

On Power Structure and Management Mechanism within Fandom: Based on Foucault's Power Theory

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Abstract

Michel Foucault conceptualizes power as an extensive network of relationships that permeates all levels of society, rather than being confined to the political or economic spheres of control. He argues that power shapes the behaviors of individuals and groups through institutions, norms, and practical practices. Although fandom is publicly perceived as a utopia built on shared interests, it still contains inherent power dynamics and corresponding mechanisms of discipline and punishment. Taking the fandom of Cai Xukun, one of the most famous Chinese idols, as a case study, this paper explores how the internal power structure and management mechanisms of the fandom guide and control fan behaviour. It concludes that the power structure of fandom is maintained through the construction of specific spaces, the recognition of group identity, clear hierarchical division, the internalization of self-discipline, strict supervision, and the improvement of existing mechanisms. Furthermore, to enhance efficiency and solidarity, the management mechanisms derived from fandom can be applied to various types of communities.

Keywords

Power Structure; Foucault; Fandom.

1. Introduction

Relying on the Internet, virtual network communities based on shared interests and hobbies have emerged and revolutionized people's modes of socialization. Gathered by sharing their love for the same celebrity, the virtual community of fans, commonly referred to as fandom, has become one of the most impressive branches among online virtual communities due to its remarkable productivity, cohesion, and execution. Even when certain celebrities were exposed for unethical or illegal behaviour, some fans continued insisting on supporting them unwaveringly while attempting to whitewash their actions.

On July 3, 2023, Cai Xukun, known as KUN, one of the most popular idols in China, posted a statement on his social media Weibo to admit that he had had a relationship with Ms. C in 2021 which then caused her to have an abortion. This affair broke the perfect persona that Cai Xukun had always built in front of the public. After that, little information about him was disclosed in public space as if he is a faded star with moral spots and has few fans now. However, on February 6, 2024, the first magazine with Cai Xukun as its cover after his "Ms. C" affair which was priced at 80 yuan, sold 103,405 copies with a total price of more than 8 million RMB, breaking the best sales record he set, 84894 copies and total priced at 33,378,800 RMB when he was the big hit in 2018. People are curious about the large number of fans he still has and also how the fans are organized. On the surface, it is about the charm of the idol self and the blind and irrational star-chasing behaviour of fans. However, at a deeper level, it is an instance showing how the internal power structure and management mechanism within the fandom contributes to the maintenance of fans.

Based on Michel Foucault's power theory, this paper takes Cai Xukun's fandom as an example to explore how the internal power structure and management mechanisms within the fandom guide and control fan behaviour. According to the observation of Cai Xukun's fandom, this paper analyzes how the power structure is established, how fandom management can achieve the discipline and loyalty of fans, and how to maintain the stability of the fandom.

In recent years, the fandom culture is no longer just a niche culture but tends to break through boundaries and integrate with mainstream culture. The phenomenon of fandom has gradually emerged in other industries, such as investment, finance, sports, etc. By analyzing the operation mechanism of the fandom, this paper tries to provide experience in guiding and managing general virtual network communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Disciplining Power

The research on Foucault's disciplinary power is primarily categorized into various disciplines. First, the discipline power in literary works. Chen Hailan using Foucault's post-structuralist literary criticism method to analyze the power relations in *A Doll's House*, explains the hidden inner discipline and explicit verbal discipline in the work, and reveals its meticulous human rights discipline system [1]. Zhao Mengge shows the discipline power system in the work, analyzes the defense strategies and feasibility adopted by individuals under the ubiquitous power discipline, and reveals the strict restrictions on people under the surveillance of the power network [2].

Second, the discipline education in teaching practice. Based on Foucault's micro power theory, Han Qi, Xue Tianfei, and Tang Yiwu study on the discipline education of college students in the classroom space, describe the use of persuasion power in college education, as well as the implicit and explicit resistance of students [3]. The paper analyzes the positive role of discipline power, and proposes to abandon utilitarianism, conduct discipline education on college students, complete teaching tasks, and promote the rational development of students. Tian Qiongying also provides a new perspective that the power discipline not only maintains the discipline management of primary school, but also helps cultivate pupils' rational freedom and self-discipline ability[4]. The research on Foucault's discipline power in this direction mainly tends to value analysis and practical application exploration.

Third, the discipline power in the network society. Based on the micro-blog platform, Li Jiawen explores internal personnel structure and management means of aid groups with relatively tight organizational structure, summarizes the feasible methods to make the fan organization have a high degree of cohesion and action, and demonstrates the practical value of Foucault's disciplining power concept in modern society [5]. In the analysis of micro-power in network society, Chenxi believes that people's behaviour on the Internet is more susceptible to discipline, and the invisibility of power makes people affected subtly [6]. She describes the disciplinary power existing in society, and expresses her opposition to the particularization and template shaping of people by this potential disciplinary power. The research focuses on the presentation of implicit power in network life, reflecting on its influence and problems, and guiding modern power to a more rational path.

Fourth, the multidimensional interpretation of Foucault's theory of power and discipline. According to Hu Yaohui, Foucault's theory of power and discourse which presents a kind of open criticism of historical limits can be regarded as a powerful complement to Althusser's ideological theory[7]. Qin Kaiyan analyzes and interprets the discussion on "prison" in Foucault's *Power and Punishment*, and Foucault's discipline theory, discipline system, discipline means and the compliance prospect of the state system, and discusses how China should establish a compliance system in the context of the Sino-US trade war [8].

2.2. Research on Fans and the Fandom

The term "fan" initially referred to the devoted followers of a baseball team. With the continuous expansion of fan communities, their involvement in diverse fields, and the increasing purchasing power of fans, the concept of "fans" has evolved to encompass supporters within various domains. Fandom represents an interest-based culture centered around shared admiration for spiritual celebrities, organizing members and sharing content internally, and promoting idols externally. In recent years, Scholars have shown increased interest in studying fandom organizational structure, internal dynamics, member characteristics and behaviors, and so on.

Pan and Zhang analyzes the most important centralized interactive rituals in fan communities in the context of new media -- movie-watching rituals and discussion rituals, and the action mechanism of fans in the face of cultural commodities and internal members in interactive rituals [9]. This paper argues that the identity of fandom is the access mechanism of rituals, and power rituals and hierarchical rituals are the information control mechanism of online fandom. Here, interactive rituals are actually a means of community management, involving the category of power.

Under the concept of identity, taking Lu Han's fandom as an example, Jiang Taiyang believes that the premise of the construction of internal relations in fandom is the identity of individual fans to their own identity and group identity, which is an important guarantee for fans to maintain the unity and cohesion of behavioral norms[10]. Yuan Yueming believes that "identity mechanism" is not only an effective community management system, but also the construction and building of fans' self-identity [11]. Besides, the identity of group identity can also play a role in maintaining enthusiasm. When fans have aesthetic fatigue towards their idols, "collective jubilation" can make fans' enthusiasm maintain at the necessary intensity. Identity has also become a means of community management mechanism, and is also linked to power.

From the perspective of feminism, Bao Zhenpei summaries previous studies and her own empirical research, and then points out that the female-dominated fan culture has realized the transformation of women from "being seen" to "watching"[12]. However, in fandom, feminist opinion leaders are in a state of absence, coupled with the subordination and blindness of fan culture itself and the catering and shaping of cultural industry. Inevitably, there is a state of "collective unconsciousness". Liang Jing lists different types of fans such as "fans like mother", "fans like sister", "fans like girlfriend" to illustrate that although female fans have become the gazers of male idols, in essence, they still take the "second sex" gender role of women in the fandom and have not really changed their position of power between men and women, idols and fans[13]. Their discourse highlight the vulnerability of feminism within the fan culture and carries significant implications for women's positioning in the fan cultural sphere.

On cultural discourse power, Yang Jirong posits that the fandom creates a shared cultural space across social classes, serving as a platform for identity expression and promoting change [14]. The resulting fan culture exhibits minimal ideological inclinations and poses challenges to the established power structures within traditional cultural discourse. However, self-identity is primarily constructed through consumption, revealing the fragility of group integration into dominant economic, social, and cultural orders. Therefore, the author proposes that theory, idols and government should guide multiculturalism to ensure ideological security. Yang Jirong also acknowledges the potential blindness of groups within fan culture but does not go deeply into their subversion or reshaping of political and cultural discourses.

In summary, the examination of power structure and fandom encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives that are closely intertwined with the power dynamics within the community. It is evident that investigating communities through a lens of power is feasible;

however, current research primarily focuses on surface-level manifestations, necessitating further exploration into underlying power mechanisms.

3. Foucault's Power Theory

3.1. Power-Discourse Theory

Foucault argues that power is not an autonomous entity; it cannot exist or operate independently but rather functions within a network of power relations intertwined with other social forces. Moreover, power does not develop in isolation; it is intricately linked to discourse, particularly language discourse, knowledge discourse, and moral discourse. This complex interplay between power and discourse permeates all aspects of society. Discourse often assumes the guise of knowledge and truth. The theory of knowledge-power serves as a crucial framework for understanding how power operates within the realms of social and cultural life. Language acts as the medium through which power and knowledge are conveyed[15].

The theory of knowledge-power formation posits that discourse is both a product and a component of power, as the exercise of power generates knowledge and shapes specific discourses of power. Simultaneously, certain linguistic expressions can create, reinforce or weaken confrontational power dynamics. Discourse and power exert mutual influence on each other, serving as the premise and foundation for their existence and development; indeed, power is constituted by discourse. Within the intricate network of power relations, individuals may assume dual roles: being subjected to control by others' powers while also implementing their own powers. Power has control and dominance over people's thoughts and behaviours.

In general, Foucault emphasizes the close relationship between power, discourse and knowledge, believing that they together form the basis of the power structure and control mechanism in society. In the theory of power-discourse, power is realized through the operation of discourse and knowledge, which in turn affect the expression and operation of power. This dynamic relationship of interaction makes power, discourse and knowledge inseparable in society, and together shape the behavior and thoughts of individuals and groups.

3.2. Power Space

In Foucault's perspective, space serves as the locus where diverse power relations collide, and he is dedicated to unveiling the concealed nexus between knowledge and power within spatial domains. Foucault introduces the critical concept of "power space," positing that space constitutes a specific realm wherein discourses of knowledge and power operate. As an authoritative discourse embodying strong volition, power space pervades and influences all realms of human society. Space forms the bedrock for any manifestation of public life and can underpin any exercise of power.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents disciplinary power as a distinct technique whereby hierarchical surveillance, normative adjudication, and inspection are employed to shape docile bodies that conform strictly to prescribed norms. The isolation and enclosure of spaces inhabited by subjects under discipline are considered crucial techniques for effective control and supervision. According to Foucault, the isolation and enclosure of spaces inhabited by subjects under discipline are considered crucial techniques for effective control and supervision. Furthermore, these spaces should also be properly arranged and allocated.

The panopticon, originally conceptualized by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is a unique architectural design featuring a central watchtower surrounded by a circular building with large windows. This structure divides the entire ring into multiple small cells, each equipped with two windows. By positioning a single supervisor in the central watchtower, all inmates within the cells can be monitored without their knowledge of being observed.

In such a prison-like setting, surveillance personnel can monitor prisoners from all angles. Prisoners are subjected to constant scrutiny and remain uncertain about whether they are being watched or not. Consequently, they live under perpetual tension both physically and psychologically. Foucault discovered that certain modern institutions such as factories, armies, and schools have implemented varying degrees of what he termed as the 'panoptic principle'. This results in individuals being confined like prisoners within specific spaces where they experience confinement, subjugation, enslavement, and ceaseless supervision. People endure prolonged periods of conscious monitoring and fear repressive disciplinary actions. The external oppression transforms into an internal mental burden for those under surveillance; thus external power directly influences individual thoughts and internalizes these commandments as self-discipline. This achieves dual-disciplinary effects on both body and spirit while controlling subconscious activities.

3.3. Discipline and Punish

Foucault explores the profound transformations that have transpired in punishment over the past two centuries in his seminal book *Discipline and Punish*. From witnessing the brutal public dismemberment of a horse, a symbol of traditional corporal punishment, to encountering the rational and invisible panoramic circular prison, punishment has progressively evolved towards gentleness and humanity. Moreover, its focus has subtly shifted from inflicting direct physical harm and public humiliation to exerting imperceptible mental pressure, thereby achieving a more effective and insidious form of social control[16].

Punishment is typically administered by higher authorities—such as governing bodies, judicial systems, or disciplinary figures—who enforce consequences for transgressions. Its primary objective is to impose negative repercussions, including physical pain, deprivation of privileges, or other forms of suffering, to deter undesirable behavior or correct misconduct. Punishment is often perceived as both retribution for wrongdoing and a deterrent against future transgressions.

In contrast, discipline operates through a more subtle and pervasive form of power. Discipline functions by regulating and normalizing behaviour and conduct through techniques such as surveillance, examination, and hierarchical observation. Its ultimate goal lies in shaping individuals into compliant and productive subjects. Unlike punishment which stems from singular authority figures, discipline's power is dispersed throughout societal institutions and practices. Discipline looks forward by seeking to instil enduring behavioural patterns characterized by self-control and responsibility while guiding individuals towards desired behaviours and values through potential influence.

3.4. Resistance to Power

Wherever power exists, resistance inevitably follows. Foucault pointed out the symbiotic relationship between resistance and power, asserting that as long as a power dynamic persists, the potential for resistance remains. All manifestations of power give rise to counterforces and engender new forms of authority. According to Foucault, resistance transcends mere opposition to power, which entails an intricate comprehension and reconfiguration of the mechanisms through which power operates. Resistance can be viewed as a proclamation seeking autonomy and individual rights within power relations or as an alternative mode of practice and organization related to dominant power structures. Subversion and resistance are underscored by Foucault as modes of understanding and critically responding to prevailing mechanisms of power. He contends that through profound exploration and confrontation with the power structure, the redefinition of power and society transformation can be realized.

4. Power Structure and Management Mechanisms of Fandom

Taking Cai Xukun's fandom as a specific case, this paper adopts research methods including participatory observation, one-on-one interviews, and text analysis to examine the internal power structure and management mechanisms operating within the fandom.

4.1. Power Space: Fandom Dominated by WeChat Groups

For Chinese fandom members, there are two categories of platforms for interaction. First, the public media platform such as Weibo, RED, and Tiktok, with the characteristics of immediacy, content diversity, interaction, topic orientation, publicity, influence and real-time hot spots, etc. These apps provide users with convenient platforms for information acquisition and sharing, and have also become important places for public opinion and social communication. Second, the instant messaging platform, such as WeChat and QQ. Through setting up groups, fandom members can participate in discussions, share information and opinions at the same time, and build closer social relationships.

Weibo has always been the main position for fans to browse and discuss related information. However, after Cai Xukun's "Ms. C" affair, to draw less attention and to prevent troubles, his fans gradually shift their main positions to WeChat.

On the one hand, WeChat provides a relatively private space for fans to discuss about some information unwilling to be known by "outsiders" or anti-fans. For instance, some fans collect negative comments about their idol and call on members in the group to report these comments on Weibo together, alleging a violation of management regulations. News about Cai Xukun's working plan and personal life are also handed down among the groups.

On the other hand, as fans join in the groups, they entered the panoramic prison where all of them are monitored by each other. Moreover, different fans may share several groups. Once fans get friends in more than one same group, it capable for other groups to know all contents they discuss. That is to say, everyone in group is a supervisor and is being watched, so that fans need to be careful when they discuss.

A certain space controls the spread of information and the infection of emotions. Once members in the group stop forwarding messages, it is convenient to cut the spread of negative information about the idol and the infection of bad emotions. Moreover, the group chat shortens the distance between fans, establishes closer emotional connections, and makes them feel like they are whole. The strong emotional resonance and recognition of identity foster a sense of belonging among fans, leading them to willingly engage in behavioral discipline, consciously accept power dynamics, and perceive themselves as integral members of the fandom.

4.2. Power Structure of Fandom

Although the fandom appears to be a space solely driven by interest rather than profit or power, it is important to recognize that there exists a clear power structure within. The acquisition and dissemination of information about celebrities serves as a crucial resource in determining one's status within the fandom. Those who possess and share more information such as the following plan and whereabouts with other fans are able to gain more advocates, resulting in increased status and influence.

Different from Weibo, an absolutely open and flat stage for everyone, fandom in WeChat has its own characters. One of the most obvious is its clear division of layers.

The top layer includes fansites and big name fans who invest a lot of money and effort to the promotion of the celebrity. As they have huge influence in the fandom, they have the opportunity to join in the group set up by staff from KUN Studio. The staff inform them some plans of KUN and assign tasks about the promotion, and sometimes even the tickets to meet the

idol face to face. After that, these fansites and big name fans share information and allocate tickets within the fandom. They can also reflect problems and give suggestions to the studio, which can be conveyed to their idol.

The second layer is groups that can connect with the fansites and big name fans, usually the groups for fansites members that work for fansites, and friends of big name fans who also take much money and time but have not reached the top layer standard. Their relationship with the top layer that built on their efforts helps them acquire information about the idol.

The third layer consists of groups established to execute the tasks formulated by the higher layers. Fans in these groups are brought together by a shared belief, "All for music, all for KUN," and collaborate to accomplish all goals. Fans on the third layer acquire information about the idol in the process of accomplishing the objectives. Fans on the third layer acquire information about the idol while accomplishing these objectives. However, taking their effort into account, their loyalty and love towards the idol may be regarded comparatively less than those of fans on upper layers, resulting in relatively less access to information.

In summary, the WeChat group of Cai Xukun's fandom can be categorized into three tiers based on their level of dedication towards supporting their idol. The top tier holds the most influence due to their extensive knowledge about the idol, enabling them to mobilize the fandom for various tasks and granting them access to exclusive information and connections with the idol's studio. This proximity to the idol fosters an implicit sense of superiority and hierarchical structure among fans, facilitating the establishment of a power dynamics and discourse system. With the eagerness of the upper status and layer, fans are disciplined automatically to keep pursuing more power, which means more input on the idol. As the upper layer is satisfied with the current situation, they make efforts to maintain the position and help preserve the existing system.

4.3. Management Mechanism: Discipline and Punishment within the Fandom

The 'panoptic principle' is also employed within the fandom. The layers of fans within the fandom are not fixed, but rather determined by their financial and temporal contributions and effort put in towards their idols. Over time, management mechanism is gradually established and improved for fans to evaluate and classify themselves.

In 2021, when Cai Xukun held his first concert, KUN studio requested the fansites help allocate more than 1000 tickets to fans. Subsequently, the fansites published an evaluation criterion wherein a higher position on the waiting list was granted to those who spent more money on Cai Xukun's new digital album priced at 26 Yuan. While some fans questioned this money-only mechanism, some eagerly invested substantial amounts to secure the tickets. Ultimately, after ranking procedures were conducted, concert tickets were obtained by fans who had spent a minimum of 12,000 Yuan. The ranking only based on spending but not relationships has allowed some fans who were previously outside the fandom to connect with the studio, obtain tickets to the concert, and improve their hierarchy in the fandom.

When it comes to WeChat group, the money-oriented mechanism has been consistently maintained. Fans must be approved by the group owner or administrator before joining a fan group. The criteria for approval are usually whether they have spent enough money and time working for the idol. When fans choose to join the group, it signifies their implicit acceptance of discipline regulations and active participation in the maintenance of the management mechanism. The invisible threshold for entry enhances fans' recognition of the fandom value, transforming joining the group into a symbolic endorsement of their fan identity and distinguishing themselves from others. Moreover, there are periodic inspections towards members of the group. Failure to meet these inspection requirements may result in expulsion from the group. While everyday discussions do not explicitly pressure members to spend

money or time on their idol, inspection times and criteria remain undisclosed, compelling members to devote themselves every time their idol is in need.

As Foucault argues, in modern society, the subject changes from the executor of power to the disciplining person. Fans also closely monitor each other's discourse and actions. Since the chat history from different groups might be disseminated, any wavering signal displayed by one fan may lead others to doubt her loyalty. If a fan is perceived as an unfaithful observer within the fandom, particularly if she expresses dissenting opinions towards the idol, numerous enraged fans may resort to derogatory remarks and potentially disclose her personal information on platforms like Weibo, which causes no physical injury but psychological stress. The disciplining power in modern society is not for severe punishment but for the obedience of regulations. For self-preservation, fans also keep self-restraint in expressing their thoughts and avoid causing controversy during communication.

As to the record-breaking sales volume mentioned at the beginning of the paper, fans expressed their attitude towards the purchase of magazines. Fans in the group urge the group owner to organize a periodic inspection after the purchase of magazines.

Fan A: *"It is the first magazine after 3rd July (the date Cai Xukun responded to his "Ms. C" affair), we must seckill to show our strength."*

Fan B: *"This time everyone should pull out all the stops, maybe we can break our record. After all, few people bought more than one in the past."*

Fan C: *"The latest inspection is supposed to check how many magazines we've bought. I'll get two."*

Fan D: *"I've already got two, but I managed to snag two more. Initially, it was said to have a limited quantity, so I asked a friend to grab it for me. The only issue is that the order record doesn't show up on my account, which might be problematic during the inspection. Later on, they changed it to unlimited quantity for a limited time, so I bought two on my account. It's not worth giving up the potential opportunity in the future just to save 160 Yuan."*

In the words, the purchase of magazines is not just about to support their idol as their wish but also to get an admittance qualification in the fandom.

The fans group is considered a distinct space formed based on shared interests, where fans voluntarily unite and collaborate towards the idol's success. Fans attribute all their efforts towards idols to their love for them. However, the discipline methods, such as the hierarchical structure, entry requirements, and periodic inspection, all indicate that the fandom is not a Utopia but instead functions as a prison-like closed space with power dynamics and mechanisms for maintaining order. Within the fandom, the external burden from others and their internal love towards their idol combined to persuade fans to internalize the management mechanism as their self-discipline and to devote themselves to the idol.

4.4. Resistance to the Mechanism of the Fandom

Under the power hierarchy of the fandom, resistance has always existed. During the KUN 2023 World Tour, three fansites, KUN's Fan Club (KFC), KUN Global Fan Club (KGFC), and KUNMMT (MMT), got the rights to allocate a lot of tickets reserved for fans. Some fans doubted the abuse of the rights as some members of the fansites got better seats while buying less amount of digital albums than other fans.

According to the observation of fans, KGFC and MMT insisted on the money-oriented mechanism to allocate tickets, while KFC members reserved the best seats for themselves. Consequently, for one thing, ordinary fans refused to support subsequent fundraising efforts by KFC, leading to its weakened capacity to organize activists and diminished influence. For another, fans questioned the person in charge and spread the scandal among the fandom to put pressure on KFC. Finally, the increase in influence and funds enables the other two fansites to

gain more discourse power and shakes the position of KFC since it was the top fansite in the past.

Foucault emphasizes that resistance is not merely subversive or aimed at overthrowing existing systems but rather constitutes a constructive endeavour aimed at redefining and reshaping power dynamics while fostering social change and transformation. Although the resistance is still in the current structure of the power, the reasonable questioning of fans towards the fansite provides a way to vent dissatisfaction, avoids further escalation of hierarchical conflicts and collapse of current power structures, redistributes the power, and promotes the healthy development of the fandom.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, by analyzing the fandom from the perspective of Foucault's power theory, it is evident that the fandom, as a representative of modern micro-societies, is far from being a purely free and unconstrained community. Though it appears to be rebellious, freely assembled, and characterized by fans' selfless dedication to their "faith" in idols, it is precisely constrained and disciplined by an invisible yet pervasive network of power. As demonstrated in this research, the stability of the fandom power structure is maintained through a combination of multiple interrelated means: the construction of specific interactive spaces that strengthen group cohesion, the shaping and recognition of collective identity that fosters a sense of belonging, the clear hierarchical division that standardizes fan behavior, the internalization of self-discipline that reduces the need for external coercion, strict inspection mechanisms that regulate deviant behaviors, and the continuous improvement of existing management systems. In modern society, where efficiency and production capacity are highly valued, the mature management mechanisms derived from fandom operations can be effectively applied to various types of communities, providing practical references for optimizing social governance and enhancing group solidarity.

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