

The Dark Side of Fandom and the Detrimental Effects of Pop Culture Idol Worship

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Abstract

The fast growth of fan culture has made excessive idol worship become widespread causing increasing anarchy among fan groups. This paper is centered on this pain point and discusses the unhealthy practices of fan groups and the harmful consequences of excessive idol worship, presenting practical applications on how to direct the sound and sensible growth of the fan culture. Based on the report of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), CNNIC 2020 Report on Internet Usage among Minors in China and the report on People's Daily Online, the study identified the chaotic phenomena and analyzed the causes and hazards of the problem in combination with the examples of fan circle governance. At its root, the drive of capital for profit, platform algorithm bias, psychological development characteristics of young people, and weak social supervision have collectively given rise to chaos such as online violence and irrational fan support, which not only harm the physical and mental health of young people, but also undermine the online ecosystem and public order. Based on this, this article proposes a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance approach, which improves supervision, strengthens platform self-discipline, strengthens home-school guidance, regulates fan behavior, guides idol worship back to rationality, purifies the online space and provides a solid safeguard for the healthy growth of young people.

Keywords

Fan groups; Idol worship; Negative effects; Fan Community Disorders; Cyberbullying; Governance Pathways.

1. Introduction

Idol worship is a common social psychological phenomenon that has existed for a long time in social development. With the continuous popularization of Internet technology and the commercial guidance of capital, the current fan culture shows the characteristics of organization and scale, and some fan behaviors also show an extreme tendency. The Research Report on the Use of Internet by Minors in China in 2020 released by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League and China Internet Network Information Center shows that in 2020, the number of Internet users among minors in China reached 183 million, the Internet penetration rate reached 94.9%, and 8.0% of minors have participated in fan support activities. Junior high school students are the main participants, and teenagers are the core component of fan groups [1]. A solid fan base can boost an idol's popularity and drive the development of the entertainment industry, but at the same time, it also exposes obvious negative problems. Frequent occurrences of chaos such as comment manipulation, data falsification and traffic boosting, online conflicts and fan wars, irrational consumption, and privacy infringement have led some fan organizers to incite group opposition, induce minors to consume excessively, and even engage in malicious photo-editing and rumor-mongering. In April 2025, the Cyberspace Administration of China launched a special campaign to rectify the sports fan circle, cleared over 1.6 million items of illegal content, disposed of 76,000 illegal accounts and closed 3,767 problematic accounts, and disbanded 5,803 illegal fan groups, which clearly demonstrates the

severity of the chaos in the fan circle. Such behavior can harm the physical and mental health of young people, distort their values, trigger problems such as consumption rivalry and online bullying, and also undermine the online ecosystem and public order, violating the legal bottom line and public morality. Even though the concerned departments have taken certain actions including cancelling the list of celebrities, controlling the fan accounts, and strictly banning fan wars and verbal abuse, fan circle disorder has not been addressed at its core and it remains under strong governance pressure. The paper examines the expression of negative behaviors of fans and their implications as well as the causes of capital profit-influenced elements, lack of sufficient management of platforms, personality traits of juveniles, and lack of effective monitoring, and provides recommendations derived in accordance with governance samples that would help regulate the conduct of fans and establish healthy fan culture.

2. Online Violence and Group Polarization: The Core Harm of Fan Circle Conflicts

The most common form of online violence is the conflict within fan circles. In the competition between idols, fans tend to disturb the internet atmosphere by manipulating online comments, rumors, and personal insults. As per a report by the Cyberspace Administration of China on April 2025, the Cyberspace Administration and the regulators of sports have together removed more than 1.6 million pieces of illegal and improper materials, removed 76 thousand unlawful accounts, shut down 3,767 accounts and dismantled 5,803 fan groups. The violations are predominantly associated with fan conflicts and personal attacks. The accounts of fans like "Shi An" and "Li Gan" are also examples of the seriousness of the chaos, which encourage the adoration of one and the hatred of the other, the agitation of the opposition, and even the organization of offline meetings.

By practice, fans tend to attack other groups as a means to enhance their sense of belonging and cause group polarization to boost their identity. A group setting causes individual moral restrictions to be lessened and extreme perspectives to be amplified. Closed societies are susceptible to the so-called echo wall phenomenon, in which internal views are constantly repeated and tolerance to external views among fans is reduced [2], leading to increased polarization. Information cocoons have been created due to homogenization of platform algorithms that expose fans to one-sided information over a period, leading to the formation of extreme views, which fuel online violence.

The fans circle conflict is mainly made up of minors and according to the CNNIC report, 8.0 percent of them have been involved in fan support and junior high school students form their core. Fan circle conflicts can easily distort the value judgments of young people, weaken moral constraints [3], and harm their physical and mental health. In summary, conflicts within fan communities have gone beyond the bounds of entertainment, infringing upon the rights and interests of others and damaging the online ecosystem. These problems must be urgently addressed through stronger regulation and governance.

3. Irrational Consumption and Fundraising Trap: Alienation of the Fan Circle under Capital Manipulation

The profit-driven nature of capital directly dominates the consumption direction of the fan circle. Fans' consumption has gradually strayed from rationality and restraint. They will frequently engage in crowdfunding for idol support, blindly compare themselves, and follow the trend to provide excessive support [4]. In fact, many fans were not originally planning to spend so much money, but were driven into it. This consumption method not only wastes a large amount of economic resources, but also breeds various fundraising traps. Fans' legitimate

rights and interests are thus infringed, with teenage fans being more affected. The irrational consumption of fans is mostly concentrated in several aspects, such as purchasing albums in large quantities, participating in crowdfunding for idol support, and producing various support materials. These are all manifestations of alienation in the fan circle after being manipulated by capital.

In February 2023, the secondary account of Ma Jiaqi's fan club specifically induced fans to borrow money to purchase albums. This account explicitly requires fans to borrow at least 10,080 yuan and purchase 60 albums. After discovering the violation, the Weibo platform permanently banned the account. People's Daily Online also specifically criticized this matter, saying that it is a consumption trap set up by exploiting fans' emotions, and clearly identified this behavior as illegal. When "Youth with You 3" aired in 2021, fans poured tens of thousands of bottles of yogurt in order to obtain voting codes. Many people felt it was a pity to see such wasteful behavior. CCTV quickly exposed this incident, and the public was very angry after learning about it. The Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau immediately stopped this program. The amount of such fundraising often exceeds one million yuan, which not only wastes resources but also poses significant financial risks and violates the Anti-Food Waste Law of the People's Republic of China.

According to relevant data, 8.0% of underage netizens have participated in fan support activities, with junior high school students being the main participants in such activities. Some minors are young and have weak judgment, so they may secretly top up money or borrow money to participate in fan support without telling their parents. These behaviors not only worry parents, but also often lead to family conflicts and economic disputes [5]. Some idol fan clubs, under the banner of "support out of love" and "supporting idols", are charging fans exorbitant fees. They also require fans to provide private information such as ID cards and bank cards, and even induce fans to participate in illicit loans. Such behavior not only brings financial risks, but also makes it easy for fans' personal information to be leaked.

4. Privacy Infringement and Legal Violations: Bottom-Line Breaches in Celebrity Worship

From the current development status of the entertainment industry, it can be seen that some fans excessively pour their personal emotions into the process of chasing celebrities, gradually breaking through moral norms and legal boundaries, and recklessly infringing on the personal privacy of artists and related personnel [6]. The frequent occurrence of such misconduct has aroused widespread attention and deep reflection from all sectors of society, and has become an important issue that urgently needs to be addressed in the field of fan circle governance. In July 2021, artist Wang Yibo's private vehicle was illegally equipped with a location tracker, and his personal itinerary, home address, and other core private information were illegally obtained and resold by individuals linked to fan circles. The Changping police in Beijing lawfully placed the two female fans involved in the case under criminal detention. This typical case clearly exposes the malicious nature of the fan circle's privacy infringement and highlights the illegality of such behavior.

According to the police data released by the public security department of the Capital International Airport, there were a total of 20 fan-related police incidents recorded in the T3 terminal of the airport in 2017. From January to July 2018, there were 7 similar police incidents. It is not uncommon for fans to block artists, secretly film privacy, and disrupt the normal operation order of the airport. Large scale gatherings for airport pick-up have brought great pressure to public transportation management and seriously affected the efficiency of public services. In April 2025, the Cyberspace Administration of China launched a special campaign to control the sports fan circle, during which more than 1.6 million items of illegal content were

cleared and 76,000 illegal accounts were disposed of. A large number of accounts were lawfully disposed of for leaking athlete privacy and illegally reselling personal information. Such behavior clearly violates the Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, and those with serious circumstances shall bear criminal responsibility in accordance with the law.

In the fan circle fraud case tried by Jiangyin Court in Jiangsu Province in July 2024, the defendant impersonated a "big fan" of the fan circle and used the pretext of arranging private meetings with idols and selling low-priced concert tickets to defraud fans of more than RMB 3 million. He was ultimately sentenced to 11 years and 6 months in prison according to law. From the perspective of judicial practice, the resale of artist privacy has formed a complete black industry chain, and Chaoyang Court has also concluded related profit-making cases. Fans' extreme celebrity-chasing behavior in public places such as airports and hotels has also caused public order chaos such as flight delays. These cases fully demonstrate that some fans have extremely weak legal awareness, and their infringement behavior not only seriously infringes on the legitimate rights and interests of others, but also disrupts the social legal order and public management order. Guiding fans to pursue celebrities rationally and abide by the legal bottom line has become an inevitable requirement for promoting the healthy development of the entertainment industry [7].

5. Distorted Values and Psychological Crisis: Growth Risks of Teenage Idol Worship

Teenagers are the main group of fans in the fan circle, their minds are not yet fully mature, and their values are also in a critical stage of gradual establishment. Overinvestment in idol worship not only affects the formation of normal values, but also brings sustained pressure to mental health and lays many hidden dangers for growth [8]. The study published by the British Psychological Society (BPS) in *BMC Psychology* in 2022 assessed cognitive abilities in 1,763 participants. The results showed that the more excessively individuals admire celebrities, the poorer their cognitive abilities become. The scores of fanatic fans in basic tests such as vocabulary comprehension and logical reasoning are significantly lower than those of rational fans or non-fans, and this result still holds true after excluding factors such as age, family conditions, and educational background. A national survey conducted by the China Youth Research Center shows that 19.2% of children have participated in fan support activities, which mostly revolve around idol images and related products. Teenagers who are immersed in it for a long time often experience problems such as lack of concentration in class, unwillingness to interact with real people, and blurred self-awareness. The popular concepts in the fan circle, such as "a traffic-obsessed mindset," "beauty first," and "money first," are not in line with the socialist core values, and can easily lead young people to form utilitarian and one-sided judgment standards, diluting their emphasis on learning and growth, social responsibility, and national identity. Teenagers are in a stage of gradually stabilizing their self-awareness and are easily influenced by the emotions of the fan circle community, leading to impulsive and irrational behaviors. Many people place a lot of emotions on virtual idols, distancing themselves from their family and classmates, and lack real social interaction for a long time [9]. Their ability to adapt to society will also continue to decline. They are also accustomed to transferring emotional satisfaction that cannot be obtained in reality to their idols, further triggering emotional problems such as anxiety and inferiority, and even gradually losing the ability to think independently. All kinds of phenomena indicate that guiding young people to pursue celebrities rationally and protecting their mental health in a timely manner has become a pressing task at present.

6. Disruption of Public Order and Waste of Resources: Misconduct of Collective Behavior in Fan Circles

The irrational behavior of some fans when chasing celebrities often crosses the bottom line of public order, not only affecting the normal operation of public transportation and public places, but also wasting a lot of public resources and imposing unnecessary burdens on social order. On December 15, 2018, four fans from mainland China and Hong Kong bought tickets to fly from Hong Kong to Seoul in order to film their idols. After taking photos on the plane, they insisted on getting off and getting a refund. Due to this action, all 360 passengers on board had to go through security again, and the flight was delayed for over an hour. The normal travel of other passengers was also directly delayed.

In 2024, when an artist returned to Beijing, a large number of fans gathered in advance at the T3 terminal of the capital airport, chasing and blocking their idol, blocking passageways severely. The police had no choice but to send more police officers to the scene to guide the crowd. Some fans even violated the rules by "illegal security check bypass" and chasing stars, and were eventually punished according to law. This undoubtedly occupied a large amount of public management resources [10].

In addition to disrupting public order, the fan circle also causes serious waste of resources in order to boost idol rankings and sales. On April 29, 2021, which happened to be the day of the implementation of the Anti-Food Waste Law of the People's Republic of China, some fans of "Youth with You 3" actually dumped tens of thousands of unopened dairy products in order to obtain the voting QR code in the bottle cap. This approach not only violated the basic concept of green conservation, but also crossed the red line of the law, which caused widespread criticism from the whole society at that time. As a result, the program was ordered to suspend broadcasting for rectification.

In the special governance notice for the sports fan circle released by the Cyberspace Administration of China in April 2025, it was mentioned that relevant departments had cleared more than 1.6 million items of illegal content and dealt with 76,000 illegal accounts. It is clear that in these cases, there are some fans who are not aware of the most fundamental rules and always put their individual desires of idol worship before the interests of other people in the community. It does not only disrupt the regular life of other people, but also the general interest of the society. Most significantly, such conduct can very easily misguide teenagers, causing them to develop wrong values, which eventually cause social disorder and moral decay [11]. Finally, unless we enhance education and guidance and enhance the proper restrictions in place through institutions, we will not be able to control the activities of fans groups and preserve our public order and resource environment effectively.

7. Conclusion

The examination of the phenomenon of fan circles and the practices of governance indicates that these are the critical social issues and should be addressed immediately, which means that the core of the problem is always two-dimensional and does not shift away from the topic of the study. The major negative impacts are online violence, irrational consumption, violation of privacy, the wrong values of the youth, and the breakdown of law and order. Such behaviors are not just violations of the legal rights and interests of individuals and the pollution of the online environment, but may also be a threat to the healthy growth of young people and social harmony and stability. It can be concluded after thorough analysis that frequent chaos in the fan circle is caused by the interplay of such factors as capital profiteering, platform algorithms deviation, specific psychological development of young people, and non-effective social control. Since March 2021, the Cyberspace Administration of China and others have gone on to conduct

special cleanup of fan circle and eliminated about 1.6 million pieces of negative information and destroyed over 4 thousand accounts engaged in illegal activities, and have achieved some initial positive results.

To be objective, this paper has a number of shortcomings. The research centers on determining the general performance and the macro reasons behind the chaos in the fan circle, but without examining the behavioral variations between the age groups of fans and the particular processes of capital profit-making. The research could be even more profound and relevant.

The result of the research findings and deficiencies is that the next governance of the fan circle should not follow one regulation but construct a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance structure, including government, platforms, schools, family, and fan circles. The government has to develop effective laws and regulations and enhance regulatory effectiveness; the platform must optimize its algorithm orientation, perform its primary task, and prevent the spread of harmful information; Schools and families need to work together and enhance the values education and mental counseling of youth, and lead them to rational celebrity chasing; The fan society should increase its self-discipline and legal-consciousness and form the right idea of idol worship. Multi-party cooperation and specific actions are the only way to achieve a balance between the entertainment and social value of fan culture, reduce the negative aspects occurring in the fan circle, bring idol worship back to rationality, develop a healthy environment in which young people can grow up, and advance the healthy and organized progress of fan culture.

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