

Commentary | Liang Ge and Erika Ningxin Wang, Scapegoating Fandom: Digital Colonialism, Capitalism, and Chinese Party-State Power

MAY 16, 2022

In June 2021, the Cyber Administration of China (hereafter CAC) began the “qinglang” (clear-up) campaign (http://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-06/08/c_1624735580427196.htm) targeting online fan communities in China. The stated goal of the campaign is to control fans' collective behavior, including “hitting the charts” (*dabang*), excessive consumption of endorsed products, and furious fan conflicts. Among the heated social media responses triggered by this regulation, the buzzword “*fanquan siwei* (fandom mindset)” has been repeatedly employed to spitefully condemn fans and their behaviors. Chinese netizens and official media have especially used this phrase from an outsider or non-fan position to decry star fans' crazy and irrational actions in a derogatory tone. The CAC regards the “fandom mindset” as particularly detrimental, singling out online activities as especially troubling, such as fangirls devoting their time and money to improve rankings on different lists initiated and operated by social media platforms, such as Weibo; pooling their money to over-purchase products endorsed by their idols; and encouraging other fans to purchase the same products to improve their idols' commercial value.

However, we argue against critiques that blame fans for disrupting everyday social life. By contrast, we suggest such denouncements only call attention to the alliance of commercial capital and Chinese party-state power. Therefore, in the following discussion, we illustrate how fans at the very end of the entertainment industrial food chain are vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by three main forces: social media platforms, commercial capital, and Chinese party-state power.

Hitting the charts

Dabang, or “hitting the Charts,” is a routine daily activity for fans of major stars in China, especially those “data fans” (*shu ju fen*) (<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1367877920904064>) devoted to inflating the metrics of their favorite stars. Given the great financial interests behind operating and publishing ranking charts, the number of charts has increased on social media and other digital platforms. Weibo, for instance, has introduced various charts, such as the Star Forces Chart (*mingxing shili bang*). Originated in 2014, this chart was then divided into several sub-charts, including ‘formal’ charts: Mainland Star Chart, Hong Kong and Taiwanese Star Chart; and the Rising Star Chart. Chart rankings were based on votes, along with the number of views, comments, and reposts on the star's personal page or under the hashtag of the star's name. Notably, Weibo set a requirement that only the top three stars on the monthly Rising Star Chart could move to other ‘formal’ charts. Fans of emerging stars, therefore, fight to place their favorites in the top rankings because they believe that moving to ‘formal’ charts signals the great influence and commercial value of the star. In this way, fans hoped to increase the star's exposure to the public and consequently, more opportunities.

Promoting their favorite stars, however, not only required significant amounts of fans' time to click, (re)post, and comment, but also their money. For example, Weibo requires users to purchase VIP status to gain the “flower” necessary for voting for their preferred star. Such a mechanism is widely employed by other social media and digital platforms that are specializing in releasing various charts, such as Guduo Media. Thus, fans' intense love for their favorite stars is exploited by social media and digital platforms, leading fans to be subsumed into capitalism. Clearly, in the present Chinese entertainment industry, metrics have become the new oil, and the oil burns at the cost of colonizing fans and exploiting their unpaid labor (<https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=28816>).

Over-purchasing

Sales of endorsed products are often seen as one crucial measure of a star's commercial value. As a result, purchasing products endorsed by their favorite stars has become so important to fans that “spending money means being good to your idol” has become a widely accepted rule among fans. Hence, fans unconsciously fall into the trap of capitalist exploitation, spending money for their idols that in fact becomes a windfall for capital and social media platforms.

Typically, when a star endorses a product, the brand will swiftly post marketing campaigns targeting fans on social media and e-commerce platforms. For example, brands often release games with in-app purchases in their online shops, release exclusive videos or posters as bonuses, and display the sales figures of the star's endorsed products on their e-shop's homepage to stimulate bulk consumption. Capital has created a kind of storytelling that directly links fans' consumption to the commercial career of the star, and a hierarchy has been created within the fan community: the more money a fan spends for the

star, the more power and higher status their beloved stars may gain. Thus, even though some fans are aware of such consumption traps, they are caught in a situation where those who are unwilling to spend money on their idols are considered disloyal. This situation, in turn, forces fans to invest as much money as others to maintain a sense of belonging to the fan community, and in effect, turns their monetary investment into digital labor and becomes one of the ways that commercial capitalism manipulates fans.

Reporting and (self-)censorship

In addition to investing time and money in support of their favorite stars, fans often mobilize to report the posts of rival fans to get their posts deleted by the platform and/or their accounts blocked. The proliferation of such whistleblowing has been widely condemned by social media users as violating freedom of speech in the digital space. However, such behavior is also shaped by complicity between the state and the platforms. While fans use the reporting mechanism as a weapon to win fan conflicts, fan reporting practices in turn expand party-state power and governmentality over fans. As fans come to believe the idea that "reporting works," the fans self-censor their posts to avoid reporting and punishment. In the Chinese media context where fans are under constant manipulation and exploitation by state power, fans' reporting behavior and self-censorship unwittingly contribute to state power monitoring and manipulating fans. Thus, criticisms of fan reporting ignore how social media users are exploited and manipulated by state power.

Conclusion

Fan culture, dominated by the younger generation, has been under constant regulation by the Chinese government in recent years. On the surface, this is an attempt to solve many of the social problems faced by young fans online – being caught in the data trap of platform capitalism, or engaging in cyberbullying by reporting each other – by condemning the "fandom mindset" among online fan communities and then imposing tighter restrictions. This diversionary strategy attempts to scapegoat online fan communities and allows digital colonialism to operate in a more invisible way, further tightening party-state governance.

Yet, rather than fan culture polluting cyberspace and harming underage viewers, we believe that this condemnation is reversing the cause and effect, with fan culture becoming the scapegoat for data colonization. Rather than condemn the "fandom mindset" as the culprit, people should instead condemn the manipulatory practices of commercial capital, the social media platforms, and party-state power. Far from dangerous groups threatening Chinese society, online fan communities are victims who are constantly exploited by these forces for profit, promotion, and power.


On 27 August 2021, CAC urged all commercial platforms (http://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-08/26/c_1631563902354584.html) to remove the ranking charts of stars and forbade media platforms from presenting fan conflicts. On the one side, we are still observing the effects generated by the "qinglang" campaign and appreciate the state's efforts to regulate against data colonization and the exploitation of capitalism over fans. On the other, we find that the reporting mechanism in this campaign is left intact. However, what is marked as illegal, pornographic, or harmful is always defined by the heteronormative state. During the campaign till now, we see the party-state's regulation of capitalism, but not the recession of data colonization, as the party-state is, even more frequently using digital technologies and data to expand its governmentality. Before, during and even after the campaign, fans are always the vulnerable and the exploited.

Liang Ge is a PhD candidate at the Culture, Media and Creative Industries Department, King's College London, UK. Their doctoral project explores the body, desires and embodiment in Chinese boys' love culture community. Their research interests include cultural sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and East Asian popular culture. They received a BLit in Chinese Language and Literature from Peking University, and their MSc in Sociology from the London School of Economics.

Erika Ningxin Wang is a PhD candidate in Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London, UK. Her doctoral project focuses on the contemporary development of fan culture in East Asia, especially the gender issues, power, and politics of fan communities. She is also active in working on media anthropology, consumers of creative industries, youth culture, material cultural studies, platform and governance. She has also obtained an MSc in Social Anthropology at Oxford University and an MPhil in Global Creative Industries at Hong Kong University.

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Jessie Ruan 8 months ago · 0 Likes

Hi, want to offer some information for the reporting and self-censorship. I was in charge of the fans' reporting group (fanheizu), which means that I would post reporting tasks and ask fans to spend their time in reporting. However, everyday I checked the reporting results and intuitively found that less than 2% of posts would be deleted or blocked, and fewer accounts would be blocked. Since the reporting mechanism is not transparent, the daily reporting tasks are more like trainings on the belief in censorship.

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