

A Study on Media Literacy in Fan Creation Behaviors as Represented by LOFTER Users (Post-print)

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Abstract

Fan culture has become an undeniable social phenomenon in contemporary society and should not be isolated or even regarded as a pathological culture. Fans' content creation also follows its own logic; fans represent a more "fanatical" audience whose degree of media usage and thirst for information acquisition surpass those of ordinary audiences. New media empowerment has precisely further enhanced fans' rights to cultural participation and expression, continuously stimulating their self-creativity and promoting their textual productivity. These elements constitute important components in the development of fans' media literacy.

Full Text

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Abstract

Fan culture has become an undeniable social phenomenon in contemporary society and should not be isolated or regarded as a pathological culture. Fan content creation follows its own logic; fans are more "passionate" audiences whose media usage and information-seeking desires exceed those of ordinary audiences. New media empowerment has further enhanced fans' cultural participation and expression rights, continuously stimulating their creativity and promoting their textual productivity—all of which constitute important components of fan media literacy development.

Keywords: fan culture; media literacy

1. Definition of Media Literacy

Academic research on media literacy has a long history but lacks a unified definition, with most scholarship focusing on audiences' cognitive, critical, participatory, and analytical abilities regarding media. Jenkins argues that in the context of participatory culture, audiences no longer communicate with others through media as isolated individuals but exist as community members with characteristics of participation and sharing. He focuses on adolescents as his primary research group, incorporating features of participatory culture and emphasizing the cultivation of adolescents' social skills, which highlights the relationship between audiences and media in the participatory culture context.

The term “media literacy” originates from Western countries, with the English term “media literacy” also translated as “communication literacy” or “media competence,” referring to people’s ability to correctly understand and rationally use media when engaging with newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and other media forms. In 1992, the American Center for Media Literacy defined it as: “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” [1].

In the new media era, the public are both consumers and producers of media information. Public media usage has become more free, with participation gradually increasing. Highly differentiated and personalized media consumption has become mainstream, influencing public consumption culture and further increasing participatory rights. The public has gained unprecedented broad space for communication and consumption. New media technologies have brought new communication characteristics—strong interactivity, high openness, creative freedom, and sharing—which greatly promote public freedom and social democracy. New media technologies call for new media literacy. In the new media era, media literacy has transformed from traditional media critical ability to current information management capability, with traditional media literacy being endowed with new contemporary connotations.

2. Characteristics of Fan Creative Behavior

2.1 Fan-Centered Creative and Aesthetic Behavior

The term “creation” in modern Chinese is defined as creating literary and artistic works, with the purpose of satisfying the need for knowledge and creative pleasure. As ordinary creative behavior, this is not difficult to understand or define. However, when the subject of creative behavior becomes fans, the situation changes.

Beyond satisfying their own needs for knowledge and creative pleasure, fan

creative behavior is often conducted with fervent worship, adoration, and other emotions for aesthetic and creative purposes. As a dual investment of body and spirit, creation in turn strengthens fans' creative and aesthetic participation, intensifying their worshipful spirit [2].

Typically, creation requires creators to invest emotionally while maintaining a certain psychological distance from their creative texts; they must be able to both immerse themselves and detach, only then can they grasp the overall content at a rational level while engaging in creative behavior. Aesthetic ability is a fundamental capability included in media literacy. Therefore, when Kant discussed aesthetic judgment, he emphasized that the psychological elements invested in aesthetic activities include not only imagination but also understanding, with the latter's formal logic ensuring the rational cognitive connotation of aesthetic activities [3]. Subsequently, Schopenhauer proposed the aesthetic contemplation theory, arguing that only by suppressing excessive investment of will and emotion can an aesthetic relationship be established with the object. However, because fan aesthetic activities are often conducted under the emotion of idol worship, their aesthetic contemplation takes on distinct characteristics of high emotional investment. Idol worship is a psychological tendency of high identification with a celebrity idol psychologically and emotionally. Although this identification is idealized and illusory, it has very objective reality and authenticity in terms of fans' emotional experience.

2.2 Media Literacy Conflicts Created by Fan Group Stratification

The stratification of fan groups is demarcated by the economic and symbolic capital accumulated by individuals in consuming interest-based objects and recreating texts about these objects, forming synergistic effects within the group and exclusivity outside the group. The amount of time, money, and manpower devoted to interest-based objects determines an individual's discourse power within the community. "Only fans" (fans who support only one idol) who produce numerous works, actively participate in comment control, super-topic ranking, event support, and daily fan operations hold the highest status in "fan circles." They not only dominate the discourse strategies and public opinion direction of idols on the internet but also determine the discourse power of other interest-based individuals in the circle. Although there is frequent friction between "only fans" and CP fans (fans who support a couple/relationship), in most cases CP fans accept their position at the bottom of the "fan circle" hierarchy and self-regulate their behavior through "staying in their own circle" [2]. However, the illusion created by symbolic capital masks the illusory nature of fan group opinion leaders' halos. Once an individual actor's behavior shakes the fundamental interests of the idol, or when a more capital-endowed event actor changes the discourse power center, the capital accumulated by the individual actor regarding that idol (hierarchical status in the interest-based organization, qualification to enter the interest-based organization, opportunities to approach the interest-based object, etc.) may be instantly deprived.

The above describes the “status” differences between different types of fans in most situations within fan groups. However, once creative behavior is involved, the media literacy and positional differences between different types of fans make it difficult to achieve true balance. When specific incidents erupt, differences arising from different levels of media literacy will greatly ferment conflicts. At the end of February 2020, fans of celebrity Xiao Zhan launched a massive reporting campaign against a fan fiction work titled “Falling” featuring Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo, published on the global non-profit open-source fan works hosting platform Archive of Our Own (AO3), under the pretext of “avoiding personal attacks,” ultimately causing the entire platform to become inaccessible on the domestic internet. AO3 domestic creators, users, and a broader range of interest-based groups involved due to the escalation of the situation assembled to form greater resistance, and as the incident continued to ferment, it triggered a nationwide boycott against Xiao Zhan, his fans, and his endorsed products [4]. This is the “227 Incident.” Simultaneously, the “227 Incident” also triggered a series of rectifications on the LOFTER platform. Due to inadequate intelligent review mechanisms, a large number of articles were blocked on LOFTER, which also aroused dissatisfaction among many users.

2.3 Ongoing Discussions on Media Literacy

Among fan creators, discussions related to media literacy have never ceased. Some believe that the fan attribute of fan creative behavior should override the creative attribute—as long as it is out of love, the creative behavior should be tolerated and encouraged regardless of content quality. However, a considerable number of fan creators believe that once creative behavior is involved, the work becomes an independent existence separate from fan identity, and its content should first have value that conforms to general literary value judgments. As one creator on LOFTER stated: “I can tolerate many things, but one thing I cannot tolerate is when ‘the direction of writing effort is to show off oneself rather than serve the work itself.’ Whenever such signs appear, self-examination is needed. Everyone racks their brains to write a good story; the process of thinking and effort goes without saying. What is truly frightening is when the purpose of painstaking effort is to show off one’s omniscience to the world, desiring to harvest more praise rather than wanting the work to receive valuable suggestions.”

3. Empowerment Behaviors Within Fan Groups

The development of new media has reshaped the mechanisms of content production, distribution, and reproduction. Communication channels have become more diverse, people’s discourse power has increased, making the expression of different opinions in society possible. Everyone in society has different social roles. Although they belong to one or several collectives, each person is an individual with independent consciousness, having their own positions and

opinions that require space and power for expression. Previous empowerment was top-down, from organizations to individuals, whereas the empowerment level in new media first activates the self as a social individual—a bottom-up empowerment mechanism. In fan culture, fan group intentions are activated by the internet, beginning to use new media to find like-minded people, dissolving communication barriers between people, using new media technology to produce and disseminate their own cultural texts, attracting more fans to join and strengthen the group, and gradually extending to higher social levels.

3.1 Self-Empowerment

Self-empowerment emphasizes subjective agency, mainly manifested in fan culture as fans using new media to meet their own needs, continuously obtaining relevant information, thereby stimulating self-efficacy, beginning to think and create, and expressing self-will. In the traditional media era, society was not friendly to fan groups, holding deep prejudices and misunderstandings. However, due to the lack of technology and channels, individual fans had no way to vindicate themselves—they existed in isolation. With continuous technological development, media has granted them greater participation rights, opening channels for communication and platforms for dissemination. Fans' self-awareness has awakened; they exert their subjective agency, continuously improving and changing themselves, using their knowledge reserves to create new cultural texts with fan culture characteristics and disseminating them through media to seek social recognition, gradually breaking prejudices against their original identity and achieving identity reconstruction. Media empowerment has gradually increased fans' social discourse power while stimulating fans' personal self-efficacy. They begin to actively use new media to find like-minded people, break communication barriers, and proactively use new media to express themselves, thereby driving group empowerment through self-empowerment to form a powerful group that shares cultural resources within the group [5].

3.2 Group Empowerment

New media's self-empowerment stimulates individuals' self-efficacy and agency, and new media dissolves communication barriers between people, who begin to use new media to find others with the same interests and values to communicate and form groups. Just as in fan culture, fans are inspired by the same culture, and each fan individual uses new media links to find a group of like-minded people in the online world, forming fan groups. Each member exerts their abilities as much as possible within the group, disseminating and sharing cultural resources, and gaining a sense of belonging and identity from it. Fan groups allow fan members to appear before the public with the same identity, thereby strengthening fans' collective consciousness and identity. Fans begin to act in the name of the group, achieving goals they cannot accomplish as individuals through communities built by media. New media's group empowerment is precisely because these originally isolated individuals, with the help of the

internet, find people with identity in values and cultural choices. They begin to use media technology to create their own cultural value space, where they share information, create cultural texts, disseminate text resources with the same orientation, and the space operates with its own unique rules and systems. Each member also maintains high self-consciousness to sustain the normal operation of the group.

Fans are typical representatives of group empowerment. New media's self-empowerment awakens them, endowing them with a strong desire for self-expression that they subsequently actualize through cultural re-creation [6]. When they use the internet to find like-minded people and communicate in an equal space, they stimulate greater social resources, gain greater discourse power and influence for idols or fans themselves, and achieve group empowerment. Fan data from major platforms also reflects the powerful energy and influence erupted by fan groups. For example, the Weibo Star Super Topic Ranking List—star super topics are the primary gathering places for star fans, where fans obtain idol-related resources, share idol information, and disseminate their own created fan texts. This is a typical representative of fan group space. The star super topic ranking list also indirectly displays a star's traffic, fan quantity, and activity level, all of which have become one of the criteria for markets or capitalists to make selections—this is precisely the value embodiment brought by new media empowerment.

3.3 Social or Organizational Empowerment

Fans use new media platforms to build communities one after another, enabling empowerment at different levels—personal efficacy, member communication, collective consciousness, and identity recognition. They begin to form organizational scale, participating in social activities in the name of the organization. Therefore, through collective wisdom, fan organizations formulate organizational systems, integrate internal resources, and conduct clear internal division of labor among organizational members to ensure normal organizational operation. In the process of organizational operation, they achieve self-management and supervision to avoid negative impacts on the organization from members' improper behavior. Although these regulations are not written conventions in fan organizations, they are recognized and followed by every member in spirit, covering practices such as post deletion, banning, and anti-defamation handling. Although media development has granted individuals great creative freedom, it also requires compliance with certain systems—no plagiarism or misappropriation. Authors generally make clear markings when disseminating their works. In addition to promoting organizational formation, new media also grants channels and power for fan groups to participate in social activities in the name of the group.

The development of new media has reduced fans' information disadvantage. They express themselves through media, exert their subjective agency, continuously obtain resources, share and distribute cultural content, and realize their

own cultural values. Through internet development, they find “another self” in the vast sea of people, breaking their isolated state, harnessing greater energy through group power, and gaining greater discourse power. New media development has made fan activities no longer confined to idol resource acquisition and distribution. They begin to participate in social activities as much as possible in the name of the organization, forming certain social influence. New media empowerment has stimulated the energy of fan groups, forming a powerful force that society cannot ignore. The continuous prosperity of fan culture is inseparable from fans’ efforts and creativity, as well as from technological empowerment. New media empowerment is precisely one of the essential reasons for the formation and development of fan culture.

4. New Problems Faced by Fan Group Creation

4.1 Group Polarization: Online and Offline Negative Emotion Outbreaks

Regarding what group polarization is, University of Chicago professor Cass Sunstein believes that group polarization is “when group members already have certain biases, after deliberation, people continue to move in the biased direction, finally forming extreme viewpoints.” Group polarization phenomena exist not only in real society but also frequently in the online world due to internet development. In fan culture, it mainly manifests as fan group confrontations leading to cyber violence, personal attacks, etc. Compared with other temporarily formed groups, fan groups already have certain organizational scales—they are not alone but organized, planned groups with high collective consciousness. Therefore, group polarization phenomena are highly likely to occur in fan culture, triggering a series of problems. Fan group gatherings are all based on emotions for idols. Fan groups are like “believers” of a “religion,” with idols as their “spiritual leaders.” In their consciousness, idols are nearly perfect existences. They do not allow others to question or even insult their idols, especially among different fan groups—they do not allow other fan groups to have any blasphemy against their idols, otherwise they will counterattack, evolving into group polarization phenomena. The main manifestation of group polarization phenomena in fan culture is cyber violence and fan “wars.” In recent years, with the deepening of internet anonymity, fan “wars” have intensified. Increased freedom of speech has also brought corresponding crises of uncontrolled speech. The “Beijing Internet Court ‘Fan Culture’ and Adolescent Online Speech Normlessness Research Report” (hereinafter referred to as the “Report”) released on December 19, 2019, shows that in star-related personal rights infringement cases tried by the Beijing Internet Court, 70% of defendants are adolescents under 30, with most cases caused by “fan wars” [7].

The development of group polarization, besides fans’ excessive emotionalization, is conflicts triggered by media literacy differences—what constitutes valuable

creation, and what should define value.

4.2 Spectacle Tendencies Shaped by Creators

In his book “The Society of the Spectacle,” French scholar Guy Debord wrote that the spectacle society is constituted by “a few performing, many watching.” In previous fan culture research, stars themselves were mostly regarded as representatives of the spectacle. However, when discussing fan creative behavior, creators who publish their own works gain their own fans and attention in the process, giving these specific creators dual identities of both fan and “star.” This dual identity gives creators undeniable influence within fan groups. On LOFTER, each user under a tag does not have the power to manage content posted by other users, but an influential creator can manage content within the tag through their own “influence” by influencing other fans—for example, when content appears under a tag that does not conform to the conventionally acceptable content for that tag, the creator may mobilize other fans through comments and publishing their own views to force the poster to delete the content under the influence of public opinion.

In addition, some creators’ content indeed affects other fans’ cognition of the original star or CP, and more importantly, because the creative content they receive is all similar text types, it affects other fans’ media literacy.

4.3 Data Fraud: The Pursuit of Identity Exceeds the Pursuit of Meaning

“Traffic is king” has become a universal phenomenon in the internet era. Even on LOFTER, a website primarily focused on fan fiction creation, there are still black industries for “brushing likes” and “brushing follower counts.”

Due to LOFTER’s browsing mechanism, under a tag, besides viewing the latest posted content, another channel is to view content with the most likes within a certain period—such as today, the past week, the past month, or all history. Receiving more likes to some extent means the content quality is higher (e.g., writing style, plot, etc.).

In terms of positive significance, fan content creation expands the perceptual connotation and emotional intensity of media literacy. Against the backdrop of China’s vigorous development of the cultural industry and the comprehensive popularization of mobile digital media, fans also need more rational and critical awareness in their creation to promote the healthy and sustainable development of self-aesthetics and popular culture. As an important component of popular culture, the healthy development of fan culture contributes to the prosperity of popular culture, and the standardization of fan media literacy is conducive to the enrichment and development of aesthetics.

The examination of media literacy should be comprehensive and holistic, not generalized. Examining media literacy detached from specific contexts is mean-

ingless. The shaping and cultivation of media literacy should also be nurtured in daily media usage, and fans' media usage should be viewed within their overall behavior.

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