefits generated by endorsed products. In this process, fans are no longer just cultural subjects, but have become highly institutionalized "consumer-labor force" whose autonomy and cultural initiative are constantly weakened in the capital chain.

3.3. Fan circle language and circumvention strategies

Under the dual pressures of national policy supervision and platform content review, fan circle culture has shown strong adaptability and creativity. By creating and spreading a unique fan circle language system, fan groups have built a network of cultural symbols that can both

maintain internal identity and circumvent external censorship. These language symbols include abbreviations and metaphors such as "yxh" (marketing account), "zqsg" (true feelings) and "plq" (comment area), which not only improve the efficiency of information exchange, but also constitute a subtle challenge to discourse power [6].

This language practice embodies the concept of "tactics" proposed by de Certeau, that is, under the power structure, vulnerable groups create "space" through flexible and covert operations to achieve partial autonomy and resistance[6]. Fan circle language is both a hidden resistance and a symbol of the boundaries and identity of the fan group, strengthening the sense of belonging and cultural cohesion among fans.

4. Influencing Factors in the Governance of Fan Culture

This section will systematically analyze how these key factors influence and strengthen fan culture, and thus shape the behavioral patterns and cultural expressions of fan groups from three levels: national discourse and policy orientation, digital platforms and algorithmic governance, and commercial capital and the idol industry.

4.1. The influence of national discourse and policy orientation

In the Chinese context, national ideology not only shapes the value expectations of "youth culture", but also intervenes in the development path of fan circle culture through institutionalized governance. The government advocates "rational star chasing" and opposes "irrational support" and "fan circle chaos", incorporating fan culture into the vision of social governance and using it as an important position to guide youth values. In recent years, a series of policy rectification actions, such as the special governance of "Qinglang", have systematically defined the boundaries of fan behavior, including cracking down on irrational support, malicious control of comments, and online violence [2]. These policies construct a binary division standard of legal and illegal, legitimate and cross-border within the fan circle through legislative and regulatory means. Behaviors that were previously regarded as fans' autonomous expression, such as fundraising, control of comments, and brushing of charts, have been redefined in the policy context as "excessive", "disordered" and even "endangering social order". In addition, national discourse is spread through multiple channels such as media, education and platform announcements, further guiding public opinion, so that fan culture is wrapped in the discipline of mainstream ideology. This kind of discourse shaping is not only to regulate from the outside, but also to encourage fans to self-censor and self-manage through the internalization of discourse. In this process, individual behavior gradually turns to "voluntary" identification and obedience to national values, realizing the coupling of symbolic power and behavioral discipline. It can be seen that national discourse and policy orientation are not simply suppression or prohibition, but through a standardized path, to shape the permissible existence of fan circle culture. This mechanism is both effective in governance and brings about the compression of the space for the expression of diverse youth culture, forming a "guided cultural control" model.

4.2. Platform Algorithms and Data Logic

In the governance of contemporary fan circle culture, platform algorithms have become an invisible but extremely powerful disciplinary tool. The hot search recommendation mechanism shapes the public visibility of fan circle discourse through real-time analysis of topic popularity and user behavior data. In order to make their idols appear on the hot search list, fans constantly adjust their behavior to meet the algorithm preferences, forming an "algorithm-driven" behavior pattern. The traffic counting rules set clear weights for interactive data such as likes, reposts, and comments. Fans need to participate frequently within a specified time to meet the growth needs of "traffic indicators". This mechanism not only guides fans to act, but

also subtly domesticates the way fans participate and strengthens their reliance on data performance. The governance of the platform presents a "decentralized" feature. Unlike traditional centralized content review, the algorithm realizes the invisible embedding and dynamic adjustment of rules through automated decision-making and data feedback loops. Platform managers use algorithms as governance "agents", which not only improves efficiency but also reduces the significance of direct manual intervention.

4.3. Institutionalization of Fan Consumption

The fan economy has been deeply integrated into the idol industry chain, forming a complex system with capital operation as the core. As mentioned in the previous section, the idol economy has achieved the commercial transformation of fan culture through brand linkage, product endorsement, fan ranking and other forms. Ranking activities are not only a cultural practice for fans to express their support, but also an explicit carrier of capital value. Brands and platforms achieve precision marketing and capital appreciation through data feedback from fan consumption. Fans occupy a dual identity within this system, functioning both as cultural participants and as consumer-laborers. On the one hand, they actively engage in shaping the meaning and visibility of idols through content creation, emotional investment, and community participation. On the other hand, they are positioned as consumers whose spending behavior fuels the commercial engine of the idol industry. The symbolic value attributed to idols by fans is increasingly materialized and quantified through capital mechanisms such as endorsement deals, merchandise sales, and data-driven marketing strategies. This process not only deepens fans' emotional and financial dependence on idols and affiliated brands but also accelerates the commodification of fan culture as a whole.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the complex interplay between cultural participation and disciplinary control in contemporary Chinese fandom culture. The study shows that fan support practices, represented by organizational structures centered on "Zhanjie", have evolved into a highly institutionalized and self-disciplined mobilization model. Fans' voting behavior is deeply rooted in capitalist logic, transforming emotional labor into measurable economic capital, which both empowers and alienates fans as "consumer laborers". Simultaneously, fans employ inventive coded language and abbreviations to evade censorship, carving out spaces of subtle resistance within the pervasive oversight of state and platform authorities. At the macro level, state discourse and policy directives actively shape the contours of fan culture, embedding fan governance within a wider apparatus of social control. Concurrently, platform algorithms function as opaque yet potent instruments of governance, steering fan behaviors through data-driven metrics and automated content visibility protocols. Moreover, the idol economy further systematizes fan consumption, positioning fans both as cultural producers and consumers, thereby integrating them into a commercial circuit dominated by the accumulation and exchange of symbolic capital.

Despite these insights, this study faces some limitations. The reliance on secondary data and case studies may limit the generalizability of the findings across different fan groups and cultural contexts. Future research should conduct more ethnographic and longitudinal studies, and comparative studies across national contexts can deepen the understanding of how different political, cultural, and technological environments shape the governance of fan culture.

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