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**From consumer collectives to brand organisations: an  
online ethnographic study of the formation of human  
brand organisations in China.**

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the formation of human brand organisations within the Chinese context, using Chinese celebrity fans collectives as a starting point and representative examples. Specifically, the research focus on *How do Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online, and what characteristics do such consumer collectives exhibit?* An 18-month online ethnographic study, grounded in symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, addresses key gaps in existing brand community research, including the limited focus on human brands, the unclear distinction between consumer-initiated and company-sponsored communities, and the lack of attention to the early stages of brand community formation.

The study introduces the concept of "fan organisations", defined as more disciplined and structured groups formed by fans with clear organisational strategies and task allocations, distinguishing them from traditional fan communities. In contrast to the typical brand communities initiated by companies and characterised by consumer behaviour, fan organisations are initiated by consumers themselves and engage in collective work to increase the value of celebrities as human brands. This leads to the development of the broader concept of '*brand organisations*', characterised by five key dimensions: productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency and adaptability. Taken together, a brand organisation is defined as "*a form of human association independently and spontaneously established and operated by brand consumers that maintains consistent brand production through a clear internal hierarchy.*" These features distinguish brand organisations from traditional brand communities and provide a deeper understanding of how such entities are formed and structured in the Chinese context.

Finally, the research explains how brand organisations are formed by identifying three key constructs – production-oriented consumers, language-centred rituals and brand content - that collectively form the brand organisation. These findings offer significant theoretical contributions, redefining the nature of fan and brand organisations in the contemporary Chinese context and addressing identified gaps in brand community research.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Research background and research questions

In 2021, a collective of Chinese fans of singer Park Ji-min celebrated his birthday by not only paying a significant sum for a full-colour advertisement in the prominent section of *The New York Times*, but also by crowdfunding the creation of a specially customised aircraft. This bespoke plane featured designs dedicated to this singer across its exterior, interior, and even the tickets issued for the flight (The Paper, 2021). In China, similar instances of collective consumption are increasingly prevalent, particularly among the fans of singers and actors. Moreover, this phenomenon of collective consumption is becoming increasingly visible across Chinese online platforms. Specifically, various online activities by Chinese celebrity fans significantly enhance the celebrities' fame and commercial success. These activities include, in particular, consumption behaviour such as buying multiple copies of albums, continuously watching performance videos, voting online and actively interacting with celebrities on social media platforms through comments, likes and shares. This digital labour aims to leverage social media algorithms to increase the celebrities' visibility and market value. In result, Yuehua Entertainment, China's largest celebrity management company, successfully completed its Initial Public Offering in Hong Kong. Its prospectus revealed that over 90% of the company's revenue is derived from celebrities. Meanwhile, recent data indicates that there are as many as 1,000 similar companies in China, with a cumulative market value reaching £100 billion (Xu, 2023). Meanwhile, this phenomenon of large-scale collective consumption targeting celebrities has drawn attention from Chinese government, as the Chinese government once launched a nationwide campaign in 2021 called 'Clear and Bright: Rectify the Chaos in Fandom' to address issues such as excessive consumption and other disordered phenomena among online fans at that time. It can be argued that the online collective behaviour of celebrity fans,

particularly the eye-catching consumption phenomena associated with it, has become one of the most prominent topics on the Chinese internet in recent years.

During the researcher's pursuit of a master's degree, he interviewed over fifty fans of celebrities to explore the underlying motivations behind fan support. At that time, the researcher has observed strong criticism from mainstream Chinese media and some 'non-fans' regarding fan behaviour (Office of Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, 2021). Reports often highlight incidents where overly enthusiastic fans engage in destructive or harmful activities, such as stalking, harassment, or excessive consumption of celebrity merchandise (Wang and Ge, 2022). These reports have created a binary image of celebrity fans, portraying them as both integral to the celebrity ecosystem and as potential sources of problems due to their intense dedication. It was during that period that the behaviour of Chinese celebrity fans began to attract attention at the national government level. A series of policies aimed at guiding fan behaviour, particularly online fan collective actions, were subsequently introduced. For example, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) launched the Clear and Bright campaign in 2021, which aimed to govern and regulate a range of fan behaviours deemed toxic, such as fan mudslinging and cyberhunting. In other words, the collective actions of Chinese fans are no longer relegated to the margins but are increasingly recognised by the public, academia, and even the Chinese government. In this context, when I contrast these criticisms of fans with the highly productive collective consumption behaviours they exhibit, the stark contrast prompts me to explore the underlying logic of collective action among fans as consumers. Specifically, such stark contrast has sparked the researcher's keen interest in understanding how individual fans participate in organised consumption activities and how the units of collective action within fan collectives are formed and developed.

In marketing theory, fans are often regarded as loyal consumers, and celebrities can be deconstructed as human brands (Thomson, 2006). As loyal supporters of a brand,



the above consumption activities do not seem to be achievable by individual fans alone; rather, they exhibit a range of collective consumption behaviours, and such collective actions are often meticulously orchestrated through online platforms, showcasing a high degree of organisation, productivity, and efficiency. However, the mechanisms behind this phenomenon, including the nature of the units of collective action among fans, remain largely enigmatic.

Since the 1990s, the marketing academia has increasingly recognised a gap in research, particularly concerning collective consumers and, more specifically, communities formed by consumers. In the early 21st century, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) introduced the crucial concept of brand communities to describe the specialised, geographically decentralised social connections formed by brand enthusiasts. Over the subsequent two decades, this concept not only garnered extensive academic discussion but also sparked a wave in the professional marketing field (Fournier and Lee, 2009). According to statistics from Veloutsou and Liao (2023), an average of 6.4 papers related to brand communities were published annually between 2001 and 2010. In the subsequent two five-year periods, the number of publications increased significantly, with 36 papers published annually from 2011 to 2015, and this number leaping to 87 annually between 2016 and 2021. This indicates a growing interest in the concept of brand communities within the marketing academia.

Major brands, ranging from luxury goods to commodities, and from tourist destination brands to sports brands, have actively engaged in building brand communities (Katz and Heere, 2015; Cheung et al., 2021). On one hand, brand communities provide companies with venues to conduct a series of marketing activities. Notably, with the help of information and communication technology (ICT), an increasing number of online brand communities have emerged. These platforms allow companies to listen to consumer opinions about their brands at a

relatively low cost and make targeted improvements. On the other hand, brand communities have gradually become important venues for consumers to learn, share, and socialise (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008). Moreover, consumers' emotions, such as joy, surprise, and even a sense of belonging, have been found to be nurtured within brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2005; Schau et al. 2009; Cheung, et al. 2021). This also sheds light on some of the reasons why consumers are keen to join these communities.

At the same time, fans as collective consumers have garnered academic attention: as dedicated supporters of human brands, some instances of collective fan consumption are rooted in the concept of fan communities, a significant notion in fan studies. Some scholars also argue that fan communities are a specific manifestation of brand communities, where fans, as consumers of the celebrity brand, collectively support the brand as a community unit (Hewer and Hamilton; 2012). This phenomenon is particularly prominent in China, where the visibility of fan consumption behaviour has enabled the researcher to quickly identify specific brand fan consumers and focus on the brand communities they form.

However, the development of brand community knowledge is constrained by three important gaps. First, as has been emphasised and called for, a quasi-luxury brand community is not the same as a cheap food brand community. This implies that researchers need to be more cautious in their classification of brands. In past research, there has been scant attention given to human brands (Thomson, 2006). Despite many marketers recognising celebrities as human brands and acknowledging the unique contributions of fans as consumers to these brands, research on human brand communities remains limited.

Second, the issue of ownership of brand communities has gradually become prominent as early researchers of brand communities did not clearly define the issue of ownership (Brodie et al., 2013). In result, recent studies have blurred the lines

between consumer-initiated communities and company-hosted communities, collectively referring to them as brand communities (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). Recent research indicates that consumer-initiated brand communities and company-initiated brand communities are heterogeneous. The involvement of marketers, and sometimes even direct sponsorship by the companies behind the brands, deviated significantly from the consumer-initiated nature of brand communities. Some notable distinctions include higher inclusivity, greater engagement, and stronger member commitment in consumer-initiated communities (Pedeliento et al., 2020). Despite this, according to the statistical findings of Veloutsou and Liao (2023), company-dominated communities have comprised more than 83% of brand community research over the past two decades. This suggests that consumer-initiated communities have been somewhat overlooked.

The third limitation concerns the formation of brand communities, which is closely related to the second limitation. If the ownership of these communities is unclear, how can we analyse their formation processes? Existing literature primarily studies relatively mature brand communities, often neglecting the early stages and formation processes of these communities (Stokburger-Sauer and Wiertz 2015). This oversight leaves marketers and scholars in the dark about the origins of brand communities.

Driven by the researcher's curiosity about the still unclear phenomena of collective consumption among Chinese celebrity fans and the units of their action, as well as the existing gaps in marketing theory regarding brand communities, this thesis aims to contribute to the academic discussion on brand communities and address the identified research gaps. In other words, this study aims to challenge the existing brand community theories by examining the collective actions of Chinese fans, thereby contributing to the research on collective consumer behaviour in the field of marketing. Specifically, the research questions focus on *How do Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online, and what*

*characteristics do such consumer collectives exhibit?* The term "entities" is used here with careful consideration, as fandom studies are rife with various confusing terms, a point that will be elaborated on in the literature review.

## **1.2 Brief review of literature**

The literature review of this study begins with a review of fandom studies, focusing on both general fans and the specific phenomenon of celebrity fandom in China. It then traces the historical evolution, cultural connotations, and contemporary manifestations of fandom. The term "fan" originates from "fanatic" and has evolved over three centuries, initially associated with sports before expanding to encompass a wide range of entertainment sectors, including film, television, and music (Wohlfeil, 2018:24). The urbanization of 19th-century America significantly influenced the rise of fandom, promoting large-scale cultural gatherings and entertainment venues, marking the beginning of the association of the term "fan" with the enthusiasm and occasionally disruptive behaviour of sports spectators (Cavicchi, 2018). Historically, fans have been negatively stereotyped as irrational and excessively obsessed individuals, but contemporary research views fans as a complex cultural and social phenomenon.

The review also examines the concept of celebrity fans, particularly within the Chinese context. Historically, Chinese celebrities were figures aligned with state ideology. The economic reforms of 1978 catalyzed the emergence of modern fan culture in China, introducing foreign cultural products and celebrities (Zhang, 2016). Over time, the landscape of Chinese fan culture evolved through various stages influenced by media technology advancements and policy changes. These changes have led to the rise of complex fan practices and a focus on artist training and

branding, with communication technology and state policies playing crucial roles in this development.

Subsequently, the focus shifts to collective fandom, specifically the organisational units of fan actions. The researcher identifies a significant research gap: most scholars tend to simplistically describe these fan organisational units as "fan communities." This terminological simplification limits the existing literature's ability to fully explain the often contentious collective fan behaviours observed in the Chinese context.

Moreover, the researcher compares the realms of fan activities in China and the West, concluding that the vast majority of Chinese fan engagements are confined to the domain of consumption, with little intention of extending into the political sphere (Fung, 2009; Zhang, 2016). This predominantly consumption-oriented behaviour offers researchers ample opportunities to thoroughly examine collective consumer practices among Chinese fans. With this perspective, the researcher seeks to disentangle fandom from the traditional confines of media and audience studies, subsequently incorporating it into the marketing literature. The literature review then integrates fandom studies with marketing by examining the concept of "human brands" and how celebrities function as brands within consumer culture, highlighting the mutual influence between celebrities and their fan communities. Fan communities, seen as brand communities, create value through social interaction and collective practices, offering a perspective for understanding the collective behaviour and dynamics of these groups. The chapter transitions from fan studies to the specific development of celebrity fandom in China, exploring the potential of celebrity fans as collective consumers within communities.

### **1.3 Methodology**

In terms of the methodology chapter, this study will employ a methodological package combined by symbolic interactionism and grounded theory. Specifically, the

research adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective, which views social reality as constructed through the interactions and meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences (Blumer, 1969). This perspective aligns with an interpretivist epistemology, emphasizing the subjective nature of social inquiry and the co-constructed reality of research outcomes. Ontological and epistemological considerations are crucial, as they guide the research design and influence the interpretation of findings (Schutz, 1973).

Building on symbolic interactionism, this study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyse the formation and dynamics of Chinese fan organisations, as this approach has been suggested to be used particularly in the absence of plausible explanations for interesting phenomena in particular organisations (Charmaz, 2014). As previously mentioned, current research not only lacks a reasonable explanation for the formation of consumer communities among Chinese fans but also falls short in understanding the processes involved in their formation. In this case, grounded theory allows for the emergence of theories directly from the data, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the complex social processes involved in fan organisation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Building on this, two primary qualitative research methods are utilised: netnography and semi-structured interviews. Netnography, as a form of online ethnography, involves immersive observation and participation in online fan entities, primarily on social media platforms like Weibo. This method captures the authentic experiences and interactions of fans in their natural online environment (Kozinets, 2015; 2020). Complementing netnography, semi-structured interviews provide deeper insights into the organisational structures, roles, and activities within fan organisations. Interviews with key members and leaders of fan organisations help to contextualize the findings from netnographic observations (Deutscher et al., 1992). It is worth mentioning that the primary research method of this study is online ethnography. The semi-structured

interviews conducted as part of this research were largely completed prior to entering the field. This preliminary phase provided the researcher with an initial understanding of fan culture and online fan practices. Overall, I had the opportunity to engage with the leaders of five fan organisations and joined three of them, where I conducted online ethnographic research for up to 18 months. These five fan organisations originated from two sources. The first source was a fan organisation I had engaged with during my master's studies, and I reached out to them again to inquire if they were willing to participate in this research. The second source was based on my limited familiarity with popular artists in China, where I selected artists I was relatively familiar with and approached their fan organisations to see if they would be interested in participating. Meanwhile, this research was supplemented by 12 semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis follows the principles of constructivist grounded theory, involving iterative coding and constant comparison. Initial coding breaks down data into discrete elements, followed by focused coding to develop core categories and theoretical constructs. Reflexivity is emphasised throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the researcher's influence on data interpretation is critically examined. To ensure the rigor and credibility of the research, several criteria are applied: dependability, transferability, confirmability and credibility (Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Also, ethical issues are paramount in this research, particularly in the context of online environments (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Kozinets, 2015). The study treats all online fan organisations as private spaces, seeking explicit permission from participants to observe and quote their online activities. Informed consent is obtained, and efforts are made to minimize potential harm and maximize benefits to the participants. Pseudonyms and composite accounts are used to protect the identities of informants and ensure confidentiality.

Overall, this methodological framework, rooted in symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, provides a robust foundation for exploring the formation and dynamics of Chinese fan organisations. The combination of netnography and semi-structured interviews enables a comprehensive understanding of the social processes at play, while rigorous data analysis and ethical considerations ensure the credibility and integrity of the research findings.

#### **1.4 The result and contribution of the research**

This study makes theoretical contributions in two key areas: fandom studies and marketing research. Specifically, it defines the nature of fan entities as fan organisations within Chinese online fandom and explores how Chinese brand organisations are structured and formed. Here, the researcher presents some key concepts that will appear throughout the paper for the reader's reference. Firstly, in fandom studies, fans and celebrities form a corresponding pair of concepts, as do fan communities and fan organisations. Their definitions are as follows:

*Celebrity*: A person known for their well-knownness, can be further categorised into three types: ascribed celebrity, attributed celebrity and achieved celebrity (Boorstin, 1987: 57; Rojek, 2001)

*Fans*: Individuals who demonstrate intensive liking for someone or something and often display a distinctive "mode of reception" towards the fandom object (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017:76). The term fans also can be discerned as passive extensions of the celebrity culture (O'Guinn, 1991).

*Fan community*: A large and loosely group of fans of a celebrity or public figure.

*Fan organisation*: A spontaneously formed collective where fans use social media platforms to engage in organised fan labour, with a clear structure, strategy, and task allocation to enhance the celebrity's value.



Previous fan studies often overlooked the fundamental nature of fan entities, leading to significant challenges in understanding the complex and multifaceted behaviours exhibited by fans. Consequently, terms such as "fan community" (Duffett, 2013; Atanasova, 2021), "interest group" (Bacon-Smith, 1992), and "fan club" (Lee and Yoo, 2015; Janet Staiger, 2005) have been used interchangeably. In response, this study clarifies these previously conflated concepts, thereby making a terminological contribution to the fandom literature.

Secondly, and most importantly, the researcher introduces the concept of brand organisations, building on the idea of brand communities. In the field of marketing, fans are deconstructed as consumers, while celebrities are reinterpreted as human brands.

*Human brand:* Any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (Thomson, 2006:104).

*Consumers:* Individuals who purchase and use goods or services to meet personal needs or desires.

*Brand community:* Built on the basis of "admirers of a brand," it represents "a form of human association situated within a consumption context" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001:426).

*Brand organisation:* A form of human association independently and spontaneously established and operated by brand consumers that maintains consistent brand production through a clear internal hierarchy.

The most significant contribution of this study lies in the introduction of the concept of brand organisation, developed through an 18-month online ethnographic study of fan organisations centred around human brands. This concept is contrasted with previous research on brand communities, thereby enriching the marketing literature,

particularly within the context of collective consumer behaviour. On this account, five distinguishing characteristics of brand organisations have been identified:

*Productivity:* The active involvement of internal consumers in the collective production process.

*Independence:* Brand organisations exhibit a significant degree of independence, being entirely consumer-formed and often resistant to corporate intervention.

*Hierarchy:* A more pronounced hierarchical structure compared to brand communities.

*Consistency:* The consistent interpretation and representation of the human brand across the entire organisation.

*Adaptability:* A unique adaptability to policies enacted by local authorities.

Furthermore, this study identifies three fundamental constructs in the formation of brand organisations: production-oriented consumers, language-centred rituals, and brand content. Consumers are pivotal as they engage in co-creating the brand, transforming from passive consumers to active producers through training and recruitment. This dynamic is crucial for the productivity of brand organisations. Rituals involve collective practices such as welcoming new members, sharing content, crediting contributions, and celebrating significant dates. Brand content is fundamental, with members collecting, processing and distributing material related to the brand. This content fuels the organisation's belief system drives member engagement and facilitates brand propagation, especially in contexts with restrictive information environments such as China.

Finally, based on the observations of democratic practices in decision-making processes within brand organisations, this study offers perspectives and calls for future research. The researcher suggests that brand organisations have the potential to evolve into alternative forms of organisation, and suggests that looking at Chinese fan organisations from an organisational theory perspective may provide an important

avenue and opportunity to integrate fan studies into the broader field of organisational studies.

## **1.5 Structure of thesis**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. This chapter primarily introduces the research background and motivation, provides a brief literature review, and offers a general overview of the research contributions. Additionally, the thesis includes a comprehensive literature review chapter, a methodology chapter, three findings chapters, a discussion chapter, and a concluding chapter.

Chapter Two comprises the literature review. This chapter begins with an exploration of the term "fans" and the field of fan studies, highlighting current key issues and debates within the discipline. Given the Chinese context, the researcher specifically examines the development of celebrity fan studies in China, noting the impact of ICT advancements and changes in national policies on fan behaviour. The discussion then transitions to the concept of fan entities, underscoring the terminology issues prevalent in this area. Furthermore, the researcher incorporates the concepts of consumers and human brands from marketing theory into fandom study, detailing the evolution of the human brand concept and the development of brand community research. The chapter concludes by identifying three significant research gaps: the issue of brand categories, the question of community ownership, and the problem of community formation.

In Chapter Three, the researcher outlines the philosophical foundations of this research and the corresponding specific research methods. Specifically, this study is based on Symbolic Interactionism (Carter and Fuller, 2016) and employs Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory (2014; 2020) for data collection and analysis. Considering the nature of fan activities online, the researcher chose netnography to

investigate fan behaviour. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were used as a supplementary research method, and efforts were made to triangulate the interview data with the results of netnographic observations (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Issues related to reflexivity and research ethics are also addressed comprehensively in this chapter.

In Chapters 4 to 6, the researcher presents the findings of the study through descriptive narratives of the field events. This section aims to provide readers with a vivid and comprehensive ethnographic account, laying the groundwork for the discussion in Chapter 7. It is noteworthy that this study focuses on celebrity fan communities as representatives of human brand communities. Therefore, in the findings, the researcher primarily uses the concepts of 'fan community' and the 'fan organisation' to represent brand communities and brand organisations, respectively. This choice is based on the field observations where other fan members prefer to use the terms 'fan' or 'fan community' rather than 'consumer' or 'brand community'.

Specifically, chapter Four is the first of the three findings chapters and aims to provide a foundational understanding for readers unfamiliar with Chinese fan organisations, explaining the nature of these groups. The researcher focuses on Organisation A, exploring the development of a fan organisation from its inception to its establishment in a chronological order. The primary contribution of this chapter lies in the researcher's detailed fieldwork, which differentiates between the concepts of Chinese fan communities and fan organisations, thereby laying the groundwork for further analysis and discussion. Additionally, this chapter examines the structural composition of fan organisations, categorising different fan practices within various subgroups.

Chapter Five conceptualises the activities of fan organisations within contemporary Chinese fan culture as labour, introducing the concept of organised fan labour. This concept is distinguished from the general notion of fan labour found in previous

literature. Specifically, organised fan labour is categorised into skilled fan labour and managerial fan labour, and primarily explains and contrasts these two types. This detailed discussion not only reveals the complexities and challenges associated with organised fan labour but also highlights the crucial role of fan labour in shaping the formation and development of fan organisations within the context of contemporary Chinese fan culture.

Chapter Six shifts the focus beyond the fan organisations themselves to explore the impact of authorities and related policies on the development of these groups. Given the state's stringent surveillance of social organisations, this interaction appears inevitable for Chinese fan organisations. The findings indicate that authorities now opt for indirect monitoring, targeting fan organisations through platforms and celebrities. The state strictly regulates social media platforms, such as Weibo, which is popular among fans, confining their activities within the bounds of cultural consumption. Additionally, by regulating celebrities' behaviour, the authorities aim to ensure that fan activities do not pose a threat to the existing political order.

Following the three findings chapters, Chapter Seven offers a theoretical discussion of the emergent research results and addresses the primary research question: how do online fans organise their entities? To answer this question, the researcher first defines these entities and then deconstructs the concepts of fans as consumers and fan organisations as brand organisations, ultimately situating the research question within the marketing field. Based on the concept of brand communities, this thesis defines brand organisations as a human collective form established and operated independently and spontaneously by brand consumers, maintaining brand production consistency through a clear internal hierarchy. Drawing on these insights, the researcher explores the issue by identifying three key constructs within brand organisations: production-oriented consumers, language centred rituals, and brand

content, highlighting them as fundamental elements in the formation of brand organisations.

Chapter Eight summarises the research conducted in this thesis, drawing conclusions and outlining the implications of the findings. This chapter also highlights some potential limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter firstly aims to provide a comprehensive literature review on celebrity fans, fans entities in fandom research. Given that previous literature has not extensively explored the inclusion of fan entities within the discourse of brand communities, this chapter will commence with an introduction to fandom, gradually establishing the connection to the review of human brand and brand communities.

This chapter begins by exploring the origins of the term "fan" and the primary themes within fan studies, gradually transitioning to a focus on celebrity fandom, with particular attention to discussions in the context of celebrity fan consumption. Since the majority of fan studies originate from Western contexts, there is a lack of systematic understanding of Chinese celebrity fandom in mainstream research. Thus, this chapter outlines the development of celebrity fan studies in China, emphasizing the role of information and communication technology and state intervention in shaping Chinese fan behaviours.

Subsequently, the focus shifts to fan entities, aiming to clarify the discussions of collective fan behaviour in previous literature. An important research gap is identified: most researchers tend to simplistically describe fan entities as "fan communities," a terminological simplification that renders existing literature inadequate in explaining the controversial collective behaviours of fans in Chinese practice. This issue will be repeatedly addressed in the findings and discussion chapters. Building on this foundation, the researcher compares fan activities in China and the West, highlighting differences primarily stemming from whether fans can be perceived as a potential progressive force participating in political life.

With these understandings, the researcher liberates fans from the domain of media and audience studies and incorporates them into the marketing literature. Celebrities are conceptualised as human brands, and fans and their entities are deconstructed into consumers and consumer communities, thereby engaging in academic discussions on brand communities. At the conclusion of this chapter, the researcher identifies three significant research gaps related to brand communities: the issue of brand categories, the question of community ownership, and the problem of community formation. Furthermore, it is essential to note that this research adheres to the spirit of grounded theory, implying that the literature review process is not linear. For instance, when data in the field revealed extensive interactions between fans and national policies and regulations, the researcher returned to the literature to analyse the differences between Chinese and Western fan on the realm of their activities.

## **2.2 Fans and fandom**

There are around three hundred years to the date since the word "fan" first been used by the public and scholars (Cavicchi, 1998: 38-39). The term 'fan' is derived from the word "fanatic," with its Latin origin 'fanaticus,' which means 'inspired by a deity.' (Wohlfeil, 2018:24). There is also a belief that this term stem from the English word 'to fancy,' meaning 'intensive liking for someone and something'(Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017:76). The proponent of this opinion believed Irish immigrants brought the term 'fences' to USA, where it gradually shorted to the term 'fan' (Dickson, 2009). Nonetheless, the most widely accepted belief is that the modern concept of the term 'fan' was initially applied to baseball enthusiasts in the late 1800s, as some extreme spectators were reported to engage in physical fights during matches and seriously disrupt the progress of the game (Leets, De Becker and Giles,1995; Staiger, 2005). It's worth highlighting that the emergence of the term 'fan' is closely tied to the urbanization of 19th-century America and the subsequent framework developed to comprehend audiences. That is, the development of urbanization was



accompanied by the establishment of new transportation networks, which assisted the cultural gatherings to operate at a larger scale and facilitated the distribution of goods and services. In the interim, the birth of new entertainment institutions offered diverse experiences to urban audiences, including music, theatre, magic, and other forms of performances (Cavicchi, 2018). For instance, in a diary from 1849, a young man named Nathan Beekley documented how he was attracted to museums, the National Theatre, and various forms of entertainment during his arrival in Philadelphia (Beekley, 1849). Meanwhile, cities like New York, Boston, New Orleans, and others were also going through a flourishing period in the entertainment industry, marked by a rapid increase in the number of theatres, lectures, exhibitions, and concerts. Some journalists took note of this phenomenon and described it as tremendous enthusiasm concentrated on the pursuit of a single object (Yale Literary Magazine, 1857).

Meanwhile, terms like 'the fancy' used by British boxing commentators during the 1880s, 'music lover' describing those fond of music in the 1850s, and 'matinee girl' referring to women theatregoers passionate about male actors and follow information related to their interests, all conveyed meanings similar to the term 'fan' (Dickson, 2009: 304–307; Cavicchi, 2018; Widita, 2018). Yet it wasn't until the early twentieth century that the term "fan" found its way into common usage, which was closely connected to the burgeoning film industry. As the film industry emerged at the end of the 19th century, the term "fan" extended from the sports industry to the realm of popular culture including movies and TV shows audiences. According to Scheiner (1998, 2000), Deanna Durbin, Joan Crawford, and other movie stars of that time had quite a few followers, with some fans even founding magazines and establishing fan clubs for these stars. Besides, The Saturday Evening Post assert that 'the great factor in the moving picture business is the fan' (Brady, 1915:50), and Educational Film Magazine declared fans as 'a product of our complex modern civilization' (Educational Film Magazine, 1921:3). As well as the films, the popularity of science

fiction novels from the 1930s onwards and tv show such as Star Trek from the 1960s both attracted a large and loyal following. Some dedicated magazines and newspapers reserved a "letters section" for fans to express their opinions about the novels and to discuss them with others. This traditional form of communication also extended to offline gatherings, as fans began to organise nationwide conventions (Coppa,2006).

As time went by, various negative connotations were also attached to this term, such as ‘person with an extreme belief then tend to have unreasonable behaviour’ (Jenkins, 1992: 12). Fans are also described as a ‘hysterical crowd’ and ‘unconventional and unusual’ as their behaviour usually seems nonsensical to non-fans and the public (Jensen, 1992: 14; Thorne and Bruner, 2006: 53). Milgram (1977) describes fans as ‘someone who goes to extremes in beliefs, feelings and actions.’ An antecedent for such negative stereotypes might that fan once caused actual danger and disruption. For example, The New York Times reported that fans attending actor Rudolph Valentino's funeral once caused a disturbance, to the extent that the New York Police Department had to intervene to maintain order, as there were desperate fans attempting suicide (New York Times, 1926). In addition, over-enthusiastic fans used to cause crowd disturbances in a soccer game in 1985, leading to the death of 35 Italian fans (Sandvoss, 2005). Among these notorious cases, the most extreme one might be John Hinckley's attempt to assassinate then-U.S. President Reagan in order to gain the attention of the celebrity Jodie Foster (Krämer,2003). Based on these real-life events, fans have gradually attracted the attention of social psychologists, and their behaviour has been referred to as ‘pathological behaviour’ (Jenson, 1992:20). Driven by such impressions, the public readily attributes specific tragic events to fans. For instance, during a music concert in 1979, a stampede incident resulted in the death of 11 teenagers. Despite investigations later confirming that the cause of this tragedy was due to inadequate venue infrastructure and a lack of communication among staff members, people instinctively placed blame on the fans, labelling them as

"barbarians" and accusing them of having 'stomped 11 persons to death after having numbed their brains on weeds, chemicals and Southern Comfort' (Johnson, 1987:362).

Similarly, the dark side of fan culture is also seen in its significant role in the celebrity-making process of serial killers (Fatallah, 2023). For example, fans of serial killers have played a crucial role in their transformation from mere criminals to cultural icons. Specifically, Jack the Ripper actively shaped public opinion through the "Dear Boss" letters, while later 20th-century serial killers often sent letters to the media or left symbolic marks during investigations to incite fear and attract attention. Fans further amplified their presence by continuously discussing, collecting, and analysing crime details, solidifying their image and even attributing them with a rebellious "legendary" status. Moreover, the rise of the "murderabilia" market further highlights the role of fans in fueling the spread of serial killer culture (Fatallah, 2023:3). By purchasing letters, personal belongings, and even artworks created by serial killers, fans elevate these criminals to an alternative form of "celebrity." This obsession not only keeps their stories alive but also blurs their identity as criminals, leading some fans to perceive them as victims of social injustice or even symbols of resistance against authority. It is precisely this fan culture that continuously propagates and reshapes the image of serial killers, ultimately securing their place in popular culture (Schmid, 2005).

Another less extreme but prevalent stereotype haunting fans is their perceived inability to fit into normal society. Some culture critics posit that numerous fans are avid nerds, geeks, or even 'alienated social misfits', and this viewpoint represents a substantial segment of the public's perception of fans (Wohlfeil, 2018: 40; Droste, 1995). Fans are also frequently accused of investing too much time in media commodities such as video games, music, celebrities, thereby escaping from their everyday lives (Milner, 2009). And such characteristics are also reflected in the fact

that fans may experience loneliness, exclusion, or even discrimination in schools or workplaces (Kozinets, 2001).

In response to this phenomenon, Fiske (1989) theoretically explained fans behaviours from the capital perspective in an early study. He made his arguments based on the two-capital model of Bourdieu (1984), which pointed out that fans could be deprived of economic capitals and culture capitals. On this account, being a fan of musicians or sports stars may help them acquire fandom knowledge and interact with other fans among the communities. Such self-formed communities provide a type of habitat for these like-minded people, and such acquired social capital could offer ways to fill cultural gaps and provide fans social prestige and self-esteem. For example, Wohlfeil (2012,2018) described how he faced disappointments in real life and then was inspired and even 'saved' by the stories of a female actress Jena Malone. Jenkins (1992a) also dedicated to rationalising and legitimising the behaviour of media fans, defining their excessive enthusiasm as 'participatory culture.' Specifically, he argued what distinguishes media fans from mere media audiences is their distinctive 'mode of reception' (Jenkins, 1992b:20). That is, fans not only passively consume books, movies, and TV shows, but they also actively interact with the metatext through interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction. In practice, media fans might spontaneously write slash fictions featuring their favourite characters from movies or television shows; they also tend to use TV images and music as raw materials to craft their own videos and share in communities and conventions.

### **2.3 Celebrity fandom and consumption**

In ancient times, individuals who achieved greatness in association with emperors, religion, and the military were revered by people. The statues of Egyptian pharaohs and the massive sculptures on Mount Rushmore are examples of early celebrity

worship (Radford and Bloch, 2012). Scholars may view celebrities from various perspectives, leading to ambiguity in the definition of celebrity. One of the fundamental definitions of the term celebrity is 'a person who is known for his well-knownness' (Boorstin, 1987: 57). During the same period, Rein, Kottler, and Stoaller (1987) believed that celebrities are not only individuals who attract attention but also capable of generating value. Similarly, Rosen (1981: 845) and Adler (1985) each provide an explanation from an economic perspective regarding celebrities as a phenomenon, "wherein relatively small numbers of people earn enormous amounts of money and dominate the activities in which they engage," and the conditions under which this phenomenon exists. As an essential element in consumer studies, celebrities are defined as 'a commodification of the human form, the epitome of economic fetishism' (Cashmore and Parker, 2003: 215). Building upon this understanding, the conceptualization of 'fans' can be discerned as passive extensions of the celebrity culture (O'Guinn, 1991). Meanwhile, Rojek (2001) distinguish celebrity as three types: ascribed celebrity comes from the pedigree, achieved celebrity is the result of accomplishment while attributed celebrity (or 'manufactured celebrity') is mainly credited with media coverage (Banister and Cocker, 2014; Moraes et al., 2019).

Over the past 200 years, the focus of individual adoration has gradually shifted to celebrities cultivated by media production and audience construction (Hills, 2006). With the development of Hollywood star system since the 1920s, an increasing number of emblematic celebrities have come into the public's view, including film and television stars, singers, athletes, models, and other famous individuals, who have become a part of popular culture consumption (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). Returning to 1909, since the first time American films began to promote the names of performers, it has been recognized that although the participation of stars cannot guarantee the success of a film, they are still widely regarded as an important

component of the Hollywood economy (McDonald, 2003). Dyer (1998:11) believes that stars have the ability to “sell films and organize markets”; Similarly, Walker (1974:15) also considers the use of stars as an important strategy to 'stabilize audience responses.' As a phenomenon of production in Hollywood, stars are thus viewed as tangible assets can be marketed (Powdermaker, 1950).

Driven by this mode of media production, celebrity fandom emerged accordingly, as a specific group identified as celebrity fans often showcases a reverence for their chosen celebrities that evokes the fervour of religious devotion. (Jenkins, 2006; Hewer and Hamilton, 2012). This fervent emotional investment often manifests as a sense of personal connection with celebrities, even in the absence of direct interaction. Such perceived bonds are commonly conceptualised as "para-social interactions" or "quasi-relationships" from a psychiatric perspective (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Koenig and Lessan, 1985). This relationship is often interpreted as an unrequited investment, wherein the emotional attachment of fans towards celebrities is inherently one-sided and asymmetrical (Chang et al., 2023). Fans may experience a sense of closeness, attachment, or even perceive their idol as a significant presence in their lives, while the celebrity remains largely unaware of the existence of individual fans. The essence of this parasocial relationship lies in its ability to provide emotional gratification without embodying genuine reciprocity or real-world interaction (Elfving-Hwang, 2018).

Scholars have identified five key characteristics of parasocial relationships (Jones et al., 2022). First, unreciprocated commitment describes the inherently one-sided nature of fan devotion, where engagement remains unilateral and imagined rather than mutual (Rubin & Step, 2000). Second, intertextuality enables fans to construct a holistic perception of a celebrity by synthesizing information from various media sources, fostering a sense of familiarity beyond the public persona (Wohlfeil et al.,

2019). Third, perceived homophily suggests that fans are more likely to engage with celebrities they perceive as sharing similarities with themselves, often through projection (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Fourth, PSRs may function as substitutes for autonomous social participation, particularly among individuals who struggle with real-life relationships or experience social exclusion (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Finally, parasocial love plays a crucial role in celebrity consumption, as some fans experience their admiration as akin to romantic or deeply personal relationships, making PSRs both emotionally significant and precarious (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012).

Furthermore, transformations in media have altered the ways in which parasocial relationships are manifested (Liu, 2023). In the last two decades, the distribution of celebrity discourse in media channels has expanded beyond the confines of traditional book publishing, television and radio (Paul, 2003). The emergence and growth of social media have not only amplified the spread of information about celebrities but have also thrust their personal lives into the limelight. This has led many modern fans to feel that they are privy to every detail of a celebrity's life, and even to imagine they have formed some kind of intimate relationship with celebrities. Such parasocial relationships in the social media era are reflected in the following cases. For example, fans could feel a sense of loss when a television show starring their favourite celebrity is cancelled (Eyal and Cohen, 2006); fans might earnestly comment advising her to prioritize her career when a newly-debuted actress announces her relationship (Wu, 2021). In some extreme cases, when a celebrity passes away, the pain and grief fans experience can be even more intense (Radford and Bloch, 2012).

As expected, celebrity fans, like fans of other types, have also faced a flood of criticism and ridicule from critics, as some 'celebrity worships' are obsessed with their favourite celebrity, even stalk celebrities irrationally and violently (Houran et al., 2005; McCutcheon et al., 2006). Scholars even define the phenomenon of celebrity

worship as serious mental illnesses. For instance, in the early 20th century, with the swift rise of the film industry, certain movie exhibitors began expressing concerns about audiences who would watch a film multiple times instead of leaving the theatre after its finale. Furthermore, these exhibitors lamented that many ticket purchasers were primarily drawn by the allure of actress Mae West, rather than the compelling plots of the films (Robertson, 1996). Moreover, some forms of celebrity worship are difficult for the general public to accept. In the early 21st century, fans would purchase paparazzi photos of Brad Pitt and George Clooney from their private lives on commercial pornographic websites. Taking True Male Celebs as an example, the monthly subscription fee of this website was up to \$36.19 (Paul, 2003). In addition, such criticism directed at celebrity fans has even had an impact on fan studies scholars. For instance, while researching the fans' consumption behaviour of American actress Jena Malone, Wohlfeil (2012, 2018:23) has, on more than one occasion, been urged by fellow colleagues to conclude this topic "for his own good" and seek the next "appropriate academic pursuit." Yet some fan scholars are cautious about such negative depiction and argue that this widespread condemnation of fandom is rooted in ideological scapegoating. The underlying purpose of portraying fans as pathological figures and disseminating severe individual tragic related to fans are twofold. On the one hand, it accentuates the media's influence and importance, on the other hand, critics aim to indirectly critique the mass media and its association with "low culture" by employing fans as a mode of agency (Jenson, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005). Similarly, in stark contrast to these criticisms and judgements, many fans recount affirming and heartening episodes stemming from their celebrity adoration. For instance, a 38-year-old schoolteacher Danielle claimed that Tom Petty's music serves as a bond between her and her spouse, noting that listening to the song "Hard Promises" often diffuses their marital arguments. Even more intriguingly, Chris, a fan of Tom Petty, once asserted that the pain in his knee miraculously disappeared the day after attending one of Petty's concerts (Schau and Muniz, 2007).



In this case, beyond these seemingly anecdotal phenomena, what kinds of fan practices do celebrity fans typically engage in? As suggested by Harrington and Bielby (2005), the researcher attempts to conduct a literature review from the perspectives of both media studies and consumer behaviour research. From the media studies perspective, combining Staiger (2005) and Jenkins (1992) salient insights, the researcher categorises fan practices into two main types: unique reception mode and a preference for collective behaviour. Firstly, celebrity fans exhibit a unique mode of reception towards celebrity texts, which includes interpretation, appropriation, and even reconstruction (Jenkins, 1992). Specifically, fans are more enthusiastic than ordinary audiences in interpreting celebrity texts. They not only passively browse celebrity-related information, but fans may also actively seek out and discuss such information, sometimes even going beyond the meta-text itself. For example, when watching a TV series starring a celebrity, avid fans may tend to engage in "faithful" and repetitive viewing, often adhering to "special rules." For example, a woman from Wales was reported to have watched "The Sound of Music" over 900 times. Additionally, some fans believe that talking is not permitted while watching television shows or films starring their favourite celebrities (Jenkins, 1988). Also, unlike ordinary audiences, devoted fans may extend their discussions to include the lead actor's gossip, rather than limiting the conversation to the plot alone (Jenkins, 1992). Similarly, celebrity fans might rewrite storylines from Charles Dickens's unfinished novels in an attempt to predict the conclusion (Hayward, 1997). More controversially, fans often create slash fiction featuring their favourite celebrities, which frequently projects the fans' own sexual desires onto these celebrities (Staiger, 2005).

Building on this, fans attempt to find like-minded individuals to engage in the aforementioned fan activities together. Fiske (1992) argues that the resulting fan communities or fan clubs provide an escapist space for fans, as the topics they are passionate about often relate to cultural tastes disparaged by mainstream value

systems. Hewer and Hamilton (2012) support this argument and add that the proliferation of the internet has provided an excellent platform to facilitate cross-regional communication among fans, even fostering close-knit relationships. Nonetheless, the diverse entities formed by fans will be discussed in detail in the next section.

From the perspective of consumer studies, the practices of celebrity fans can generally be understood using a consumption-production continuum, which implies fans are involved in varying degrees of production and consumption activities, playing a mixed role as both producers and consumers (Ritzer 2014; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Cova and Dalli, 2009). Specifically, marketers view actions such as attending concerts, purchasing music albums, and watching the latest stage videos as primarily consumption-oriented fan practices. Still, these consumption behaviour also involves a degree of "production" concerning the celebrity. That is, attending concerts and purchasing albums may enhance the celebrity's popularity to some extent, reflecting a co-creation of value for the celebrity (Von Wallpach et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Chinese fan scholars have identified a deliberate production behaviour where fans massively participate in practices primarily focused on the production of celebrity value. This includes purchasing multiple, sometimes even hundreds of copies of a musician's album (Chen, 2021; Yin, 2021). In the internet era, overzealous fans are often observed repeatedly watching the latest performance videos, persistently voting online for their favourite artists, and tirelessly commenting, liking, and sharing posts on celebrity social media accounts. Behind these actions lies the fans' attempt to engage with the intricate algorithms of social media platforms, using digital labour to boost the celebrity's visibility and commercial value (Zhang and Negus, 2020; Yin, 2020).

## **2.4 Celebrity fandom in China**

After a review of celebrity fandom research as a whole, it's time to shift our focus to China and understand the influence of this country on celebrity fans and fan behaviour. Celebrity culture is not an exclusive phenomenon of the West, the Chinese government used to recommend national heroes who conform to the mainstream ideology to its citizens in order to inspire and educate the general public (Jeffreys & Edwards, 2010). For example, Chairman Mao, the first president of the People's Republic of China, is probably one of China's most famous figures. He has been portrayed as a historical hero, a great military strategist, politician and poet. His images, story and philosophy theories has been extensively promoted by state-controlled media, and his pictures were decorated in many workplaces and home in China to this day. Another example is Lei Feng, who is an important propaganda and educational tool for the Chinese Communist Party. He served in the People's Liberation Army of China, and while serving in the military, he was always willing to help others, disregarding personal gain, and he was actively involved in various volunteering activities. His stories were once collected in 'Lei Feng's Diary' and published in 1963, which was also widely printed and distributed to Party members at all levels in China. Gradually, a wave of "learning from Comrade Lei Feng" swept the country, as Lei Feng's image became an important part of the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda to inspire Party members to selflessly serve the people. The two examples above illustrate the state's control over the selection and promotion of public figures at that time. That is, the state selects individuals who conform to national interests and mainstream ideologies, promotes their achievements and makes them public figures. On the other hand, the state controls the media that play a role in this promotion, thereby indirectly controlling the channels through which the public learns about these public figures. According to Rojek's (2001) definition toward celebrity, Chinese celebrities before 1978 achieved a certain level of accomplishment and therefore can be considered 'achieved celebrities'. Also, these celebrities relied

heavily on state-sponsored media for promotion and coverage, making them more like 'attributed celebrities'.

The year 1978 marked a pivotal turning point in cultural and entertainment consumption in China, and Chinese fan scholars believe that before the Chinese economic reform in 1978, China did not have a widespread concept of "fan culture"(Zou, 1998; Zhang, 2016). On the one hand, this was due to the low standard of living of the majority of the population, with many families struggling to meet basic needs. On the other hand, most celebrities at that time were nationally appointed figures, and ordinary citizens had no way of accessing celebrity information and choosing their own object of fandom from outside mainland China due to the limited channels. As part of the economic reform that began in 1978, China underwent a profound shift from a centrally planned economy to a market-driven one. This pivotal transition saw China extend a welcoming invitation to foreign companies, encouraging them to invest and set up factories within its borders. This era also marked the introduction of the Chinese people to the cultures of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Britain and the United States. This exposure encompassed various cultural elements, including music, film and the emergence of notable celebrities who featured prominently in these creative works. In result, the development of modern industry and the initial improvement in China's economic level stimulated an increase in the consumption of cultural products. On one facet, people's disposable income increased, and consumption of goods and culture became an essential part of modern life. On the other facet, research on Chinese leisure reports showed that after the Chinese economic reform, the leisure time of urban Chinese gradually increased, which is also a key factor for Chinese people to enjoy entertainment and leisure (Zou, 1998; Zhang, 2016).

With time, the first wave of celebrity worship in China emerged around the late 1980s, as film and television productions from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan,

and South Korea began to flow into mainland China with the Chinese economic reform. Media advancement, specifically the widespread availability of television, played a pivotal role during this phase. In the late 1980s, China overtook Japan as the world's largest producer of televisions, and television in China also gradually transitioned from being a luxury item to an indispensable cultural and entertainment commodity for urban residents. After the 1990s, state restrictions on the media continued to ease, paving the way for the proliferation of privately owned newspapers and magazines. By 1996, the number of television sets in the country had reached 298.5 million, an average of one television set for every four people. In addition, radio was prevalent at that time, with a broadcasting coverage rate of 84.6 percent of the population. At the same time, the number of publishing houses, newspapers and periodicals in China increased from 105, 186 and 930 respectively in 1978 to 542, 1,788 and 7,011 in 1993 (Zou, 1996).

With the combination and proliferation of these traditional and new media, Chinese people have been exposed to a to a group of entertainment celebrities, exemplified by the renowned "Four Heavenly Kings" from Hong Kong at the time. These four celebrities once ruled the entertainment lives of mainland Chinese youth, with their influence dominating music, films, magazines and advertising. At that time, Chinese people commonly used the term "chasing the star" (zhuī xīng, 追星) to refer to a series of enthusiastic actions in support of celebrities. In 1993, during the 35th anniversary celebration of China's official television channel CCTV, a sketch called "The Star Chasers" humorously and wittily portrayed the phenomenon of star chasing on stage (Hu, 2020). However, at that time, the term 'fan' was not widely used in China, let alone the concept of fandom or the fan community. Compared to the pioneering research done by Jenkins (1992) and others on Star Trek fans during the same period, fan studies in China were relatively backward and there was a lack of scholars studying fan behaviours.

It is worth noting that in 2003 the Chinese government implemented a policy requiring state-owned television stations to generate at least half of their revenue from user subscriptions, rather than relying solely on government subsidies (Brady, 2010). This policy was introduced in response to the growing number of television viewers and the increasing competition in the market. Building on this, several TV channels increased the amount of airtime devoted to entertainment content, including entertainment celebrity news and even the proliferation of tabloids, as a means of attracting viewers (Hu, 2020). Hunan Television, a state-subsidised provincial television station, produced the reality show 'Super Girl' in 2004, which played a significant role in igniting the second wave of celebrity worship in China. In this show, contestants from all over the country participated in nationwide auditions, singing and dancing in weekly competitions. This show put the outcome of the competition in the hands of the audience, giving them the power to vote. A multitude of audiences actively participated in the weekly voting by sending text messages from their mobile phones, and contestants with the highest number of votes moved on to the next week's competition (Yang, 2009). It was during this period that these enthusiastic audiences became known to the general public and to scholars, and their set of behaviours and the effects they produced were exposed to public view. For example, it is reported that the winner of the show alone received over five million text message votes, and the producer of this show pocketed around £3.40m solely from the SMS (Short Message Service) votes (Jeffreys & Edwards, 2010).

During this period, the term "fēn sī" (粉丝) finally entered the public consciousness as a loanword transliterated from the English "fans", a word widely accepted and used by the Chinese public to describe people who support their favourite objects. The term is spreading like wildfire on television and the internet. "Who are you a fan of?" was become a common question among the younger generation in China. In result, Chinese fans firstly instigated collective discussion in academia, although the

influence was still relatively limited. Research during this period has focused on the TV show "Super Girl." For example, by studying the fans devoted to the champion of "Supergirl" Yuchun Li, Meng (2009) discusses the impact of this show on the transformation of Chinese media. She also claimed that "Super Girl" provides a platform for practicing democratic discussion and governance in an authoritarian society. Meanwhile, Wu's (2021) discussion centres on the potential of online fan communities to engage in public affairs. However, despite the use of the term "fan community," there remains a lack of precise definition. Furthermore, Yang (2009) proposed the term "prosumer" to describe fans, arguing that fans are not only consumers of popular culture, but also producers. In particular, not only do fans buy an inordinate number of the singer's albums and frequently attend her concerts, but they also create slash fiction about the singer and edit video clips of the singer (Yan and Yang, 2020).

Contemporary consumer researchers have further explored and elucidated this phenomenon. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) challenge the previously held dichotomy between production and consumption, a perspective endorsed by scholars such as Baudrillard. Instead, they argue that production and consumption are not mutually exclusive but rather intrinsically interconnected. Similarly, Cova and Dalli (2009) introduced the concept of the "working consumer" to describe individuals who enhance brand value through immaterial labour. Crucially, these consumers may operate beyond the direct control of brand owners, integrating elements of production into the consumption process (Fuchs, 2014). Through this engagement, they actively participate in the co-creation of brand value, aligning with the concept of "value co-creation" proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). Nevertheless, within the contemporary discourse on Chinese fans, the concept of the working consumer or prosumer remained largely underexplored. This gap will be critically examined in

chapter seven, where the author will engage with this concept in depth and integrate it into the final theoretical framework.

Since the second decade of the 21st century, trade and tourism between China and South Korea have significantly facilitated the dissemination of Korean culture in China. A number of young Chinese individuals have been captivated by Korean music and audiovisual works, becoming deeply enamoured with the entertainment products of Korean artists (Sun and Liew, 2019). In this context, South Korea has exported a substantial amount of popular culture to mainland China, including music, dance, and television dramas (Lee and Yoo, 2015). Even Chinese unicorn companies have started to invest in the South Korean entertainment industry. It has been reported that between 2014 and 2016 alone, Chinese companies invested over £10 million in South Korean entertainment firms (Hwang, 2016). Concurrently, many Chinese companies have sought to emulate the South Korean entertainment model, with an increasing number of Chinese entertainment agencies recruiting and training local idols and assisting them in their debuts. Meanwhile, a number of Chinese reality shows emerged. Similar to "Super Girl", these reality shows select potentially talented contestants from the amateurs of these agencies, evaluate them on singing, dancing and various other dimensions, and the final winner, who can make their debut, is voted and chosen by the audience. Unlike early television broadcasts, most of the reality TV shows during this period are produced by online platforms and aired on the internet, accompanied by intensive promotion on social media to boost viewership. In addition, Chinese investors began to recognise the profitability of the celebrity industry, with more talent management agencies being established and invested at this stage. Recent data suggests that there are as many as 1,000 similar companies in China, with a cumulative market value of £100 billion (Xu, 2023).



During this phase of research, scholars shifted their focus towards the examination of fan practices within the context of the Chinese internet. For example, Yin (2020) researched how fans make full use of internet algorithms and work as ‘data labour’ to increase the popularity of celebrities online. Meanwhile, Yan and Yang (2020) offered the term "parakin relationship" to describe the connection fans have built with celebrities by virtue of social media platforms, that is, fans regard idols as their own family members and achieve self-realisation in the process of worshipping and supporting these celebrities. As the number of Chinese fans has grown, news about "crazy fans" have continued to appear in the media coverage. Some of them devote numerous time and money to unconditionally work for celebrities, even insulting and attacking other net users on social media in order to maintain the reputation of celebrities (Wang and Ge, 2022). Such research trends are argued to be underpinned by the progressive transformation of online media, as in the early 20th century, the predominant medium through which netizens accessed the internet was desktop computers. However, a significant turning point occurred in 2012 when the number of individuals accessing the internet through mobile devices in China surpassed that of desktop computer users, subsequently experiencing a substantial surge in numbers over the ensuing decade. By the year 2021, the number of internet users in China will be 1.032 billion, of which 1.029 billion will be mobile phone users. That is, a staggering 99.7% of internet users in China were utilising mobile phones as their primary means of internet access, while the proportions of netizens resorting to desktop computers and laptops, for the same purpose were merely 35.0% and 33.0%, respectively (CNNIC, 2022). In this context, program production teams and artist management agency collaborate with news media to intensively release the latest updates about celebrities, aiming to cultivate a growing number of Chinese fans. As a result, many native Chinese artists have come into the public eye over the past years, these celebrities include singer, models, and dancers tend to have ‘exquisite make-up, delicate skin and exaggerated elegance’ (Zhang and Negus, 2020).

Looking back the development of Chinese fan studies, it became evident that the development of media communication technology and national policy interventions have played an important role. Media communication technology not only drives the proliferation of the entertainment and cultural industries, but also changes the way fans form their entities. While the genesis of fan culture in China can be traced back to the latter half of the 20th century, it wasn't until the early years of the 21st century that fans initiated the establishment of substantial offline fan communities. The advent of Web 2.0 in the year 2006 catalysed the emergence of a diverse range of Chinese fan communities, varying in size and scope. Nonetheless, these communities often exhibited geographical affiliations, primarily organized along regional lines. An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be seen in the case of Yuchun Li, the winner of the 2005 Super Girl, where fans form fan communities for her in Shanghai and Beijing respectively. Since the second decade of the 21st century, China's rapidly developing online social media platforms have broken down geographical boundaries, allowing an increasing number of fans to form online fan communities that span thousands of kilometres. In terms of the impact of national policy, China's economic reform that began in 1978, the initiative to expand competition for local television stations in the early 21st century, and the 'Korean Restriction Order' issued around 2016 have each driven three distinct phases of prosperity in the Chinese entertainment industry. As a result, these developments have stimulated the growth of fan culture and the expansion of fan studies in academia.

## **2.5 Fan entities**

As mentioned in the previous section, scholars tend to focus more on individual fans, such as their psychological motivations for becoming a fan and the individual characteristics of fans (Bernard Cova et al., 2007). Although such entities formed by multiple fans have been mentioned before, the definition and classification of these

units remains unclear (Bacon-Smith, 1992; McDonald, 2003; Duffett, 2013; Cavicchi, 2018). It is noteworthy that fans' entities deserve in-depth investigation for several reasons. First, media reports in China have reported that some large-scale Chinese Internet fan practices, such as collective purchasing, exhibit a certain degree of behavioural norms. In other words, fans seem to be acting according to instructions and patterns. This phenomenon raises the question of how fans are organised, trained and standardised, which attracts me as a marketing researcher focusing on collective consumer behaviour. In this context, the study of fans' entities becomes particularly important, as distinguishing and defining fandom terminology could pave the way for subsequent research. Secondly, the fan practices observed by the researcher are mainly based on Chinese social media platforms. In contrast, some existing literature describes how Western fans, in times of limited computer technology, formed their entities through activities such as exchanging letters and organising regular meetings. This contrast raises several questions, such as: are Chinese online fans just the tip of the iceberg for these entities? Do the online fan interactions and practices observed by the researcher or reported by the media represent the whole of fan activity? Do they hold regular offline gatherings, as fans used to do? If not, does this mean that these activist units have built their "empire" solely on the Internet?

In order to answer these questions step by step, this section aims to review the literature on terminology related to fan entities. By and large, scholars tend to use several concepts and terms when describing groups of fans, such as fan bases, fan clubs, fan communities and fan organisations. A review of the literature from the last three decades shows that these terms have often been used interchangeably, leading to considerable ambiguity.

The term "fan community" is perhaps one of the most popular terms in fandom studies, with most articles mentioning it without providing a proper explanation.

Moreover, individuals' conceptualisation of the term 'community' is also nebulous, with different definitions attributed to it in different disciplines (Price and Robinson, 2017). Of particular note is, Hillery (1955) once offered up to 95 definitions of this term, and these definitions are also commonly confused in the layman's daily life. In sociology studies, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) classically employ the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to initially describe the term 'community'. That is, *Gemeinschaft* can be translated as "community", meaning people "remain essentially united despite all separating factors", in comparison, *Gesellschaft* is loosely translated to society to represent people "essentially separated despite all uniting factors" (Bender, 1978: 17-18).

In many academic contexts, scholars seem to conflate the constructs of fandom culture and fandom community, implicitly assuming that fans are inherently part of a particular fandom community. To clarify this misconception, fans automatically fall into the definition of fandom because the term is a broader one, generally used to describe people who have connections to the fannish object. Meanwhile, fans could immerse themselves in an imagined fan community, whereas such a community does not really exist in the tangible realm; it exists only in the fans' imaginations, and no real social networks have been established among its members (Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Jenkins, 1992).

Building on this foundation, traditional letters, electronic mail and contemporary social media platforms have sequentially evolved as vehicles for fan interaction. This evolution has led to the crystallisation of fan communities. Within these communities, members not only have the prospect of cultivating intricate social networks, but also initiate and orchestrate periodic face-to-face conventions to engage with their specific object of fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1992). Duffet (2013:244) describes such a community as 'a physical manifestation of the fandom', where fans with common

interests can exchange insights about their object, share specific values, and welcome new members. This type of social entity benefits fans in several ways. The fan community provides ample space for fans who are heavily criticised to fend off outside judgement, and allows fans to acquire social capital by forming private networks with other fans based on shared interests. Furthermore, there may be different fan communities for the same fandom of an object. This phenomenon often implies that different fan communities may have their own distinctive norms and habits to standardise the way of textual consumption and community functioning (Jenkins, 2006).

Different scholars provide different terms for this kind of social entity; Bacon-Smith (1992) defines such fan communities as interest groups and proposes four criteria to distinguish between different groups, including preferred genre, media delivery channel, source product and activity. For example, *Friends* (source product) was a television show (preferred genre) that was broadcast on television, and fans may form fanzines (activities) that are organised primarily through email correspondence (media delivery channel), or fans may form another interest group that is organised primarily through online email communication (media delivery channel) and collectively watch the show offline (activity). In short, fans spontaneously form different social entities, even when they are focused on a single singer or a TV series.

Interestingly, fans do not seem to be satisfied with merely superficial interpersonal connections. Within the vast tapestry of the fannish community, observations suggest the manifestation of more intimately woven connections. Based on her autoethnography, Bacon-Smith (1992) proposed the existence of 'circles' in several fanzine communities. Such circles are made up of around 10-30 fans with clearly defined roles, i.e. a typical fanzine circle includes editors, writers and fans who specialise in photocopying or video. In order to increase the efficiency of operations

within the publishing unit, members of the Circle are encouraged to live as close to each other as possible, facilitating regular face-to-face meetings. By and large, Despite the variety of names used in previous academic discourse to characterise the entities of fans who coalesce around a common object of fandom, these descriptions agree with the following nature of fan communities: spontaneously formed non-profit social entities that provide platforms for fans to connect and interact. And this kind of community provides fans with an emotional and ideological refuge akin to a *Heimat* (Sandvoss, 2005).

It's worth noting that fan clubs share similar characteristics, but most documented fan clubs require payment of a membership fee to gain access. The main difference between fan clubs and fan communities is that the former are often officially sanctioned, typically by entities such as the companies behind the celebrities or the management boards of sports teams. For example, one of the oldest fan clubs dedicated to Joan Crawford was founded in 1931 and gradually developed many branches internationally (Scheiner, 2000; Staiger, 2005). In the field of football, the existence of extensive formal fan clubs can be observed. To illustrate this point, consider the case of the British football team Manchester United, as these fans are obliged to make an annual financial commitment of at least £20 in order to achieve the coveted status of membership. This membership status, in turn, confers the privilege of buying match tickets and actively participating in dedicated fan forums.

It is important to emphasise that the fan communities we have examined so far arose primarily from the interpersonal relationships that fans formed in physical, offline settings, a phenomenon that can be traced back to about two to three decades ago. During this period, members of these communities met regularly in person to facilitate the growth of their respective communities and to actively participate in various fan-related activities. Importantly, the venues for fan-related activities

extended beyond traditional physical spaces such as football stadiums or fan conventions; a significant proportion of these activities, and the emergence of fan communities themselves, took place in virtual spaces (Sandvoss, 2005). This transformative shift can be largely attributed to rapid technological advances, particularly the widespread use of the Internet.

New forms of technology have changed the way people interact (Harrington and Bielby, 1995). As early adopters of the internet, fans quickly embraced the era of social networks with the advent of affordable broadband services in the late 20th century and the widespread availability of home computers. Since the emergence of the internet, fans can not only download vast amounts of audio and video files for their enjoyment, but online fan communities have also begun to form, establishing the concept of the online fan community as an important phenomenon (Duffett, 2013). One of the earliest online communities can be traced back to 1985, when a group of high-tech enthusiasts founded "the well", which has become an important platform for tech enthusiasts to communicate with each other and establish connections (Armstrong and Hagel, 1995). Over the past two decades, the widespread adoption of computer technology and the pervasive influence of social media platforms in everyday life have led some fan communities to move into an online environment, making them significantly more visible and accessible (Duffett, 2013). As early as twenty years ago, scholars described how Goth culture enthusiasts used the internet to create online translocal communities to facilitate communication between fans and organise offline gatherings (Hodkinson, 2002). In addition, many fan communities are even being created online, so that extensive research into behaviour is possible through the use of large amounts of digital traces (Lee and Sarker, 2023). And the impact of this computer technology exposing fan communities is twofold; on the one hand this increases the visibility of fans, making it easier for other like-minded fans to locate these communities and bring fans together in a way that was not possible before (Price and Robinson, 2017). For example, British singer Jarvis Cocker even

established his own online social platform *Jarvspace* and accepted over 60,000 of his fans to join. This platform provides fans with information about him and facilitates communication among fans, as well as between the fans and the singer (Beer, 2008). On the other hand, the public has had the opportunity to spy on snippets of online fan communities and their collective behaviour, leading to some unpredictable consequences (e.g., public aversion to the slash fiction online community)

Another impact that computer technology has brought to the fan community is reflected in the processing of information. On the surface, the internet appears to have increased the efficiency of access and dissemination of fandom information. In contrast to the earlier practice of fans relying on postal mail or offline gatherings for communication, the advent of Web 2.0 has enabled fans to freely share their interpretations and comments about the objects of their fandom, even if they "have never met the other fans they communicate with regularly" (Brooker, 2002:14). Platforms such as YouTube and Twitter have allowed fans to express and disseminate not only celebrity-related information, but also their perspectives and feelings, and to receive communal responses from other fans more easily. Due to the existence of these websites, Susan Boyle's performance on "Britain's Got Talent" in 2009 garnered millions of views on YouTube within just a few hours. In contrast, it took Elvis Presley two years after releasing his first independent record to become a global sensation (Duffett, 2011). To wit, the metamorphosis of fandom sites not only signifies the deterritorialisation of fan communities, but also creates a milieu of social effervescence (Hills, 2002).

## **2.6 Fans & Political Action in China**

As the internet provides fans with a virtual and more expansive space for activities, some fan behaviours that extend beyond cultural consumption are also being widely observed. Meanwhile, political scholars argued that a defining characteristic of post-millennial politics is the strategic employment of popular culture as a key mechanism



for shaping political movements. That is, the attributes of political movements should become 'ubiquitous' within everyday life, embedding political ideologies within the cultural fabric (Earl and Kimport, 2009: 223). On this account, activists among fans are considered to have the potential to transcend the realm of mere cultural consumption, thereby engaging with concerns pertinent to the real world.

Here, we observe an interesting dynamic relationship where there is a delicate balance between the state, the fans and the realms of fan behaviour. In general, the Chinese government has not intervened extensively in fan behaviour, as most of fans' behaviour has remained at the level of material consumption and cultural entertainment. In comparison, certain scholars argue that fans are not confined solely to cultural consumption; they also possess the potential to engage in daily political activities and may even challenge the existing political order (Bennett, 2014). For instance, Jenkins (2015) defines the term 'fan activism' to describe civic engagement and political participation that emerge from engaging in fan activities. Specifically, fan activism refers to a series of mobilizations among fans around different issues, such as safeguarding the common interests of fans.

However, Chinese fans' collective actions appear to be particularly cautious and prudent. In previous literature and reports, there has been a scarcity of Chinese fan activities that transcend cultural consumption, and collective fan activities that exhibit political potential are often deemed unrealistic. For instance, in March 2004, to celebrate male singer Jay Chou winning the 10th Chinese Music Billboard Awards, approximately 30-50 of Jay Chou's fans, dressed in uniform T-shirts and holding banners, passed by Tiananmen Square—a landmark of significant political symbolism in China and a site of past collective protests. While some scholars have suggested that the meaningful gathering of fans in front of Tiananmen Square in support of singers is part of fans demonstrating 'political activism', the close surveillance of public gatherings by the Chinese government and the nature of fans supporting

celebrities both suggest that it is difficult for fan behaviour in China to develop into further political action (Fung, 2009; Zhang, 2016).

## **2.7 Celebrity as human brand**

In the debates concerning the characteristics and behaviours of fans, scholars often interpret fandom as a cultural phenomenon, exploring it from various perspectives. In addition to the contributions from communication and media studies, marketing scholars have significantly advanced the field of fan studies. Specifically, researchers in the field of consumer behaviour argue that fans and their activities are not solely a subject of interest for media scholars but can also be regarded as potential consumer collectives, thereby falling within the scope of marketing research (Stanfill and Condis, 2014; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017). Correspondingly, celebrities are no longer just symbols but have the potential to become brands, as Kotler (1991:442) defined brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". From this definition, celebrities can be understood as a form of human brand.

It can be said that without discussing fan theory, it is challenging to analyse mass consumption. Notably, the potential value of fan identity for consumer research has been extensively examined. Fans often demonstrate a strong commitment to consuming the objects of their fandom (Kozinets, 2001, 2014). Recently, research on fan consumption behaviour also covers areas such as sports (Parganas et al., 2017; Mastromartino and Zhang, 2020; Fenton et al., 2023), brand (Muñiz Jr. and Schau, 2005), gaming (Milner, 2009), movies and television (Jenkins, 2013), as well as celebrities (Yang, 2006; Hower and Hamilton, 2012; Wohlfeil, 2018).

In the consumer research literature, studies on celebrity endorsements aim to explore how celebrities, as media-produced images, assist manufacturers in selling products and thereby stimulate consumption (Silvera and Austad, 2003). However, as Hower and Hamilton (2012) noted, the "celebrity turn" is being observed in consumer practices, necessitating a revaluation of the role of celebrities in both production and consumption by researchers. Cashmore and Parker (2003:215) attempt to understand celebrities from an economic perspective, defining them as "a commodification of the human form, the epitome of economic fetishism." In other words, celebrities can also be viewed as commodities themselves, produced and revered by consumers much like brands such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

Taken together, celebrities can be interpreted as human brands and hold a central role in marketing study, attracting significant attention from academic professionals (Rosen, 1981). Supporters of this argument cite presidential campaigns as an example, asserting that presidential candidates present themselves as brands that require meticulous management. These candidates often have dedicated campaign teams to carefully craft and refine their public image (Simon, Gilgoff, and Samuel, 2004). In academic discussions, Thomson (2006:104) defines human brands as "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts."

Additionally, human brands are considered a type of hedonic or experiential product within the broader concept of brands, providing consumers with emotions such as pleasure or joy (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Jones et al., 2022).

Specifically, human brands may comprise athlete brands (Hofmann 2021), Artist brands (Schroeder, 2005; Kerrigan et al., 2011), and musician brands (Adler, 1985), among others. Some scholars who analyse human brand identity emphasise the co-creative role of key stakeholders, particularly highlighting celebrities as the brand itself and fans as consumers (von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2017) Building on this perspective, Centeno and Wang (2017) further analyse that the co-

creation of human brands involves a social network comprising both "human" elements, such as celebrities and consumers, and "non-human" elements, such as social media platforms and talent agencies.

In early studies, successful celebrities were seen as having the ability to market themselves as "products." For instance, Andy Warhol's entire career was immersed in the process of producing himself as the ultimate consumer good. This is evident in his famous declaration that "everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes" and his controversial paintings, sculptures, and photographs. As a result, Warhol became a renowned figure, and his soup can series led potential consumers to purchase not just the soup cans themselves but also the celebrity brand of Andy Warhol (Schroeder, 2005). In contemporaneous studies, Eager and Lindridge (2014) employed structuration theory to trace the origins of human brands, asserting that their emergence was influenced by both media and audiences. Mills et al. (2015) investigated the positive impact of scandals on celebrity brand building, examining how compelling scandal narratives enhance the communicative value of the brand.

Over time, theorists gradually recognized that fans, deconstructed as consumers in the marketing realm, play a crucial role in the significance of co-creating human brands (Holmes and Redmond, 2014). As passive products of the celebrity system, fans are considered ideal consumers due to their highly predictable consumption habits (Jenkins, 2006). This understanding might also explain why marketers treat the term "fan" and its negative connotations with relative caution. In classic marketing studies, they refer to audiences engaged in fandom studies—such as celebrity endorsements and human brand attachment—as 'consumers' rather than 'fans.' (McCracken, 1989; Thomson, 2006). The study of the interaction between consumers and human brands not only extends Fournier's (1998) pioneering work on consumer-brand relationships but also delves deeper into the research on human brands (Parmentier, 2010). In the

past decade, an increasing number of studies on interactions between consumers and human brands have been published in prestigious mainstream journals. This trend indicates that marketers believe brands are not solely the result of managerial efforts (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013); the interests of brand stakeholders also need greater attention (Von Wallpach et al., 2017). For example, the results of the experiment indicate that idol attractiveness has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between vanity traits and human brand attachment (Huang et al., 2015). Kim and Kim's (2022) research on online influencers indicates that similarity, social presence, and attractiveness can enhance consumer attachment to human brands, thereby increasing follower loyalty to the brand.

## **2.8 Fan community as brand community**

Just as marketing scholars view celebrities as human brands, the field of marketing frequently regards fans as brand consumers, with fan communities further conceptualized as brand communities (Muñiz Jr. and Schau, 2005; Hower and Hamilton, 2012). In fact, discussions about consumption communities gained significant traction at the end of the last century. At the end of the 20th century, a group of pioneering marketing scholars started to recognise that the concept of "community" had been overlooked in research (Cova, 1997). Under the influence of postmodern perspectives, Gainer and Fischer (1994:137) firmly pointed out that previous prominent theories explained only individual characteristics influencing personal consumption behaviour while "neglect of non-individual level phenomena". Besides, maintaining individual relationships with each customer is not somehow inefficient and difficult to manage (Laroche et al., 2012). Against this backdrop, the marketing field witnessed a shift from individual consumption to community-level consumption research (Goodwin, 1994, Cronin and Cocker 2019). Scholars in service marketing took the lead to advocate for focusing on the communal aspects of consumption behaviour and recommended studying consumer communities from an

anthropological perspective (Sherry, 1995). Gradually, the idea of consumer collectives and the interactions between consumers have garnered the attention of marketing practitioners. For example, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) in an early study on motorcycle brands called on marketers to pay attention to groups driven by similar passions. Cova and Cova (2002:595) not only assert “the future of marketing is in offering and supporting a renewed sense of community”, but astutely identify and define tribal marketing, which involves conducting marketing activities within social groups composed of individual consumers with similar experiences or emotions. Kozinets (1997) further pointed out that two key factors define a consumption community: the degree of close linkage between members and their consumption behaviours, and the strength of social relationships and interactions among community members. Contemporaneous research also posited that consumers could attain a sense of belonging and intimacy through interactions with other consumers within the community (Oldenburg, 1999).

Entering the 21st century, research on consumption communities has increasingly emerged such as open-source communities (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2009) and innovation communities (Moon & Sproull, 2008). However, in conjunction with the review of human brands in the previous section, the concept of brand community within these consumption communities have particularly attracted the researcher's attention. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001:426), inspired by Cova's (1997) concept of communal consumption, conceptualise the notion of brand community. They posit brand community is built on the basis of “admirers of a brand” and represents "a form of human association situated within a consumption context." With time, this concept quickly captured the attention of industry professionals, with the rise of brand communities being specifically highlighted in the August 2004 issue of *BusinessWeek* (Cova and Pace, 2006). In this context, definitions of brand communities began to proliferate and even become ambiguous. Dholakia and his colleagues (2004) describe

the brand community as established collaboratively by collective consumers and brands, often transcending geographical boundaries to form "imagined communities" with the assistance of the internet. While some definition became more flexible, as Cova and Pace (2006) describe any group with a shared interest in a particular brand that creates a subculture as a brand community. In many cases, certain online communities hosted by companies were also included in the discussion of brand communities (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007; Brodie et al. 2013) .

Initially, the foundational elements of brand communities have been extensively studied and articulated in the literature. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified three pivotal aspects: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. The concept of "consciousness of kind" is interpreted as an intrinsic connection collectively felt among members (Gusfield, 1978). This way of thinking denotes a shared identity among community members, distinguishing them from outsiders, even in circumstances where they have never met each other. This is evident in the Star Wars brand community, where members recognize each other through their engagement levels, such as the number of times they have watched the films (Brown et al., 2003). Shared rituals and traditions are vital for the cohesion and endurance of brand communities, as these practices create and reinforce collective meanings. Specific channels include ceremonial events and festivals, sharing brand stories, and using lexicon, emoticons or acronyms for communication, among others (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). For instance, the "Wrangler Wave" among Jeep Wrangler owners is a ritual that fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity (McAlexander et al., 2002:42). Similar customs and practices are considered factors that unite community members, as they derive a sense of satisfaction from participating in repeated rituals and traditions (Laroche et al., 2012). Lastly, a sense of moral responsibility is observed, where established members offer guidance and support to newcomers, ensuring the continuity and integration of the brand's ethos

within the community. For example, users in the Macintosh brand community often assist acquaintances in salvaging faulty Mac hard drives, while members of the Apple Newton brand community tend to provide technical support to others. Additionally, this sense of responsibility is reflected in the community's "apostolic function," where members believe they should recruit new members to maintain the community's vitality (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005).

On this basis, Schau and her colleagues (2009) conducted a detailed examination of the value generated by brand communities. Using social practice theory as their framework, they performed in-depth observations and interviews within nine brand communities. Their research identified four distinct types of consumer practices: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use. Collectively, these practices were instrumental in creating value for brands and businesses. Similarly, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) summarised three important characteristics of brand communities through a literature review: interaction among members, a sense of identity among members, and the social relations constructed through their interactions.

Notably, early research into brand communities highlights differing views on the significance of "geographical concentration." A notable example is the ethnographic study of the Jeep brand, which underscores the importance of physical proximity in fostering brand communities. This study reveals that by creating these communities, Jeep owners and brand engineers could participate in direct, face-to-face roundtable discussions, thus facilitating a deeper connection and more robust exchange of ideas (McAlexander et al., 2002). In comparison, most studies suggest that members of brand communities can be geographically dispersed, and some communities are even entirely rooted on the internet with the rise of information and communication technologies (Kozinets, 1997; Brodie et al. 2013; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017). That is,



the proliferation of social media has significantly facilitated the development of brand communities. Increasingly, brands are registering "fan pages" or "brand pages" on platforms such as Facebook and TripAdvisor. These pages not only showcase brand products but also create a space for consumers to interact and exchange ideas. Despite some scholars positing that brand communities foster a reciprocal relationship between consumers and brands, such communities, primarily driven by brands or companies, often primarily aim to enhance economic value (Brodie et al., 2013). In other words, while online brand communities provide a venue for consumers to learn, share, and socialise, the primary benefits accrue to the brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008). This is evident in the notion that brand communities can enhance consumer engagement, loyalty, and satisfaction (Brodie et al., 2013), and ultimately shape consumer's emotions including joy and surprising (Cheung, et al. 2021). Consequently, many articles on brand communities highlight their practical contributions and urge marketers to actively participate in nurturing these communities (McAlexander et al. 2005; Schau et al. 2009; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017).

Based on this understanding of brand communities, the researcher argues that the concept of fan communities, which is the focus of Section 2.5 of the literature review, can be seen as a manifestation of brand communities. Specifically, members of the same fan community share a common fandom object, creating a consciousness of kind. They interact with each other through regular activities, such as group movie viewings or face-to-face discussions, which establish shared rituals and traditions. Additionally, existing members of the fan community impart knowledge to new members (Sun, 2020), thereby fostering integration and retention within the community, instilling a sense of moral responsibility. Interestingly, both fandom studies within media research and consumer studies within marketing research have undergone similar shifts. In fandom studies, the focus has gradually moved from

exploring the causes and motivations of individual fans to investigating the behaviour of fan groups. Similarly, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, marketing scholars have increasingly recognised the importance of consumer collectives, shifting their research focus from individual consumers to communities formed by consumers (Gainer and Fischer, 1994).

Despite the fact that research on brand communities has been developing for over two decades, the knowledge of brand community is limited in three aspects. The first limitation pertains to the scope of discussions surrounding the concept of a brand. Of note, research on brand communities initially focused on commodities, such as automobile manufacturers like Saab, Jeep and computer manufacturers like Apple (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). Over time, this research has gradually extended to include film and television brands, tourist destination brand (Cheung et al., 2021) as well as sports brands (Katz and Heere, 2015). However, despite many marketers recognising celebrities as human brands and acknowledging the unique contributions of fans as consumers to the brand, research on human brand communities remains limited. While fan communities are a popular topic within fan studies, they have not been thoroughly analysed as brand communities in brand research. On the surface, fan communities possess the potential to be considered brand communities: fans form various online communities centred around their shared interest in celebrities and employ a range of unique methods to interpret texts.

The second issue concerns the ownership of brand communities, specifically who actually forms a brand community. In response to the increasing demand within the academic community, an increasing number of companies are recognising the importance of consumer participation in co-creating brand value and are actively engaging in the establishment of brand communities, listening attentively to their voices (Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007; Fournier and Lee, 2009). Concurrently, some

studies have indicated that many brand communities are entirely company-driven, while others are spontaneously initiated by consumers. In this case, earlier research blurred the boundaries between consumer-initiated communities and company-sponsored communities, considering them homogeneous and collectively referring to them as brand communities. (Brodie et al., 2013). A recent study counted the occurrences of the two types of brand communities in academic journals. The results indicated that over 630 brand communities were company-initiated, while only 33 brand communities were clearly identified as consumer-initiated (Veloutsou and Liao, 2023). Despite the considerable academic neglect of consumer-initiated brand communities, some research suggests that communities operated by consumers are more likely to foster high levels of engagement and commitment (Pedeliento et al., 2020). Still, in the latter cases, companies might lose some control over the brand, with consumers collectively attempting a form of "brand hijacking"—taking the brand from professional marketers to promote its development from a consumer perspective (Wipperfurth, 2005).

The third limitation pertains to the process of brand community formation, which is closely linked to the second limitation: if there is ambiguity regarding the ownership of these communities, how can we comprehend their formation? Existing literature predominantly examines relatively mature brand communities, frequently overlooking the early stages and formative processes of these communities (Stokburger-Sauer and Wiertz 2015). In the limited relevant studies, Katz and Heere (2015) investigated a brand community of a university football team, highlighting the critical role of centralised leadership during the early stages of brand community development. However, this study is constrained by the narrow scope of the brand community's activities. The brand community involved in the study was limited to a "tailgating" event, where sports fans gather before and after games, typically in parking lots. In other words, this research primarily elucidates specific consumer behaviours within a

brand organisation, whereas consumer behaviours in most brand communities are evidently diverse. In a recent article, 18 different constructs, encompassing psychological constructs, structural constructs, and behavioural constructs, were identified as crucial for brand community development. However, these conclusions were derived from a systematic review of past brand community literature, which encompasses significant variations in brand types, community structures, and scales. Consequently, although such theoretical articles may offer generalised insights into how brand communities are formed and developed, they lack practical guidance for specific brand communities (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005; Heere et al., 2024).

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Overall, this chapter begins with fan studies and examines the development of celebrity fan studies in China, ultimately integrating these insights with brand community research in marketing theory. The chapter identifies two significant research gaps: one in fan studies and one in brand community research. In the realm of fandom, the oversimplification of the term "fan community" can cause ambiguity when analysing fans' collective behaviour. Regarding brand communities, three areas warrant further exploration: brand categories, community ownership, and brand formation.

Simultaneously, when examining the celebrity-fan relationship and their entities from a marketing theory perspective, the interaction between human brands and consumers, as well as the related concepts of brand communities, come to the forefront. Taken together, given our limited understanding of the logic behind collective fan behaviour, the researcher poses the research question: How do Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online?

In the subsequent sections, the researcher will clearly explain how philosophical stance and specific methods will address these gaps in both disciplines.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

While the elaboration of philosophical ideas is not a principal task of social science, social research devoid of a clear philosophical stance may be considered questionable and incomplete. The coherence between the research question and research philosophy is crucial for determining the quality of social research (Gephart, 2004; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The purpose of this research is to explore how *Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online*.

The subsequent discussion delineates how I, adopting the perspective of a symbolic interactionist, utilise grounded theory to conduct this research. Two primary research methods—netnography and interviewing—will be critically examined. Additionally, reflexive thoughts on the research will be addressed at the conclusion of this chapter.

### **3.2 Research Philosophy**

While philosophical assumptions in the social sciences can sometimes appear bewildering, they are aptly considered as 'heuristic devices in structuring our understanding' (Duberley et al., 2012:16). Furthermore, these assumptions often bear practical consequences for research (Cunliffe, 2010). Confronted with the question, "How do individuals form organisations?", I perceive myself as addressing a quintessential social science problem, necessitating a philosophical stance distinct from that of the mainstream natural sciences (Schutz, 1973). Notably, ontology and epistemology emerge as two pivotal concepts within research philosophy: the former pertains to the essence of phenomena and the constitution of social reality, while the latter concentrates on the methodologies for approaching and justifying this so-called reality (Gephart, 2004). The adoption of an ontological position, an endeavor to grapple with truth, can be regarded as the initial step in defining a research paradigm. This is logically succeeded by the formulation of the researcher's epistemological

assumptions. Predicated on this foundation, the synergy of ontology and epistemology exerts a profound influence on the design of research (Cunliffe, 2011; Bryman, 2016). The term "ontology" derives from two Greek words: "ontos," meaning 'being,' and "logos," signifying knowledge or theory. Ontology's central debate revolves around the existential status of entities (e.g., social phenomena and organisational structures) — whether they truly exist or are merely illusions within people's minds. Taking fans' entities as an example, an objectivist (realist) ontological perspective might view celebrity fan culture as a tangible entity that exists independently of fans' cognitive structures. In contrast, proponents of subjectivism (nominalism) argue that organisational culture is not an inherent entity; rather, it is a construct of social actors' consciousness, continually forged through social interactions (Duberley et al., 2012; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Closely related to the ontological discussion is the philosophical concept of epistemology, which delves into the nature of knowledge and its dissemination among individuals (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The term "epistemology" also originates from Greek, combining "episteme" — meaning "knowledge" or "science" — with "logos," indicating "reason" or "account." The epistemological discourse has persisted since the era of Plato and Aristotle, centreing on the essence of knowledge itself. Specifically, epistemology examines the process of knowledge acquisition and the means by which presumed existences can be understood (Grix, 2002).

Building upon the previously discussed philosophical underpinnings, my research stance on fans' entities is deeply rooted in a scepticism towards the applicability of positivism in this context. This is primarily because I argue that the intricacies inherent in social actors (fans), alongside their actions and interactions (collective consumption activities), defy simplistic quantification. The structure of fans' entities and their culture are not a static entity existing independently; rather, it is continuously shaped and reshaped through the dynamic interplay between fans and their surrounding

environments. Consequently, I advocate for an understanding of social science as a fundamentally subjective endeavour. This perspective necessitates that researchers immerse themselves within the social actors' frames of reference to truly grasp the informants' perspectives. From this vantage point, research findings emerge as a collaborative creation between the researcher and the fans, underscoring the interactive essence of knowledge production.

This epistemological orientation aligns with interpretivism, a framework that champions the subjective nature of social inquiry and the co-constructed reality of research outcomes. However, it's important to acknowledge that interpretivism itself is a broad term, enveloping a diverse array of specific subtraditions, including symbolic interactionism, dramatism, and hermeneutics (Prasad, 2017). In the subsequent sections, I will delve into my identification with symbolic interactionism and elucidate the implications of this stance for my research methodology.

### 3.3 Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, a pivotal sociological perspective that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, seeks to elucidate the formation of society through the lens of symbolic interactions among individuals and groups. Symbolic interactionism champions a micro-level, bottom-up approach, underscoring the significant role of human agency in shaping social realities (Carter and Fuller, 2016). More than a mere theory, symbolic interactionism is viewed as a comprehensive framework that interprets human behaviour and its associated meanings as inherently dynamic constructs. As Martindale (1981) describes symbolic interactionism as a school of thought that emphasises the creation of meaning within social contexts. Particularly, symbolic interactionists emphasise the critical role of language and symbols in shaping and interpreting actions and meanings. This study attempts to provide

plausible explanations for the patterned and regular behaviour of Chinese fans from the standpoint of symbolic interactionism.

Many scholars within the symbolic interactionist tradition recognize George Herbert Mead as a seminal figure, despite the posthumous and scattered nature of his publications (Huber, 1973). According to Mead (1934), social reality has an unstable ontological status, and social actors do not enjoy ontological independence: individuals' identities are constantly constructed by dynamic social interactions (Burrell and Morgan 1979). To wit, even one's sense of self is socially constructed, acquired from an early age through influences such as family, friends, school, and what Mead (1977) terms the "*generalised other*." Through interactions between the individual and society, people cultivate the capacity to perceive themselves through the eyes of others, leading to the development of what Cooley (1918) refers to as the "looking-glass self." In these interactions, subjective meanings are rendered through language and symbols, and these meanings are subsequently attached to human life. Mead's insights illuminate the critical role of language as not merely a tool for communication but as a fundamental building block in the construction of the self and the broader social landscape. Additionally, Mead (1977)'s philosophy also posits the importance of role-taking, wherein individuals shape their perceived world by assuming roles. This role-taking, in turn, influences and guides human behaviour.

On the basis of Mead, Blumer (1969) from the Chicago school coined the term 'symbolic interactionism', positing that social phenomena are symbolic. He believed that events do not possess inherent meaning; rather, meaning is ascribed to events through human interaction. Similarly, He suggested the human behaviour research should start from human association since the self emerges in interaction and joint action. Guided by this philosophy, this study aims to explore how fans interpret their own activities and the meanings they ascribe to these actions through their



interactions and collective behaviour. In turn, these fan activities are expected to define fan identity and imbue the collective actions of fans with significance.

Blumer (1969) also argued that different people assign different meanings to objects, activities and behaviours. Regarding this research, Chinese fans' collective activities, rituals, titles, and other elements of fandom are interpreted and imbued with symbolic meaning (Pfeffer, 1981). Particularly, the roles that fans take on within their collective activities are often fluid and not rigidly defined. Previous fandom literature has depicted fans as managers, educators, consumers, and buyers. And this research aims to investigate how these socially-defined roles influence their interactions and shape their collective behaviour (Mead, 1977). Meanwhile, concepts like consumption or leadership do not have fixed and intrinsic meanings. Instead, meanings are formed and assigned by members through their shared language (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 1980). For example, the term 'fan activity' is an elusive concept: for some more engaged and experienced fans, this term means an average daily workload of several hours, including maintaining online forums and participating in offline events. In contrast, some peripheral and novice fans may define fan activities as participating in online discussions and randomly buying products from the artists. Note that proponents of symbolic interactionism argue that defining and naming are unlikely to be neutral. Strauss (1959) suggests naming is a hybrid way of understanding, classifying and locating an object; naming may involve delineating boundary- setting and meaning construction. Furthermore, the source of meaning formation is action, and a member's particular action can create new meanings or reinforce previous meanings. The meaning-making process is also a process of interactive negotiations between individuals and groups, who inhabit multiple realities. (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2008; Snow, 2002).

The application of symbolic interactionism to this study elucidates how fans interpret and assume their roles through participation in fan activities within their entities. This process of role taking serves as a foundational guideline for fans as they navigate and establish their fannish identity within these groups. Fine (1992) posited that symbolic interactionists should delve into daily conversations, considering language as the primary conduit for the construction of meaning. In alignment with this perspective, researchers have advocated for immersing themselves in the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of members to 'know the inhabitants and learn their vocabulary and habits' (Prasad, 2017, p. 26). This approach underscores the ethnographic methodology as a quintessential strategy for symbolic interactionists, facilitating a deep understanding of the social worlds they study. Contrasting with conventional ethnographic research, this variant of ethnography emphasises a closer examination of how internal members interpret specific situations, transcending mere descriptions of events. The goal is to delve into the nuances of members' self-perceptions and identities. By prioritizing the exploration of individual and collective sense-making processes, this approach seeks to uncover the intricate layers of self-image and self-identity within fans' entities.

Of particular interest, Mead did not methodologically formulate symbolic interactionism, which has led to a divide between positivism and anti-positivism on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969:1). Positivists such as Kuhn (1964) developed the 'Twenty Statements Test' and suggested a quantitative approach to understanding the self and social structure. Kuhn argues that human behaviour can be studied in the laboratory and universal behaviour patterns can be summarised through quantitative analysis. In contrast, Blumer (1969) argues that understanding social behaviour cannot rely on antecedent knowledge since each social encounter is unique; therefore, the core of understanding social behaviour is getting inside the group and qualitatively understanding how social actors view their social world. Echoing Blumer, many qualitative studies on collective behaviour have been guided by symbolic interactionism. For example, Taylor (2000) explored members' identities and

emotions within social movement organisations by using interactionist theory. Lengel and Newsom (2014) researched the impact of social media on Arab Spring from the lens of symbolic interactionism. The above thoughts and research shed light on that the researcher needs to delve into the origins and changes of organisational concepts, also, members' construction of many concepts is expected to reveal their interpretation of many aspects of an organisation. To wit, the discourses and actions of fans also become grist for analysis. As a result, brand community researchers who opt for symbolic interactionism are encouraged to focus on ordinary lives within fans' entities, seek intimate understanding and extract the meanings of social interactions.

It is important to clarify that while the author acknowledges and foregrounds symbolic interactionism as the philosophical underpinning of this study, this does not equate to a rejection of a macro-level, top-down analytical approach. In Chapter 6, the analysis shifts to a macro-level perspective, examining how state policies shape fan behaviours and how fans, as a collective consumer entity, respond to these policies. This analytical orientation is informed by Askegaard and Trolle Linnet's (2011:381) concept of the "context of contexts", which highlights how many brand community studies focus predominantly on closed-context interactions, often overlooking the influence of broader social policies, regulatory frameworks, and structural factors. In this sense, Chapter 6 is not solely rooted in symbolic interactionism but rather adopts a structural perspective, exploring how macro-level social structures intervene in and shape interpersonal interactions within fan communities.

### **3.4 Constructivist grounded theory approach and data analysis**

As a vital intellectual legacy of symbolic interactionism, the grounded theory approach will be employed to demystify and capture the complicated phenomenon in Chinese fans' entities (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Plummer, 1991). Grounded theory method was first proposed by Glaser and Strauss in the mid-1960s, enjoys a canonical

status in both qualitative and quantitative research (Holton, 2018; Locke, 2001). Around the 1990s, a schism occurred between the two originators of grounded theory. Glaser (1992) sharply criticised Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research* for betraying the spirit of grounded theory in several important ways, arguing that such behaviour was 'unacceptable' and 'destructive' (Glaser, 1992: 1). For example, Strauss and Corbin (1990) move the grounded theory approach toward a method of verification rather than a method of discovery, which has been trenchantly rejected by Glaser (1992). In this schism, I tend to support Glaser's version, with strategies such as constant comparison, approaching the field without preconceptions, and theory emergence as the "foundational pillars" of the grounded theory method (Glaser, 1992; Holton and Walsh, 2017: 29–30; Locke, 2001). On the one hand, prior knowledge in grounded theory can leave researchers entangled in old issues and overly dependent on authority, limiting their perspectives and creativity. On the other hand, totally disregarding extant literature is not only logically impossible but also leads researchers to create masses of descriptive material and unstructured manuscripts (Coase, 1988). I adopt a potential antidote to this issue by reading with a focus on breadth rather than depth. Here, I tend to borrow the concept "sensitizing concepts" coined by Blumer (1954) as "guiding principles" (Boh'm, 2004:270) and heuristic devices in qualitative inquiry (Flemmen, 2017; Zaidi, 2022). In other words, the literature review does not seek to thoroughly examine a single theory or area. Instead, knowledge of brand community and fandom scholarship may provide possible clues and directions. (Barley, 1990; Suddaby, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2014:59).

Of note, I concur with Glaser's methodological strategies but unequivocally reject its epistemological foundation (Charmaz, 2011). Specifically, I dismiss Glaser's (2002, 2009) notion of an objectivist grounded theory approach. As a constructivist grounded theorist, I strive to establish distinct demarcations from the objectivist grounded theorists. For instance, proponents of the latter, such as Glaser (2002, 2009), argue

that data is embody objective facts and are separate from the researcher, positing that data is neutral. In stark contrast, constructivist grounded theorists vehemently oppose this viewpoint, asserting that researchers play an integral role in the entire data analysis process, thereby influencing the emergence of categories. This means that researchers must constantly reflect on how their participation influences the data analysis process and the eventual generation of theory (Charmaz, 2020). Categories do not naturally emerge from the data, nor does theory. Instead, researchers play a key role in the process of constructing categories and contribute significantly to the interpretation of the final theory (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2014; Charmaz et al. 2018).

Influenced by symbolic interactionism, this research is more idiographic than nomothetic (Burrell and Morgan, 1979); that is, it is an intensive study of a specific brand community that does not attempt to develop general rules about brand community formation (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Unlike traditional descriptive qualitative work, the grounded theory approach provides not only raw data but rather a series of concepts and theories that are interpreted by the researcher (Gephart, 2004). This feature also responds to the criticism by some scholars that grounded theory is not innovative: in contrast to traditional ethnography, grounded theory codifies the ethnographic research and democratizes the power of theoretical innovation to the popular researcher (Lofland, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, the research goal is to generate both substantive and formal theories, the former is mainly empirical and the latter is primarily conceptual. In this case, substantive theory is related to fan studies – namely, how fans’ organisations have been constructed in China – whereas formal theory refers to theories related to brand community formation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 32–35).

As a symbolic interactionist, the grounded theory approach could be adapted to focus on the interpretive process by investigating ‘the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings’ (Gephart, 2004: 457). In other words, the adoption of symbolic interactionism contributes the researcher to become constructivist grounded theorists and pay more attention to languages and discourses. From this perspective, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory constitute the theory-method package (Charmaz, 2014, Clarke, 2005). In line with the nature of interpretive social science, constructivist grounded theorists do not attempt to generate ‘truth’ from reality but rather offers a fresh perspective on how reality can be interpreted, they tend to elicit the participant to define terms and situations, also try to uncover implicit meanings and unspoken rules behind their behaviours (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Suddaby, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). In particular, this method has been employed where interesting phenomena in specific organisations lack rational explanations, which is also the circumstance in which the two originators or grounded theory approach believe that the approach should be most appropriate: an under-explored area without ‘well-tilled soil’ (Suddaby, 2006: 635).

Following the principles of grounded theory, the researcher embarked on this research driven by a curiosity about collective fan behaviour in China. Beginning with concepts such as fans and celebrity fandom, the investigation gradually extended to fan consumption behaviours, leading to the exploration of consumer communities, particularly brand communities. A review of the literature on brand communities revealed a significant gap: few scholars have explored the formation processes of these communities. This gap aligns with the limited understanding within fan studies regarding the entities of fans. Consequently, the findings of this study contribute to the collective consumer behaviour within the marketing field, while also making a significant terminological contribution to the understanding of entities in fandom studies.

### 3.5 Research method

#### 3.5.1 Netnography

Netnography, also called online ethnography, will be employed in this research. Literally, ethnography represents a specific way of writing: the written record (*graphein*) of people (*ethnos*). Ethnography is seen as a qualitative method to understand the lifestyles of specific groups about their milieu and social behaviours. Through prolonged engagement and intimate involvement, ethnographers immerse themselves in participants' social context to obtain the first-hand data and offer thick descriptions of social processes (Hobbs, 2006). Meanwhile, ethnography is also known as fieldwork and refers to a hybrid research method that includes participation, observation and talking with informants (Yanow et al., 2012). Van Maanen (1988: 2) also emphasises the importance of 'being there' for fieldworkers, who should be 'living with and living like those who are studied' to understand members' assumptions and rules (Charmaz & Olesen, 1997). Unlike traditional one-to-one interviews, ethnographers inspired by symbolic interactionism tend to analyse collective acts in real situations and uncover meanings embedded in participants' activities (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014).

Since the mid-1990s, the development of the World Wide Web ushered in a new era of ethnography. Many scholars have attempted to embed the characteristics of the digital age in traditional ethnographic studies; for example, Jenkins (1992) and Correll (1995) studied online fan communities and online lesbian communities separately. On this basis, Kozinets coins the term 'netnography' to describe ethnographical research that takes place on the internet (Kozinets, 2020). Because fans tend to communicate with other like-minded people via social media, many fan practices are also frequently observed online (Wu, 2021; Yan and Yang, 2020), netnography is therefore adopted to grasp fans' archival material and word-of-mouth discussion. As a research method

that has flourished over the past two decades, netnography attempts to capture an authentic account of the fan experience and answer the fundamental question of grounded theory study: what is happening here? (Glaser, 1978; Kozinets, 2015; Wang, 2019).

Additionally, the researcher himself has been following the music industry and singers in China and South Korea since 2018. As a result, he has opened himself up to a range of behaviours among artists' fans and found that a large number of Chinese fan practices take place online. In this case, I believe netnography, or online ethnography could help me to learn and explore 'what actually happens' and 'how things work' in the world of Chinese fan organisations (Watsons, 2011). As Kozinets (2021:381) suggests, 'those cellphone-innocent halcyon days of ethnography are gone,' and we are witnessing a range of ethnographies that rely on digital technology. As a research method emerged in the increasingly digitalized world, a number of qualitative studies use netnography to explore issues ranging from how people use email in everyday communication to how online environments facilitate collective behaviour. Besides, netnography is extensively used in Chinese fan study to trace trail of online fans: both Zhang et al. (2022) and Yin (2020) highlighted how fans strategically adapt the culture of platform algorithms, using algorithms to manipulate online data for the celebrities they support. On this basis, Hou (2022) analysed the negative impact of this algorithmic culture on Chinese fans through 18-months of online fieldwork. Also, Wang and Ge (2022) reveal the existence of online suppression done by Chinese fans through illusory power after their 12-month netnographic research.

Specifically, online data will be traced and collected from social media platforms, particularly Weibo, with participants' permission. As a key field site for this research, Weibo hosts a massive number of active Chinese fans, making it an indispensable platform for observing fan activities and interactions. For example, this digital



platform had over 400 million monthly active users in 2018 (Xinhua, 2018). Research into Chinese online fandom has primarily focused on these platforms over the past decade. These platforms are anticipated to serve as valuable archival resources, offering insights into the pre-founding context and the early development of fan organisations, as well as their collective consumption behaviours. (Yan and Yang, 2020; Zhang and Negus, 2020). Additionally, immersion into the platforms could help the researcher locate key informants as well as the gatekeepers in this study, who could be the leaders, managers or administrators of various fan organisations. With the help of these gatekeepers, snowballing techniques will be used to search for more members to participate in this research, in which step also paves the way for the following interviews. However, in contrast to traditional ethnographies where demographic information on respondents can be obtained quickly and accurately, potential participants' information reached by researchers in online fieldwork may be incomplete or ambiguous. In other words, netnography compromises between broadening the range of potential participants and deepening participants' information (Wang and Liu, 2021). In terms of the platform policies, Weibo presents users' data in an open domain that does not require approval of the operator to be seen. In the Weibo service usage agreement, it is explicitly stipulated that users are aware that third parties may use the public content sent by users through the Weibo platform (Weibo, n.d.).

Methodologically speaking, I see myself as a constructivist/interpretivist in the field. The phenomena I observe and record do not exist independently but are co-created and co-interpreted by the researcher and situational fans. I also admit it could be difficult for the researcher to recognize all the blind spots and assumptions in the research (Alvesson and Sköldborg, 2018). In this case, to offer a more rigorous academic contribution and greater transparency, I, as an interpretive netnographer, accepted Shehata's (2006) suggestion to provide the researcher's demographic information, including my socio-economic background, education level, gender and

other factors that may affect the construction of theories. The above factors are expected to illuminate how I interpret certain data and the process of theory emergence.

While netnography adapts traditional ethnographic methods to the digital age and offers unique advantages for the study of online cultures, it also faces new challenges. Firstly, the pervasive online censorship in China transforms online fieldwork into a "cat-and-mouse game," as described by Wang and Liu (2021: 2). Social media platforms, influenced by economic and political interests, often filter or erase information. This makes it challenging for netnographers to observe the day-to-day activities of online groups, as noted by Yang and Wu (2018). Despite these obstacles, online fandom topics like gaming and fan fiction are less scrutinized by authorities compared to sensitive issues such as feminism and human rights, providing a somewhat freer space for research. Secondly, netnography primarily relies on the digital traces of human activity rather than direct human interactions. Kähkö (2018) critiques this approach, noting that individuals' online behaviour may not accurately reflect their offline actions. This methodological limitation necessitates that researchers engage closely with social actors to gain a deeper understanding of their behaviours. Interviews, as a staple method in social science, are thus employed to obtain a more authentic account of online organisations. By combining netnographic observations with interviews, researchers can overcome some of the inherent limitations of studying online phenomena, providing a richer understanding of digital cultures.

### **3.5.2 Interview**

Ethnography and interviewing are often portrayed as antagonistic approaches within the qualitative research landscape, particularly in discussions post-millennium. Proponents of each method engage in debates over superiority, citing various strengths and limitations. Ethnographers contend that interviews fall short in

capturing the essence of direct interactional situations, suggesting a gap in the method's ability to fully understand the nuances of social interactions. Conversely, advocates for interviews argue that certain research fields, especially those involving sensitive topics such as condom use, are not readily accessible through ethnographic means (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). A compromise idea to this problem is to deny the agency of single research method and embrace different methods based on the fit between the method and the research question. Therefore, interviewing will be embraced alongside netnography, as it is deemed essential for gaining in-depth knowledge of fan experiences, which are central to this research.

Interview is one of the most commonly used qualitative methods in marketing study. Interviews are designed to elicit discourses that could be fragmented and contradictory, but that discourse could define and explain respondents' views and behaviours (Charmaz, 2014). Ideally, a scientific and sound interview plan can make respondents willing to share their knowledge, as a result, a large amount of empirical data in the social sciences also relies on high-quality interviews (Briggs, 1986; Roulston et al., 2003). In this study, 'Scientific' interviews may help the researcher gain a comprehensive and systematic understanding of Chinese fans' online life. As noted above, netnography could be utilised to kindle the connection between the researcher and fans initially, and some interviews will subsequently be conducted with these fans. The first group of interviewees are expected multiple leaders and key members from various Chinese fan organisation who have more comprehensive understanding on these collective fans. Of note, figure 1 presents the anonymised identities of these fan leaders along with the fan organisations they belong to, while the interview schedule is provided in the appendix A. Cultivating the relations with these fans is helpful for the researcher to familiarise with more concrete fan culture, deeply access their organisation, and engage in more fan consumption activities. Additionally, my rapport with these fans may allow me to locate more fans to join the interviews.

Before discussing the various details such as time, place and degree of formal structure in the interview, an essential premise is often overlooked: What is the philosophical identity of the researcher in the interview? What is the nature of the knowledge produced by the respondents (Alvesson, 2011; Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012)? As a constructivist grounded theorist, I see myself as a reflexivist in the interview, partly following romanticism's insight and clearly rejecting the tradition of neo-positivism (Symon and Cassell, 2012). In order to understand 'facts' and minimise 'bias' from the respondents, proponents of neo-positivism often design tightly structured interviews to collect 'undistorted' data. The principal limitation of neo-positivism is that the data collected in this way is superficial and thin, it is also difficult to deeply understand the organisational life without follow-up questions. Meanwhile, as a symbolic interactionist, I believe the meaning construction should stem from the interaction and negotiation between the researcher and the respondents.

Hence, I adopt the claim of reflexivism, aim to interpret the interviewees' responses and reject the possibility of neutrality in the interviews (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). During the interview, both the researcher and the interviewees belong to the cultural subject, which indicates that bias cannot be eliminated in the process of knowledge production. Therefore, choosing this position chimed with my philosophical stance as an interpretivist and paves the way for the reflexivity examination (Roulston et al., 2003; Lee and Aslam, 2018). Also, the final production of knowledge is more like narrative knowledge rather than scientific knowledge, the emergent theory is not an exact picture of Chinese fans as consumers but an interpretive portrayal of fans' world. (Lyotard, 1984; Charmaz, 2004).

Moreover, I align with Dingwall's (1997) perspective on romanticism, which posits that the quality of knowledge production is influenced by the proximity between researchers and respondents. This theory suggests that informants are more inclined to share openly within the context of "warm" interpersonal relationships (Symon &

Cassell, 2012: 242). In light of this, reflexivists often opt for flexible, semi-structured interviews that allow for follow-up inquiries, probing questions, and interpretive questions, thus fostering a more dynamic and responsive interview process (Kvale, 2007). Nonetheless, this approach introduces a pivotal challenge concerning the assessment of research quality, a topic that will be further explored in subsequent sections. In this study, I transitioned my identity from a 'non-aca fan' to an 'aca-fan'—a term referring to individuals who identify with both academic organisations and fans—to build closer ties with Chinese fans and deepen the authenticity of the knowledge exchange. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent limitations in completely bridging the distance between researcher and participant. An excessively close relationship, characterised by a total relinquishment of my academic identity in favour of becoming a 'pure fan', could potentially undermine my analytical capacity regarding the information shared by fans (Hills, 2002). Thus, maintaining a balanced stance that allows for both engagement and critical analysis is crucial.

To facilitate comprehensive data collection, this study will employ semi-structured interviews. This methodology allows for both flexibility and depth, beginning with standardized introductory questions aimed at gathering basic background information on the participants, as advocated by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). The initial set of questions will include:

1. Which organisation is you affiliated with?
2. Which celebrity do you support?
3. How long have you been a member of this organisation, and what prompted you to join initially?

These questions are crafted to establish a foundational understanding of the participants' connections to their respective organisations and the celebrities they support. To delve deeper into the organisational dynamics and activities, additional, more focused questions have been prepared, these questions aim to uncover the

nuanced interactions and engagements of fans, offering insights into the roles individuals play, the nature of their connections, and the activities that define their experience:

1. What is your position or role within your organisation?
2. How are members of the organisation connected? Can you describe your relationship with other members?
3. Have you participated in any activities that you found particularly memorable or impactful?

Depending on the distinct information provided by the fans, the interviewer will ask a number of probing questions such as "can you describe more about...?" and interpreting questions like "is it right that you think that...?" As mentioned before, knowledge production in the interviews is the art of interaction, where a low degree of structure may prompt surprises. To be specific, there may be answers that go beyond what the researcher has gleaned from his own prior experience and extant literature (Lee and Aslam, 2018). As a constructivist in grounded theory, the key task is to delve into 'emerging phenomena and defining their properties'. Meanwhile, being a reflexivist in the interviewing, the principle is to monitor how the researcher's participation influenced the interview itself (Charmaz, 2014: 179).

Of note, although semi-structure interviews may help generate theories about the formation of Chinese fan organisations, some potential drawbacks of this approach should also be mentioned. Firstly, there has also been ongoing criticism of the sloppiness of the interviews, with much data obtained from interviews considered "quick and dirty" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 4). In this case, the collected data may document more specific individual fan behaviours rather than group trajectories that deserve more attention. Another challenge interviewers face is the inaccuracy of the data, some studies on attitude-behaviour consistency (ABC) demonstrate that respondents may provide incorrect accounts of past activities (Jerolmack and Khan,

2014). One example can be found in Miller's (2001) research, which shows that African women exaggerate their level of poverty, and men exaggerate their level of wealth. Therefore, Dean and Whyte (1958) suggest triangulating the interviewing data with other data to provide a more comprehensive narrative.

As such, Netnography is argued to fill this gap by recording how fans interpret their actions, a combination of ethnographic observations and subsequent interviews is suggested as an efficient data collection strategy. Meanwhile, the researcher may immerse themselves into the field to compare fans' statements with the direct observations (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). As one of the most common methods used by symbolic interactionists, ethnography and its advocates Blumer are often criticised for methodological tribalism (Best, 2006). In response to this, netnography could be combined and triangulated with the interviewing to draw on the strengths of both research methods. To wit, netnography could provide fundamental information about Chinese fans through close observation and interaction in natural settings, which could assist the researcher in locating potential interviewees. Simultaneously, interviewing creates opportunities to gain deeper insight into the fan organisations. With this understanding, the researcher could re-enter the field to collect more specific data. In conclusion, netnography allows the researcher to 'observe behaviour in process' and 'view written records of people', while interviewing is chosen to 'ask questions and listen to answers' (Deutscher et al., 1992:15).

### **3.6 Access to the field**

Following the exploration of the researcher's philosophical orientation and the specific methodologies employed, this section delves into the strategies for accessing the research field. Methodologically, scholars of Chinese fan culture often adopt a transformative approach to their identity during their research, transitioning from a purely academic stance to a dual identity that encompasses both academic and fan perspectives (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017). This shift signifies a preference for an emic

approach—prioritizing an insider's perspective—over an etic or outsider's viewpoint, facilitating a deeper observation and analysis of individuals within the organisation (Cunliffe, 2010). In this case, a successful entry into the field would provide a good basis for subsequent data collection, as two approaches of accessing the field is detailed in the following sections. To borrow Geertz's (1973:22) insightful quote that anthropologists do not study villages, they study in villages. Online organisational netnographers do not study online organisations, they study in online organisations. As Van maanen (2011:220) suggests, immersive fieldwork require researchers to 'cutting their life down' to adapt to new identities even belief systems. On this account, the first challenge of collecting data from online Chinese fan organisation is getting permission to access the field.

Thanks to my previous research on fans' motivations through questionnaires in 2020, I believe I'm more familiar with Chinese fan culture than people who have never been exposed to it. Specifically, the concept of “cultural similarity” is facilitated by my familiarity with the language of online fans, especially the understanding of specific jargon, which aids in comprehending the ongoing dynamics within the field (Prasad, 2017:90). For example, fans often use the seemingly confusing abbreviation "cr" on social media. Thanks to my familiarity with the online linguistic habits of fans, I know that “cr” stands for “credit to”. This abbreviation is commonly used by fans to indicate the original creator's ID when reposting images, videos, and other content originally shared by someone else. This study diverges from traditional ethnographic explorations, such as those situated in the Amazon jungle or the slums of London, by focusing on the digital terrain of China's internet, specifically within social media platforms. My personal experiences suggest a variance in willingness among fans to share their stories; some are open, while others exhibit reluctance in disclosing their information. In this context, the identification and engagement of key gatekeepers within these cultural sites are anticipated to significantly enhance the data collection process. These individuals play a critical role in facilitating access to the entities and



in navigating the complexities of online fan culture, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the field.

In the preliminary phase of my research, I employed two principal strategies to gain access to Chinese fan organisations. The first approach involved reconnecting with fan leaders whom I had previously encountered. In late June 2022, I initiated contact with several key members of fan organisations via Chinese social media, individuals I had originally connected with for my master's thesis research in 2020 and with whom I had maintained contact. Although some had moved on from their previous places, I was fortunate that two leaders from organisation I and T, still in pivotal roles, agreed to participate in this study. It is important to note that, even though Paru, the leader of Organisation T, initially agreed to my observation of the fan group, I ultimately left without collecting any valid data from Organisation T due to "some differing opinions from other fans." One notable interaction was with Jiyu, a 25-year-old female fan leader from organisation I newly transitioned into the workforce. She expressed a keen interest in my research, offering to share "all the details she knew" out of curiosity about academic perceptions of Chinese fans. This led to a 47-minute interview with Jiyu, which served as an invaluable foundation for my research. The interview covered a wide range of topics, including the current state of her organisation, her background, the internal structures of her organisation and the functions of various groups within the organisation. Particularly, I was interested in learning about her journey from serving as a Korean-Chinese translator to becoming a core member of the management team. Still, Jiyu candidly admitted that she could not control the opinions of other members within the organisation towards me as a researcher, and thus politely declined my request to enter the organisation. Nevertheless, during the two-year period of data collection and analysis, Jiyu and I maintained online contact, and at times, she provided his own insights into some of my arguments.

The second method of field access employed in my research was predicated on an identity transformation—I transitioned into the role of a celebrity fan and integrated myself into fan organisations for my favoured artists. The question of how one becomes a celebrity fan is somewhat misdirected. In my observations, fandom is not a choice made *ex nihilo*; rather, it is often ignited by an encounter with a song, a TV show, or other media content, leading to an online exploration of celebrity-related information (Yang, 2009; Sun, 2022).

Contemporary Chinese fans predominantly engage with their idols by posting, liking, and commenting on online content related to them, thereby crafting distinct identities on social media platforms (Fuschillo, 2020). Such behaviours allow fans to recognize fellow enthusiasts through shared 'fan characteristics' visible on their social media profiles. This dynamic underscored the necessity for me to curate my online persona in a manner that would facilitate the building of trust with potential research participants. To this end, I established a new Weibo account and began following two artists, A and Y, whose work I had personally enjoyed. This affinity provided a genuine foundation for connecting with other fans. I then immersed myself in fan activities, such as voting in polls and engaging in discussions about the celebrities, to authentically exhibit my fan identity. After identifying and following the Weibo accounts of two fan organisations, I reached out with an introduction and offered my services as a translator. Subsequently, my applications were accepted, and I was invited to join these organisations—a process that will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Of note, the researcher reveals his presence, affiliations and intention in both of the above approaches, although this practice has been greatly neglected in the netnographic research with around more than half of the published netnography articles failing to mention this topic (Kozinets, 2002; Langer and Beckman 2005; Whalen, 2018). The researcher aims to act as an active participant rather than a

passive observer in the field. In doing so, I disclose my identity prior to the interviews and observations to offer greater transparency to the participants, either in writing or verbally, to ensure that the research is conducted overtly. In the meantime, I have adopted Buchanan et al.'s (1988: 57) suggestion to carefully avoid using terms like "publication" or "formal interviews" in conversations. Instead, I often express my willingness to learn about and understand the fans' experiences through discussion, and to ensure that the final results will be accessible to them as well. Below are two examples of the message I sent when I first contacted Celebrity Z's fan organisation's Weibo account and reconnected with Celebrity T's organisation leader, Jiyu, in July 2022. The messages are translated as follows separately:

*Hi, I am a third year PhD student at the University of Nottingham Business School in the UK. I am majoring in organisational behaviour and my PhD research is about Chinese fans. Information about me can be found on the University of Nottingham website: <http://t.cn/A6aYQS0Y>, or you can also find my profile on LinkedIn: <http://t.cn/A6aYQS0j>. I am contacting you to invite you to participate in my current research. If you are interested, please contact me further by replying to this message or by adding me on WeChat, my WeChat number is AndyLu97\_. A copy of the study's Informed Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet will be sent to you as a pdf. Also, this study has been approved by the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee and your participation will be kept strictly confidential. Your participation will be very helpful to my research!*

*Hi, I don't know if I've changed my name hahaha, but I contacted you two years ago to do research on fan organisations. I'm now in my third year of my PhD at the University of Nottingham in the UK and I'm specialising in organisational behaviour. Information about me can be found on the University of Nottingham website: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/study-with-us/phd/students/yifan.lu.html>. Or you can also find my profile on Collage website: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yifan-lu-722602106/>. I wonder if you are interested in participating in this research again, which is more formal and standardised, with all research procedures reviewed and approved by the university, and there are some forms you can share. If you are interested, we can work together again haha. This research could benefit your organisation and we can discuss further about some of the rewards.*

In total, I successfully contacted five fan leaders from five different organisations, and I joined three of these fan organisations, remaining involved for periods ranging from three days to fifteen months. The first approach helped me to reach two fan leader

Paru and Jiyu, while the second approach helped me to reach the rest leaders Waiwai, Xiaocai and TT. Basic information about these fan leaders and the celebrities that their organisations support is listed below, of note, key information such as the artist's name has been withheld to protect the privacy of the fan organisation. In addition, although the artists' nationalities are diverse, this research focuses only on the Chinese fan organisation, which means that the fan leaders are all Chinese. Meanwhile, in the following text, particularly in the findings chapter, I will use abbreviations of celebrities' names to refer to fan organisations. For instance, the fan organisation formed around celebrity T will be referred to as Organisation T, The brief introductions of the five artists are shown in the table below.

<b>Celebrity</b>	<b>Short description</b>
I	Five-member girl group from South Korea, debuting in the late 2010s under a major entertainment company. Known for their confident concept, strong choreography, and catchy pop tracks. Their music often blends EDM and hip-hop influences with empowering themes. They have gained global recognition through chart-topping songs and international tours.
T	Eleven-member boy group from South Korea, debuting in the early 2020s under a major entertainment company. They are known for their energetic performances and a mix of pop, hip-hop, and EDM. Their music frequently charts globally, gaining a strong international fanbase. Beyond music, they actively engage in variety shows and online content.
Z	Chinese male singer who gained recognition through an idol survival show and later debuted in a boy group. Known for his smooth vocals and emotional delivery, he has since expanded into solo music. His activities include acting, variety shows, and frequent fan interactions. His style blends pop and R&B influences.
A	Korean female solo singer who gained fame from a survival show, standing out with her powerful, rock-influenced voice. She is recognized for her high-energy performances and stage charisma. Her debut as a soloist

	showcased her strong vocal identity. Despite being new, she has quickly built a dedicated fanbase.
Y	Korean female singer who debuted in a popular girl group under a major entertainment company. She is known for her strong dance skills, bright stage presence, and youthful appeal. Besides music, she is active in endorsements and media appearances. Her influence extends into fashion and entertainment.

Figure 1: Information about the celebrity supported by the organisations

Fan leader	Celebrity supported	Age at time	Gender	Occupation
Paru	I	24	Female	Full-time employee
Jiyu	T	25	Female	Full-time employee
Waiwai	Z	24	Female	Full-time employee
Xiaocai	A	23	Female	College Student
TT	Y	23	Female	College Student

Figure 2: Demographic information of fan leaders

Organisation	Time of entry	Time of leave	Reason for leaving
I	15/08/2022	18/08/2022	Internal members objected
Y	26/07/2022	12/05/2023	Leadership change
A	02/01/2023	30/05/2024	End of research

Figure 3: Durations in different organisations

In addition to getting in touch with the leaders of the five organisations, I followed the accounts of five organisations on Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo is China's largest social media platform, with 5.73 billion monthly active users, Weibo is also considered the main online venue for Chinese fans, with each organisation account attracting large followers (Wang, 2022; Huang et al., 2017).

Organisation account for which celebrity	The number of followers
I	196 thousand
T	189 thousand
Z	34 thousand
A	15 thousand
Y	201 thousand

Figure 4: Number of followers of each fan organisations Weibo account (updated 30 Aug 2024)

As Kozinets (2020, 2021:386, 2022) suggests, although netnography does not require ‘strict enforced prescriptions’ in terms of specific methods, the term ‘immersion’ is considered as the essential data collection requirement for netnography. Meanwhile, immersive participatory in the field may alleviate concerns about online research being relatively superficial and lacking in depth. As a netnographer, I immersed myself for an average of two hours per day in observing fans' daily activities on Weibo and within WeChat groups at the beginning of my research, closely monitoring the events as they unfolded. This duration, however, was not fixed. When there was no fresh news about the celebrity, fan activities—be it consumption behaviours or other practices—tended to decrease. Conversely, when the celebrity released new content, such as an album or announced a concert, fan activity on Weibo and in WeChat groups would surge, requiring me to dedicate more time to observation. Meanwhile, due to the time difference between UK and China, sometimes I have to adjust my daily routine and check the chat room as soon as I wake up to see if there

are any messages I need to reply to. On Weibo, for example, fans may form their own chatrooms with dozens of people, and there could be hundreds of messages a day. To maximise interaction with fans in China, regularly perusing these messages and actively participating in enthusiastic discussions, even heated debate became my daily life.

On the one hand, I paid attention to fan posts and comments on Weibo which could be composed of various type of data such as texts, videos and photos. On the other hand, acting as a constructivist conducting grounded theory approach, I kept writing reflective immersion journal to capture my virtual world experience and thoughts (Kozients, 2022). Specifically, I used an Excel document to record the time, place and the scope of people involved of key events. My personal recollection and perception of such events are highlighted, as well as possible theoretical directions linked to the event (memoing). For example, on 26 July 2022 and 2 January 2023, I documented how I separately contacted and negotiated with two Chinese fan organisations supporting singer Y and singer A on Weibo. I have a detailed record of my request to be part of the group and my conversation with TT and Xiaocai, who are the administrators of these two groups. On this account, I coded and interpreted the requirements for recruiting new members to the fan organisation, resulting in a new category of the data coding: recruitment and selection. As such, the combination of open coding in grounded theory and the immersion journal in netnography helps the authors to distil and generalise new and salient categories such as government policy, departmental classification and decision making. In the early stage, it was unknown how these categories influenced the formation of a fan organisation, while in the spirit of grounded theory, the authors continued to interact with fans with an open mind and collect a variety of complex and fragmented data in the field in the hope of reaching theoretical saturation (Strauss,1987).

Additionally, I echoed Watson's (2011:205) call to see ethnography as a product rather than the method of production. This perspective highlights ethnography as a style of writing and encourages the use of multiple research methods in the field. In result, I used a range of methods including online interviews, textual analysis and even small-scale surveys (Heinonen and Medberg; 2018). Specifically, the focus of textual analysis lies in the use of language, symbols within organisational activities, particularly in relation to the construction of member identities. In terms of the small-scale surveys, applied by the author prior to interviews, primarily involves gathering basic information about the interviewees' identities and the entities to which they belong. Of note, there is far more 'naturally occurring data' collected through lengthy participant observation than 'manufactured data' collected from interviews or informal conversations (Silverman, 2007: 9). In this study, the questions in the interviews were primarily designed to clarify my doubts or confirm my assumptions that emerged from the field. The advantage of ethnographic interview is that, with my knowledge of the fan organisation, I am often capable of challenging the interviewees based on my 'rich dataset' (Whittle, 2005: 1307).

As of Aug 2024, I have conducted 12 semi-structured interviews including five fan organisational leaders. The shortest being 20 minutes and the longest being 59 minutes, all the interviews were transcribed and sent back to interviewees for double check. Nvivo is used to save transcripts, public documents and all data collected online, such as screenshots from Weibo. As a common-used software for qualitative data analysis, Nvivo is employed in this research for mainly data management, and the researcher bears in mind that superior instruments cannot compensate for inferior craftsmanship (Vezyridis, 2021; Bazely, 2013). By the end of Aug 2024, the project had collected 10.12 GB of data. Meanwhile, the researcher also keeps in touch with these participants regularly, asking questions about their organisation on real-time messaging software such as WeChat. For example, after learning that Celebrity Z's fan organisation manager Waiwai had left her organisation, I asked her questions like



"Can you tell me what is your position now" and continued the conversation based on her answers.

*The researcher: So, can I ask what is your identity now?*

*The researcher: No longer in the organisation anymore?*

*Waiwai: Yes.*

*The researcher: I remember that you mentioned you didn't want to be a fan leader anymore.*

*The researcher: So, quitting is not a totally bad thing for you?*

*Waiwai: correct, it is good for me.*

*Waiwai: Being a fan leader really influences my daily life.*

Of note, the field in this study includes all online venues related to Chinese celebrity fans and is not limited to Weibo, public online sphere such as online group chats on various platforms spontaneously created by fans are also part of the field. This practice is also considered a notable improvement over the online ethnography that was limited to a single forum or website in the 1990s (Kozinets, 2021). Also, such phenomenon supports Yanow et al.'s (2012) discussion of multisited ethnography: on the Internet, as online users are not confined to a single platform, 'shifting fields' should be seen as a norm and a promising direction in netnographic research (Van Maanen, 2015: 46). In particular, the application of multisitedness in netnography implies to track how Chinese fans behave on different social media platforms since social actors 'are in a constant state of displacement' (Falzon, 2009: 5). An example of multisitedness attempt is shown below, where the researcher notices that a fan has created a group chat on WeChat (Chinese version of WhatsApp) and I expressed a desire to join the group chat. By observing in these fields, the researcher gained an initial understanding of Chinese online fans, which paves the way for the next step of deeper interaction with them.



Figure 5: Talk to fans to request access to a group chat.

In summary, Figure 6 presents an overview of the different data types used in this study, along with illustrative examples. The next section will elaborate on how these data were analysed and developed in line with the principles of grounded theory.

Method/Data Type	Description & Source
Online Archival Documents	Publicly available online reports on fans and their entities
Surveys	Structured online questionnaires distributed to fans
Online Semi-structured Interviews	Conducted with key fan organisation members
Informal Conversations	Unstructured discussions with fans online, normally on Wechat
Immersion Journal Fieldnotes	Researcher's self-reflection and observations recorded over 18 months
Screenshots	Including online photographic and video posts, comments on Weibo
Online Group Chat Forums	Group discussions via WeChat or Weibo
Participant observation	Engaging in online fan organisation activities

Figure 6: Different type of data collected in this research

### 3.7 Data Analysis

Grounded theorists aim to conceptualize incidents within data through the process of coding. This study initiates with the collection of first-hand data from online Chinese fans. Comprehensive data related to fan interactions and their consumption behaviour will be systematically gathered from the field. This data primarily encompasses online archive documentation, fans' posts on various social media platforms, and online conversations within fans' organisation.

The online archival document of fan organisations is a key piece of data in fieldwork, Hodder (2003) defines this type of data as mute information that can be transposed across time and space, the analysis of archival document is suggested to involve three key realms: creators, users and settings (Prior, 2003: 2). Unlike some large companies, documents relate to fans organisations cannot be found on the internet. Taking a personal experience as an example: in my MA thesis, the researcher used to study different types of motivation of Chinese fans. One of the leaders of Chinese fan organisation handed the researcher a PowerPoint describing the structure of their group. This slideshow helped the researcher to gain an initial understanding of their group and to familiarise the researcher with elements of fans' policies, contexts and basic activities. Moreover, media coverage of target groups can also be collected and analysed: in Bogard's (2001) study of the homeless population, he collected and analysed the Washington Post and New York Times coverage of this population. These publications helped researchers to reconstruct multiple perspectives on the homeless people. Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 161) highlight the role of 'library research' in qualitative data sourcing, suggesting that researchers focus on

data caches such as letters, memories and speeches in addition to observations and interviews. This method will be applied in this study, as it may significantly reduce time and space costs, although the researcher was unsure whether the fans had an adequate 'data cache' and had difficulty discerning whether such data resources had been filtered or modified.

Moreover, the researcher adopted Charmaz's (2014) recommendations regarding coding, initially importing the transcriptions of interviews with several organisations' leaders (the details of these interviews are discussed later in the text) and captured conversations among fans into NVivo. This process involved word-by-word and line-by-line coding, also referred to as initial coding. Guided by the researcher's theoretical sensitivity, the data are meticulously coded and grouped into distinct categories. Some typical examples of line-by-line coding include instances where a new member joins an group chat and is welcomed by others. In such cases, I record the conversations between members and code them as "new member joins and receives a verbal welcome from the organisation." Similarly, when a member elaborately explains their reasons for leaving the group in the chat, I code these instances as "member departs." In terms of word-by-word coding, ambiguous and unexpected terms were coded, for example, the frequent use of the term "ladder" by members when discussing browsing Instagram, and similarly, the term "going to work" used within the organisation. These terms appeared frequently during the initial period after the researcher joined the organisation and were initially coded as "unexpected terms used in the process of collecting celebrity information" and "terms describing members' actions within the organisation," respectively. There are two types of coding. The first is 'in vivo coding', in which incidents are stated by the informants themselves. In contrast, coding that is constructed from the material by researchers is known 'in vitro coding' (Strauss, 1987: 33). In the process of in vitro coding, the personal element of the researcher must be considered as part of the study, which also aligns with my

interpretivist philosophical position. As the coding proceeds, the new data are constantly compared to the old data to determine whether the emergent data can create new categories or be grouped into existing categories.

During this process, in addition to categorising fragmented data into topics and themes, the researcher also experimented with grounded coding, a heuristic device to “bring the researcher into the data” (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2014:221). For instance, after witnessing several instances where fan leaders inquired and directed members to execute specific plans in group chats, these data were coded as “monitoring progress and assigning tasks.” Another coding strategy used by the researcher is incident-to-incident coding, where two similar incidents are coded and analysed to identify their similarities and differences. A specific example of this can be found in the subsequent section on “Entertainment Ban Notices.” The researcher observed that even though two organisations issued similar notices during specific periods, the content of these notices and the choice of dates slightly differed. By constantly comparing these two incidents, the researcher gradually uncovered the underlying implications of this policy, as the core category could emerge as theoretical centrality of the study (Charmaz, 2014).

After the initial coding, the researcher attempted to perform focused coding to further theorize and conceptualize certain categories. The frequent appearance of some codes highlighted the necessity of focused coding. For example, common activities within fans’ entities, initially coded as personnel changes and financial matters, led to the development of one of the core categories “managerial labour” to advance the analysis. It is worth mentioning that some relatively rare but highly indicative and telling codes were also treated as focused codes (Charmaz, 2014). For example, there was a single instance within the organisation where I closely communicated with the fan leader to complete a task of translating an artist's Chinese name, a process

unknown to other members. When the leader later publicly announced it, I developed the code "communicating with organisational leadership about the artist's Chinese name issue" into "autocratic decision-making with small-scale communication." As a result, these emerging categories may continue to be captured in the form of theoretical codes as a process, a direction or a pattern. It also can be seen as a signal to guide the researcher to start theoretical sampling. By drawing diagrams or models, the researcher expects to determine how other categories relate to the core category and eventually generate theories (Strauss, 1987).

As a constructivist grounded theorist, the term "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1954) can provide preliminary ideas during data analysis, as Charmaz (2014:31) suggests, "sensitizing concepts can provide a place to start enquiry, not to end it". Blumer contrasts sensitizing concepts with definitive concepts, noting that sensitizing concepts provide scholars with a general reference and guidance rather than prescribing what they should observe. In other words, sensitizing concepts may guide grounded theorists in their direction of further data analysis (Bowen, 2019). For example, when analyzing interview transcripts where an interviewee mentioned being a leader in fan organisation do not have income, the researcher experienced several "aha!" moments and decided to consider "free labour" as a potential category. Building on this, the researcher reviewed literature related to free labour and, after assessing its applicability, decided to retain it. Meanwhile, the researcher acknowledges the role of intuition in theory generation during the data analysis process, that is, this "non-sequential information processing mode" continuously aids in advancing data analysis during the coding process of grounded theory (Kump, 2022; Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005: 357).

Additionally, Suddaby (2006: 636) claims there is no 'clean break' between data collection and analysis, and grounded theory researchers need to continue to collect

substantial amount data until the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Charmaz, 2014). A multitude of data may counteract the negative effects of misleading or fabricated accounts, subsequently better avoids the risk of superficial analysis and increases the theoretical accuracy and plausibility. (Glaser, 1998). In other words, the work of data collection and data analysis may be carried out simultaneously, prematurely leaving the field may result in difficulty conceptualizing the extant data into theory (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Charmaz, 2014; Holton, 2018).

However, in this study, the grounded theory approach suffers from two limitations. First, many researchers struggle with the time-consuming process of data coding and analytical induction, since the method tests researchers' calculation and imagination (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Refining theories around core categories can take up to several months, leading to a certain inefficiency, and can be tedious for many novice researchers (Annells, 1997; Strauss, 1987). Another risk is that grounded theory does not guarantee high-value research results. The close proximity to empirical data may create trivial, old knowledge of 'low social value': in some instances, researchers may simply belabor the obvious (Glaser, 1993). Specifically, the researcher collected 18 months of data across several fan organisations, adhering to the principles of grounded theory—a process undeniably time-consuming. Initially, the coding results were deemed repetitive and even invalid, as many categories, such as the various practices of fans, had already been thoroughly reported in previous studies. This is a common and often frustrating phase for grounded theory researchers. Over time, however, some unexpected data were gathered and coded. These included "entertainment ban notifications," which appeared unrelated to the cultural entertainment consumption aimed at celebrities, and the different decision-making processes among fans, which is significantly ignored in the previous research. These observations provided the researcher with memorable "aha!" moments, significantly

driving the entire coding and theory generation process. Moreover, the researcher's most significant methodological insight emerged from the perspective of coding. Since fan behaviours have been extensively discussed by media researchers, many crucial categories, such as fan practices and fan communities, have already been reported. However, when approaching fan behaviour from a different angle—in this case, through the lens of (brand) community analysis—the researcher was pleasantly surprised to find that this area remains largely unexplored and is rich with potential for grounded theory.

### **3.8 The discussion of rigour**

The criteria for examining the degree of rigour in this study will also be briefly discussed here. Unlike quantitative research, a typical qualitative study lacks standardised guidance for collecting and analysing data rigorously. Most scholars contend that no single set of criteria can fit all qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Pratt, 2008; Rheinhardt et al., 2018). In this study, I decided to adopt the earlier proposed, perhaps most commonly used and widely recognised, set of criteria by Guba and Lincoln (1989) as the framework for evaluating this qualitative research. Specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the core pillars of this framework:

1. **Credibility:** This criterion focuses on the authenticity and trustworthiness of research findings, emphasising how researchers ensure that their reconstruction of participants' experiences and perspectives aligns with the participants' original constructions.
2. **Transferability:** Through methods such as thick description, researchers provide rich, detailed accounts of the research context, enabling readers to assess whether the findings can be transferred to other similar contexts.



3. **Dependability:** This process as an audit process, where researchers document the dynamic nature of their work through research diaries and provide detailed accounts in their research reports. This includes addressing whether there were any "methodological changes and shifts in constructions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 242) during the research process.
4. **Confirmability:** By clearly specifying the sources of data and detailing the data analysis process, external reviewers can verify that the research findings are grounded in authentic evidence.

### **3.9 Ethical issues**

The public, searchable and multifaceted online environment poses new challenges to netnography researchers, particularly with regard to ethical matters (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Kozinets (2015) suggests considering four perspectives of netnographic research ethics. Addressing these issues may help researchers conduct credible netnography research at a practical level.

1. Public or private space?
2. Informant consent
3. Harm and benefit
4. The issue of pseudonymous complexities

Traditional ethnographers often argue that discourse in mediums such as books and journals can be freely quoted because those mediums are considered to be public, and authors agree to place their expressions in a public space for discussion. Yet this situation needs to be re-examined through the lens of netnographic work: is the internet a public sphere or private sphere? One voice argues that online user's default to the fact that the text, photos and videos they post online are public knowledge (Zimmer, 2010). However, some social media users are argued to be reluctant to

allow researchers to use their posts freely, empirical evidence show that some members of open chatrooms are hostile to researchers and ‘deeply resent’ their access (LeBesco, 2004; Johns et al., 2003: 159). Therefore, the first two matters, public vs private space and informant consent, are closely related because the internet (and, in particular, the chat rooms of some online forums) is not open to researchers by default. To deal with this ethical issue, I will treat all online fan organisations as a private sphere and only enter their chat rooms with the permission of administrators or managers. Particularly, Buchanan’s (2010) suggestion about informed consent will be adopted, as I tend to use an inductive strategy of obtaining permission from organisation members to quote their words or social media postings at the beginning and end of the fieldwork. The significant goal of properly citing the fans is to minimize the harm and maximize the benefit this research does to fan organisations. In the informed consent form, some potential harms and rewards are communicated to participants to ensure fans understand what they are getting into.

As a researcher who will be deeply involved in fan organisations, the ‘researcher’ identity could bring asymmetry between me and fans, potentially resulting in the issue of cultural appropriation (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017). To be specific, some netnography researchers can easily enter into the field with permission, intuitively believing that data collection is their right and taking the data for granted as long as they obey academic norms. However, such a perspective has been refuted since academic status inevitably endows researchers with certain privileges. For instance, scholars’ accounts will be considered more authoritative by the media and fans; their academic personas also help them gain access to people or locations that are difficult for ordinary fans to access (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). At this juncture, an ethical suggestion for researchers is to actively contribute to the fan organisations they are involved in (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Feasible forms of reducing power imbalance and promoting reciprocity could be reading fan productions, offering ideas on fan

discussions, and buying albums from the artists they support. As Booth (2013) summarised, it might be unethical and problematic when fan scholar holds certain power without contributing to and participating in fan practices. In my personal capacity, I engaged actively in the crowdfunding initiatives undertaken by fan organisations A and Y. These initiatives primarily involved the purchase of the artist's merchandise through social media platforms, with all generated profits being allocated to the organisation's funds. This direct involvement served a dual purpose: it constituted a tangible contribution to the fan organisations and facilitated my exploration of the underlying dynamics of crowdfunding activities within these organisations.

As mentioned before, I have been forced to leave several organisations due to various challenges. Despite these obstacles, I continued to strive to maintain good relationships with the gatekeepers of these organisations, who are the former leaders of the organisations. For instance, when the new leader of fan organisation Y refused to participate in the study, the previous leader, TT, continued to communicate with me. TT had resigned from her leadership position due to personal reasons, but after her resignation, she still engaged in in-depth discussions with me on several topics, including the notification of entertainment bans. Similarly, the researcher and most participants maintained good relationships, despite never having met in person and not knowing their real names. One member of organisation A, had three conversations with the researcher, including one formal interview and two informal online discussions. During the first interview, Celia was nearing childbirth and told the researcher, "After we finish this interview, I'm going to the hospital to check in." As Knott (2019) suggested, ethnography is a type of research built on relationships. Within the field, the researcher made efforts to respond to messages in the group promptly, took the initiative to undertake translation tasks, and even provided

extensive information to a member who was facing challenges with applying to a Master's program in the UK.

The last ethical issue mainly considers the protection of the informants' identities. Unlike conventional ethnography, online search engines could easily link a verbatim quote with informants' pseudonyms and thus allow backward tracing of online users' identities (Kozinets, 2021). One potential solution is to change the wording of fans' online posts to 'minimize their reverse-searchability' (Tiidenburg, 2014: 5). The researcher took stringent confidentiality measures to protect the details of the activities within the fan organisations. In the subsequent findings chapter, to further prevent the backtracking of information, the researcher chose to omit specific details about the artists when presenting the data, significantly increasing the difficulty of tracing the information back. Furthermore, an analytical form of storytelling will also be used to address this issue. This strategy aims to integrate interview transcripts, observations and other online material from multiple fans and organisations to present an analytical view (Wang and Liu, 2021). Markham (2012: 342) refers to such a method as 'composite accounts', where representative data are selected and combined into new and untraceable accounts. This writing style is argued to protect participants' identities and provides relatively comprehensive netnographic accounts. Still, this style may cause the narrative to lose liveliness and beauty. To mitigate this disadvantage, some original quotes from the interview transcripts will be included to provide the reader with more raw data.

### **3.10 Reflexivity in the field**

When Charmaz discusses her choice of the term "constructivist," she talks about how scholars in the 1980s overly focused on others' social constructions of things, yet neglected to critically examine how the self participates in the construction process (Charmaz and Keller, 2016). Such a perspective leads constructivist grounded

theorists to seriously consider how researchers' positionality can influence theory emergence. The concept of researcher positionality is extensively esteemed within constructivist grounded theory research, similarly to the role of reflexivity in interpretive qualitative studies. This notion addresses the researcher's social position and perspective, encompassing aspects such as gender, class, age, and educational background (Rhoads, 1997; Charmaz et al. 2018). Nevertheless, given the overlapping meanings of reflexivity and researcher positionality, I intend to use the term reflexivity to thoughtfully consider how my positions might shape this research.

Reflexivity is suggested as a critical process of qualitative research to help researchers be more introspective and understand how theories are generated from the data. Although the word is often used with reflection synonymously, scholars conceive the slight difference between them: reflection help researchers to observe their practice from a mirror image while reflexivity entails "questioning ways of doing" and lead to the change during the reflection process (Hibbert et al., 2010: 48). Toward this end, this section aims to discuss the value of reflexivity in my research (Khiat, 2010).

Of particular interest, various philosophy orientations could result in the different elaboration of reflexivity: for postmodernists, they argue the self is largely multiple and unknowable, reflexivity in the research fail to help researchers "truly" interpret themselves and provide "real" accounts (Pillow, 2003; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). Conversely, a researcher with modernist position could argue reflexivity can arcuately analyse how researchers themselves impinge upon the research. Besides, Day (2012: 82) emphasises reflexivity is not a "universal cure-all" and has its limitation: excessive reflexivity may cause uncomfortableness against researchers, lead them to self-indulgence and narcissism (Weick, 1999). Still, leaving aside the debates and potential pitfalls surrounded by the term, it questions my interpretation of fans'

organisations from multiple aspects, resulting in garnering unique insights and delivering credible findings.

The first aspect relates to my philosophy assumptions, questioning how I understand social reality and the nature of knowledge (Day, 2012). Being a constructivist grounded theorist in this research, I consider fans as social actors and conceptualizes reality (e.g., fan's practices and organisations) as being constructed. This philosophical assumption partly stems from my understanding of fans' behaviour and organisational practices; for instance, various fans have different characteristics, and their organisation may gradually develop over time. In addition, I realised my involvement (observation and interview) was socially situated and impacted the production of knowledge (Haynes, 2012). Taking observation as an example, it is suggested that the phenomenon I observed is not "real" but rather the reality I interpret by my personal experience and assumptions. In this case, it is necessary to mention my personal connection with the research topic and the potential bias brought by it.

The second aspect of reflexivity concerns researchers themselves, as Cunliffe (2003) describes reflexivity as a way of opening the researcher up to scrutiny. Specifically, this type of reflexivity involves critical appraisal of relationships between the researcher with the research context, participants and the potential outcome. Several questions associated with this are presented below:

1. Why am I undertaking the research topic I have selected? What are my personal motivations (James & Vinnicombe, 2002: 97)?
2. What is the relationship between me and the research subjects, and how does it influence the research (Haynes, 2012: 78)?
3. What is my role in the research, and how does it impact (Cunliffe, 2011)?

The above questions lead us to refocus the target of this research, Chinese fans and their organisations. As suggested by Hills (2002), every scholar enters this field should ask themselves a question: Am I an academic fan? This term, also known as scholar fan or aca-fan, refers to individuals who identify with both academic and fan organisations. Compared to non-aca fans, aca-fans could have higher involvement within fan consumption behaviour and be more familiar with fans' practices. Personally, I do not recognize myself as an aca-fan since I never join or belong to any fan organisation or engage in any type of their practices. Most of my initial observations toward fans come from social media, where I am motivated to study these originations from the very beginning. With the aid of online networks, more fan organisations have their own social media accounts to campaign their events and show their achievement, including how they help celebrities enhance commercial value and protect celebrities' reputations. Such seemingly loosely organised groups depict a high degree of cohesion and execution in collective matters, driving me to wonder about the process of these originations' formation and development. Notably, my attention is specifically attracted by some radical fans and their dangerous comments. For example, in the case of a Chinese male singer accused of rape and being arrested, his fans collectively express criticism against the victim, mock the victim try to increase online visibility by sharing the untrue story, some extreme fans even claim to help the singer escape from prison. (Yip, 2021).

On the other hand, from my personal conversations and observations within fans, I gradually realised the vast majority of them do not fit the neurotic and pathologically obsessive image described by the media. On the contrary, multiple fan actions are observed as the product of careful thinking, collective decision and highly orderly structure. Such conflict drives me to explore the organisational logic behind these long-stigmatized groups. On this account, although I hardly know any 'real fans' at this stage, it is expected that my research could reflect fans' collective wisdom in

terms of forming and ruling their organisations (Jenkins, 2006). To be reflexive, since I aim to study "an object that is the target of popular suspicion and ridicule", this mindset may lead me to inevitably defend the behaviour of fans and have a balanced representation (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017: 13). In addition, to gather more data in the fieldwork, my identity is expected to be transferred from an outsider of fan organisations (non-aca fan) to an "expert" of it, that is, being an aca-fan and immerse myself in fans' daily practices. This identity not only paves the way for collecting spontaneously generated data (fan productions and discussion on social media) but also help to "trigger the generation of a set of data", such as data from interview and recordings of critical events (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017: 8).

### **3.11 Conclusion**

With the research question of how fans, as consumers, form their own entities, this chapter primarily discusses the researchers' philosophical stance and corresponding research methods. Specifically, symbolic interactionism, which advocates a bottom-up view of social phenomena and emphasises the influence of humans in interactions, is used as the basis for this study (Carter and Fuller, 2016). Correspondingly, the researcher employed Charmaz's (2014;2020) constructivist grounded theory as the method for collecting and analysing data. Proponents of constructivist grounded theory believe that researchers play an indispensable role throughout the data analysis process, thereby influencing the formation of categories. This means that researchers must constantly reflect on how their involvement affects the data analysis process and the eventual generation of theories (Charmaz et al., 2018).

Regarding the specific research methods, considering the nature of fans' online activities, the researcher chose netnography to understand the online environment, lifestyle, and behaviour of fans, conducting online participation and observation for a year and a half. As a burgeoning research method over the past two decades,



netnography aims to capture the authentic records of fans' experiences, addressing the fundamental question of basic theoretical research: What is happening here? (Glaser, 1978; Kozinets, 2015). On this basis, the researcher adopted semi-structured interviews as a supplementary research method and attempted to triangulate the interview data with the results of the netnographic observations (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This approach yielded surprising results: fans had concealed certain facts, and the differences between their statements and observations prompted the researcher to further explore the field.

Overall, driven by a curiosity about collective fan behaviours and the nature of their entities, the researcher conducted several interviews to establish basic background information about fan practices. With this understanding, the researcher successfully gained access to three fan organisations, employing long-term online ethnography to observe fan interactions, which primarily included their conversations and the specific vocabulary used within these discussions. Within the field, the researcher engaged in occasional informal interviews with some fan leaders to clarify certain terms, such as "梯子" (ladder) and "cr." Taken together, the rich data, particularly in the form of screenshots, guided the researcher in identifying common collective behaviours among fans, especially consumption behaviours, and in developing several important categories. These categories will be presented descriptively in the following three chapters.

## **Chapter 4: Findings: Demystifying Chinese fan organisations: What happened in the field**

### **4.1 Introduction**

To provide a preliminary answer to the research question "How do Chinese celebrity fans, as human brand consumers, form their own entities online? " The main task of this chapter centre on defining the essence of entities spontaneously formed by celebrity fans (also understood as human brand consumers). The researcher argues fans' entities as fan organisations based on his fieldwork, laying the groundwork for the development of the central concept of brand organisations discussed in the chapter 7. Additionally, this chapter aims to initially address fundamental questions, including what fan organisations are, how they are formed, and what components they comprise. Moreover, the researcher intends to reveal how fan organisations are formed from two perspectives: the process perspective and the structural perspective. The researcher's rationale for employing the term "*fan organisation*" will be further elucidated later in this chapter by delineating the distinctions between fan organisations and fan communities from various perspectives.

In particular, the section 4.2 describes the researcher's initial involvement with Organisation A in its early stages, providing a first-hand account of the early founding process. Given the researcher's extensive interaction with the founder of Organisation A during the early stages of the research, this section focuses primarily on the founder and highlights the dual role of the founders: they are portrayed not only as leaders but also as mentors. This dual capacity is crucial as they provide the researcher, a newcomer at the time, with essential guidance in several dimensions. Additionally, this section will also demonstrate how, as a symbolic interactionism grounded theory researcher, the researcher has utilised the rich data obtained from Organisation A to develop the fan action unit into a 'fan organisation.' For instance, some fans refer to

themselves using the term 'leader' and have established 'organisation guidelines,' even explicitly employing symbolic terms such as 'prohibit' and 'dismiss.'"

In the section 4.3, the researcher categorises the various groups within the fan organisation into three functional segments: information processing, celebrity promotion and internal operations. And outlined the primary responsibilities of each group along with their respective practices. Each segment is supported by data sources such as screenshots and interviews, providing a preliminary picture of the work content and processes within the organisation. This functional dissection provides a clear, structured view of the inner workings of the organisation, thereby shedding light on the central question: "What activities do fan organisations engage in?" The use of real data sources such as screenshots and interviews not only enrich the narrative, but also adds authenticity and depth to the analysis.

The third section, as the cornerstone of this chapter, innovatively delineates the definitions and distinctions between fan communities and fan organisations in the Chinese context. By introducing the concepts of 'membership boundary' and 'identity boundary', the researcher distinguishes fan communities and fan organisations along various dimensions.

## **4.2 Make bricks without straws: the genesis of a Chinese fan organisation**

### **4.2.1 The process of Organisation A going from zero to one.**

Unconfirmed organisational rumor such as hearsay about a celebrity's upcoming debut, is a starting point for a Chinese fan organisation. As such social entities are formed spontaneously by fans of celebrities, it is observed that the information related to celebrities triggers fans to act to build their organisations. In addition, with the increased speed of information dissemination through social media, critical

information often reaches Chinese online users in a short period of time, which accelerates the formation of online fan organisations in China.

On 20 December 2022, a series of unconfirmed news reports claimed that female singer A was about to make her debut in Korea. At almost the same time, two Chinese fans registered a Weibo social media account and posted their first content as shown below. Ten days later, when a Korean entertainment company officially announced the debut of female Singer A, fans from China immediately located this Weibo account and began discussing Singer A fiercely. Meanwhile, an announcement posted on 30 December by this pre-existing Weibo account, which claims to be the account of Singer A's fan organisation in China, indicates that it is starting to recruit new members:

*Since the formation of the organisation, there have only been two members of the management group, and each member has multiple tasks. With A's debut coming up, there is an urgent need for manpower! We hope that everyone who likes A will join us!*

*We are politely requiring you to complete the tasks assigned in a timely manner.*

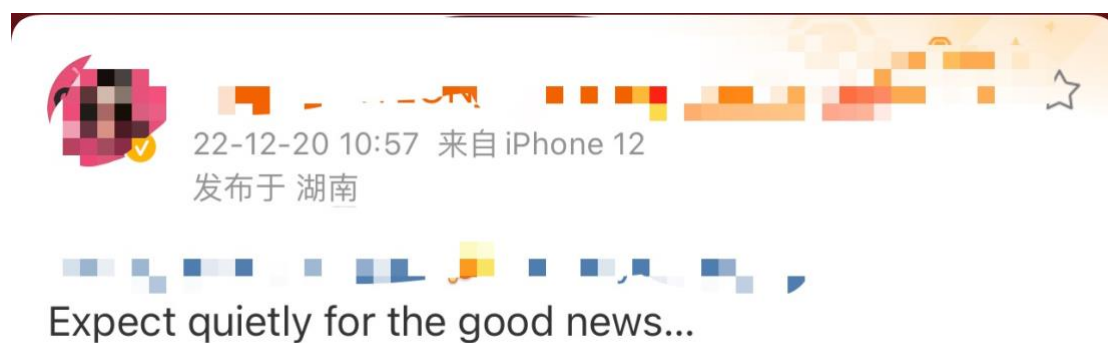


Figure 7: The first post made by Celebrity A's fan organisation on Weibo



Figure 8: The first recruitment message posted by the fan organisation A

If we consider the object of fandom as the initial focal point for establishing contemporary Chinese fan organisations, then the strategies for recruiting and selecting committed members, which are discussed in the subsequent chapter, become crucial mechanisms for the development of these organisations. After a comprehensive examination of the available online data, it becomes evident that this particular fan organisation A was founded by two dedicated fans within the digital realm. Specifically, its origins trace back to the prominent social media platform, Weibo. Launched in 2009, Weibo has become the dominant microblogging platform in China, with an impressive 260 million daily active users (Thomala, 2023). Similar to Twitter, this platform facilitates multifaceted digital interaction by allowing users to share text, images, and videos. Since 2011, Weibo has actively sought to attract celebrities from diverse fields, inviting them to register and establish a presence on the platform. Notable figures such as physicist Stephen Hawking and former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd are among those who have joined (Wang, Shen and Chen, 2014). This initiative has facilitated a direct channel of interaction between public figures and their followers. Among them, stars from the entertainment

industry, including singers and actors, have garnered significant attention from Weibo users. Many celebrities have chosen to establish accounts on Weibo to interact with their fans. This trend has increasingly led fans to prefer Weibo as their primary platform for accessing the latest celebrity news and performances on the internet.

In this context, it is understandable that two fans chose to establish Fan Organisation A on Weibo. Over time, this initially small online organisation established on Weibo strategically expanded its presence by registering additional accounts on other platforms such as TikTok and Twitter. This deliberate expansion across different digital landscapes underlines the organisation's commitment to engaging with a wider audience and maintaining a robust online presence. In Xiao Cai's original words, such deliberate expansion means *"show them (foreigners) how popular Artist A is in China, while promoting Artist A's achievements in China."* To achieve this goal, the content sent by fan organisations on Twitter mainly includes the high viewership of Artist A's performance videos on Chinese streaming platforms, as well as the compliments and praise of Chinese fans for Artist A.



Figure 9: Organisation A's Twitter account

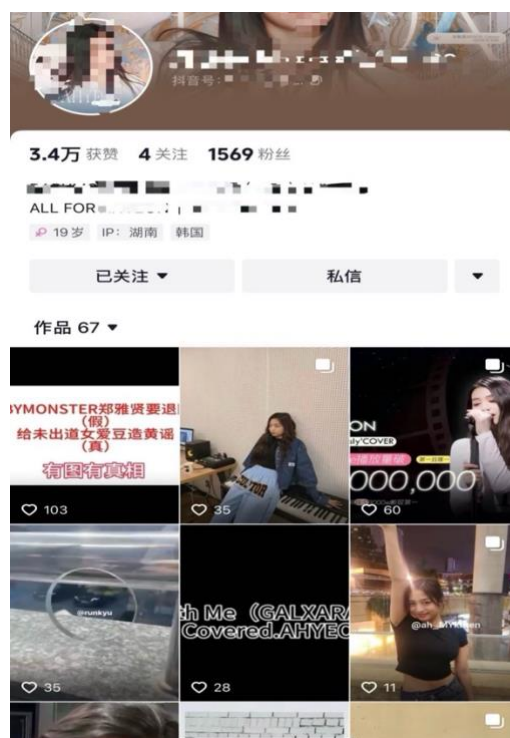


Figure 10: Organisation A's TikTok account

Similar 'territorial expansion' behaviour was also observed within the fan organisation dedicated to artist Y. Although the organisation did not set up its own TikTok account, it created its social media accounts on Twitter and Bilibili. Bilibili is a video-sharing platform widely used by Chinese youth that, similar to YouTube, allows and encourages users to upload their own content. In addition, Bilibili is known for its unique real-time commenting feature, where viewers can post comments that appear directly above the video, creating an interactive viewing experience. As shown in the figure 13 and 14, the primary content shared on the Bilibili accounts of the two organisations are performance videos of the artists. However, in comparison, the main focus of both organisations is on the Weibo platform, as the followers and posts on other platforms are significantly lower than on Weibo.



Figure 11: Organisation Y's Twitter account





Figure 12: A typical post on Organisation Y’s Twitter (Translated: 28/01/2023  
“Checkmate” concert in Singapore, thanks for sharing)

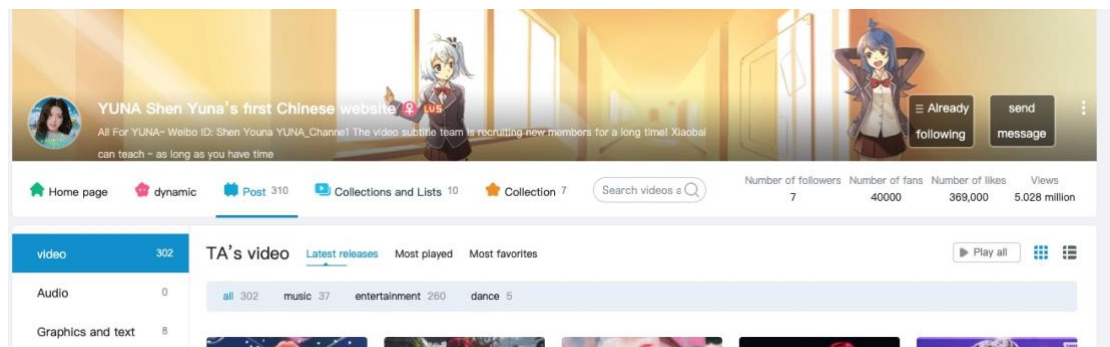


Figure 13: Organisation Y’s Bilibili account

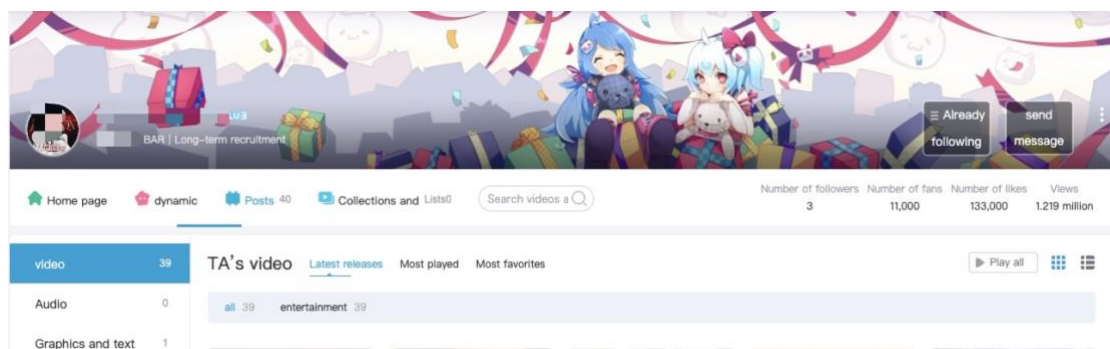


Figure 14: Organisation A’s Bilibili account

Platform	Organisation Y Followers	Organisation A Followers
Weibo	188,000	45,000
Twitter	2,784	1,304
Bilibili	40,000	11,000
TikTok	N/A	1,647

Figure 15: The comparison of follower numbers across different platforms (The data is updated at 09/09/2024).

After successfully joined the organisations, new members will be invited to join a private chat group that is not publicly accessible. Upon entering the group, I observed that newcomers are usually verbally welcomed by existing members and immediately change the nickname in the group chat to clearly define their role. For example, I am an English-Chinese translator and my name in the group chat was changed to Andy-English translator. As the eighth member to join the group, the nicknames of other members remind me that there are already existing members in the organisation who have been assigned specific roles, such as managing resources, handling copywriting tasks, and editing video content (See figure 16). Over time, the organisation expanded rapidly as more and more fans became part of it. While the exact number of members fluctuated, it typically remained at a consistent size of around 20 people. Reflecting on the whole process of the organisation's formation, it is interesting to note that the founders did not invest any financial resources during this period, as the whole organisation has no physical office space, there is no need to pay rent. Meanwhile, the organisation does not incur advertising costs in the recruitment process, nor does it pay salaries or other material rewards to members, which means that the organisation has zero labour costs. All things considered, the whole organisational formation process relies on the free social media platforms provided by the internet: registering on Weibo and posting Weibo content is completely free. What these founders did was to use Weibo, a meeting place for fans, as a platform to post recruitment messages for

individuals interested in joining the organisation. This Chinese fan organisation went from non-existence to a group of 20 members within the first week of my joining, even before Celebrity A made her public debut.

Field note (2 January 2023)

Organisation A is technically the third fan organisation I've joined, and probably the most rewarding. The reason for this is that I joined in the early days of the organisation's formation, which finally gave me quite a chance to watch the organisation go from 0 to 1.

Field note (4 January 2023)

With just a few pictures and a video, technically Artist A hasn't even debuted yet, but the organisation has reached ten members.

Field note (15 January 2023)

Another trailer has been released, revealing more information about the artists. This has caused yet another uproar in the group chat.



Figure 16: organisational members with clear roles attached with their nicknames

#### **4.2.2 Founders, mentors, and leaders in fan organisations**

As a new member of an organisation A, I found myself in an unfamiliar territory that required step-by-step progress. Two founders of the organisation—one known as Xiaocai, who consented to my joining, and another whose name has not been disclosed—kindly guided not only me but also other members of the organisation. From my perspective, they seem to be taking on the role of mentors in the emerging organisation as they are observed to have a thorough understanding of how fan organisations should operate, including where to get the latest updates on Celebrity A, how to write attractive posts on Weibo, and how to maintain positive interactions with other fans. For instance, following a promotional album-signing event attended by the Korean artist A, Xiaocai reminded other members of the group to monitor Red Book, a popular social media platform in China, to collect the latest images. This was an unusual step, as most of Artist A's photographs and videos are typically published and collected on Twitter. Xiaocai explained within the organisation that the event had attracted significant participation from Chinese fans, suggesting that Red Book might be a key platform for sharing content among them under this circumstance. With this in mind, members of the Resource Team collected photos of the artist at the signing event from Red Books that had been posted by fans. Subsequently, Xiaocai issued further instructions to ensure ethical practices: when publishing these images on Weibo, it was mandatory to credit the source of the images or to send private messages to users on Red Book to seek authorization for their use.

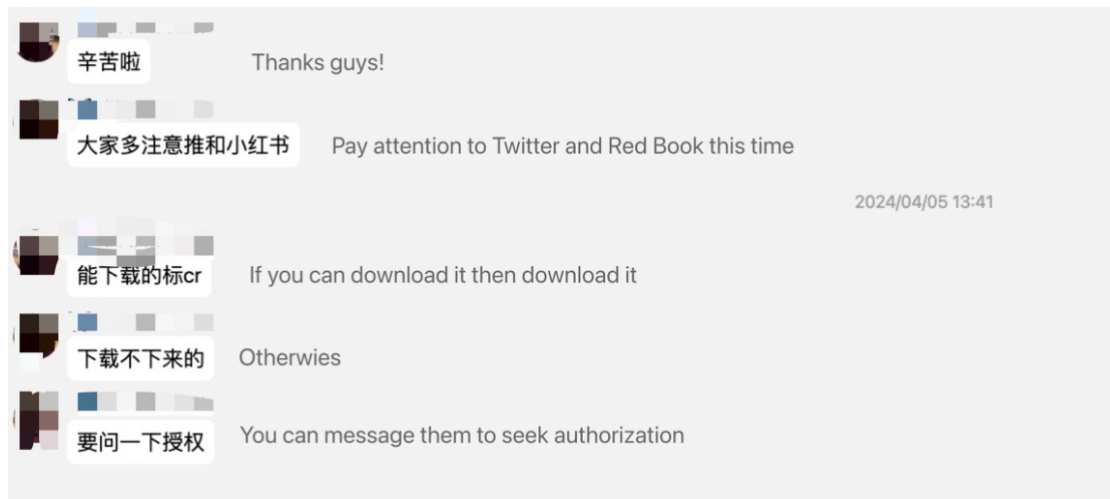


Figure 17: Organisational leaders guide resource group members in finding and posting resources in special situations

Of Note, the role of mentors has been reported in the extant fandom literature. For example, in an online fan fiction writing group, members reported how mentors within the group helped them to develop their writing skills and to publish their own books (Campbell et al., 2016). In my organisation, mentorship mainly exhibits two attributes: informality and continuity. On the one hand, Informality implies that the founders do not formally declare themselves as mentors for everyone, nor do they set up any specific training programmes. Instead, it is more common for them to answer questions raised by members, such as how to quickly find the latest videos of artists on TikTok. The figure 18 below is a typical example. After I took on some tasks to find resources about the artist, I found it challenging to locate videos of the artist on TikTok. Therefore, I sought help from the organisation's founder. Following her suggestion, I used another related tag to search, which significantly improved the resource-finding process and helped me locate many more relevant clips. Meanwhile, in organisation Y, I was responsible for finding the latest news about the artist on Twitter for a period. In this case, the organisation's founder offered me informal training by giving me a list as figure 19 shows, and explained which accounts should be focused on and which ones might release exclusive photos.



On the other hand, continuity suggests that such mentorship is continuous and accumulative. The founders not only play a mentorship role in the early stages of the organisation but throughout my year in the field, they provide me with sporadic guidance, which accumulates to help me gain relevant knowledge and fulfil the role in translation team and resource team separately. Taking Organisation A as an example, the first guideline I observed within the organisation was issued on January 16, 2023, concerning the correct English spelling of artists' names. From that point onward, guidance continued up to the most recent instance, shown in **Figure** 17, dated April 5, 2024, which pertained to the collection of information about artists during specific situation.

Besides, the founders also automatically took on the role of leaders since the inception of the fan organisation: a series of rules and regulations were issued, and members within the organisation were reminded of what they could and could not do. For example, as figure 20 showed, the first rule issued by the founder of the organisation A requires members to speak less on public platforms, avoid sensitive topics and refrain from mentioning other celebrities in order to reduce the chances of causing unnecessary trouble.

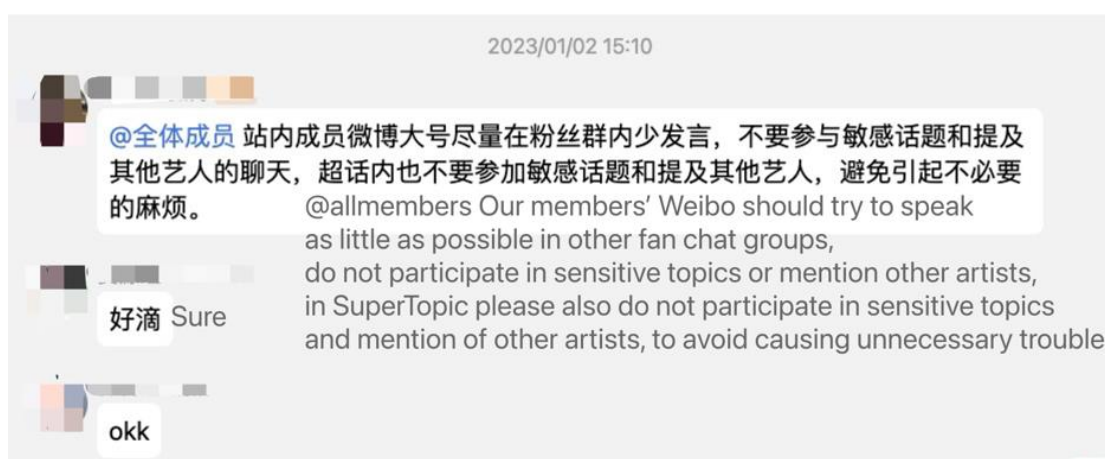


Figure 20: The first regulation issued by organisation A's founder/leader

Based on this, the founders even created a formal document called "Organisation Entry Guidelines" on 13 January 2023, shared it in the group chat and notified each member to read it. In this document, five aspects are clearly specified as follows:

- 1. It is forbidden to share the contents of the chat group on public social media platforms without a valid reason.*
- 2. Please actively adhere to the schedule for work shifts, and repeated instances of unavailability during assigned shifts (or for those not assigned shifts, failure to maintain contact within 24 hours) may result in consideration for dismissal.*
- 3. Members within the group chat should not add each other without prior notice to the leader, ensuring that there is no mutual disturbance. Any issues should be resolved within the group whenever possible.*
- 4. Upon joining the group, please promptly change your nickname to indicate your position followed by your alias.*
- 5. In order to provide better support to A, everyone is encouraged to protect this organisation, voluntarily adhere to the above rules, and repeated violators will be discussed and potentially removed by the leader.*

Xiaocai, the leader of organisation A also made a supplement to this guideline: "*due to the sudden announcement of Artist A's debut, our recruitment process was very rushed, and many things were not explained to everyone in a timely manner. This document includes some important information that everyone needs to know, so please take the time to look at it. We will update everyone on other matters in the group chat promptly.*"

In other words, the founders of the organisation play a dual role. On the one hand, they are involved in training and educating new members to adapt to their roles and fulfil their tasks. On the other hand, they have taken on a leadership role with a degree



of authoritarianism. Taking this document as an example, no opinions were sought from other members during the drafting process. Not only do symbolic terms with implicit hierarchical connotations such as 'forbidden' (jìn zhǐ, 禁止), 'should not' (bú yìng, 不应) dismiss (cí tuì, 辞退) appear several times in the document, but the founders are also referred to directly as 'leaders' (lǐng dǎo, 领导) and 'person in charge' (fù zé rén, 负责人).

Field note (13 January 2023)

Apparently, the rules and regulations within the organisation are stricter than I thought, at least from the words they use. Some of the vocabulary didn't seem like it would be found in an online organisation, but rather posted on the walls of a hierarchically strict office space. Isn't the word "forbidden" a bit much? I would have thought they would have used something milder like "please don't" or "guys please don't". Also, this is the first time I've ever seen a leader of a fan organisation refer to herself as a "leader".

As the founders take on the dual role of 'mentor' and 'leader' in the organisation, they appear to exert control over all members from the outset. Edward (1981) breaks down the control system within the organisation into three aspects: work tasks, work evaluation, and rewards and punishments arising from work. Specifically, the assignment of work tasks is clarified by schedules and nicknames within the group, which means that all members can see who is supposed to complete a certain task within a certain period of time. In addition, the role of work evaluation and the provision of rewards and punishments have also been taken on by the founders. The organisation's guidelines also explicitly state that the founders have the power to 'dismiss' members under certain circumstances. So how did the members of the organisation react to this set of rules and regulations? On the surface, no one ever objected or asked, "How can you make rules without asking everyone's opinion?" Organisational members normally said "copy that" in response to new rules or

policies released in organisations. From my perspective, I felt the presence of a hierarchical structure from the first day I joined the organisation. While members didn't need to use respectful titles for superiors, as they do in many other formal Chinese workplaces, it was clear from the start that all members were clearly meant to enforce the rules.



Figure 20: Unified responses from organisational members on the newly promulgated rules: Copy that (Translated in English)

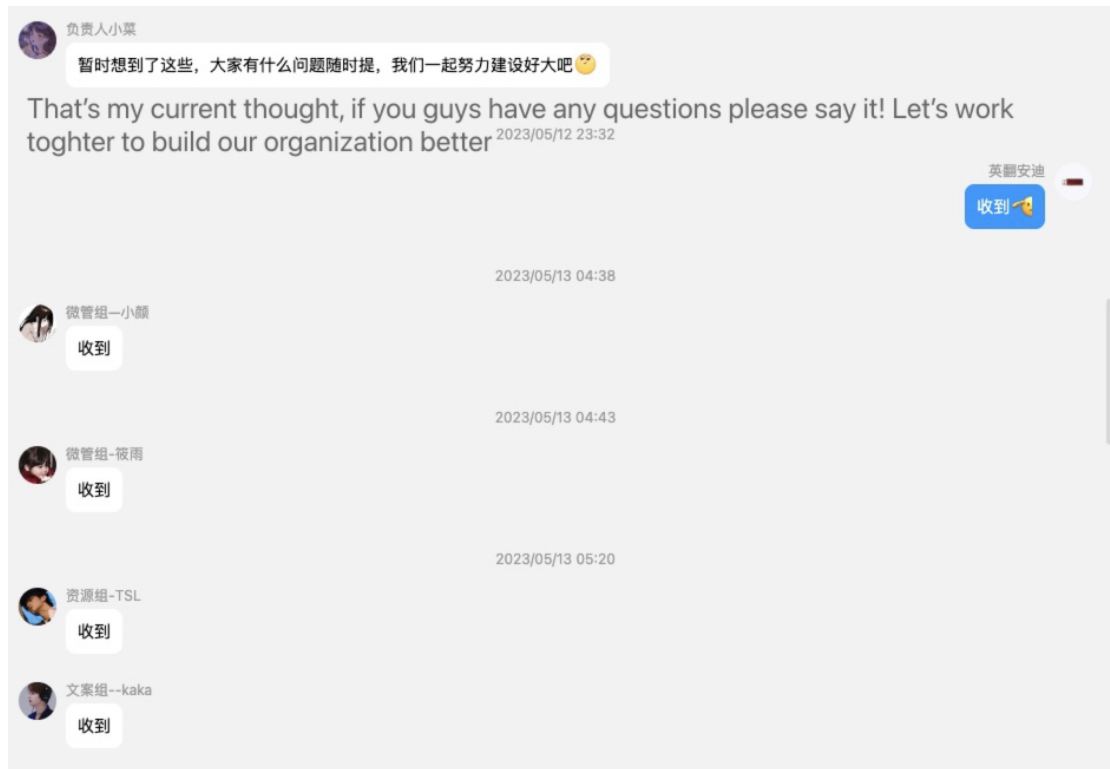


Figure 22: Unified responses from members on the updated organisational rules:  
Copy that (Translated in English)

Interestingly, leaders often distribute tasks in a friendly manner, especially using a lot of colloquial language and emoticons commonly used by Chinese youth to tactfully assign tasks. For instance, in contrast to typical workplaces, leaders within fan organisations frequently use the term '宝' (bao), meaning 'babe,' to address fellow members. This is in stark contrast to the words like "forbidden" used by the founders in the organisational rules. Despite the implementation of some strictly worded policies, the general tone of day-to-day communication tends to be much friendlier. The symbolic use of the term 'babe' is more of a sign of affection and, rather than causing resentment within the organisation, has to some extent bridged the gap between new members. In the task assignment phase, which is full of power imbalances and hierarchical ideology, the use of the word 'babe' to some extent reflects a friendly attitude on the part of the leadership, but also makes it difficult for members to refuse. Take the following screenshot as an example: after politely asking

me if I had any free time, the founder assigned me a translation task. Meanwhile, when I encountered specific problems during the translation process, the founder would communicate with me and guide me. For example, the first time I translated an artist's name, I capitalized only the first letter. The founder pointed this out and emphasised that according to information she had seen online, the second letter should also be capitalized.



Figure 23: Task distribution with the word “babe” by the founder of Organisation A



Figure 24: Task distribution with the word “babe” by the founder of Organisation Y

One could say that in the early stages of my involvement with the organisation (which was also its founding period), most of my organisational life was filled with translation tasks, often assigned by the leader. I gradually developed a question: How did this leader manage to collect so many news articles and reports about celebrity A? Because although I often follow the artist's updates, I hadn't collected that much material on this celebrity. It wasn't until one day that the leaders publicly shared various sources of information in the group chat. They shared accounts to follow on Twitter and TikTok, pointing out that these social media accounts often publish the artist's photos or the latest news. In addition, the leaders also have the ability and authority to judge the quality of the information. After a member shared picture about the artist from Twitter, one leader pointed out that the authenticity of the news was not reliable and indicated that the information should not be shared for the time being. Likewise, as figure 26 shows, one organisation leader suggested a translator to not to mention other artist's name in the translation without further explanation.

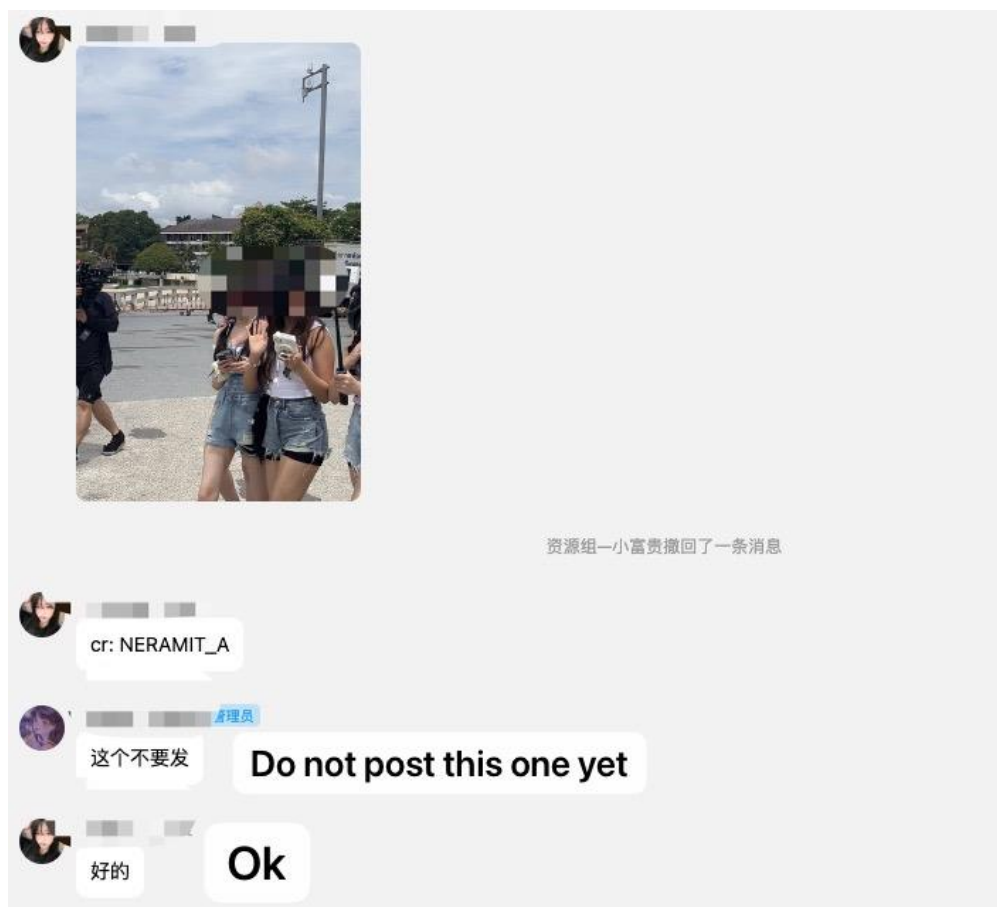


Figure 25: Organisational leaders prevent a member from posting a specific image



Figure 26: Organisational leaders instructed a translator to remove another writer's name from the translation.

As Blasco and Wardle (2007) point out, focusing on specific roles can make some features of the field more apparent, and identifying and distinguishing the roles of specific individuals in the field is one of the foundations of ethnography. From the first day I joined the organisation, my attention was drawn to Xiao Cai, one of the co-founders of organisation A. Not only did she sign the consent form that allowed me to enter the field, but she was also the first person to assign me translation tasks. My observation is that Xiao Cai's commitment and knowledge within the organisation are key to the establishment of her leadership position. When members of the organisation ask her a question, she usually answers immediately. As she jokes about herself, she seems to spend her all days managing the organisation on her phone and computer, besides eating and sleeping. Xiao Cai's wealth of knowledge also helps her to gain recognition within the organisation, that is, she is not only knowledgeable about the various channels and methods for gathering information on artists, as previously discussed, but also understands the norms of the Weibo platform, including strategic posting techniques to maximize attention. Specifically, within Weibo's policies, 'Sunshine Credit' is closely linked to account weight. In other words, accounts with higher Sunshine Credit scores are more likely to receive exposure on the platform. Xiaocai is well-versed in both the computation and enhancement of Sunshine Credit scores. One key criterion is the account's credit history, which

includes the user's long-term posting history and the healthiness of their discourse on Weibo. The platform considers users whose posts are deemed healthy and positive as having good credit, thereby boosting their Sunshine Credit. As figure 27 shows, when a member of the resource group noticed that a Weibo post had low viewership, Xiaocai realised the account might have been throttled. She then advised the member in the group chat to post a 'Daily Good Deed' before attempting to post images again. The term Daily Good Deed is a popular expression within fan organisations on Weibo, denoting a specific type of post on the platform. A typical example, as illustrated in figure 28, reads: “Behind every ounce of confidence and grace lies a pursuit of and persistence in dreams. Sometimes, the line between success and failure is but a fleeting thought. Therefore, no matter the difficulty, never speak lightly of giving up. Persistence is not only an admirable trait but also a radiant charm. Those who have weathered storms grow more resilient; to those we pass by, we wave and say goodbye. Believe that those who love you most will not bear to leave. If things go awry, trust that fate has other plans. Focus on being your best self and striving hard; the future will surely hold the best outcome.” Posts composed of sentences that appear unrelated to artists have become a crucial strategy for fan organisations aiming to increase their 'Sunshine Credit' scores, thereby enhancing their visibility on the platform. Xiaocai, as the founder, leader, and mentor of the organisation, is well-versed in this method.

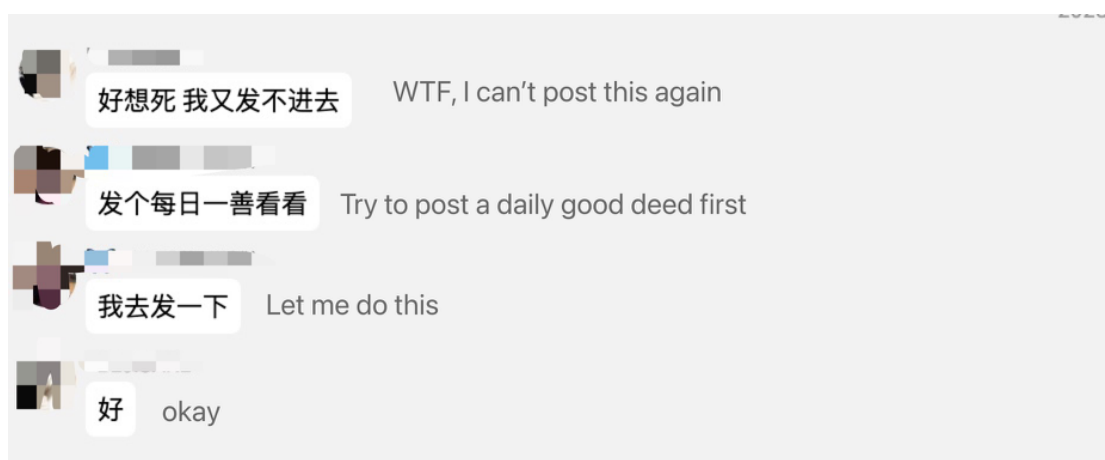


Figure 27: Organisation leader Xiaocai reminds a member the way to increase account exposure



每一分自信和优雅的背后，都有一份对梦想的追求和坚持，有时候，成功和失败之间只在一念之差，所以，无论多难，都别轻言放弃，坚持，是一种令人钦佩的能力，更是一种会发光的魅力。经历过风雨，心会变得更坚韧，擦肩而过的人，挥一挥手说声，再见。相信，最爱你的人，舍不得离开。若事与愿违，相信老天另有安排，好好做自己，好好努力，未来的日子，相信一定会有一个最好的结果。

Figure 28: A typical “Daily Good Deed” content on Weibo (Translated in the above)

In the nascent phases of the organisational establishment, Xiao Cai was tasked with a dual imperative: not only was it requisite to consolidate her leadership stature internally, but it was also paramount to facilitate an external legitimization of the organisation to acquire social acceptability and credibility (Scott et al, 2000:37). For instance, in the early days of the organisation's founding, a crucial external endeavor for founders like Xiao Cai was to establish organisational legitimacy with an expansive fan base. Although numerous fan organisations for a single artist can exist simultaneously in the Chinese context, those organisations of considerable size and complete functionality tend to garner particular recognition and support from the wider fan base. Consequently, addressing the potential skepticism of external fans in



order to secure the legitimacy of the organisation emerged as a cardinal objective for the founders. Specifically, the legitimacy of our organisation was once questioned by external fans based on a previous incident where the artist's English name was misspelled on Weibo. In this case, Xiao Cai, as the representative of our organisation, quickly entered into negotiations with the opposing side, responding with language that was both aggressive and passionate:

*You posted it, so we're coming to you. Sort it out among yourselves. But make sure you explain and apologies, and don't even think about skirting around it! Or you can contact representative privately to apologize, and here is the leader's QQ number: xxxxxxx. If this isn't dealt with in 24 hours, we're going public with holding you accountable!*

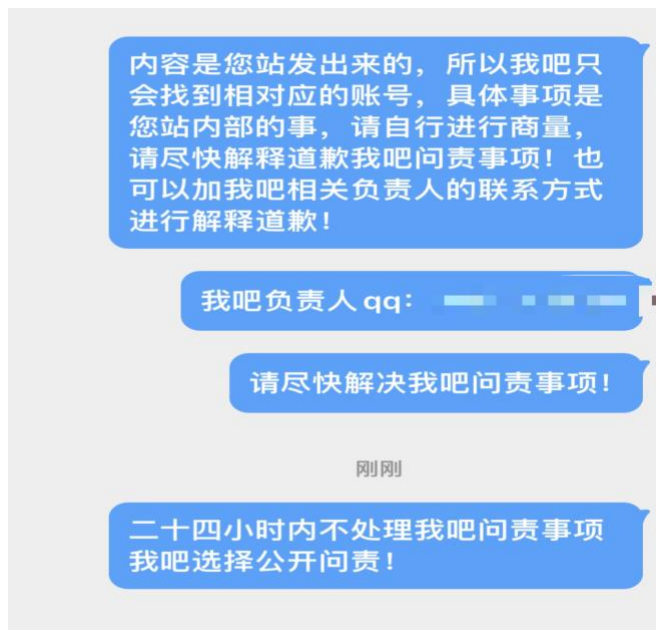


Figure 29: The organisation leader attempts to demand an apology from the other party

As a result, the opposing party chose to issue a public apology and clarification on Weibo, which brought the matter to a close. It is worth noting that after this incident,

hardly any fans questioned the legitimacy of our organisation. As all fans on Weibo could see, our organisation was diligently protecting the reputation of artist A while spreading A's messages. Such organisational activities seem to be in line with the expectations and recognition of the huge fan base.

In conclusion, the previous section described how the Chinese fan organisation I was involved with was formed from a process perspective. It is worth noting that the founders play a crucial role in the early establishment of a fan organisation. Internally, they act as mentors and leaders, while externally they act as representatives of the organisation. Through the efforts of the founders, a fan organisation gradually establishes its legitimacy on the Internet and attracts increasing attention from external fans. In response to Katz and Gartner's (1988) call for a structural approach to analysis how an organisation evolves from nothing to something, we will now discuss the components of a typical fan organisation.

### **4.3 The composition of the fan organisation: classification of functional groups**

This section aims to analyse the process of building a fan organisation from a structural perspective. According to my observations and interviews, a normal Chinese fan organisation could be divided into different groups, and new members may be assigned to different groups with different responsibilities. The following figures 30 and 31 are the breakdown of the five fan organisations gathered from interviews and observations, and these groups can be functionally classified into three categories: information processing, celebrity promotion and internal operation.

<p><b>Organisation for celebrity</b></p>	<p><b>Organisation composition</b></p>
--	--

<b>Z</b>	Management, Online Promotion, Finance, Graphic Design, Copywriting, Data, Video
<b>I</b>	Weibo Management, Resource, Copywriting, Video, Translation
<b>T</b>	Management, Subtitles, Video, Copywriting, Graphic Design
<b>Y</b>	Graphic Design, Video, Korean Translation, Copywriting, Planning, Weibo-Management, Resources
<b>A</b>	Translation, Video Group, Copywriting, Weibo Management, Resources

Figure 30: The composition of the five fan organisations

<b>Category</b>	<b>Groups</b>
Information Processing	Graphic Design Group, Video Group, Resource Group, Translation Group
Celebrity Promotion	Copywriting Group, Planning Group
Internal Operation	Management Group, Finance Group

Figure 31: Different categories classified by the function of the groups

#### 4.3.1 Information processing

The information processing groups include the graphic design group, the video group, the resource group and the translation group. As the name suggests, the main role of these groups is to collect text, images and any celebrity-related information from across the internet and deliver it to the Chinese online audience. In these potential information flows, images are often the most direct form of information. Considering that Chinese fans often choose artists from other countries as the object of fandom, textual and video information often involve language barriers, while images are the most readily accepted type of information by fans. In this scenario, the resource team within the information processing group is tasked with scouring various websites and

social media platforms to locate images, download them and then post them on the organisation's social media account, usually Weibo. For example, the resource team at Celebrity Y's Chinese fan organisation downloaded a series of celebrity-related photos uploaded by Twitter user "shinsarang\_yn" and then simply posted them on Weibo. In another example, the organisation Y posted two photos of celebrities that were also originally taken by a Twitter user.



Figure 32: The simplest form of information processing in Organisation Y: downloading images and post them to a platform accessible to Chinese fans.



Figure 33: Simplest form of information processing in Organisation A: downloading images and post them to a platform accessible to Chinese fans.

In contrast, the flow of textual information often necessitates the collective efforts of multiple groups. For instance, within a more complex workflow, fans assigned to the resource team might download an English-language celebrity video from YouTube and forward it to the video editing team. Subsequently, the clip may undergo editing by this team and then be translated by fans within the translation team. Following translation, the clip would be passed back to the editing team to attach subtitles and eventually posted on the fan organisation's Weibo account to reach a broader fan audience. For me, the workload involved in the aforementioned tasks is rather heavy, as translating a three-minute video often requires at least thirty minutes. The example below illustrates my role within this complex workflow, specifically, translating a YouTuber's review of artist A's performance video found on YouTube. Upon completing the translation, I sent the translated document back in the form of a Word file.



Figure 34: Translating videos in Organisation A as a Chinese-English interpreter  
(translated in below )

*Member: Hey Andy, can you watch a video and then translate it?*

*The researcher: I can try, hope it's not too difficult.*

*Member: I took a quick look, and it seems not that hard for you.*

*Member: Some compliments, I guess.*

*Member: It's not that hard.*

More often, the workflow among members responsible for information processing is straightforward. For instance, in the context of translation tasks, members of the resource group might send me materials that require translation individually, or they may ask me and other members of the translation team in a group chat to inquire who is available. I then translate these materials and return the translated content to them, and this processed text ultimately appears on the organisation's social media accounts. For example, I translated an interview with celebrity Y that a resource group member found in an English-language magazine and sent to me for translation. A similar scenario occurs within Organisation A, as illustrated in Figure 35. The leadership of Organisation A directly sent me a sentence with a request for its translation into English. Of note, this mode of operation constitutes the majority of my organisational life as a translator, characterized by the passive receipt and completion of translation assignments.

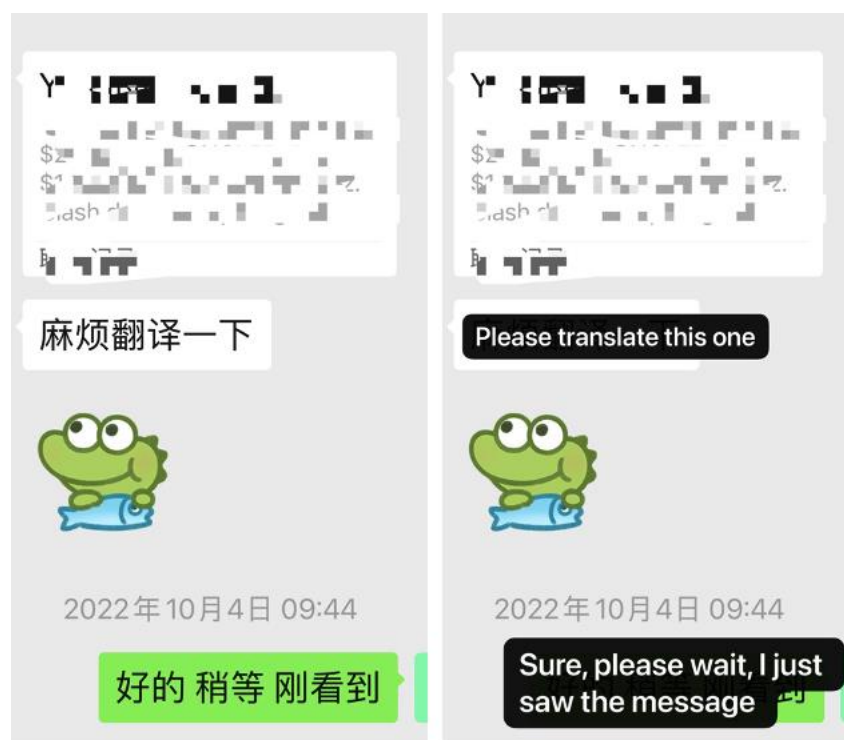


Figure 35: Collaboration between the different groups responsible for information processing in Organisation Y

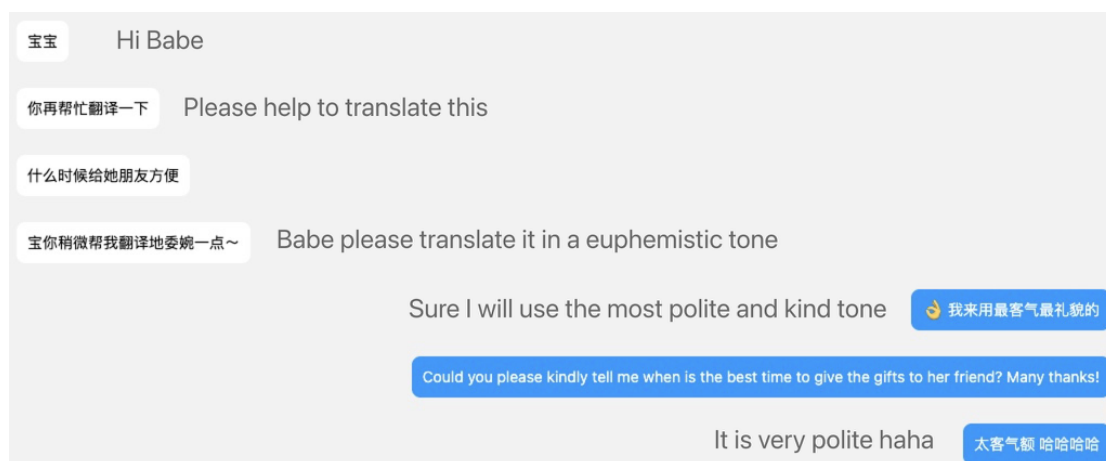


Figure 36: A direct translation task distribution in Organisation A



Figure 37: Resource group members check the availability of translation group members in the group chat.

Interesting to note, the researcher observed that in describing the action of "downloading resources", members of the organisation not only use the verb 下载 (xià zài) "download" but often employ 搬运 (bān yùn), meaning "transfer". A typical example, as shown in Figure 38, is when the leader of Organisation A reminds other members of the resource group to help transfer new resources. It's worth noting that this scenario is not isolated. In Organisation Y, I also frequently witnessed the widespread use of the term "transfer" among members. As illustrated in figure 39, during a conversation with the leader of Organisation Y, she mentioned the term "transfer," asserting that she would teach me how to "transfer."





Figure 38: One leader reminds resource team members to “transfer” resources.

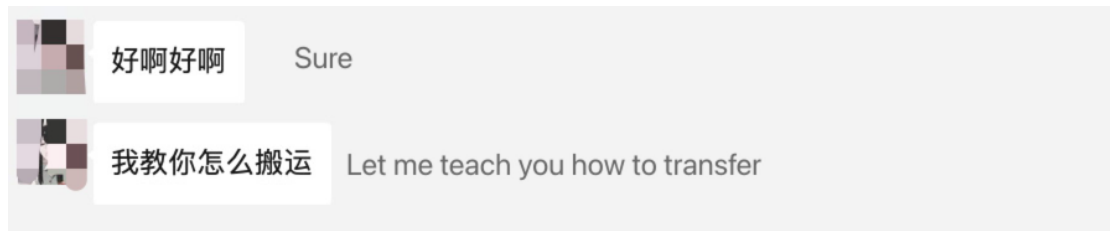


Figure 39: One leader from organisation Y offers to teach me how to “transfer”

#### 4.3.2 Celebrity promotion

Readers should note that celebrities are often regarded as human brands within the field of marketing. In this context, the primary responsibilities of the copywriting group and the planning group are to participate in the brand promotion plans, specific actions include organising online or offline events around celebrities. In particular, copywriters in fan organisations are trained to write copy for different circumstances, which means they need to provide appropriate text to accompany the artist's images on social media platforms. For fans in the planning group, they are responsible for design and executive specific activities and provide actionable publicity advice to raise the celebrity's profile online and offline. Here, two activities showcased by different fan organisations aim to provide the audience with an initial insight into celebrity promotion, fostering a clearer understanding.

Fans from the copywriting team could write poems in Chinese to celebrate the celebrity's birthday. For example, Singer Z's planning team designed a series of activities to celebrate Singer Z's 22nd birthday, which consisted of four main parts. First, the copywriting team employed an ancient Chinese term 槐序(huái xù) as the keyword and wrote a short three-line poem to celebrate Singer Z's birthday:

*槐序(huái xù) is an elegant name for the month of April, and a symbol of summer.  
May he ride the breeze of late spring in April and rise to the top.  
May he ride the wind into summer, always bright and hot, his heart like the sun.*

Second, the planning team released four special birthday headshots of Singer Z and invited ordinary fans to use these headshots on their Weibo account. Thirdly, the team invited fans to write letters and make videos for Singer Z to celebrate his birthday. The planning team set requirements for the letter and video formats. For example, the letter must be handwritten rather than printed, and the paper size of the letter should not exceed A4. The video should be no longer than 40 seconds and the format should be 16:9 landscape. Fourthly, the team invited everyone to take part in a charity project to raise sexual awareness among girls in underprivileged areas by buying gift packs. The gift packs included items such as a sex education booklet, a child sexual assault prevention booklet and children's shower gel. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that fan-initiated philanthropic activities are nothing new in China. Back in 2006, fans of Li Yuchun worked with the Chinese Red Cross Foundation to set up the Li Yuchun Charity Fund to help children in underdeveloped areas (Jeffreys and Xu, 2017). Since then, fan-led charity activities have proliferated. For example, fans of Chinese male singer Jackson Yee raised more than four million yuan, about £450,000, to celebrate his 18th birthday. The funds were used to initiate more than twenty charity projects, including the donation of a hospital in a nationally recognized impoverished county and two primary schools in underprivileged mountainous regions (Li, 2009).



Figure 40: Birthday poem written by copywriters for artist Z



Figure 41: Charity project announced by planning team of Singer Z’s fan organisation

Another celebrity promotion activity was observed in fan organisation dedicated to celebrity Y. As a traditional activity of fan organisations, the planning team tends to organise a series of birthday celebrations when an artist's birthday approaches, such as gathering fans offline to celebrate the artist's birthday. In 2022, the Chinese fan organisation supporting artist Y, of which I am a member, tried to organise such an event in Shanghai. However, because of government restrictions caused by the pandemic, the planned venue was ordered to close on the day of the event. Between 2020 and 2022, this similar situation occurred many times due to pandemics, forcing many organisations to cancel their offline activities. It was not until 2023 that the situation began to improve. From 2023, as the Chinese government gradually eased

restrictions on public gatherings, the fan organisation of artist Y began to announce offline events on Weibo two months before the artist's birthday. According to one member from the planning team, this is the biggest birthday celebration in the organisation's history. That is, to celebrate singer Y's 20th birthday on 9 December 2023, the planning team organised "birthday coffee events" in Shanghai, Beijing and four other cities across China. On 14 September 2023, the fan organisation announced on Weibo that this birthday celebration would take place in three months' time, and began recruiting 'event coordinators' for different cities (the original post is presented in below and translated by the researcher). Here, a event held in Shanghai is used as an example to illustrate the whole process in chronological order. The planning team announced the event on the public platform Weibo on 7 October, and then set up different WeChat groups for different cities to invite potential fans to attend. Gradually, interested fans joined these WeChat groups, meaning that fans were moving from a public online sphere to more private discussion groups.



Figure 42: The first post announcing the birthday event and recruiting event coordinators

### **【Recruitment for celebrity Y Birthday Celebration Coordinators】**

📍 **Celebration Cities:** Beijing/Shanghai/Guangzhou/Shenzhen/Chengdu

📅 **Event Date:** December 9

👥 **Personnel Requirement:** 1 coordinator per city (must be of legal age) and several assistants.

📅 **Deadline:** October 7

📁: Coordinators and assistants will receive a small gift from the organisation after the successful completion of the Y's birthday celebration event 🎁



#### **Responsibilities:**

1. Selecting the coffee shop (On-site inspections, coordinating with the coffee shop owner)
2. Decorating the coffee shop a day in advance.
3. On the birthday, conducting on-site verification and distributing support items (prepared by the fan organisation)

#### **💖 Application Requirements:**

1. Consumption record for the celebrity before
2. Preferred for coordinators who are of legal age. (patient, responsible, with ample time).

3. Preferred for coordinators who has experience in such activities.

 Application Method: Send a direct message on Weibo and email to  xxxx@163.com (Note: Weibo direct messages might get lost, please provide a detailed introduction about yourself in the email).

*!! If there are no confirmed candidates after the October 7 deadline or if the event cannot proceed due to other reasons, the opportunity will be extended to the next city.*

*For those who couldn't host a Y's Celebration, don't be sad, there are surprises awaiting!*

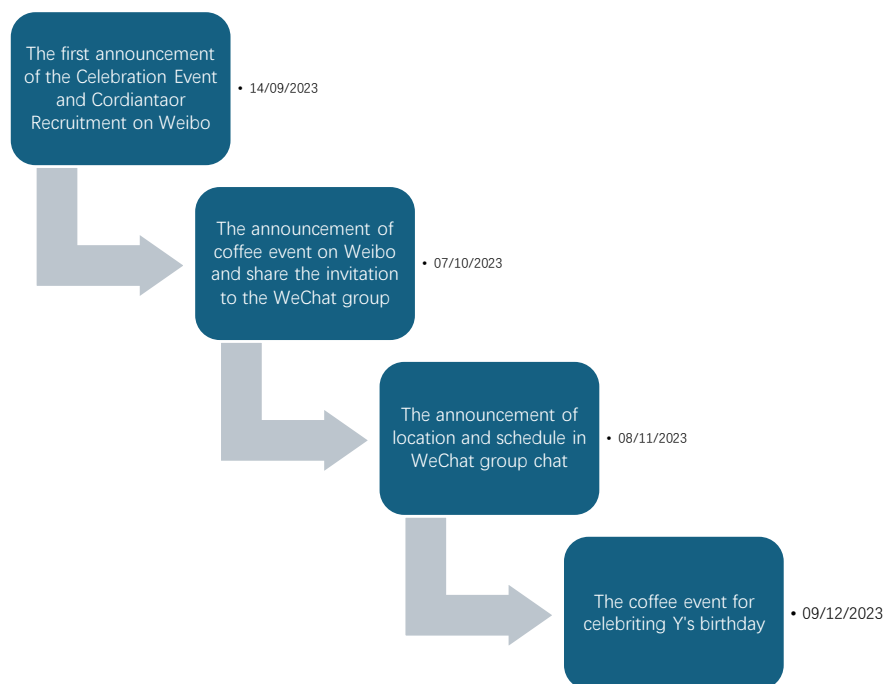


Figure 43: Timeline for celebration event happened in Shanghai

On the 8th of November, the Shanghai event coordinator posted a group announcement in the WeChat group, detailed the time, location and other details of the Shanghai birthday event. The screenshot of the announcement is presented below,

and the key information of this announcement is summarised and translated by the researcher:



Figure 44: Announcement in WeChat group for details of Shanghai celebration event

### ***Event Details***

***Date:*** 9 December 2023, Saturday, 10:30am - 5:30pm

***Location:*** Kaveh Kanesh (LUXUN PARK Branch)

***Address:*** Opposite Zisu Technology Health and Beauty Centre, 2288 Sichuan North Road, near Hongkou Football Stadium Station (Exit 6) of Metro Line 8

### ***Event Schedule***

***10:30 AM:*** Priority Entry for Material Preparation Fans

***11:00 AM:*** Open entry for support material collection

***15:00 PM:*** Cake cutting and group photo shooting.

***How to receive Y's memorabilia:*** Simply purchase one of the designated meal kits from the Coffee Shop and present your order receipt to receive the memorabilia. (See the specific meal kits below, there are four options with prices ranging from 57-68 Yuan).

To sum up, the above description illustrates that the organisation of charity events or café gatherings are among the fan practices initiated by the fan organisation to

celebrate a celebrity's birthday. These practices are argued to carry significant symbolic meaning: they not only serve as expressions of support and admiration for the celebrity but also reinforce the central role of the celebrity within the fan organisation. The annual celebrations foster internal cohesion by solidifying and disseminating their symbolic significance within the organisation, while also strengthening the organisation's ties with external fans. This ritualistic, annually recurring behaviour allows fans to express their support in a symbolic manner, thereby deepening the emotional connection between the fans and the celebrity.

#### **4.3.3 Internal operation**

The management group and finance group in the **Table** are responsible for maintaining the internal operation of the fan organisation. Based on my personal experience, although as a translator I occasionally participate in discussions related to celebrity promotional activities within the group chat, I have never had the opportunity to be involved in the administrative affairs or financial matters of the organisation. In this case, these two groups tend to be under the direct control of the organisation's top leaders from my perspective, as the authority and responsibility of both groups is more significant than others. Specifically, the management group is set up to make decisions related to task allocation and personnel changes, which will be covered in more detail in **section x**. The screenshot below shows an example of the management group of artist Y's fan organisation organising the work of its members in a WeChat group (Chinese version of WhatsApp).





Figure 45: An example of a management group allocating work

In terms of the finance group, the organisational leaders interviewed did not emphasise this aspect. However, in all of the organisations I have been involved with, Chinese fan organisations have been observed to consistently engage in various forms of fundraising activities. The following text elaborates on the implementation of crowdfunding activities from a participant's perspective. On September 29, 2023, the Chinese fan organisation for Y announced on Weibo an invitation titled "Join the Birthday Party for Superstar Y," the content of which was intriguing and complex.

*Dear fans:*

*I hope this letter finds you well.*

*Taking advantage of the early timing, Autumn Wind has brought this invitation. In our fifth year of meeting, there's a strong sweet vibe, and many expectations as well.*

*Welcome to Superstar Y's birthday party!*

In this post, the planning group unveiled an online ‘blind box raffle’ activity, with each virtual blind box valued at 16.9 RMB, roughly equivalent to £2. Each blind box may contain different celebrity-related merchandise such as umbrellas, mouse pads, picnic mats, shopping bags, picture frames and other everyday items. The post included a hyperlink to purchase, as well as the relevant rules for the activity.



Figure 46: the announcement made by celebrity Y’s fan organisation to raise funds

Fans are guided to follow the link to an online shopping application called ‘mini store’ where they can purchase these blind boxes. In this application, the organisation plays the role of a seller whose identity has been verified by the platform, and the celebrity's wider fan base in China collectively plays the role of potential consumers. It should be added that selling blind boxes is not the whole story of the activity. "Buy it and get it free" activities were added to the campaign to incentivize fans to stimulating fans to consume a large amount. In other words, the more blind boxes you buy, the more chances you have to win gifts designed by the organisation for fans. The corresponding prizes are listed below:

1. *Fans who purchase the 129th and 1209th blind box will receive a discount voucher for pizza.*
2. *Fans who purchase the 129th blind box after 12:09 every day will receive a random commemorative artist card.*
3. *Fans who purchase the 77th, 777th and 7777th blind box will receive an appointed commemorative artist card.*
4. *Fans who purchase the 8888th and 12009th blind box will receive an artist's autograph card.*
5. *Fans who purchase the 129th blind box after 19:00 every Saturday will receive an autograph mini card.*

In addition, this activity, which appears to be centred on the purchase of blind boxes, also includes incentive rewards as below:

1. *Fans who buy 6 blind boxes (£12 total) will receive a key ring,*
2. *Fans who buy 13 blind boxes (£26 total) will receive an artist Y poster.*
3. *Fans who buy 18 blind boxes (£36 total) will have their shipping fees waived.*
4. *Fans who buy 20 blind boxes (£40 total) will receive a towel with the celebrity's image on it.*
5. *Fans who buy 25 blind boxes (£50 total) will receive a water bottle.*
6. *Fans who buy 31 blind boxes (£62 total) will receive a wall tapestry with the celebrity's image on it.*
7. *Fans who buy more than 39 blind boxes (£78 total) can graduate immediately (receive all the gifts at once).*



Figure 47: Interface for Purchasing Blind Boxes in the App

From the above description, it is apparent that this fundraising activity was packaged as a "birthday blind box raffle activity" and involved a third party, an app called Mini-Store. After browsing through numerous fan organisations' Weibo accounts, I noticed this 'mini-store' application is not a common-used online shopping platform in China. Interestingly, however, it serves as a mainstream fundraising platform designed for Chinese fans, where fans can purchase celebrity-related merchandise designed by the fan organisation and then have the fundraising platform handle the shipping.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, when a fan organisation transforms the simple act of selling celebrity merchandise into an elaborate lottery event, this activity becomes a symbolic action within the organisation. The symbolic nature of such activities is evident in how they invite other fans to participate, thereby constructing meaning within the fan organisation's life. Moreover, each participating

fan becomes an active contributor to the creation of this meaning. Furthermore, these activities gradually become part of the shared memory among fans, a memory that is reinforced and strengthened with each subsequent participation.

Also, to be reflective, this particular activity took place after I was 'kicked out' of Y's Chinese fan organisation. Therefore, what I see is no different from what other fans see. In other words, I did not have the opportunity to observe who conceived or led this complicated activity. However, I did have the opportunity to argue with Waiwai, the former leader of Organisation Z, about the financial situation of her organisation.

***Yifan:** I want to ask a sensitive question: are you currently making a profit? Is your goal to achieve a profitable state while supporting the artist?*

***Waiwai:** Whether or not we make a profit doesn't matter. We might make a few hundred yuan today, but this money is all kept in one account. When Z has a new song to release and needs to purchase some data, this money will be spent on that.*

***Yifan:** Why not directly ask for money from the artist's company?*

***Waiwai:** They (the company) definitely spend money on promotion too, but we are us, and they are them. Our account must always have funds. Otherwise, every time we ask the company for money, we have to listen to them and get their approval.*

***Yifan:** So you want to maintain control of your finances?*

***Waiwai:** Pretty much. Our organisation is an independent entity. If we hand over financial control to the company, we would be constrained. Moreover, sometimes the relationship between the artist and the company isn't good. If the company doesn't want to spend money on promoting the artist, then it's up to us to use our funds for that purpose.*

From Waiwai's perspective, fan organisations are not profit-making entities. Still, looking at Organisation Y's fundraising activities, it is clear that they have generated income through the sale of merchandise. In fact, Chinese fan organisations invite a wide range of fans to crowdfund for various reasons, sometimes to celebrate a

celebrity's birthday and sometimes to collectively buy the celebrity's albums and other official merchandise. The difference lies in the allocation of these revenues: rather than distributing the profits internally, they were reinvested in subsequent celebrity support activities. This model underlines a key characteristic of fan organisations - the channeling of resources and efforts into sustainable support for their idols, rather than the pursuit of financial gain for the organisation's members.

However, this model has indeed faced controversy due to a lack of transparency. In recent years, fan organisations across China have frequently uncovered incidents where the organisation's leaders have absconded with money raised from fans. In 2021, the China's largest fan organisation dedicated to South Korean singer Park Chanyeol raised over £1 million from the celebrity's Chinese fan base, claiming it was for the purchase of the artist's latest album and magazines. However, on 30 June 2021, Korea Apple Music, as the agent responsible for album purchases, publicly announced that it had never received any payment from the fan organisation. TTT, the main leader of Park Chanyeol's Chinese fan organisation at the time, suddenly disappeared and is suspected of fleeing with over £1 million. Since 3 July 2021, an increasing number of aggrieved fans have collectively sought justice by calling China's consumer rights hotline and filing police reports, working together to protect their rights. On 9 July, Beijing police announced the arrest of suspect TTT while she claimed that the majority of the embezzled funds had already been spent, and she was unable to reimburse the losses suffered by the fans (YY, 2021).

Concerned about incidents of leaders of similar organisations absconding with donated funds, more and more fans are demanding that organisations disclose their fundraising details. Using Organisation Y as an example, at the end of 2023, Organisation Y published a simple financial statement detailing the use of its funds for the last year. This statement clearly showed the expenditure on nine fan activities over the past year (e.g. the celebration of the artist's birthday and the collective

purchase of artist-related merchandise), amounting to RMB 251,647.8 (approximately £28,000). The statement also listed the funds raised through crowdfunding during this period, which amounted to 247,114 RMB (approximately 27,000 GBP). In this scenario, the organisation's total profit was a negative 4,533 RMB (about 500 GBP). However, the members of organisation Y contributed from their own pockets and raised 10,526 RMB (about 1,100 GBP). Therefore, the current financial balance of organisation Y is 5,992.2 RMB (about 600 GBP). In addition, the organisation kept receipts and vouchers for every transaction across all activities and organised them in a cloud-based folder, even providing a link to this folder on Weibo for all fans to check.

支出			收入			
2022生日应援	生日应援大屏剪辑	250	9165			
	生日应援公告	50				
	生日应援	1975				
	生日应援	2550				
	生日应援	4250				
柴郡猫回归	生日应援公告	90		卡册	10249	
	卡册打样	95		拆拆乐	2240	
	手幅约稿	400		手幅	1625	
	柴郡特典赠品	881		补邮	2800	
	卡册邮费	115				
	卡册大货	10230	18385			
	拆拆乐大货	2400				
	手幅大货	2000				
	运费+包装费（新冠无代发）	2018				
	微店手续费	88				
	封口贴转运运费	158				
	扭蛋机稿费+公告	1480				
	打样合计	310				
草薺扭蛋机	扭蛋机大货	33634		草薺扭蛋机	75067	
	15抽手幅补做	768		加路特典	7038	
	卡册加购	4110		扭蛋机补邮	7020	
	拆拆乐加购	850	49580.1	愚人节特典	2173	
	加购手幅	260				
	转运代发邮费	50				
	加购提前发货运费	774.5				
	扭蛋机发货运费	5542.8				
	愚人节稿费	80				
	愚人节大货	1173				
	微店手续费	547.8				
	c a k e 回 归	CD册约稿	216		卡册+CD册	17548
		卡册约稿	400		床上桌	2975
床上桌约稿		90		毛毯+冰垫+九宫格	1833	
卡册+CD册大货		18682		扭蛋机余量	1471	
床上桌大货+打样		2500		回归补邮邮费	2694	
毛毯大货		1300		维权特典邮费	1650	
冰垫大货		635		卡车散粉出资	4300	
赠品贴纸大货		680	46520.2	酒吧	1000	
回归版头约稿		70		卡车特典	6878	
卡册+CD册打样		200				
卡册二样（作废）		100				
毛毯打样		41				
贴纸约稿		80				
回归+维权邮费		2744				
微店手续费		169				
卡车维权大货		1029				
中秋		卡车维权	15680			
		微店手续费	41.2			
		阿拉丁指定余量	1863			
	秋代发放假邮首自行发货其中包含延误费邮首承	1664		中秋	5222	
	中秋大货	4088	5833.3			
中秋手幅打样	50					
微店手续费	31.3					
生日派对约稿	5439			生日派对邀请函	729	
精灵球挂件打样（作废）	160			抽抽乐	82662	
生日CCL	总打样费	425		生日版头battle	1335	
	生日版头（商用）	504	48340.2	DID认领	4672	
	cd公告	370				
	披萨券	200				
	小卡万能券	470				
	盲盒商品图	100				
	抽抽乐大货	40130				
	微店手续费(0.6%)	542.2				
	生日项目设计	part1（GS25便利店）		300	2637	
		part2（花墙）	100			
part3DID认领		777				
part4（JYPTAXI）		100				
part5（uplex+did）		800				
part6（生咖）		300				
part10（街舞大屏+应援物）		200				
2023生日应援	视频剪辑（作废）	60	61776			
	全国GS25便利店	23900				
	签售应援	2979				
	新村DID认领	7500				
	JYP出租车站台	6700				
	UPLEX+DID+乐天大屏	6500				
	美食册制作	120				
	线下生咖+随舞	7377				
日常支出	2024JYP出租车站台	6700		创作者计划	3096	
	资源下载网盘	118		兔兔红包	837	
	internet download manager	280				
	微博会员	70	9411			
	泡泡翻译	189				
	版头DJ+尾款	70				
	头像挂件+版权申请	90				
	泡泡翻译	187				
	圣诞节版头（加急）	168				
	香港应援	720				
	泰国演唱会应援	266				
	香港演唱会应援公告	100				
	娃娃DJ+尾款稿费	360				
	未使用稿子	3640				
	图包	400				
	卡比特周边（未使用）	1400				
	专轴运费	532				
	更换代发转运	821				
总支出		251647.8	总收入		247114	
			总盈利		-4533.8	
			邮首内部自费		10526	
			结余		5892.2	

Figure 48: Detailed financial statement made by organisation Y



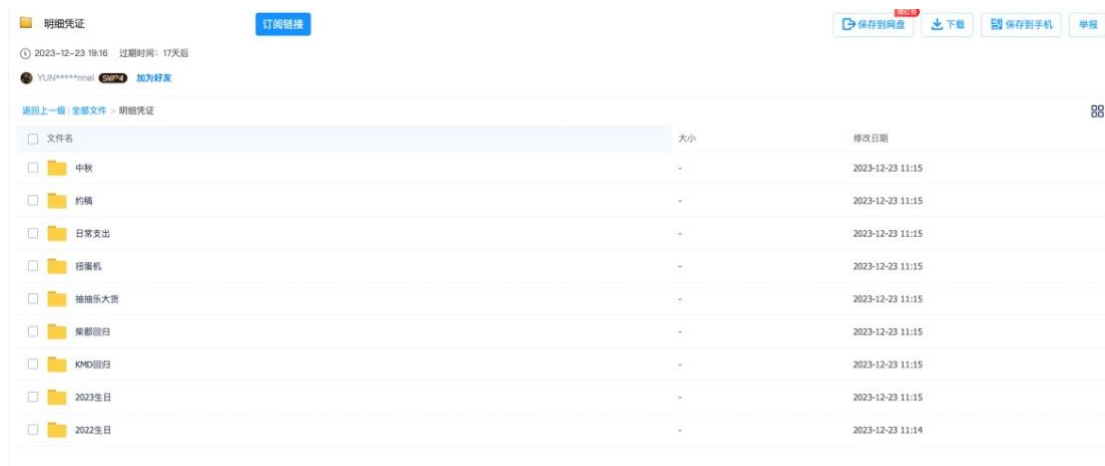


Figure 49: The folder contains screenshots of all transaction records.

#### 4.3.4 Discussion of functional groups in organisations

After over a year of immersive netnographic work, the groups within the different fan organisations can be divided into three functions: information processing, celebrity promotion and internal operation. In the meantime, two observations should be highlighted.

Firstly, it should be noted that this classification is not absolute and there is some overlap of responsibilities within different groups. For example, TT, the fan leader of artist Y, believes although they have up to 13 members in their management group while many decisions are also advised by members of other groups. This feedback fits my personal experience as a translator in the organisation Y and A. As a member of the translation group, I sometimes participate in discussions and make suggestions when there are other fans discussing issues that are not related to my duties. For instance, figure 50 illustrates members from the planning team within Organisation Y inviting all members to select the image they deem most suitable for promoting artist Y. And such personal experiences show that the boundaries between different groups are fluid.



Figure 50: The researcher was involved in a celebrity promotion activity in Organisation Y.

Secondly, informants seemed to deliberately avoid mentioning groups with negative connotations or ambiguous responsibility in the interviews. In contrast to excessive and irrational fan phenomenon reported in the media, the cooperative and efficient groups described to me by the interviewees made me think I was talking to the executive of a multinational company. Similarly, when I returned to the literature from the data following the grounded theory approach, I found the interviewees' accounts of the intra-organisation groups did not match previous research in two ways. For example, fans tend to describe the expertise of their various groups, such as how data groups co-ordinate fans to purchase albums to help celebrities climb the charts and inflate their popularity, while ignore the controversy these 'data workers' cause: as Hou(2022) suggests, such data-driven fandom has led to reckless over-consumption by some socio-economically disadvantaged fans, with many of them using loans and credit cards to pay for high expenditure in the fundraising activities.

What's more, some of the groups that actually existed were not mentioned at all in the interviews. Taking the anti-criticism group as an example, although there is a Weibo account registered for the anti-criticism group (figure 51) in the Artist Z fan organisation, the group was both ignored in two interviews with Artist Z organisation leader Waiwai. Of note, fans in this group are tasked with defending celebrities' reputations by engaging in mass verbal refutation of specific online users, which is also seen as likely to escalate into organised verbal bullying or even collective doxing (Zhang and Negus, 2020). Similarly, the controversial finance group and its primary responsibility—fundraising—were significantly downplayed in the interviews.



Figure 51: Weibo account of singer z's anti-criticism group with over 8,000 followers

#### 4.4 Further discussions on the nature of fans' entities

In section 4.2 and 4.3, the researcher attempts to show how Chinese fan organisations are initially formed and take shape from both process and structural perspective. This chapter was built on that and focus on the nature of such spontaneously formed entities. Section 2.5 in literature review chapter has examined the imprecise and chaotic use of the term "fan community" in previous fan studies (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005; Liu and Wang, 2011). That is, when discussing the collective behaviour of fans, scholars often use the term 'fan community' to simply describe the

subject carrying out activities. In my opinion, this simplification and ambiguity with regard to key terms is the source of subsequent confusions since the number of people represented by the term 'fan community' can vary widely in different context. For example, the collective purchase of artists' albums by the Singer I's Chinese fan community means that a huge number of fans are involved in this activity, with sales running into millions of pounds (see figure 52). While in another case, two key leaders from action unit dedicated to celebrity A once individually funded a bracelet and earrings for singer A's birthday. In both cases, the actors who carry out the activity are "Chinese fan communities", while the scale of fan participation varies wildly. In this case, in order to better outline the characteristics of spontaneously formed fan entities in China, the researcher firstly uses two boundary concepts to distinguish between two different social groups, then elaborate the difference from six dimensions.



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내 역	KTOWN4U(케타포) 공동구매	
일자(DATE)	상 품 명 (ITEM)	수 량 (Q'ty)
2022-07-15	 (STANDARD EDITION)	3,677
	 (LIMITED EDITION)	336
	합 계	4,013

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Figure 52: Confirmation of sales from Chinese fans buying Singer I' album

#### **4.4.1 The explanation of fan organisation, fan community and fan base in the context of China.**

By comparing the data collected from the field with previous literature, the researcher found significant discrepancies between the concept of fan communities in the Chinese context and its theoretical definition. This raises the question of whether it is accurate for previous marketing scholars to consider fan communities as typical representations of brand communities. In other words, has the brand community in China evolved into a new form? To address this, the researcher decides to provide a detailed account of the fan entities observed in the field, which are defined as "*fan organisations*," contrasting them with the "fan communities" described in earlier literature. This step is intended to lay the foundation for advancing the literature on brand communities.

Before discussing the various differences between fan communities and fan organisations in detail, it is necessary to define and distinguish these two notions in the context of contemporary Chinese online fan practices. As figure 53 shows, the Chinese fan community may contain multiple fan organisations. As Chinese online fan communities include those fans who are active on a wide range of social media and actively participate in fan practices. On the other hand, Chinese fan organisations refer to a small subset of fans within online fan communities who spontaneously form smaller, relatively more disciplined organisations with clear role assignments and internal structures. In other words, members of online fan organisations are certainly part of online fan communities, but most fans in fan communities do not belong to any fan organisation. Furthermore, introducing the concept of the fan base can help readers better understand the inclusive relationships between these terms: all of Taylor Swift's Chinese fans automatically form her fan base in China (Duffett, 2013). Within this fan base, some fans are accustomed to participating in fan activities online, such as collectively buying Taylor Swift's latest album or sharing experiences and insights from attending her concerts. This group of fans collectively forms Swift's

Chinese online fan community. Within this online fan community, a subset of fans decides to take on a more significant responsibility: they seek to support Swift's music and performing arts career in an organised and disciplined way by forming their own fan organisations on the internet.

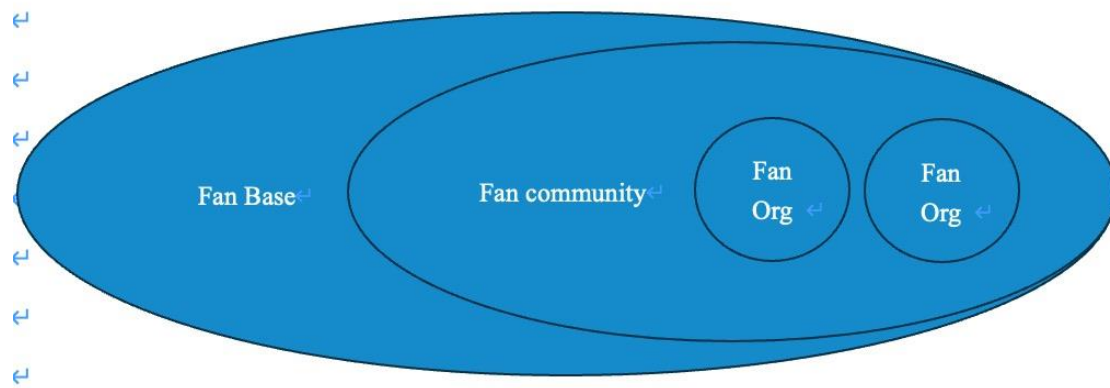


Figure 53: The inclusion relationship of three concepts.

#### 4.4.2 Chinese fan community and identity boundary

The Chinese online fan community comprises individuals who actively participate in online fan activities or express their fan identities within a specific fan base (refer to figure 53). This concept is broader than that of fan organisations, emphasizing inclusiveness, while this concept is more restrictive than that of fandom, requiring fans to express their preferences in the public sphere. Popular Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo, offer a digital space for these fans. This intriguing distinction indicates that the Chinese fan community is not entirely imagined but possesses a certain degree of visibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This visibility arises because, on Weibo, every user's post and comment are documented and made public. The way users express their preferences for celebrities—whether through admiration for performance videos, clarifications of celebrity scandals, or sharing posts related to fan activities—suggests their identities as fans. Furthermore, beyond these basic platform features, Chinese fans show a particular affinity for Weibo's "Super Topic Community", colloquially known as "Super Topic" (Wang and

Luo,2023). Defined by Weibo as "a community of interest around a continuous topic of discussion", this feature, launched in 2016, allows members to share content exclusively within the confines of Super Topic (Yin, 2020; Wu, 2021). Although Super Topic, akin to other sections of Weibo, are accessible to the public, posting privileges within Super Topic are exclusively reserved for subscribed users. In this scenario, posts by subscribers that are tagged with a celebrity Super Topic label further highlight the visibility of fan identities.

Taken together, I utilise the concept of "identity boundaries" in defining the online fan community. According to this definition, entry into a fan community does not require external validation; instead, individuals may autonomously decide to join or depart from the community. Compared to fan organisations with formal recruitment procedures and clear organisational roles, this kind of definition suggests that the mode of existence in these communities is more of a subjective feeling, meaning that fans themselves might consider themselves to be part of a particular fan community. Under this identity boundaries, fans have the ability to choose whether to make their identity public: when a fan follows a celebrity's news on social media, forwards news related to the celebrity, and gradually gains influence among fans, this fan can be identified as internal member of a certain fan community (Deuze and Thompson, 2014). By contrast, those who are not interested in the celebrity or refuse to express their admiration would be seen as outsiders. As a result, the membership size of the fan community significantly surpasses that of fan organisations, rendering them innumerable and hard to count.

In this definition of identity boundary, internal fans are often seen as acting as individuals rather than collectives. In contrast to fan organisations where designated managers can offer explicit guidance, fan communities containing numerous fans frequently face challenges in achieving consensus in decision-making. In other words,

fans in the communities are not controlled by a small fraction of people, but each individual fan can act as an initiator for various fan campaigns. However, this does not imply that fans are equal within the community. I have recorded the following observations:

Field notes (11 November 2022)

I once thought that members of fan organisations were superior, especially the managers within these organisations. What challenged this view was noticing that some active fans in the community had not joined any organisation, nor did they intend to. Yet, these fans still garnered considerable attention and support from others. The reasons behind this are varied: they might purchase a hundred copies of an album during a sales event or repost nearly thirty posts about the artist on Weibo in a day.

While I find it hard to understand, these fans use the artist's photo as their Weibo account cover, pin inspiring quotes from the artist's interviews, and share pictures of their bedrooms adorned with the artist's posters. Such active community members, even without joining fan organisations, still remain highly popular among fans.

Of note, this status quo is believed to result in the hierarchy within the community: fans with higher investment in their daily activities are observed to attract more fan followers and gain greater influence. And such investment includes monetary investment, time investment and resource investment. In the case of boosting a celebrity's popularity, for example, fans who are highly time-invested may register multiple Weibo accounts to tirelessly and repetitively repost celebrity-related content and leave comments on each celebrity's post. The logic behind this is that the number of likes and comments on Weibo is an indicator of a celebrity's popularity, which in turn is closely linked to the celebrity's commercial value (Zhang and Negus, 2020). Likewise, for fans who invest more money, they may purchase relevant online promotion services such as buying front-page positions for celebrities to increase



celebrity awareness. As for fans with more resources, they may be more familiar with the algorithms and rules of a particular social media platform, which can help them develop strategies to increase the celebrity's popularity. (Wu, 2021; Zhao, 2022). Toward this end, highly invested fans are inclined to be more exuberant on Weibo, while passive fans are observed to be more rational and less likely to engage in repetitive tasks. With time, fans with higher investment are seen as core fans within the community since they have more followers on social media and a bigger voice on a variety of fandom issues. And those who are less engaged and lower investment in fan activities are considered ordinary or passerby fans.

Interestingly, many interviewees were reluctant to agree with my observations about the hierarchy within the community. Ji Yu, the former leader of Artist T's fan organisation, argues 'all fans are the same'. Another 22-year-old female fan of Singer Z, subtly refutes my opinion about hierarchy within their community from the perspective of financial investment:

*'Sometimes when we needed money to buy Z's album, we would ask 'is there anybody who can come out and help us?' Gradually we all became familiar with these rich fans. But there are so few rich people, right?'*

At the same time, there was also some support for this argument from the respondents., a 24-year-old female fan of Singer Y, who works as a secretary in a state-owned enterprise, stressed the importance of resources:

*'For those of us Chinese who support Korean artists, we need someone in Korea to take the latest photos and videos of those artists. In the long run, whoever can get up close to the artists will become a 'key fan' in the circle.'*

Although some fans are hesitated to admit that hierarchy exists in their communities, the researcher's fieldwork suggests the existence of this phenomenon time and time again.

#### **4.4.3 Chinese fan organisation and membership boundary**

Now, let us turn to the main focus of section 4.4: defining Chinese fans' entities as *fan organisations* and describing their characteristics. One critical term is the 'membership boundary,' a narrower criterion that delineates the extent and makeup of these fan organisations. How many people are there in a fan organisation? Although the number of members varies from time to time, the number of members within each organisation is generally in the dozens. Specifically, the fan organisations of singers A and Y have around 20 members, singer I has an internal organisation of 30 members, while the leader of singer T's fan organisation claims that their internal membership is close to 100 at its peak.

##### **4.4.3.1 Entry/Exit Mechanism**

In Chinese fan organisation, the entry and exit process for internal members is relatively strict: internal members need to be selected, recruited and examined before joining the organisation with certain position (e.g., video editor, translator). In section 4.2.1, the researcher mentioned that Organisation A had posted recruitment notices for members at its inception. In fact, recruitment is an uninterrupted part of organisational life. That is, recruitment does not occur at fixed times in fan organisation, rather, it is planned according to the availability of internal members and when there are vacancies. To be exact, taking Organisation A as an example, from my first day of joining up to May 2024, new members have continuously been joining our group chat.

In terms of the methods of recruiting members, fan organisations tend to post recruitment information on public platforms such as Weibo. The figure 54 is a

recruitment announcement posted on Weibo by the singer Y's fan organisation, where the 'basic requirements for new members' is translated as follows. Additionally, as figure 56 shows, there are also three images attached to this post, each of which corresponds to the recruitment needs of two groups. In other words, this recruitment is focused on six groups, and the requirements for each group are translated and summarised in figure 56.



Figure 54: A typical recruitment announcement of the Chinese fan organisation

*Basic requirements for new members*

- 1. genuinely like Y*
- 2. stable online time (resources), can complete tasks on time*
- 3. over 18 years old, don't accept students who are about to take the undergraduate or postgraduate entrance examination*
- 4. have responsibility, patience, motivation, refuse 3-minutes passion.*



Figure 55: Three recruitment posters made by the fan organisation of Singer Y

Group Name	Requirements
Weibo management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ability to use ladders to browse foreign websites.</li> <li>-Understand how to download resources or have the willingness to learn.</li> <li>-Long online time, fast to download resources</li> <li>-Only like Y and have bought related products before. Careful and cautious.</li> </ul>
Graphic design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Proficiency in painting and drawing software</li> <li>- Can work independently on artwork tasks</li> <li>- Have a good taste on artworks and have high standards your work.</li> <li>- Welcome to join us as a painter</li> <li>- No plagiarism, no personal views can be added to the work.</li> </ul>
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interest in product design and event planning, experienced fans preferred.</li> <li>- A good understanding of the Chinese fandom culture.</li> <li>- Able to work under pressure and get things done</li> </ul>
Translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ability to translate from and into Korean and Chinese</li> <li>- Good language organisation and a high level of audio transcription and translation skills.</li> </ul>
Copywriting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong writing skills, well-phrased</li> <li>- Able to work independently and efficiently on birthday celebrations poems and other announcements</li> <li>- No plagiarism, no personal views or unrelated elements</li> </ul>
Video production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have enough online time</li> <li>- Proficient in using video production software such as PR and AR.</li> <li>- Ability to edit video or create subtitles</li> <li>- High level of proficiency and speed on video editing.</li> </ul>

Figure 56: Different requirements for different groups in Singer Y's fan organisation

Similarly, one recruitment announcement previously published on Weibo by Organisation A is illustrated in figure 57. This announcement included six meticulously designed posters by graphic designer Xiaoyu. These posters detailed the application format, basic requirements, and specific demands of various groups. Due to space constraints, only one information-rich poster is displayed in this thesis. Additionally, information regarding the "Groups introductions" has been organised and translated in Figure 59.



Figure 57: A recruitment post made by the fan organisation A (Translated in Chinese: 2023 Recruitment notice: A new round of recruitment has begun. We hope capable fans can actively participate. Graphic design: Xiaoyu. Thanks for our great designer!)

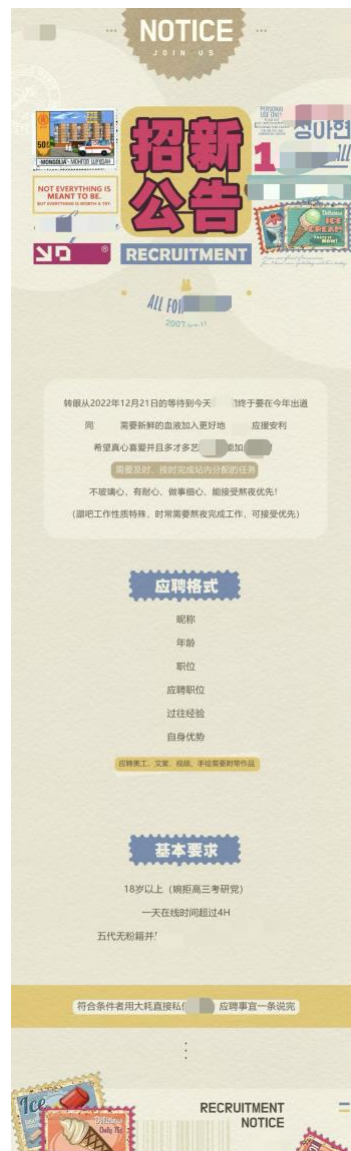


Figure 58: One informative poster from the recruitment post for Organisation A (Translated in below, and the bolded sentences are the part of the poster that the organisation emphasises)

*From the long wait since December 21, 2022, to today, A is finally set to debut this year. At the same time, we need new blood to join us to better support and promote A.*

*We hope that fans who are truly passionate and talented will join us! **You are required to complete the tasks assigned within the organisation on time.** You should not be overly sensitive, must be patient, meticulous in your work, and those who can handle staying up late are preferred! (Due to the special nature of the work and market demands, those who can accept working late are prioritized.)*

**Application Format:** *Nickname, Age, Occupation, Position Applied For, Previous Experience, Personal Strengths (Applicants for graphic design, copywriting, video, and hand-drawing must include samples of their work)*

**Basic Requirements:** *Over 18 years old, and not a high school senior or a student preparing for postgraduate entrance exams. Must be online for more than four hours a day, have no other favourite artists in fifth generation, and be solely focused on A. Eligible candidates should directly message us using their Weibo account. Please include all necessary information in a single message.*

Group Name	Requirements
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Familiar with Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms</li> <li>-<b>Transfer in time, long online hours</b> and experience</li> <li>- Have your own ladder, being hardworking and able to stay late is preferred.</li> </ul>
Graphic design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Proficiency in PS, experience with AI as well as being hardworking and able to stay late is preferred.</li> <li>- Have a good taste on artworks and not too sensitive</li> <li>- Finish the work in time</li> <li>- <b>Apply with your recent artworks, no plagiarism!</b></li> </ul>
Hand-drawing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The drawing style is aesthetically pleasing, not sensitive, and willing to listen to opinions.</li> <li>- <b>Have appropriate online hours and complete tasks on time</b></li> <li>- Have recent works, hard-working, can stay up late is preferred.</li> </ul>
Translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We need <b>Korean, Japanese and English</b></li> <li>- Certificates (<b>Japanese N2 or above, Korean TOPIK 4 or above</b>) and the ability to listen to translations are preferred.</li> <li>- Long online hours, <b>finish the work in time.</b></li> <li>- Experienced, language majors, hard-working, and able to stay late are preferred.</li> </ul>
Frontline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Based in Japan and Korea</li> <li>- <b>With more professional shooting equipment, guarantee the speed and quality of the pictures.</b></li> </ul>



Group Name	Requirements
	- Experienced, hard-working, can stay up all night is preferred.
Video	- Experienced, hard-working, and able to stay late are preferred. - <b>Proficient in using video production software such as PR and AE.</b> - <b>Apply with your recent works.</b>
Copy writing	-Good writer with many ideas -Long online hours, finish the work on time and insensitive -Experienced, hardworking and can stay late preferred - <b>Apply with your recent works.</b>

Figure 59: Different requirements for different groups in Singer A's fan organisation

When I first saw this recruitment post, these well-designed posters surprised me to some extent, that is, rather than simply listing job positions and requirements, both fan organisations were observed creating elaborate posters to attract fans to join.

Also, the way fan organisations recruits people is similar to that of conventional companies: announcing job vacancies on public platforms, designing informative posters, providing specific job descriptions and contact channels. That being said, I realised that the fan organisation may not have thoroughly screened all the candidates during the selection process based on my personal experience. For instance, although Organisation A requires candidates to be "not a fan of the fifth generation" during recruitment, which refers to a classification method for Korean artists where the most recently debuted artists are categorized as fifth generation stars. However, even though I was asked this question during my application process to join the organisation, the answers to it are almost impossible to verify for authenticity. Also, as figure 59 demonstrates, the organisation requires a 'high level of audio transcription and translation skills' from the members of the translation team, which means the translators are expected to be able to interpret and translate what they hear without video subtitles. In reality, however, I was recruited by the organisation leaders without any assessment of my ability to do the above. The potential explanation for this issue could relate to my educational background, as I mentioned in my application that I was a PhD student in the UK, which may have given the



organisation leaders the impression that 'this candidate must have no problem with English'.

Another observation is that the recruitment notices from the two organisations, issued at different times, featured some intriguing vocabulary. For instance, when describing the task of gathering celebrity information from foreign websites, both organisations used the term 'ladder' and required candidates to be familiar with how to use a 'ladder' to "climb over the wall". In this context, "ladder" refers to a technical tool commonly used to bypass regional internet restrictions or access blocked content. As both celebrity A and Y are Korean, many of their pictures and videos will be released on YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. In this case, Members from resource group are required to use a VPN or other proxy services to access these platforms. A similar situation can be observed in Organisation A's recruitment criteria for the resource team, which includes the requirement of "transfer in time." In this context, the term "transfer" refers to the process where members, after successfully "climbing over the wall" via a "ladder," download information about the celebrity and re-upload it onto Weibo. This act of disseminating the acquired resources constitutes the "transfer" of resources. As illustrated in Figure 38 and 39 of section 4.3.1, a member used the term "transfer" in a group chat, seeking assistance from other members to carry out the "transfer" together. However, such terminology will undoubtedly be unfamiliar to those not acquainted with contemporary fan culture. Yet, in my view, terms such as 'ladder' and 'transfer' are not merely functional but are symbolically employed and have become integral to the organisational life of fans.

After being a translator in the organisation for a while, I decided to try out more roles to see what other groups' recruitment criteria were. So, I sent a message to the organisation leaders of Singer A and Singer Y, respectively, saying that I wanted to join the Resource group. Interestingly, the leaders of both organisations immediately

agreed and invited me to join their online chat group of the Resource group. In result, I am not only a translator in these organisations, but also responsible for downloading videos and pictures from the Twitter and TikTok platforms. Of note, during the application process, the applicant's ability to "collect resources" was not tested at all. After I expressed my interest in joining the resource team, the organisation's leader gladly accepted my application and invited me to join the group chat for the resource team.



Figure 60: Researcher's request to join resource group approved

Once again, I was inevitably influenced by my previous educational background: I couldn't stop comparing the various methods of talent selection and recruitment in the company I had previously studied with what was happening in the fan organisation. Since the authority to select and recruit new members is not in my hands, I have no way of knowing how the organisation chooses members they deem appropriate. Although the requirements for different groups have been detailed, my personal experience suggests that the actual selection criteria seem to be more lenient and relaxed. Subsequently, another question that comes to mind is whether such selection criteria can ensure the quality of the work carried out by fan labours. I found it difficult to make the connection between the efficient cooperation between groups

described by the interviewees and such a lenient selection threshold. And it was even harder to imagine that such selection procedure would help the organisation to find appropriate talents and deliver efficient productivity.

Of particular interest, however, not all positions in the organisation are as easy to obtain as I described earlier. Some positions are observed to have higher recruitment thresholds and more complex selection process. For instance, it may be challenging for new members to obtain positions in the management group, as these roles are typically reserved for experienced members with a solid support base. Jiyu, the fan leader of Singer T explained why she can be promoted to her current position.

*My work in the translation team has provided me with a certain foundation, and I'm quite well known in our fan groups. Other fans know what I did for our idol, so they have allowed me to take on some important responsibilities.*

Waiwai also articulated her rationale for why she is qualified to lead the fan organisation of Singer Z:

*The previous leader knew me and came to me, asked if I want to be the next leader. He said he was too tired to manage everything. We had met before and he knew how much I liked the celebrity. I believe that's the reason he wanted me to be the next leader. He said, 'Why don't you come and try it?'*

In these two examples, Jiyu and Waiwai did not actively pursue a position like I did. Instead, they were promoted based on the reputation and recognition they had earned from their previous experience in the organisation. Such obvious difference in the recruitment process was attributed to the unique nature of the management group, which bears greater responsibility and pressure, leading to more rigorous and complex selection criteria.

Compared to joining the organisation, the procedures and processes for leaving become relatively straightforward and simple. In fact, it is rare for the researcher to notice who leaves the organisation and when. The statement in the figure 60 below comes from a member of organisation A, who claims that personal reasons make it difficult to continue working within the organisation, leading to her decision to leave; this has become one of the very few observations regarding members' departures.

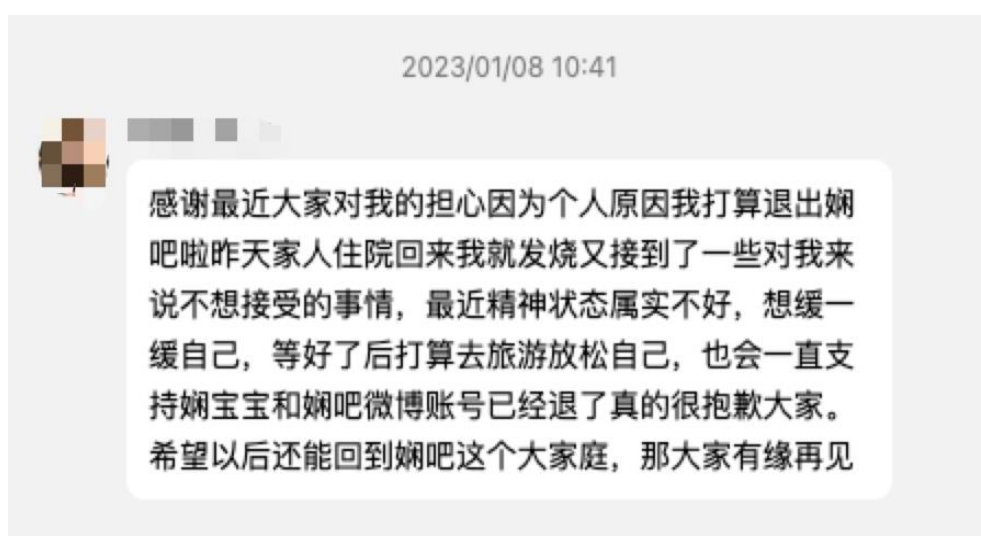


Figure 61: A member of fan organisation A leaves for personal reasons.

*Thank you for all the worries. For personal reasons I'm going to leave our organisation. Yesterday, after my family came back from hospital, I had a fever and received some news that I didn't want to accept, so my mental state is really bad lately. I hope I can come back to our organisation family in the future, so I hope I will see you all again!*

#### **4.4.3.2 Digital Visibility of Members**

After describing the mechanisms for members' entry and exit from the organisation, it is time to focus on the members' lives within the fan organisation. Members who successfully join fan organisations are usually invited to join an online chat group. In my fieldwork, new members are often verbally welcomed and formally recognised by

existing members, which also marks the official entry of new members into the fan organisation. The screenshots in Figures 62 and 63 illustrate conversations in different group chats in which the leaders of Organisation A and Organisation Y welcome newcomers and introduce their respective groups: the Resource Team and the Translation Team. In addition, the researcher observes that within these group chats, all members of the organisation use screen names, indicating that no individual reveals his or her real name. Besides, the screen name of organisation members within the group are generally accompanied by a clear position, which clearly demonstrates the functional nature of organisation defined by membership boundaries. Taking figure 65 and figure 66 as examples, in the member lists of the group chats for organisations A and Y, the information of the members is clearly marked with their screen names and the teams to which they belong. On this account, my name in the group chat is made up of my screen name and my position: English translator Andy, and the names of other members could be Korean Translator John Dow or Weibo Management Peter.

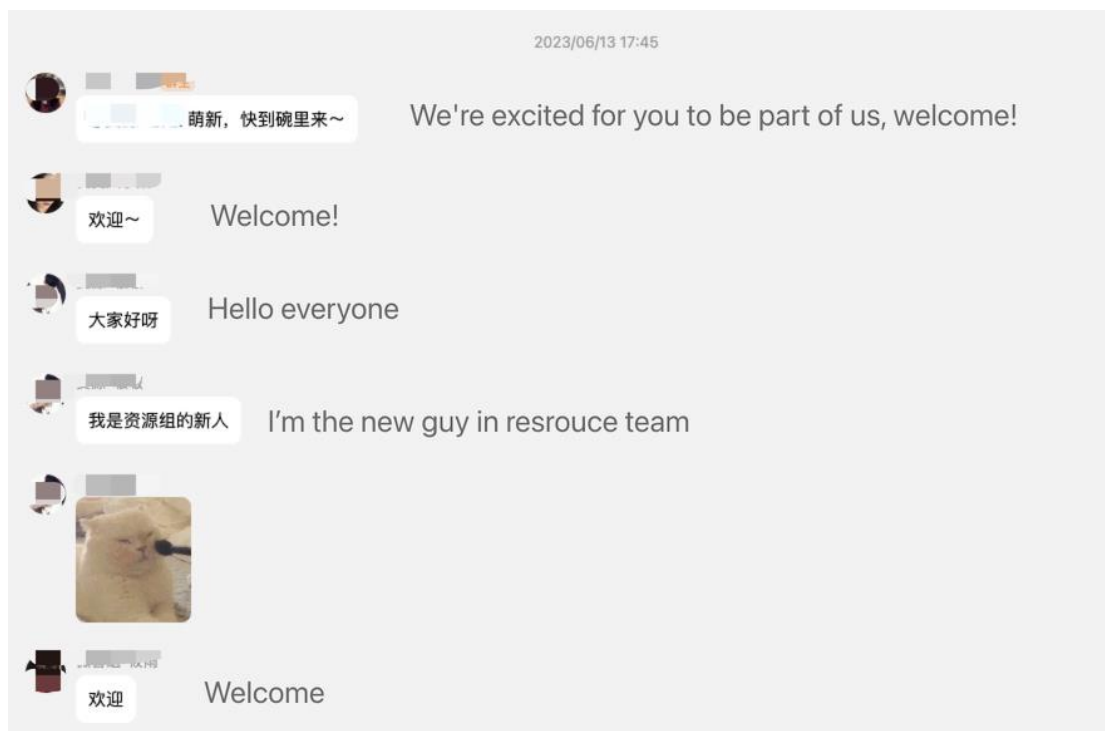


Figure 62: Verbally welcome to new resource team members in organisation A

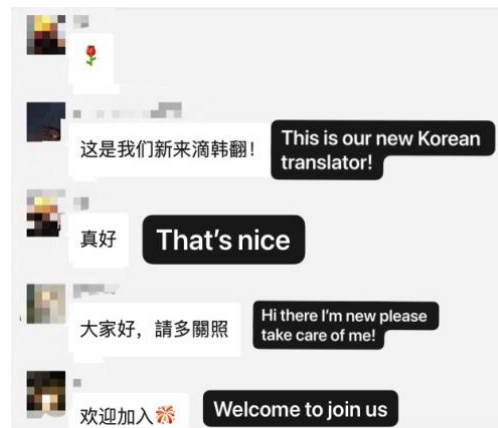


Figure 63: Verbally welcome to new translation team members in organisation Y



Figure 64: Verbally welcome to new resource team members in organisation Y



Figure 65: Member in fan organisation A has their position title attached before their screen name.



Figure 66: Member in fan organisation Y has their position title attached before their screen name.

In this case, the visibility of Members in Chinese fan organisations is argued to be clear and explicit, as one of the temporary mechanisms of the Chinese fan organisations is that the members of the organisation often have the opportunity to be exposed on the social media: when the organisation posts the latest information about an artist that it has obtained from foreign websites, it often indicates who downloaded this information and who translated it. As figure 67 shows, I helped the organisation get information about artist A's TikTok video getting one million likes, and my name was included when the organisation posted this news. Another example is shown in figure 68, I translated an English interview manuscript of artist Y, and the organisation included my name in the publication of this translation. Under this mechanism, social media platforms allow external fans to learn which member modified a celebrity's photo or which member is leading a philanthropic project.

Meanwhile, if something goes wrong with a particular fan activity, external fans may collectively target the internal members responsible for the activity. To be reflexive, I have to admit that this monitoring mechanism puts a certain amount of pressure on me, and when I translate an article or a video, I may have to consult a dictionary to give the most accurate translation.

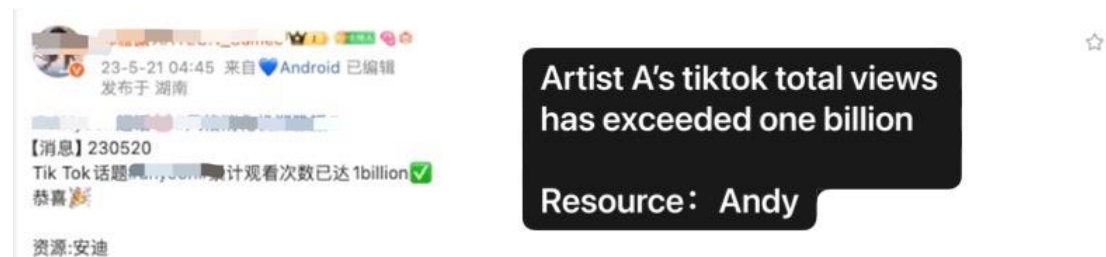


Figure 67: My name is attached in the organisation A's post and public to the external fans



Figure 68: My name is attached in the organisation Y's post and public to the external fans

#### 4.4.3.3 Unit of action

The previous discussion of the size of fan organisations and their mechanisms for integrating and disengaging members underlines the mode of existence. That is, the existence of fans in these organisations is an objective situation, as their roles and responsibilities, while explicitly recognised internally, are also recognised by the wider fan community through social media platforms. In this context, it is noteworthy



that although each organisational activity is carried out by individual members, organisations tend to present a collective façade on social media. This strategic presentation ensures that external fans perceive the organisation as a cohesive and unified entity. Taking Organisation Y as an example, it is explicitly communicated to new members that the organisation's regulations prohibit the private disclosure of internal matters on online platforms. In addition, the organisation typically uses the first-person plural pronoun 'we' in its social media communications, engaging in dialogue with a wider fan base. For example, when the organisation felt that artist Y was being treated unfairly in her career by the company, it posted the following statement on Weibo (and translated below).



Figure 69: Fan organisation Y uses the first-person plural pronoun 'we' in Weibo.

*'We understand everyone's current feelings of anger and we feel the same way. We're still working out the details of our legal action, and we may need everyone's help in the future.'*

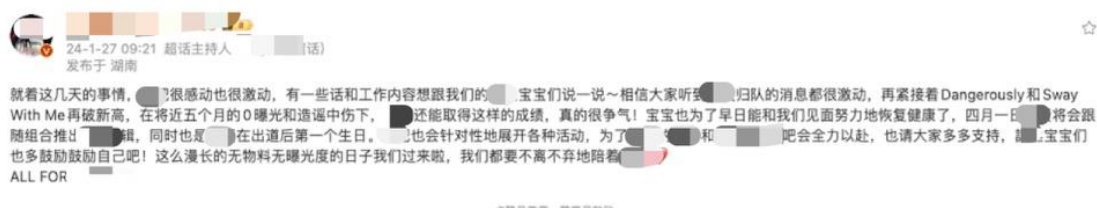


Figure 70: Fan organisation Y uses the first-person plural pronoun 'we' in Weibo.

*With regard to the things of these days, our organisation is very moved and excited, there are some words and work content want to talk to our babes ~ I believe everyone is very excited to hear the news of A returning to the team, and then immediately after Dangerously and Sway With Me breaks the new high again, under the 0 exposure and*

*rumor vilification in nearly five months, A can still achieve such a result, and it is really very competitive! Our baby A also work so hard to recover health in order to be able to meet with us as soon as possible. At the same time, it is also the first birthday of A after her debut. We will also carry out various activities specifically for A's birthday and the first mini album. We will do our best, and we ask for everyone's support. Also, encourage yourselves babes! We've made it through these long days without materials or exposure, and we will stick with A without leaving* ❤️

*All for A*

#### **4.4.3.4 Decision Making**

In Chinese fan organisations, the decision-making process combines democratic discussion with autocratic decision-making in a black-box-like environment. During my initial involvement with these organisations as a Chinese-English translator, I frequently observed organisation managers actively soliciting input from members in the group chats. They often asked for feedback on aspects such as image selection for artist merchandise designs and copywriting ideas. Impressively, the members' perspectives and suggestions were not only welcomed, but also significantly influenced the final decisions. For example, to commemorate the birthday of artist Y, the leadership of organisation Y initiated a discussion within the group, inviting members to select their favourite photographs of the artist to be compiled into a booklet of photo cards. Different members had different opinions, as shown in Figure 71, where members shared their preferences. These suggestions were ultimately adopted by the organisation's leaders.

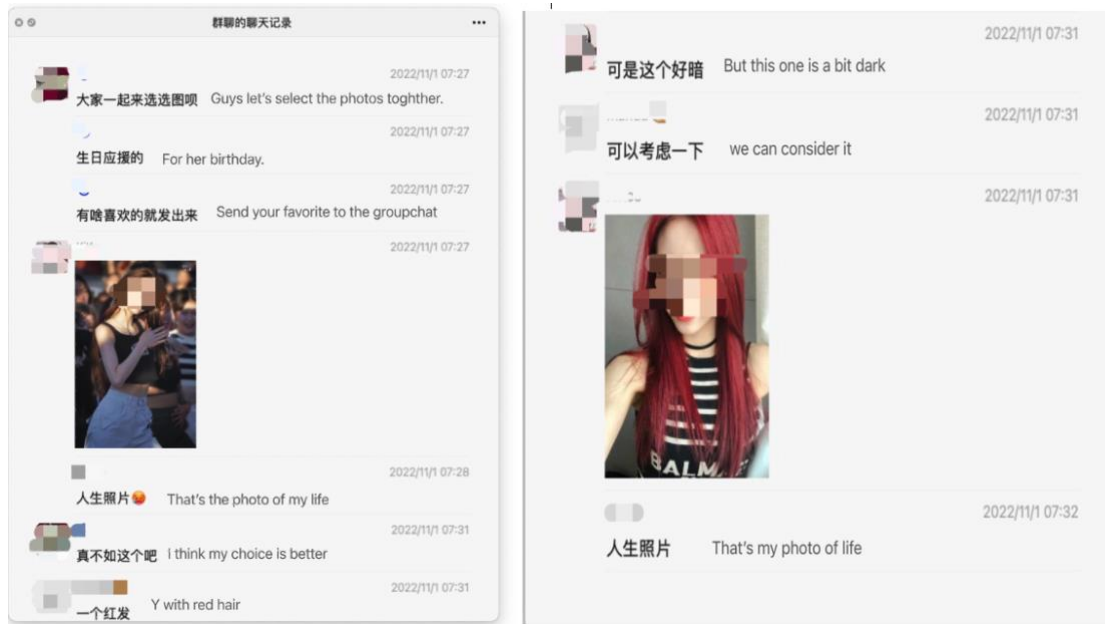


Figure 71: The leadership of Organisation Y invited members to participate in the decision-making process of selecting promotional photographs.

Furthermore, Organisation Y also sought the opinions of internal members regarding budget allocations, as depicted in Figure 72. Members engaged in discussions about how much money should be spent on producing celebrity merchandise, and whether this expenditure should be tightly controlled in consideration of the upcoming birthday support activities.

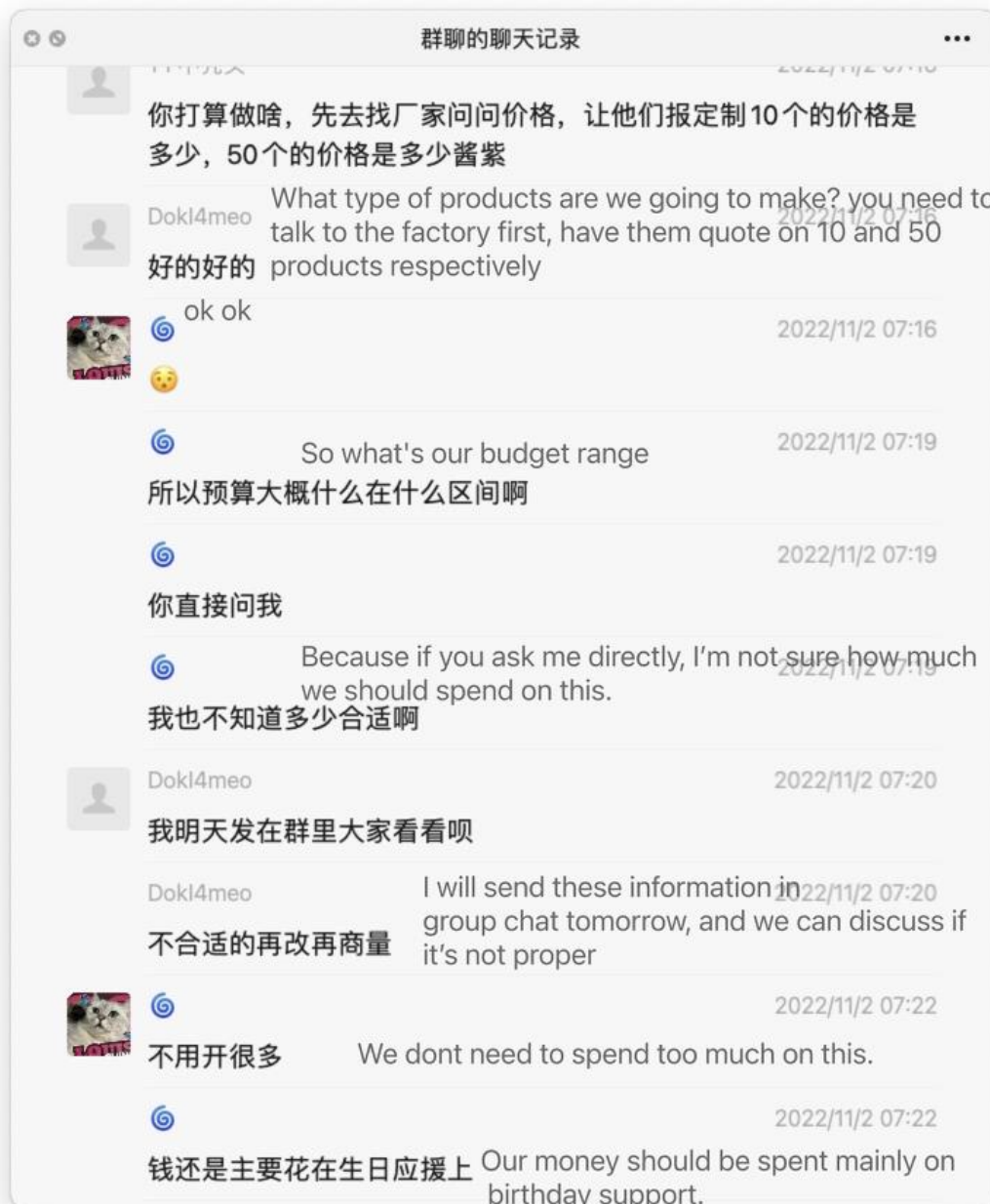


Figure 72: Members of the Organisation Y make decisions about budget spending through group discussions.

Moreover, in some task assignments, the leadership of the organisation would alter the conventional mode of task distribution in the group, flexibly inviting members to "claim" certain tasks. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 73, when the leadership of Organisation Y inquired who was willing to undertake the task of writing copy for a particular project, one member actively responded.



Figure 73: Involvement of organisation members in decision-making on task allocation

Meanwhile, fan organisations often use the polling function in WeChat group chats, especially when the organisation's leaders are indecisive about certain decisions.

Within Organisation Y, a member from the planning team, known by the nickname YTT mini, suggested to the organisational leaders to initiate a vote on which type of paper material should be used for designing a celebrity photo books, and the leadership promptly accepted this proposal. Of note, fan organisations' leaders

regularly invite members to participate in these polls, and use the collective input as a key factor in finalizing their decisions.



Figure 74: Voting by members is a common decision-making method in Chinese fan organisations.

In addition, the managers of fan organisations may extend their decision-making process beyond internal members, often inviting a wider online community of fans to weigh in. This typically takes place on Weibo, the most popular social media platform in China. For example, the Y launched a campaign in August 2023 to gather information about Chinese cuisine from a broad community of fans by writing storytelling and engaging text. Specifically, they invited fans via Weibo to introduce their recommended Chinese dishes and send the information to the organisation's

email. Based on this, the organisation planned to create a booklet of Chinese cuisine as a gift for the Korean artist Y. Still, it is crucial to note that, compared to engaging internal members in democratic decision-making processes, the occasions where fan organisations seek contributions from external fans are few and far between. Within the context of Chinese fan organisations, the decentralization of decision-making power to individuals outside the organisation seldom happens.

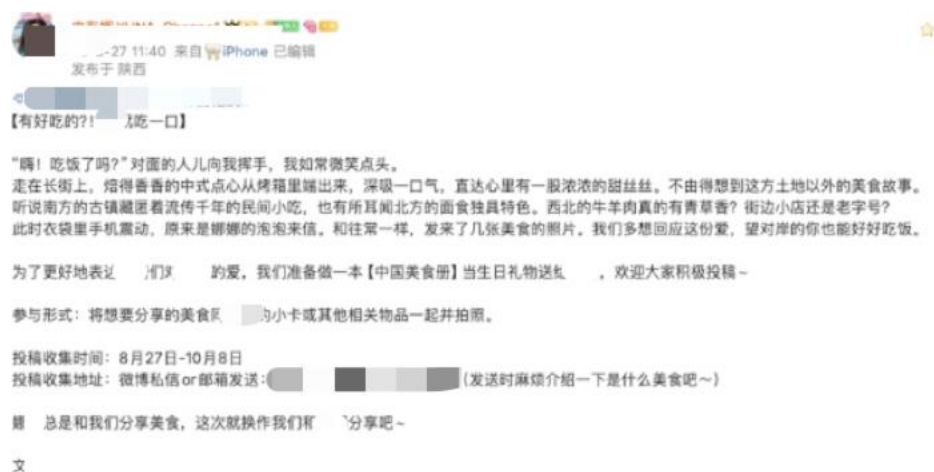


Figure 75: Organisation Y solicits campaign ideas from external fans (Translated in below)

***"Is there anything delicious? If so, Y will take a bite!"***

*"Hi! Have you eaten?" The person across me waves and I smile and nod as usual. Walking down the long street, the aromatic Chinese pastries are brought out from the oven, a deep breath of them brings a strong sweet sensation straight to the heart. It makes me think of the food stories beyond this land.*

*I've heard that ancient towns in the south hide folk snacks that have been passed down for thousands of years, and I've also heard about the unique characteristics of northern pasta dishes. Does the beef and mutton in the northwest really smell of fresh grass? Is the street food stand or the time-honored brand better?*

*At this moment, my phone vibrates in my pocket, it turns out to be a message from Y! As usual, she sent a few photos of delicious food. We all want to respond to this love, hoping that she on the other side can also eat well.*

*To better express our love for Y, we plan to make a "Chinese Food Album" as a birthday gift for her, and we welcome everyone to actively submit!*

*Submission method: Take a photo of the food you want to share with a card of Y or other related items.*

*Submission collection time: August 27th - October 8th*



*Submission collection address: Send via Weibo direct message or email to: xxxxx@163.com (Please introduce the food when sending)*

*Y always shares delicious food with us, this time let's share with her~*

*Copywriting: Yuan Ye*

Until now, the research has unveiled numerous instances of democratized decision-making processes observed within Organisation Y. The question arises whether this degree of democratization is consistently reflected across different fan organisations. Through the authors' observations of fan organisation A in the period from January 2023 to June 2024, it can be observed that the democratization of decision-making observed there is rather limited. Although Fan Organisation A has once decentralized decision-making to external fans, such instances have been observed only once in my study. In a situation where Artist A's fan organisation faced a controversy over the artist's Chinese translated name, a dilemma arose as to whether to alter or retain the current name of Artist A's "Super Topic" on Weibo. Addressing this, the organisation offered three possible options, explicitly stating 'the decision is left to the fans' (The figure 76 is illustrated and translated in below). As a result, 247 people chose option two, 24 people chose option three, and 18 people chose option one. Ultimately, the fan organisation adopted this proposal and decided to continue using the artist's previous name.

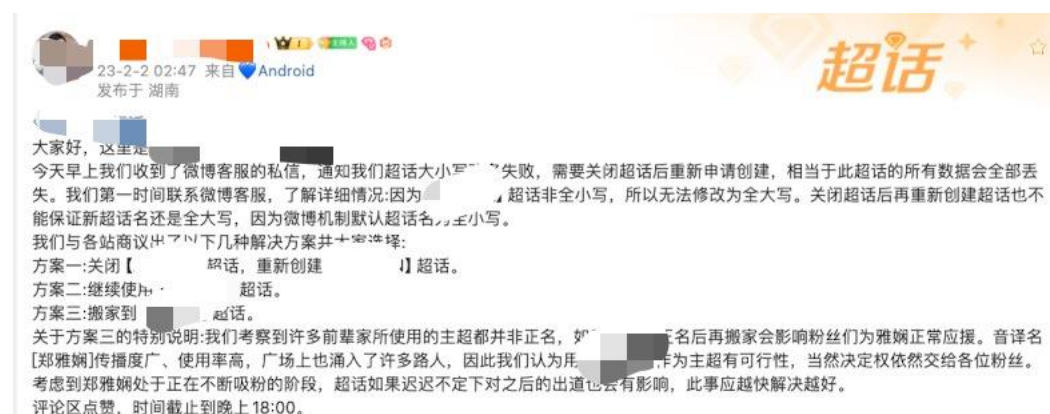


Figure 76: Examples of fan organisations inviting the broader fans to make decisions



*Hello everyone, this is A's fan organisation here.*

*This morning we received a private message from Weibo service team, informing us that the SuperTopic's name renaming failed, and we need to close the SuperTopic and reapply to create it again, which is equivalent to all the data of this SuperTopic will be lost. We contacted the Weibo service team at the first time to learn more about the situation: Because [the name of the artist] is not all lowercase, it can't be changed to all uppercase. After closing the SuperTopic and then re-create another SuperTopic can not guarantee that the new SuperTopic's name is still all upper case, because the Weibo mechanism default SuperTopic's name is all lower case.*

*We have discussed the following solutions:*

*Option 1: Turn off the previous SuperTopic and then re-create the new SuperTopic.*

*Option 2: Continue to use the previous SuperTopic.*

*Option 3: Move to the new SuperTopic.*

*Special note on Option 3: We have found that many of other fan organisations main SuperTopic is not the correct name, so if we wait for the company's correct name and then move, it will affect the fans' normal support for our artist. Since the name is widely spread and used, and there are many passersby in the Weibo, we think it is feasible to use the name as the main super, but of course the decision is still left to the fans.*

*Considering the fact that artist A is in the stage of absorbing more and more fans, and that a delay in deciding will have an impact on her subsequent debut, the sooner this matter is resolved, the better.*

*We put these options in the comment sections and please choose your preferred one.*

*The comments section is open until 18:00 PM.*

However, the researcher who joined Organisation A as translators from its inception have rarely observed the organisational leaders consulting members for their opinions

or inviting members to participate in the decision-making process. Moreover, I noticed that certain decisions were made exclusively by leaders in an autocratic way. For example, when a member from Resource group who was in charge of collecting the latest artist information believed that two screenshots were appropriate to share on the organisation's Weibo account. While the organisational manager, Xiaocai, firmly stated that these two screenshots were not well taken and therefore not suitable for posting.



Figure 76: The leader of Organisation A clearly rejects the members' suggestions.

Scenarios like this often came up in our group discussions. Sometimes managers would offer a rationale for these decisions, such as, "This photo caption is not compelling enough, so we need another one. " or " The quality of this video is low. Can we find a higher quality one to post? " Still, there were also times when the manager would just give a direct order without any explanation. As illustrated in the

figure 78, members from the resource group inquired within the group chat about whether to post two news items related to Artist A from Twitter on Weibo. The organisational leader, Xiaocai, rejected the proposal twice. The first rejection was issued without an explanation, while the second was based on the reason that 'it was a birthday project by international fans.' In these cases, I noticed that none of the members seemed inclined to question the leaders' decisions.

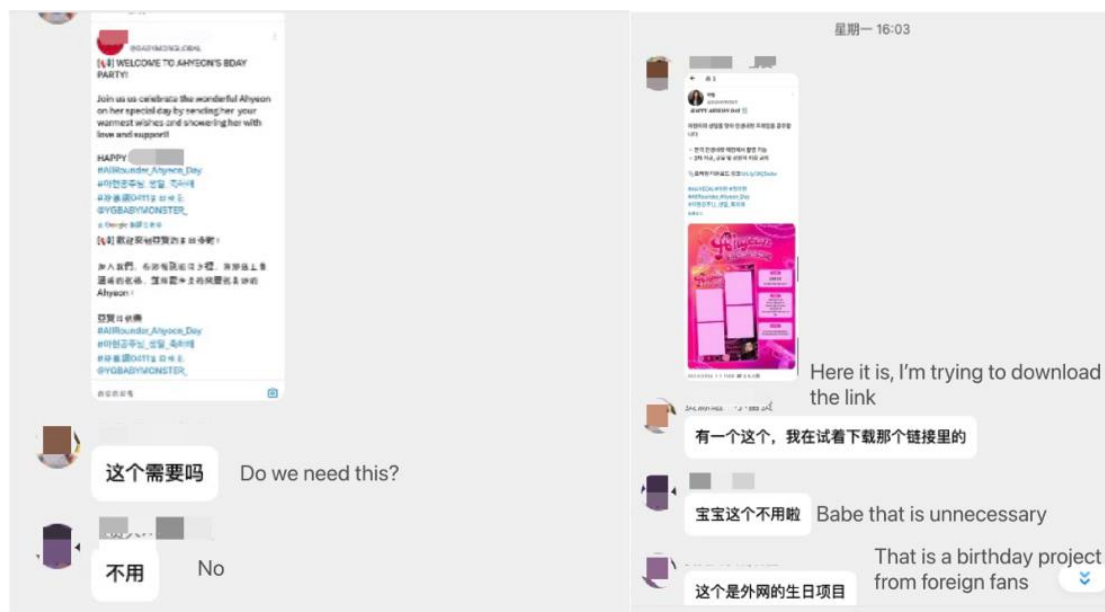


Figure 78: The leader of organisation A explicitly rejected both proposals and only gave one reason for the second proposal.

Certainly, in some instances, the leadership of Organisation A provides seemingly convincing reasons for their autocratic decision-making. As depicted in Figure 79, a member of the resource group discovered an account in Twitter posting an 'animal statue' of Artist A and reported this within the group chat, seeking organisational leadership approval to share it on Weibo. Although the organisational leader categorically rejected this proposal, they provided a comparatively persuasive rationale such decision. Specifically, the leader suggested that the artist's company might officially release the 'animal statue' of the artist in the future, and the version shared by the fan from Twitter could potentially differ from the official release.

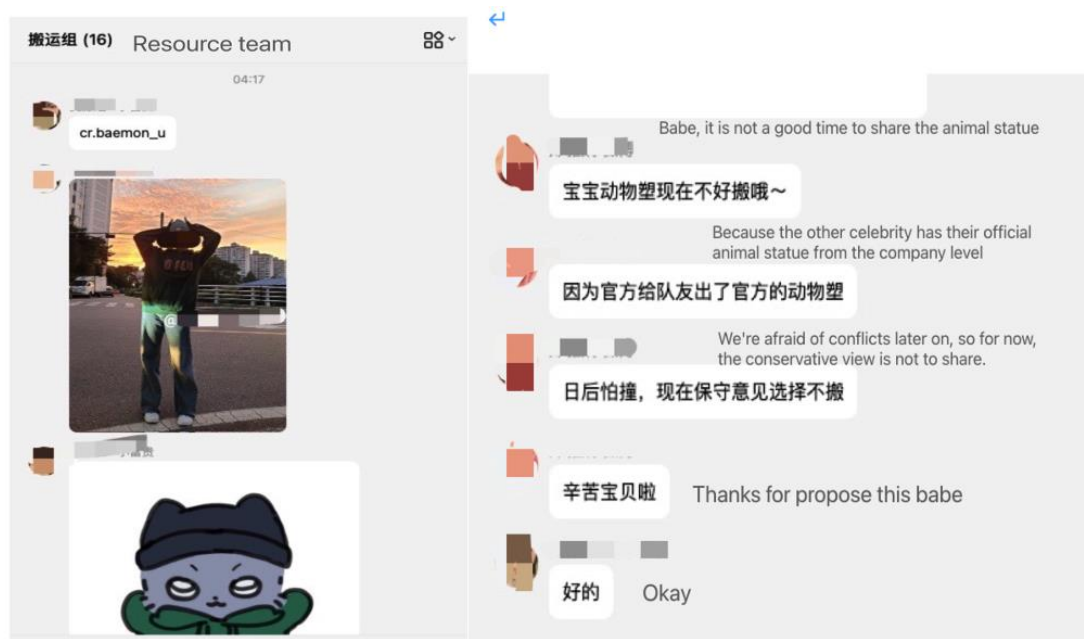


Figure 79: Autocratic decision-making with clear explanations

Moreover, my personal experience suggests that some authoritarian decisions at the organisational level may be the result of small-scale discussions. On 17<sup>th</sup> February 2023, the soon-to-debut Korean artist A did not yet have a unified Chinese name. A leader of Organisation A reached out to an individual on Twitter, purportedly a close friend of Artist A, attempting to communicate with him/her. Due to the language barrier, the organisational leader attempted to converse in English, specifically by sending me the Chinese messages they wished to express. I then translated these messages into English before forwarding them to the alleged informant on Twitter. However, the details of these communications were not disclosed within the organisation's chat group. An hour later, the organisational leader officially announced Artist A's Chinese name in the group, a decision evidently reached through communication with the so-called friend of Artist A on Twitter. In this matter, I was privy to the process leading to this decision-making outcome due to my role in translation, while other group members, including other fans of Artist A in China, remained unaware.

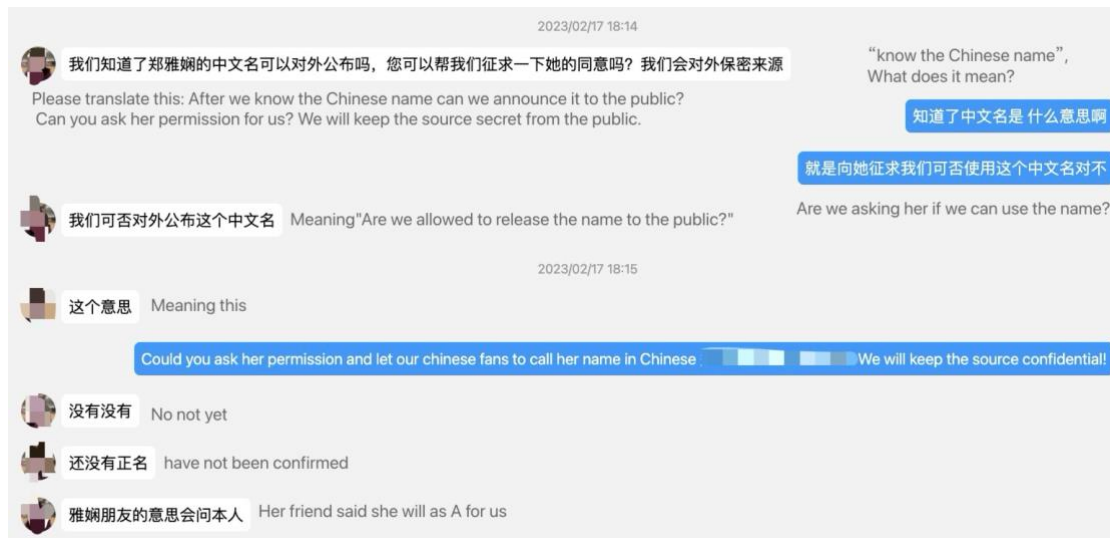


Figure 80: The researcher became involved in the autocratic decision-making process of the organisational leader.



Figure 81: One leader publicizes the results of authoritarian decision-making within the organisation

Taking the above case into account, my argument is that many decisions that appear to be entirely autocratic are actually the result of consultations within a small group comprising organisational leaders and relevant team members. Of note, it is noteworthy that the leader of Organisation A did not explain how she came into contact with Artist A's friend, nor did the leader seek the consent of other members of the organisation to engage in dialogue with that person. Although this autocratic

decision-making method is more common in Organisation A, it has also been observed in Organisation Y. On May 2, 2023, the leader of Organisation Y TT decided to step down, citing "academic pressures," and privately contacted me with the intention of passing on the responsibilities. In the days that followed, we maintained communication as they tried to determine my suitability for the role.

*TT: Hey Andy, you can log into our Weibo account, right?*

*Researcher: Actually no, I just downloaded resources and sent them to our resource group.*

*TT: I'd like to invite you to join the management group and help us manage Weibo.*

*What's the time difference between England and here?*

*Researcher: It's 7 hours in the summer and 8 hours in the winter.*

*TT: Will you stay in England forever?*

*Researcher: For the last year or two at least, yeah, except for going back to see the family.*

*TT: By the way, are you currently a fan of any other fourth generation Korean celebrity? Because when you go to the head of the organisation, you can't be a fan of others.*

*Researcher: No I'm not, I'm just a fan of A, who I think is fifth generation.*

*TT: That's great, I'll teach you how to transfer resources and become a manager to manage our Weibo account. If there's a time difference, you'll be responsible for posting resources at night in China time.*

*Researcher: Sure, I can start to learn, I have never been in a management position before.*

*TT: No problem, I don't think there are many resources in our night-time.*

*Researcher: So what is the current situation? There are only five of us in our group chat.*

*TT: KK didn't want to be involved in management anymore, I don't know what happened, and Maimai decided to leave. Now it's just you, me and Min (KK, Maimai and Min are all names in this organisation).*

From the above conversation, it is clear that my communication with TT was fruitful. However, just as I was looking forward to learning more about "how to become a leader," unexpectedly, on May 7, Organisation Y introduced a new leader via Weibo, an individual unknown to me and, to my knowledge, not previously a member of our organisation. In this case, I immediately contacted this new leader, introduced myself, and suggested that I could continue my previous responsibilities in the resource and translation teams, though not as the manager of the organisation. However, the new leader replied, "The resource team is already fully staffed." This was not true, as I clearly understood that just a week earlier, Organisation Y was facing a staffing shortage and struggling to recruit new members. I do not know how this new manager was chosen, nor do I understand the reasons for my own removal. When I asked the TT for explanation, I was told, "I have already left the organisation and am not aware of the subsequent matters. "

Overall, the above findings in Chinese fan organisations have unveiled a multifaceted structure and operational mechanism. It underscores the rigorous processes governing membership and role allocation, the public acknowledgment of member contributions on social media, and the dual nature of decision-making combining democratic and autocratic elements. In essence, a great deal of space in this article is devoted to describing and comparing the definitions of the two boundaries, not to make a strict distinction between the two, but rather, to help the reader understand more about the definition of a 'Chinese fan community'. Put starkly, the audience should have a clear understanding of what a 'fan community' stands for when they use the term.

Here, I attempt to make a clear distinction to define the action subject of fan behaviour: fan organisations are defined as entities that are divided by membership boundaries, while fan communities are defined as entities that are divided by identity boundaries. In the context of the Chinese internet, a 'fan organisation' refers to a more disciplined and structured action organisation that is spontaneously established by a small group of fans with clear organisational strategy and task allocations. In contrast, a 'fan community' refers to a large and loosely group of fans of a celebrity or public figure. Therefore, the fan-entities that the researcher was allowed to join belong to the former, namely the Chinese fan organisation.

	<b>Membership Boundary (fan organisation)</b>	<b>Identity Boundary (fan community)</b>
<b>The number of members</b>	Dozens	More and hard to count
<b>Entry/Exit Mechanism</b>	Strict, selection and recruitment with leaders' approval needed	Less strict, no need for approval
<b>Member Publicity</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Digital Visibility</b>	Objective situation	Subjective feelings
<b>Unit of action</b>	Collective	Individual
<b>Decision Making</b>	Democratic and autocratic	Rambling discussion

Figure 82: Comparison of the two boundary definitions



## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter aims to provide an introductory blueprint for readers unfamiliar with Chinese fan entities, and to define and explain their nature as fan organisation. It draws on the researcher's experience with various fan groups, with a particular focus on Organisation A, and vividly addresses the question: How do fan organisations develop from inception to establishment? Furthermore, the chapter's main contribution is to delineate the conceptual distinction between Chinese fan communities and fan organisations. In previous literature, 'fan community' has been a widely used yet nebulous term within fandom studies. Through meticulous fieldwork, the researcher demarcates the nuances between the two, thereby solidifying the basis for further analysis and discourse. In addition, the chapter dissects the structural composition of fan organisations, delineating the different fan practices within different groups, thus offering a structural perspective on the fundamental question: How are fan organisations constituted?

Moreover, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the researcher presents a series of significant activities, such as birthday celebrations and lottery events, which are ritualised and symbolic within the organisation. These activities reveal how fans construct organisational life and collective memory through such interactions. Additionally, certain specialised terms, including "ladder," "transfer," and "babe," are considered key symbols in the construction of the fan organisation.

In light of this understanding, the researcher aims to guide readers back to the reflection posed at the beginning of section 4.4.1: due to the numerous inconsistencies between fan communities in contemporary China and those described in the literature, the researcher developed the concept of the fan organisation. Similarly, can the concept of a celebrity fan organisation directly represent a typical human brand community? The researcher argues that this is challenging because, as mentioned in

section 2.8, most brand communities are predominantly established by the brand and its supporting company. In contrast, fan organisations are formed by the fans themselves and typically reject corporate involvement, resulting in a fundamental discrepancy. Therefore, the significance of this chapter lies not only in providing an ethnographic account of the formation of fan organisations, but also in inspiring both the researcher and readers to consider that celebrity brand communities in contemporary China may be undergoing new developments.

## **Chapter 5: Findings: Fan labour**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter aims to offer an initial understanding to the readers in terms of what is a Chinese fan organisation and what kind of things members do in such organisations. And this chapter, the discussion of fan labour was built on that. When the researcher revisited the literature with an understanding of fan organisations, he unexpectedly encountered relevant studies on brand communities. In the field of marketing, numerous scholars regard collective fandom as a quintessential example of brand communities. However, when the researcher returned to the fan organisation in search of collective consumption behaviours, he unexpectedly discovered the fan labour practices in which collective fans are engaged. Here, the researcher will introduce the novel concept of 'organised fan labour' and merge it with the existing discourse on fan labour from previous literature to further unravel the intricacies of the nature of fan organisations.

In the first section, the researcher innovatively coins the concept 'organised fan labour' on the basis of observed fan activities, describing the collective efforts made by members of the organisation in activities aimed at enhancing celebrity value. The second section introduces Weibo, one of the most popular social media platforms in contemporary China. This application, functionally similar to Twitter, serves as a dense hub for fan activities and organised labour. The researcher then provides a detailed account of the two classifications of organised fan labour in section 5.3 and 5.4: skilled fan labour and managerial fan labour. Through observations and interviews conducted during fieldwork, supplemented by the researcher's field notes, the reader is presented with a vivid account of the content and differences between these two types of labour.

Sections five, six and seven focus on discussing the characteristics and impact of organised fan labour. In particular, in-depth online ethnography reveals that fans subjectively do not perceive their unpaid labour as exploitation. Objectively, however, the researcher finds that the intense labour of some fans does indeed sacrifice personal time and may sometimes go unrecognised by other fans. In Section 5.7, the researcher highlights their most "aha" moment in the field, which occurred when they heard fans explain the meaning of the term "generating electricity with love." The spontaneous and unpaid effort to form fan organisations and to engage in a series of practices aimed at enhancing the value of celebrities fundamentally distinguish fan organisations from the collective consumption behaviours described in previous literature on fan communities. From that moment, the researcher profoundly realised that fan organisations do not view the fulfilment of personal consumption desires as their ultimate goal. In addition, involvement in organised fan labour can have negative effects on individuals, possibly including cyberbullying. In some cases, if the leaders of the organisation are deeply involved in these issues, the whole organisation may face closure or dissolution.

## **5.2 The concept of fan labour in the context of China**

In the existing literature, the topic of fan labour often intersects with discussions of fans' textual reconstruction activities (Stanfill and Condis, 2014; Noppe, 2011).

Unlike typical consumers, fans tend to re-create and interpret the objects of their admiration. Take a novel, for example: while the normal reader might simply read and discuss its content, enthusiastic fans often engage in creating fan fiction around its characters or even take it upon themselves to extend the novel's narrative. In other words, activities such as reading books, listening to music, and watching television can be considered forms of work, and the content produced by fans around these objects is also called user-generated content by critical media scholars. Scholars commonly perceive the act of textual reconstruction as intertwined with fans' self-

expression, which implies that fans engage in interpretive consumption of their favoured fandom object and derive pleasure from the process (Fuchs, 2012).

Of note, fans who simultaneously embody the roles of consumers and producers are ubiquitous across various domains. In terms of media fans, Jenkins (1992) characterizes the phenomenon of 'prosumption' as participatory culture, this concept can be exemplified through the spontaneous recreation of 'Star Trek' characters by its fan base, illustrating a deep engagement with the show's narrative and elements. Within the realm of game fandom, Milner (2009) discussed how committed players of the video game *Fallout 3* got involved in developing the game. To wit, players may be recruited by companies to participate in the development process of games. These individuals often take on the role of volunteers during the beta testing phase, providing invaluable feedback and suggestions that contribute significantly to the refinement and improvement of the game. Similarly, Yang (2006) conducted research on the behaviour of Chinese celebrity fans and suggests that in the wake of Web 2.0, the boundaries between producers and consumers among fans have become increasingly blurred. For example, fans are not merely consumers of celebrities' performance; they also actively participate in "creating" celebrities, notably through digital voting campaigns aimed at amplifying celebrities' influence. Equipped with this understanding of the concept of 'fan labour', research around the idea of textual reconstruction brought by participatory culture attracted many fandom scholars. This encompasses a detailed exploration of the characteristics inherent to fan labour, as well as an assessment of the viability of commodification of fan works (De Kosnik, 2012).

However, contrary to the fervent acclaim by fan scholars for the practice of text reconstruction as a form of fan labour, this activity has not been widely recognized within fan organisations. Instead, based on extensive field research, it is evident that

the consumption behaviours of organisational members towards artists fall under what Holt (1995) categorizes as 'appreciating'. This typically involves emotional reactions to aesthetic elements in artists' photographs and videos. For example, in the given example depicted in the image, a member, after witnessing singer A's performance, uses multiple crying emojis in succession to convey their overwhelming excitement about the singer's rap abilities. And another member explicitly states feeling so excited by the music that it brought them to the brink of tears. Another typical comes from organisation Y, when Artist A released her latest music video, members within the organisation expressed their appreciation separately for the music's beat and the artist's styling.



Figure 83: A typical act of text consumption: members of the organisation comment on singer A's vocals (Translated below)

*Member A: Our baby is doing so well 😭😭*

*Member B: Her high pitch and pitch bend is damn good 😭😭*

*Member C: Wow I'm crying I just saw it and it makes me so excited*

*Member A: Her rap is so good.*

*Member A: I'm wildly in love with this deep, powerful voice!*



Figure 84: Members from organisation Y expressed their appreciation

Given the difficulty of comparing the ratio of fans' textual presumption behaviour to their textual production behaviour, this article provides a less rigorous approach to demonstrate the incommensurable differences between the two: The researcher manually searched and counted the types of posts made by the Weibo accounts of four fan organisations in February 2023, and found that of the 1,552 posts made by the four organisations in March, there were only three posts related to textual reconstruction (i.e., drawings based on celebrity appearance).

For this reason, leaving textual reconstruction aside for the moment, another explanation of fan labour is more in line with my actual field experience, that is, fan labour is characterised by collaborative online initiatives undertaken by fan organisations, including the establishment of various functional groups and the recruitment of specialised members. These efforts are aimed at collectively fostering a broad fan base in order to enhance the artist's value, transcending the conventional perception of the artist as a mere object of consumption or textual construct. This phenomenon encompasses a spectrum of activities, such as organising, creating and

disseminating content, as well as providing multifaceted support for artists and their work.

On this account, I have termed the work conducted by fans within organisations as '*organised fan labour*,' distinguishing it from the concept of 'traditional fan labour' described in previous literature. In contrast to the fan labour discussed in previous studies, where fans are involved in the reconstruction of fandom texts, organised fan labour is characterised by activities that are primarily aimed at enhancing the value of the celebrity, rather than focusing on the self-expression and personal pleasure of fans (De Kosnik, 2012; Stanfill and Condis, 2014).

In fact, the naming of various groups implies that the core mission of Chinese fan organisations is to engage in celebrity-oriented work. In particular, video groups, translation groups, and resource groups responsible for information processing tasks all deal with different divisions of labour. Similarly, the planning group and the copywriting group, which are responsible for promoting celebrities, also prioritise labour as their primary task. Moreover, organisational members fully understand this scenario, symbolic phrases such as "上班"(go to work) and "干活"(do the work) are often used in their daily conversations. The figure 85 below shows how a leader in Organisation Y directly uses the term "start work" to remind members of the resource group to begin their tasks. Another image illustrates how, in Organisation A, when a manager inquires if another member has the capability to add timestamps to a video and receives an affirmative response, the term "do the work" is used while assigning the respective task.



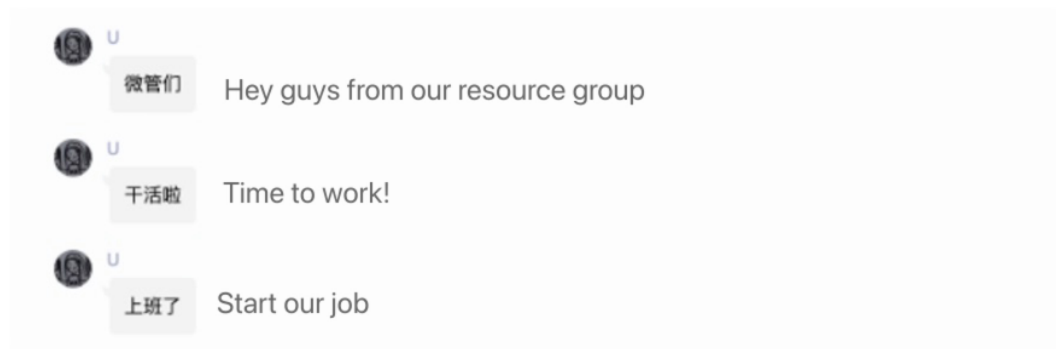


Figure 85: The leader of organisation A reminds the members of the resource group it is the time to work.



Figure 86: The leader of organisation Y employs the term "do this work" when assigning the tasks.

Moreover, in an internal announcement updated within Organisation A on May 12, 2023, the announcement specifies working protocols during the "off-cycle period," which is when artist A is not releasing new albums, nor are there any new concerts or other performance schedules. In this announcement, the term "上班" (start work) is

explicitly and repeatedly used: *"Off-cycle period with flexible shifts, meaning as long as everyone is available, you can choose to work whenever they wish. To mark the start of work in the transfer group chat, send 1, and to mark the end of work, send 2. Each work period must be no less than 10 minutes, and one must work at least once within three months."*

It is worth noting that the translation of the above-mentioned work-related vocabulary is a literal one, without any embellishment. This suggests that, from the perspective of the vocabulary and discourse used within the fan organisation, we can observe how fans employ these symbolic terms to frame their practices. The fan organisation genuinely perceives their activities as a series of "work behaviours," rather than the collective consumption activities mentioned in previous literature.

### **5.3 Weibo and organised fan labour**

Before discussing the classification of organised fan labour in detail, it is crucial to elucidate the realm of fan labour. Although Chinese fans build their organisations predominantly in the online sphere, there are instances where their efforts transcend digital boundaries and manifest in various forms of physical labour. In particular, notable events such as an artist's birthday prompt members to orchestrate offline gatherings in different cities across China, creating a collective celebration of the artist's special day (see figure 43). These events require extensive offline coordination, with organisation members actively involved in logistical operations, including securing venues, garnering sponsorship support, and carefully orchestrating the aesthetic of the event through meticulous decoration preparations.

Nonetheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the core of Chinese fan organisations is intrinsically anchored in online social media platforms, notably Weibo. In section

4.2.1, the researcher introduces Weibo and particularly highlight its popularity in China.

Six years ago, it was through this very digital medium that the researcher initially encountered the online dynamics of Chinese fan organisations. Currently, as a netnographer and a formal member in fan organisations, the majority of fan activities are still mainly observed and emerged from this platform. As mentioned before, Weibo has actively engaged celebrities from various sectors, inviting them to register and establish a presence on the platform since 2011(Wang, Shen and Chen, 2014). This initiative has facilitated a direct channel of interaction between public figures and their followers. In particular, many singers and actors, who enjoy considerable popularity among China's youth, have successfully cultivated large fan bases on Weibo. By the end of 2023, records show that four prominent figures in the entertainment industry had each amassed more than one hundred million followers on the platform (Chinese Stars Channel, 2023). Moreover, this platform is designed to nurture a dynamic online community, facilitating connections among users who are encouraged to follow one another and actively engage with shared content through comments, likes, and reposts. In this nexus of fan-celebrity interaction, the inherent features of the platform play a pivotal role. Fans not only frequently interact with celebrities' posts by commenting but also take a proactive stance in disseminating and championing their idols' content. Simultaneously, a marked emphasis is placed by fans on the quantitative aspects of engagement, specifically tracking the volume of likes, shares, and comments each celebrity post attracts. This aspect will be discussed in detail in the context of skilled labour in the following section.

Furthermore, as introduced in Section 4.4.1, the "Super Topic" feature launched on Weibo in 2016 has become a focal gathering point for online fans (Wang and Luo,2023; Yin, 2020; Wu, 2021). Figure 87 shows the page for the super topic of the female singer Taylor Swift. It demonstrates that the Super Topic feature includes

many sub-features, such as celebrity updates and celebrity videos, allowing netizens to participate in the latest discussions and obtain the most recent news about celebrities.



Figure 87: The page for the Super Topic feature of Taylor Swift

Meanwhile, this Super Topic feature implements a stratified ranking system for its subscribed users since 2018, which is predicated on a multifaceted set of criteria. These criteria collectively serve as quantifiable metrics, directly influencing the accrual of points. For example, the duration of membership, the volume of user-generated content, and the frequency and depth of interaction with fellow community members can accumulate different points for subscribed users. On this basis, accruing higher points leads to ascending ranks within the Super Topic hierarchy. Users who reach predefined levels and meet a series of criteria (such as being over 18 years old, completing real-life verification, etc.) are allowed to apply to become the 'Host' of a

Super Topic. Especially in the context of Chinese fandoms, the majority of fans join celebrities' Super Topics to interact with other fans and keep up with the latest celebrity-related information. It is notable that Chinese fan organisations frequently assume the mantle of 'Super Topic host', a role that entails orchestrating and steering the fan-driven discourse within these dedicated forums. Of note, these hosts in Super Topic have considerable authority, including the ability to remove posts and ban specific users. It is precisely this set of powers that poses certain challenges for fan organisations, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### 5.4 Skilled labour in fan organisations

Building on Sun's (2020) classification of fan labour and taking into account the different functional groups within the organisation, the following figure 88 presents how the authors define and differentiate the main typology of organised fan labour within the organisation, categorising it as 'skilled labour' and 'managerial labour'.

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Organised fan labour</b>
Graphic Design Group, Video Group, Resource Group, Translation Group	Information Processing	Skilled labour
Copywriting Group, Planning Group	Celebrity Promotion	
Management Group, Finance Group	Internal Operation	Managerial labour

Figure 88: The subordinate relationship of groups, categories, and the typology of fan labour in organisations.

Skilled labourers are organisational members who are well versed in fandom knowledge and the contemporary Chinese online fandom culture and norms, and who

are directly involved in fan activities that enhance the value of celebrities. A defining characteristic of skilled labour in this context is the need for participants to possess specialized skills, honed through targeted training within their respective groups, complemented by a deep-rooted savvy in their specific fields. In section 4.4.2, the researcher details the recruitment notices of Organisation Y and Organisation A. As showed in Figure 54 and 55, both organisations require candidates to have certain skills. For example, in the copywriting team, Organisation Y requires candidates to have "strong writing skills, well-phrased" and also mentions that candidates should be "able to work independently and efficiently on birthday celebration poems". Similarly, Organisation A expects candidates in the copywriting team to be "good writers with many ideas" and specifically mentions that they do not want candidates to be sensitive. Additionally, from the perspective of skill requirements, Organisation Y requires candidates for its Weibo management team to have the "ability to use proxies to access foreign websites", while the graphic design team needs to have "proficiency in painting and drawing software". Similarly, Organisation A has specific skill requirements for its translation team: requiring Japanese translators to achieve level 4 in the TOPIK, and Korean translators to reach level N2.

In fact, fan organisations not only establish explicit skill requirements for candidates during the recruitment phase but also provide continuous guidance to members from various groups, equipping them with the necessary skills to competently perform skilled labour tasks within the organisation. Taking the training I received in Fan Organisation A as an example, this kind of skills training is often informal. When I was translating a video, Xiaocai, the leader of Organisation A, instructed me on the format for writing translation drafts: *"Don't use punctuation, one sentence per line, try to translate concisely, don't exceed 20 words per line, and make sure the sentences are smooth. "*

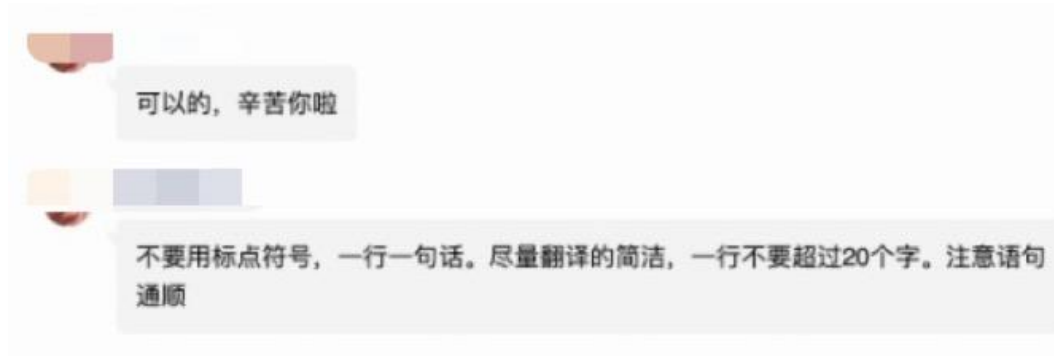


Figure 89: The researcher underwent informal training within the organisation to qualify as a skilled translator.

It is noteworthy that the guidance on skills mentioned by the researcher here often does not pertain to translation, writing, or video editing, which are the technical skills typically listed in recruitment announcements. Since fan organisations set skill thresholds during recruitment, members often already possess the requisite skills. More significantly, the skill guidance provided by organisational leaders relates to norms among contemporary Chinese fans, which I term 'adaptive skills'. For example, Xiaocai did not guide me on specific translation skills, but rather on how to write translation drafts—specifically, not to use punctuation, aligning more with the reading habits of fans on Weibo. Similarly, within Organisation A, when a member of the resource team was about to publish a GIF created from a short clip of a video, the organisational leader, Xiaocai, reminded him or her to mention who made the GIF. To wit, this type of skill guidance does not strictly fall under the category of video editing skills; rather, in my argument, it can be classified as a skill in familiarizing oneself with and adapting to online fan customs, in this case, explicitly mentioning the source of information and crediting the processor in Weibo posts.



Figure 90: One resource group member receives adaptive skills instruction

In terms of the scope of skilled labour, it often encompasses fan labour in its conventional sense, which is known as the textual reconstruction of the fandom object. For example, on a celebrity's birthday, members of the copywriting group create poems that encapsulate key moments in the celebrity's life. As previously mentioned, Fan Organisation Z created the following poem for the artist's birthday:

*槐序(huái xù) is an elegant name for the month of April, and a symbol of summer.  
May he ride the breeze of late spring in April and rise to the top.  
May he ride the wind into summer, always bright and hot, his heart like the sun.*

Similarly, Organisation A also composed the following congratulatory message for the artist's 17th birthday and posted it on Weibo:

*Rain falls,  
All things thrive,  
Everywhere I look thrives with vigor.  
You are like the young bamboo shoot,  
Breaking through the soil and obstacles, growing steadily.*



*At 17,  
A year full of challenges and opportunities,  
Everything is possible.  
In the past year,  
There may have been many disappointments,  
But these are valuable experiences for the years to come.  
Once again, the grass is green,  
Like the newly risen sun,  
Brimming with energy.  
This year,  
Should be filled with hope and joy.  
In this new year,  
Be the happiest version of yourself,  
Continuously enrich your life and experiences.  
Do not fear difficulties and obstacles,  
Believe in yourself,  
And all who love you.  
They are the support that fuels your progress.  
Become the person you aspire to be,  
Embrace your prime, push forward vigorously,  
You will always achieve what you desire.  
May you face the storms with steadiness and advance steadily,  
And may your dreams soar as high as the stars, may all your wishes come true.  
Wishing you a safe and smooth 17th year, forever surrounded by love and flowers on the path  
to realizing your dreams.*

Also, members of the graphic design group can create bespoke cartoon avatars of the celebrities, with full curation and attention to detail (see the pattern of the doll appearing in Figure 47, section 4.3.3). Similarly, the video group creates a compelling narrative by distilling hours of raw footage into a concise two reel showcasing the artist's most dazzling moments.

Furthermore, the scope of skilled labour extends beyond mere textual reconstruction, encompassing digital labour that primarily focuses on shaping data, which is a prominent practice in contemporary Chinese fan culture. The emergence and popularisation of digital data labour is because organisational members are well aware that fans' online activities are under the watchful eye of entertainment companies and

various brand businesses. These online activities are tracked, recorded and translated into a set of metrics that are used to assess the value of celebrities (Yin, 2020; Zhang and Negus, 2020). Under this circumstance, the direct manifestation of data shaping is chart beating, which is controversial but ubiquitous in online fan activities in China. In essence, chart beating is a series of traffic-generating activities, including collecting video views, online voting and boosting album sales. For example, if a celebrity is about to release a new music video, members of the organisation will play the role of 'digital workers', organising several temporary online chat groups to coordinate upcoming strategies to increase video views. These groups are often set up on social media platforms such as Weibo, where members screen potential participants by reviewing their social media profiles to decide whether to allow them to join. Criteria for joining may include whether the user has previously posted about the celebrity or participated in similar activities. Within these group chats, members guide each other on how to efficiently watch the celebrity's music video to maximise views. For example, when artist Y's latest music video is released on YouTube, organisational members provide Chinese fans with reliable VPNs to bypass the firewall and access the site, which is banned in China. One former member from organisation Y made such explanation:

*.....Sometimes we would create a group and invite some willing fans to join, boosting the view count together. ... You know, in theory, using VPNs is not allowed, but platforms like YouTube and Spotify essentially require the use of VPNs. ....We share some accounts, as some paid VPN accounts allow multiple simultaneous logins, so we distribute these accounts in the group chat for everyone's convenience.*

Also, organisational members may motivate other fans to invest more time in repeatedly viewing these videos by highlighting the rapidly increasing view counts. The reason why Chinese fan organisation emphasise views as a key metric, primarily because it's a widely accepted measure among Chinese fans to gauge a singer's

popularity and public recognition. In addition, similar metrics include participation in online popularity polls and rankings, which are also valued for assessing an artist's standing in the entertainment industry. Members of the organisation will actively promote and share these online voting links with other fans, encouraging everyone to take part in this repetitive task.

Fan fundraising is another prominent chart-beating activity, perhaps the one that attracts the most attention and controversy both from academic and media reports (Hou, 2022). Unlike free activities such as collectively boosting video/audio views and voting, fundraising requires fans financially contributing real money to support the celebrity. Jiyu, the former manager of organisation T made the following explanation:

*You don't know what these fans can do...you can search Park Ji-min if you want, take a look what his Chinese fans do for him. The reason why we emphasise fundraising is that it directly brings significant economic benefits to celebrities and also boosts their album rankings on major music charts. These achievements are also valued by brand merchants, meaning more advertising invitations are sent to artists with high popularity and commercial value. Those foreign brands Chanel, Fendi, Gucci all choose influential singers as their ambassador, so we really want to do our part.*

After hearing Jiyu's explanation, I searched the name Park Ji-min (whom I had never heard of) and almost made my jaw drop: His Chinese fans crowdfunded a specially customised plane for him, with the entire fuselage, cabin and even the required tickets customised exclusively for Park Ji-min. In addition, to celebrate Park Ji-min's birthday, his Chinese fans paid an unimaginably exorbitant advertising fee to the New York Times just to publish a colourful advertisement of Park Ji-min on the newspaper's biggest page (The Paper, 2021; Shanshan 2021). To be precise, several fan organisations I belong to don't have the capacity to raise such substantial funds or organise such lavish celebrations, as Park Ji-Min's case is just an extreme example of the practices within Chinese fan organisations. Unsurprisingly, this situation has

attracted the attention of the Chinese authorities, who have introduced measures to monitor and standardise fans' behaviour. The interaction between Chinese fan organisations and the government will be the focus of our discussion in the next chapter.



Figure 91: Advertisement in The New York Times for the singer Park Ji-Min



Figure 92: Airplane customized for Park Ji-Min through fan fundraising in China

Building on the previous discussion of the definition and scope of skilled labour in fan organisations, it is critical to consider one question: what is the role of the organisation's members in the above skilled labour? In short, fan organisations emerge as orchestrators, adeptly coordinating a series of skilled labour processes within the domain. In the context of digital prosumption labour within skilled labour, members of different groups each play their respective roles, performing tasks such as video editing, image processing and document translation. Meanwhile, for the digital data labour within skilled labour, it is imperative to first delineate that these extensive efforts extend beyond the capabilities of the organisation's members alone. As such high amounts of money, viewership, shares, likes and comments cannot be achieved by just a few dozen people within the organisation. Members predominantly undertake planning roles, encompassing tasks such as liaising with merchants to formulate support strategies, establishing and managing online fundraising platforms,

and communicating these channels to their fellow fans. Members recognise that the behaviour of fans can have a significant impact on the value of the celebrity in terms of economic gain and popularity. Given this awareness, planning groups within these organisations proactively create initiatives such as voting campaigns and fundraising events aimed at rallying the fan community for active and supportive participation. Additionally, they craft motivational materials, including posters and promotional content, to galvanise continued contributions from fans. Members of the planning team frequently invest considerable effort into fundraising activities. For example, in the case of the fundraising event organised by Organisation Y, as detailed in the last section, organisational members adeptly convert the event into a lottery using a third-party event platform. This strategy enables fans to engage in paid lotteries, thus facilitating monetary contributions to the celebrity. Subsequently, the organisation utilises these funds for activities, including the purchase of celebrity albums.

### **5.5 Managerial labour in fan organisations**

The main role of the managerial labour is to maintain the day-to-day running of the fan organisation. This includes strategising work schedules, dealing with personnel issues within the organisation, and overseeing financial health. Such behind-the-scenes efforts make it much easier for the skilled labour to engage in fan activities, thereby indirectly contributing to the celebrity's value. In comparison, skilled labour manifests its output in forms that are immediately recognisable to external fan communities, such as the latest artist videos distributed by resource groups or the elaborate celebrity birthday events orchestrated by planning groups. In stark contrast to this visibility, managerial labour operates predominantly in the background. Their contributions, while crucial, often remain enigmatic. Based on my personal experience, before joining the organisation, I spent some time browsing through its Weibo posts and noted that many posts included credits for roles such as translators

and graphic designers. However, as an outsider at that time, I was unaware of the presence of members responsible for managerial tasks within the fan organisation.

In addition, the scope of managerial work not only extends within the organisation, but also into the online fan community. As mentioned above, fan organisations typically take on the role of Super Topic hosts on Weibo. This position endows these organisations the power to curate trending topics, delete posts, and even ban users within Super Topic. Occasionally, such exertion of authority by the organisations incites discontent among fans, and can even spark more significant conflicts. The subsequent section will explore in-depth the controversies and paradoxes that emerge between organisations and communities, stemming from the power dynamics associated with this managerial labour.

On this account, if we compare the groups and members involved in the skilled labour to the front line of fan activities, then the Management Group and the Finance Group, responsible for the managerial work, can be seen as the backbone of the organisation behind the scenes. Much like the fluid boundaries within groups within the organisation, where many fans may juggle multiple roles, today's managerial labour may find themselves taking on responsibilities of skilled labour tomorrow. Especially for fan leaders, such as TT in organisation Y or Xiaocai in fan organisation A, their role is multifaceted. They have managerial responsibilities, overseeing the day-to-day running of the organisation. They also play a crucial role in skilled labour, actively participating in the planning and execution of key activities such as fundraising events.

Approximately eight months after joining the fan organisation, I gradually recognised that participation in managerial labour represents an embodiment of power, and that not all members of the organisation have the opportunity to engage in such roles. In my field notes, I documented these reflections.

### Field notes (2 May 2023)

Thinking about myself, as a pure Chinese-English translator, I do not have the authority to decide the work arrangements of other members, nor do I have the right to select and recruit anyone. I am like a soldier on the battlefield, following the orders of the general in the camp. However, the general rarely sits in the camp to give orders; more often, they tend to join the battlefield in person.

To be candid, my contention is that the locus of real authority and power within an organisation predominantly resides within its management layer, tasked with managerial labour. This concentration of power frequently leads to the emergence of various inequalities within fan organisations. For instance, members tasked with translating press releases and editing videos are typically not privy to the organisation's real-time financial situation. Rarely do members question or request the fan leaders to reveal such details. Furthermore, when organisational activities require coordination with external platforms, it is typically the leaders, who assume the role of managerial labour, that manage these interactions. An apt example is illustrated in section 4.4, as the leader of Organisation A engaged in confidential communications on Twitter with someone claimed to be a friend of Artist A. In this scenario, my role was to assist them with translation. However, like other members within the organisation, I was unaware of the specific context and content of these communications. Alternatively, as mentioned in the section 4.3.2 about the offline celebration held to commemorate Artist Y's birthday, the leadership of the organisation announced this event on September 14, 2023. The specific location at a café was later announced on November 8, 2023. However, details about how these cafés were selected and the nature of the negotiations between the organisation and the café remain unknown to members without managerial responsibilities. In consequence, in the context of major collaborative events co-organised with third-



party platforms, my role as a translator left me uninformed about the unveiling of these activities.

In addition, financial management issues, particularly sensitive ones, were never openly discussed in the various private chat groups I participated in. In Section 4.4, as depicted in Figure 72, a manager from Organisation Y and a member of the planning team once discussed the budget allocation within a group chat. The manager emphasised minimizing expenditure on artist-related merchandise, allocating more funds for the artist's birthday celebration instead. However, public discussions regarding financial matters are infrequent within the organisation. In most instances, it is difficult for the researcher, serving as a Chinese-English translator, to understand the latest financial situation of the organisation or to offer suggestions or opinions on financial expenditures. Reflectively, the researcher has passed the Level I CFA exam and possesses a foundational knowledge of accounting and finance. Nevertheless, in the fan organisation, the researcher's primary role is that of a translator, with the management retaining exclusive control over financial affairs, thus preventing any participation from the researcher in these matters. My interpretation of this exclusion is that my status is not 'at that level' - typically only members of the management or finance group, often people who have been deeply involved in the fan organisation for a long time, are privy to the financial affairs of the organisation.

As a postgraduate researcher with a systematic business education from both China and the UK, the realisation of this 'exclusivity' piqued my curiosity about the nature of the management skills possessed by the leadership tier. Interviews with the leaders of these fan organisations revealed that they were all women in their twenties, many even younger than the researcher and many of them still in college. For an organisation comprising dozens of members, capable of raising hundreds of thousands of pounds in a single fundraising event, I was curious about what management theories have these young women mastered? And how do they put these theories into

practice? However, it seems my expectations were somewhat overestimated for these young managers. Among the fan organisation leaders I encountered, there were individuals employed by state-owned enterprises, sales personnel from cosmetics companies, and university students preparing for postgraduate studies. It is not without modesty that I believe the management theories and practical skills I have acquired surpass those of all fan organisation leaders I have encountered. My undergraduate and master's studies provided me with the opportunity to explore both Chinese and Western management philosophies and the challenges they face. Furthermore, my doctoral research on organisational behaviour and social media has led me to believe that I intellectually exceed these fan organisation managers. However, my role was merely that of a translator, and the only opportunity I ever had for a 'promotion' to organisational leadership was negated by the autocratic decision-making mentioned in the section 4.4.

Commonly, leaders of fan organisations with managerial responsibilities are argued to lack exposure to conventional studies in management theory and systematic training in management practices, typical of senior executives in traditional organisations. In fact, their rise to leadership positions within fan organisations is primarily due to their experiential knowledge, deep familiarity with Chinese fan culture, and especially their solid understanding of fan behaviour on social media platforms. However, such leaders, devoid of formal 'management skill training,' might encounter formidable contradictions when engaged in managerial labour, potentially leading to inadequate resolution of these complexities.

Organised fan labour	Skilled fan labour	Digital prosumption labour	Video editing, Creating cartoon images
		Digital data labour	Chart beating: e.g. fundraising and voting

	Managerial fan labour	Internal management	Personnel and financial issues within the fan organisation
		External management	Power over the fan community: e.g. Banning people on Weibo

Figure 93: Organised fan labour with its explanation

## 5.6 Crisis and conflict in organised fan labour

Just as conflicts and disputes could frequently arise among employees in traditional work environments, organised fan labour also leads to conflict and disagreement. However, these contradictions typically do not occur within the organisation itself. Even in Organisation A, where I spent the longest period, I never witnessed any open disputes among its members. In fact, the researcher's fieldwork indicates that conflicts typically arise between Chinese fan organisations and their corresponding fan communities, both entities deeply immersed in fan labour. Before discussing why engaging in fan labour can lead to conflict and even crisis at an organisational level, it's necessary to use a metaphor to help the reader better understand the relationship between fan organisations and fan communities. This metaphor was conceived at the end of 2023, 17 months after the researcher first joined a fan organisation.

Field notes (15 November 2023)

One city, numerous citizens, barracks, some generals, and dozens of soldiers.

In this metaphor, the celebrity is the core of the city and the object that all the citizens of the entire city want to protect with all their might. Some of these citizens volunteer to form barracks in the hope of protecting the city more effectively. A barracks is what we call a fan organisation, and sometimes a city can have several barracks. In the barracks, some people play the role of a general, recruiting able and willing citizens as soldiers under their command. The barracks are under the scrutiny of the

citizens of the city, because their every move affects the core interests of the city. In certain instances, the barracks may initiate significant campaigns and frequently amass considerable funds from the urban citizenry. This trend can lead to a noticeable shift in the city's power dynamics, with citizens increasingly viewing the generals and soldiers stationed in the barracks as principal power holders. Consequently, this perception engenders an expectation among the citizens that those serving in the barracks, especially the generals and soldiers, not only demonstrate competence but also uphold a high degree of trustworthiness. This expectation is rooted in the citizens' desire to ensure that the enhanced influence and resources controlled by the military are managed responsibly and in alignment with the broader interests of the civilian population.

However, the above metaphor has subtle differences from the actual situation, as the actual online fan organisations is not highly centralized. As discussed in the section 4.4.2, the decision-making process within the organisation exhibits a tendency towards democratization, delegating key decisions such as image selection for artist merchandise designs and budget allocations to members within the group and even to the broader fan community. In comparison, the army in this metaphor necessarily operates under a strict hierarchy, where soldiers closely follow orders and military strategies are largely shaped by a select few, with minimal influence from the general population. And such strict structure ensures the operational effectiveness and combat readiness of the army. In contrast, fan organisations have a more decentralised and democratic framework. Although these entities have hierarchical elements such as 'managers', 'leaders' and 'group leaders', their authority is heavily regulated by the wider fan community. This celebrity-centred approach ensures that the leadership remains accountable and responsive to the collective voice of the fans. If there is significant disapproval or backlash from the fan community against certain decisions or individuals, the fan organisation is forced to address these concerns promptly. In

extreme scenarios, the organisation may even find itself in a position where either an individual or the entire entity is held accountable for the discontent, in stark contrast to the rigid, top-down command structure of a military organisation. Under the influence of this accountability mechanism, leaders within fans organisations are often the ones who take on responsibility and endure criticism. The consequences of such conflicts and disagreements often lead to the departure of organisational members, including leaders who are unable to meet the expectations of fellow fans. In particular, the following paragraphs will provide two detailed examples to elaborate on the researcher's argument.

As mentioned above, the 'Super Topic' feature on Weibo serves as a venue for extensive discussions within the fan community. This space not only hosts fans' praise and admiration for celebrities, but also often contains harsh criticism of them, sometimes escalating to personal attacks. To prevent such incidents, Organisation I once introduced a level restriction for posting to Celebrity I's 'Super Topic' on Weibo, allowing only fans who had reached a certain rank within the 'Super Topic' to post messages. In January 2023, for some unknown reason, Organisation I removed this posting restriction, leading to a spate of unfettered derogatory remarks, mockery and ridicule, even including some dirty jokes towards Celebrity I by online users who disliked the celebrity. This situation continued for a whole day until the organisation, prompted by fans, deleted these posts and reinstated the posting level restriction.

However, the damage was irreparable: the fan community could not tolerate their beloved celebrity being subjected to such verbal abuse, and they quickly directed their anger towards what they perceived as an accomplice in the incident: Fan Organisation I. The fans accused the organisation of intentionally tolerating such behaviour and demanded that its members come forward to explain and apologize for the incident. In response, on January 28th, the organisation issued the following clarification on

Weibo: *"During the New Year period, we relaxed our management, hoping that everyone could celebrate joyously, and thus, we removed the level restrictions. We did not anticipate such consequences. We apologize for this. As all members of the organisation are working professionals, we couldn't monitor the 'Super Topic' in real-time. We ask for everyone's active feedback while we patrol the posts. Thank you all for your support."*



Figure 94: The clarification post sent by Organisation I with fans' doubt in the comment section

Still, the fans were clearly dissatisfied with this response, leaving many comments of doubt and ridicule in the comment section, demanding a sincere apology from the organisation. For instance, one fan commented, *"Public apology, do you even understand these words? Stop muddying the waters."* Another fan wrote, *"She (Celebrity I) doesn't deserve your respect, is that it? If you can do the job, do it; if not, leave."*

Buckling under the overwhelming tide of criticism from the fans, Organisation I issued a "closure notice" four hours later, effectively halting all fan labour activities with immediate effect: *"Effective immediately, the site will be closed for internal restructuring. Major announcements and matters related to the album will continue to be communicated as usual. For inquiries related to album deliveries, please reach out*

*to us via private message. We appreciate your support all this time. We will strive to improve and return better than before. Farewell for now."*

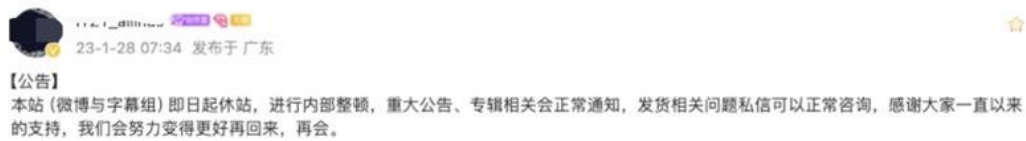


Figure 95: The closure notice posted by Organisation I

However, Organisation I never returned and this organisation, consisting of four managers and up to forty members, ceased all fan labour activities. When I attempted to arrange an interview about this matter with Paru, the leader of the organisation, she did not respond to me. As the main host of the Super Topic in Weibo, the members of the organisation inherently take on the responsibility of managerial labour, which was referred to in the previous post as the 'patrol team', watching for any comments that are detrimental to the celebrity. Nonetheless, while the organisation is watching others, it is also being watched by others. In this context, I would like to draw your attention to a comment by a fan in Figure 94, as one fan left a message under the apology post of Organisation I, stating, 'If you can do it, do it; if not, leave.' Therefore, such use of words suggests that when the broader fans from online communities perceive that the organisation is not meeting expectations on certain issues, especially those crucial to the interests of celebrities, the organisation may face a wave of criticism, accusations, and sometimes even verbal abuse.

The aforementioned example represents a scenario at the more extreme end of the spectrum, wherein an organisation deeply embedded in fan labour encounters substantial resistance and approaches a near dissolution post-conflict. Conversely, in less extreme circumstances, it is often the case that individuals within these organisations shoulder the responsibility for the arising conflicts. For example, In April 2023, Milk, a leading figure within Organisation Y, was subjected to scrutiny by several influential members of the fan community. The criticism centred on Milk's

perceived lack of commitment to the organisation and alleged disparaging of other fans, a behaviour colloquially termed as throwing shade. This controversy unfolded publicly, with multiple posts on the microblogging platform Weibo, directly tagging the official account of Organisation Y. Owing to the substantial nature of the conflict, Milk's attempt at reconciliation through an apology failed to garner the forgiveness of the wider fan community. The impasse led to Milk's eventual withdrawal from the fan organisation, a decision that ultimately quelled the dispute. Similarly, the former leader of fan organisation T, Jiyu, also revealed in an interview a similar situation. At that time, the fans were dissatisfied with the quality of the works produced by the organisation's Graphic and Design group and consequently engaged in sustained verbal attacks against the organisation:

*..... the situation even involved the management team, which at the time consisted of three members. All three of us were subjected to such intense attacks that we were left utterly devastated. The severity of the situation led us to the decision to dismiss two graphic designers. Of course, the dismissal was handled calmly and without major conflict. However, the harm inflicted on us wasn't something that could be easily or quickly healed. Instead, it necessitated a gradual process of recovery, where we focused on our individual tasks. Perhaps, only by consistently engaging in numerous positive actions, could we slowly encourage our fans to forget this minor transgression.*

Taken together, the researcher's long-term field research indicates that organised fan labour within fan organisations can potentially lead to conflicts between the organisation and external fan communities. Specifically, both managerial labour and skilled labour within organised fan labour may potentially provoke these conflicts. Given that fan communities to some extent oversee fan organisations, contradictions naturally arise when the broader community perceives that these two types of labour deviate from their expectations.



## **5.7 The discussion of free labour in fan organisations: Exploitation or reward?**

The previous sections focused on the contradictions and conflicts faced by members of organisations involved in organised fan labour. It is crucial to remember that the labour performed by these members is unpaid, a characteristic often associated with discussions of exploitation in previous literature. The phenomenon of unpaid cultural and technological labour on social media platforms is neither unique to China nor a recent trend. Twenty years ago, Terranova (2000: 73) coined the term "free labour" to refer to those who participate in the cultural and technological labour of the Internet, continuously producing value and keeping the Internet "thriving and hyperactive". Meanwhile, the description of free labour is closely related to 'digital economy', a concept that emerged at the end of the last century, referring to economic activities that emerged under the influence of new technologies and new types of workers (Barbrook, 1997). Since then, controversies and practices surrounding this new form of economy have emerged. Going back to 1996, tens of thousands of 'community leaders' served as chat hosts for free, generating substantial revenue, about \$7 million, for America Online, a major Internet service provider at the time. Yet, as certain chat hosts and web designers became aware that their involvement constituted a labour process that generated value, they found it challenging to come to terms with the fact that their efforts were not being rewarded materially. Three years later, seven chat room volunteers jointly appealed to the Group of Labour against America Online, requesting government intervention to investigate the issue of wage arrears. (Stanfill and Condis, 2014; Terranova, 2000). This approach to value creation has garnered attention in management theory, particularly in the context of managing 'knowledge workers'. Scholars argue that the absence of conventional salaries as compensation in this economic model may render it more vulnerable to exploitative practices. On the contrary, some posit that this mode of work isn't inherently exploitative but rather a conscious choice made by workers due to the self-fulfilment it offers. If we take the

example of chat hosts in American online, they may not have received adequate financial rewards, but they still managed to get the joy of communication.

Additionally, this work satisfies their cultural and emotional desires, desires that are no less genuine for occurring in the online realm. To rephrase, while workers in the industrial economy found fulfilment in leisure, in the digital economy, they derive it directly from their work (Tapscott, 1996).

Based on my personal fieldwork experience, being a translator in two organisations leads to a heavy workload from time to time without any financial compensation.

Unlike traditional workplaces, fan labour within organisations often does not distinguish between weekdays and weekends. Whenever the latest information about the artist emerges—be it a new interview, a performance video, or occasionally evaluations by international fans—all such artist-related content is promptly captured by the resource team members and sent to me for translation. Indeed, it is crucial to emphasise that I am not the only Chinese-to-English translator. Additionally, considering that Artists A and Y are Korean female singers, the volume of Chinese-to-Korean translation substantially exceeds my own workload. Still, I am often assigned tasks during the weekend and sometimes I am compelled to sacrifice my leisure time to translate documents. The conversation in the following screenshot is an example of an assignment: Due to the seven/eight-hour time difference between China and the UK, the manager of the organisation A asked me at 4am if I could translate a press release.



Figure 96: The example of task assignment in 4am in organisation A

In the meantime, having witnessed the intense work of the members of the organisation, I made the following note:

Field note (13 January 2023)

I have been part of Organisation A for two weeks now, and my biggest impression comes from the work intensity of the organisation's founder, Xiaocai. While young people in China are still complaining about the 996-work schedule (working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week), Xiaocai seems to live on the internet 24 hours a day. She guides members on how to Photoshop images and how to write more appealing copy. What's more shocking is that no matter when you message her, she always replies within a minute. What kind of work ethic and passion is this?

Although I am a grounded theorist in this research, I also believe that few people can logically and practically escape the impact of presuppositions on research (Coase, 1988). Given both my undergraduate degree and my Master's degree were in Human Resource Management, such educational backgrounds leads me to subconsciously associate working hours and performance with payment, and even to refer to these "working members" of the organisation as employees. In one interview I inadvertently used the word 'employee' and relayed the view of previous fan studies that Chinese fans are an exploited workforce. Unexpectedly, this point was immediately refuted by Jiyu:

*I got really tired of being a translator at that time, but I was also in a process of self-growth: my Korean was not that good, and I had been learning it in order to complete my translation tasks. My Korean language skills could be described as having improved by leaps and bounds after working as a translator, which is why I don't think I was exploited.*

Waiwai does not respond directly to this view. In her account, she states that she does not have unrealistic aspirations:

*You just need to give what you can, this is what a fan organisation is all about, you don't have money, you don't get paid, you're not a company employee..... You ask me if I've been exploited, I haven't thought about it, but I can tell you that there is no money in it.*

While the researcher acknowledges the pre-existing knowledge of fan labour's unpaid nature from media reports and literature in fan studies, the discovery of its profound extent remains startling. This is particularly evident in the account of Jiyu, the leader of Organisation T. Her recollection of dedicating six hours daily during her college years – effectively allocating all her available time outside of eating, sleeping, and attending classes to the organisation – underscores the intensity of her commitment. The researcher's personal experience as a translator further enriches this understanding, as the painstaking process of translating and editing, where even a

brief five-minute video demands one to two hours of meticulous attention, fosters a deep sense of empathy towards the challenges faced by Jiyu during her tenure as a translator. In my opinion, this process is time-consuming and confusing, and it is often at these moments that I feel ambiguous and anxious about my identity:

Field notes (4 Oct 2022)

I realised that this was what I needed to do as a regular fan in the organisation, but I also felt that it was very different from the normal work of a PhD student (e.g. reading literature, writing chapters). I have to admit that this ambivalence made me a little uncomfortable when I first joined the organisation, but luckily this intense work was not a daily occurrence as there were other translators in the organisation and there was no material to translate on a daily basis.

Another pieces of evidence to show the intensity of fan labour comes from the Singer A's and Singer Y's fan organisation separately. Due to the fan organisation's requirement for members from Weibo management group and resource group to promptly collect the latest updates on celebrities, the term "排班" (pái bān, shift) is used internally to describe the online schedules of the resource team members, that is, each member is responsible for being online during designated times to continuously browse websites such as Instagram and Twitter, ensuring that celebrity updates are captured in real time and reposted to Weibo. For example, on September 17, 2022, the leader of the organisation announced that the addition of new members to the resource team necessitated an update to the shift schedule. According to the updated schedule, depicted in Figure 98, each team member is expected to be online for two hours daily. Following the announcement, the leader shared these details in the group chat and responded to a question posed by a member.



Figure 97: Leader in Organisation Y announced the new shift schedule

	工作表1	Working schedule						+
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
1		周一 Mon	周二 Tue	周三 Wed	周四 Thu	周五 Fri	周六 Sun	
2	11:00-13:00	TT	TT	TT	TT	TT	TT	
3	13:00-15:00	牛奶	白煮蛋	大橘	大橘	kk	白煮蛋	
4	15:00-17:00	牛奶	ytt	大橘	ytt	牛奶	kk	
5	17:00-19:00	白煮蛋	牛奶	牛奶	ytt	大橘	大橘	
6	19:00-21:00	kk	ytt	kk	白煮蛋	ytt	ytt	
7	21:00-23:00	牛奶	大橘	牛奶	kk	牛奶	牛奶	
8								

Figure 98: The new shift schedule in Organisation Y

Similarly, in organisation A, the shift schedule has been continuously changing as the organisation grows and the number of members increases. Initially, the schedule included only four members, each responsible for three hours of resource collection

daily. In April 2023, the organisation updated the shift schedule. At that time, since the artist had not yet officially debuted, there was limited information available about them. Consequently, the shift schedule prepared by the organisational leaders was somewhat vague, specifying only the days when the artist's company might release new videos or photos.



Figure 99: Shift schedule in organisation A in January



Figure 100: Shift schedule in organisation A in April

Indeed, the skilled labour within fan organisations is not bound to fixed times. When Artist A's company unexpectedly released a documentary, the organisational leadership promptly inquired in the group chat if the members of the translation team were immediately available to undertake a collective translation effort.

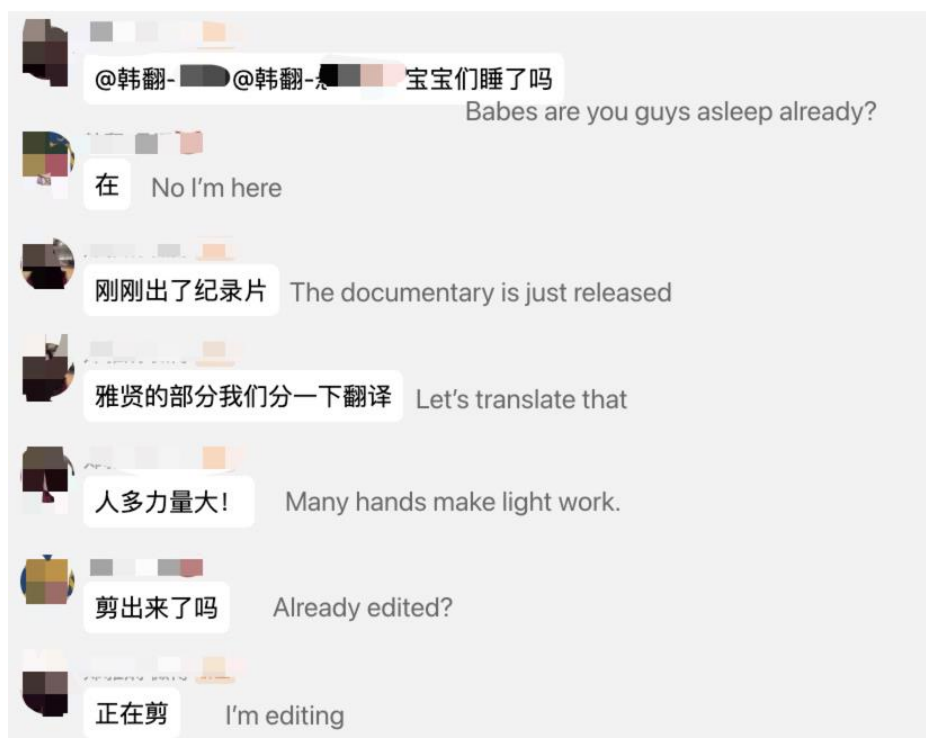


Figure 100: The leadership in organisation A arranged the tasks on an ad hoc basis.

To be fair, in the various fan organisations I am a part of, members in resource group and Weibo management group often shoulder the heaviest workload. They are required to proactively search for the latest photos and videos of the artist on various websites within a given timeframe. My role as a translator, on the other hand, is generally more passive and involves waiting for tasks to be assigned. On this basis, as an English translator, I often undertake fewer tasks compared to a Korean translator. Since both Artist A and Artist Y are Korean, the majority of the materials related to them are also in Korean.

Of note, it should be emphasised that the workload of the organisation's members is closely linked to the frequency of public appearances of the artist they support. When



the artist has a high frequency of public events, such as new album releases or movie premieres, the members find themselves exceedingly busy. Conversely, during periods when the artist makes fewer public appearances, the members experience a corresponding period of downtime, similar to a 'vacation'. For example, since 15 November 2023, when Artist A announced an indefinite hiatus for health reasons, there has been a noticeable drought of news about her on the internet. This scarcity of updates has led to an extended period of inactivity for the organisation I'm a part of. As a translator within the organisation, I experienced a significant slowdown, not receiving any translation work for a period of several months. In contrast, when Artist A finally debuted in April 2024 and presented numerous performances, the subsequent months of April and May became the busiest period for the researcher as a translator. A plethora of artist performance videos, interview clips, and images inundated the organisation's group chats. Despite being Korean, Artist A is proficient in English, facilitating extensive interaction between the artist and western fans online during the initial stages of debut. Consequently, this led to a sharp increase in my workload.

In terms of the compensation for such intensive work, all five fan leaders said no to the question "Is there any compensation for being part of the organisation?". In fact, none of the fans I observed or interviewed received financial rewards for their productive work. As Waiwai, the former leader of Singer Z's fan organisation said:

*Our organisation does have earnings and expenses, but not a penny of that money goes to the individual member. For example, if the organisation makes some money today by making and selling artists' merchandise, tomorrow we will spend that money to buy the artist's album.*

An expression often mentioned by Chinese fans in this context is 'generating electricity power with love' (yòng ài fā diàn, 用爱发电), which was originally used by Chinese environmentalists. It was a slogan they used to campaign against nuclear power, calling for the closure of nuclear power plants - an unrealistic slogan at the time. Now it has become a popular phrase in China to describe an individual or group who persists in doing something despite the small benefits.

Jiyu, the leader of singer T's fan organisation explains this term:

*This could be the most popular phrase in our organisations, You won't make a penny doing these things. Probably all we get in return are encouragement, support and recognition from other fans.*

Paru, the leader of Singer I's fan organisation offers another perspective to understand this term:

*This seems like a case of "if you don't do this, you'll end up doing something else." For some people, like those who play video games or such, they also spend several hours every day on it. Maybe because of my hobby and liking for this artist, I put my time and effort here. It's just a different form of expression, all driven by affection.*

I vividly recall the moment of clarity I experienced upon hearing Paru's words, which I personally consider to be the most telling statement of the fieldwork. Before immersing myself in the field, my time spent observing fan activities online had presented me with numerous perplexing behaviours. Fans were spending substantial amounts on albums and dedicating hours daily to various online chart-topping activities. The prevalent critique towards these fans on the Chinese internet often goes like this: "Why waste your time chasing celebrities? Why not do something more useful?" Yet, Paru's statement, "It's just a different form of expression, all driven by affection," struck a profound chord within me. From this perspective, what's the difference between supporting a celebrity and playing video games? Buying albums is

like buying a computer with a better CPU or a more sensitive mouse, and dipping into your phone to follow celebrity updates is like a gamer retreating to their bedroom for an all-night gaming session. Much like the web designers and chat hosts of American online, these fans are engaged in tasks devoid of tangible rewards. Nonetheless, they are fulfilling personal passions, extracting joy from their array of activities.

Moreover, the notion of "psychological satisfaction" is a recurring term among interviews with organisational members. Waiwai, as the leader of a fan organisation, orchestrated an effort to purchase gifts for Z. This initiative involved considerable effort on her part, including liaising with company staff to ensure alignment with Z's preferences and sourcing limited edition items as gifts. Despite these efforts, when Z finally received the gifts, he was unaware of the identity of the giver. This anonymity led to other fans seizing the opportunity to self-promote, overshadowing Waiwai and depriving her of the accolades and recognition she rightly deserved. Despite this, Waiwai was at peace with the situation, stating, "It wasn't my intention to seek adulation; the mere fact that he liked the gift is satisfying enough for me. "

Furthermore, Waiwai admitted that although she may not have received any tangible benefits, the intangible feeling of satisfaction was her true reward. She reflected:

"Among all the of the fans who admire him, I take comfort in the fact that I am able to contribute in my own way."

Synthesising the fan leaders' interpretations of unpaid work with my first-hand observations within the organisation, situations similar to the grievances experienced by Waiwai are not uncommon. In fact, fans are not the sole collective dedicating their efforts towards celebrities. In the entertainment industry dominated by celebrities in China, artists, as the most valuable resources of an entertainment company invested by capitalists, often have a dedicated team to ensure their productivity and commercial value to the company. These company employees are typically seen as

traditional waged labour, directly hired and paid by the entertainment company. These waged labours are responsible for every aspect of the artist's career, including arranging the artists' work, promoting their creative outputs such as albums and films, managing media and public relations, and handling any legal issues that may arise.

In contrast, fan organisations set up by enthusiasts are spontaneous and voluntary, characterised by their non-profit nature and commitment to unpaid contributions. Furthermore, while fans may objectively be subject to varying degrees of criticism and even personal attacks, they do not typically perceive this as 'exploitation', but rather as a normal facet of participation in organised fan work. Many fans who are familiar with the internal dynamics of the organisation even recognise this reality from the outset. This prevailing situation implies, in my argument, that enjoyment and exploitation coexist. Objectively, members of these organisations are at risk of exploitation when they engage in organised fan labour. Subjectively, however, the majority experience this involvement as pleasurable.

### **5.8 The impact of organised fan labour on fan organisation's development**

Returning to the fundamental question of this study: how a Chinese online fan organisation forms itself and develops. In the preceding sections of this chapter, we have defined organised fan labour and described its characteristics. At this juncture, it is appropriate to shift our focus towards the profound impact that this labour has on the establishment and evolution of the organisation. In the previous section, we discussed the negative impacts of organised fan labour on the members of the organisation, noting that in severe cases, it can lead to the temporary suspension of the entire organisation's operations. Despite this, the conflicts that emerge between fan organisations and their communities often result in the departure of individual members. In such cases, the leaders of these fan organisations are not exempt from consequences. As demonstrated in the case of Milk, a leader from Organisation Y, she

chose to exit the organisation, while the rest of the members did not face widespread condemnation. In other words, in most instances, the crises associated with engaging in fan labour tend to remain confined to the personal level of the individual members, rather than escalating to impact the entire fan organisation.

Participation in organised fan labour also brings moments of collective joy to its members. In the early stages of Organisation A's establishment, efforts were made to establish a connection with Company K4, a business responsible for procuring Korean products. K4 serves as a popular intermediary among Chinese fans for purchasing Korean merchandise, offering a channel through which Chinese fans can extensively buy Korean artists' albums and other related goods. The challenge, however, lay in K4's policy of engaging only with fan organisations they deem trustworthy, ensuring the authenticity and reliability of transactions. Consequently, in the context of Chinese fan culture, fan organisations that manage to establish contact and form collaborations with K4 are perceived as 'certified' and 'more reliable.' On January 5, 2023, K4 proactively reached out to Organisation A on Weibo, inquiring about potential collaboration opportunities (see figure 102). This screenshot, once shared in the organisation's chat group, sparked a wave of excitement among the members. Fans used exclamation marks to express their astonishment and joy, as they all understood the significance of this potential partnership. Within the context of contemporary Chinese fan culture, the opportunity to collaborate with K4 is seen as a hallmark of recognition and validation for a fan organisation.



Figure 102: Message received from K4 (Translated in English: Hi, did you see our message?)

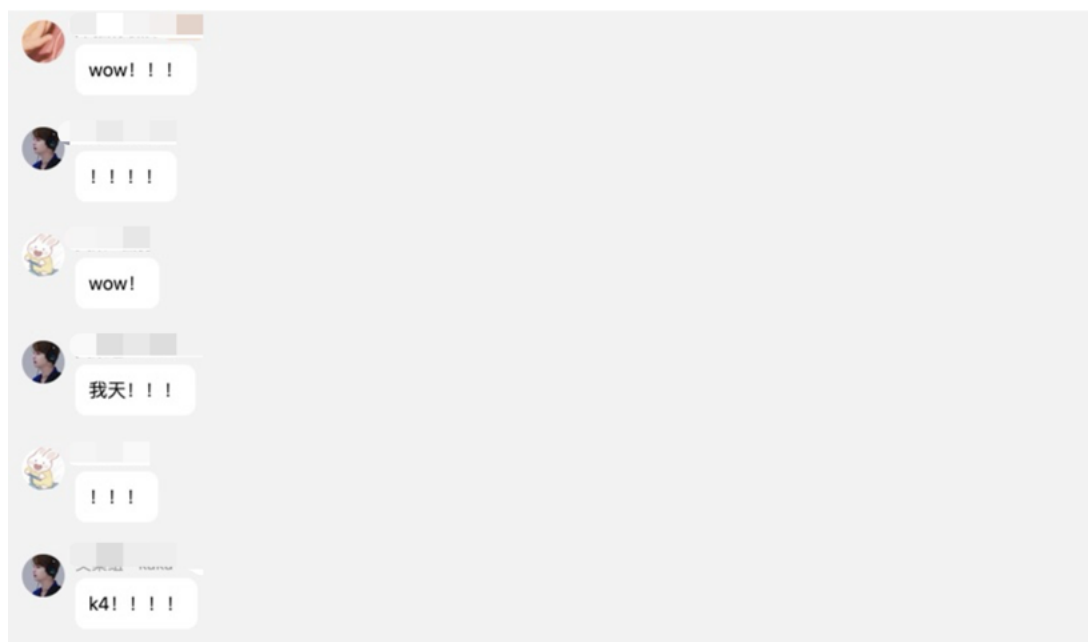


Figure 103: The collective excitement expressed by members of the organisation after receiving the message of K4

Furthermore, Sustained participation in organised fan labour can also garner recognition from the wider fan community, earning accolades from a wide base of fans. This is because online fan communities often freely consume the fruits of fan organisations' labour, including the downloading and sharing of images by members of the organisation and the translation of press releases. At this point, the broad online

fan community may express gratitude to the organisation for sharing this information on its Weibo account and sometimes encourages the organisation's members. Taking the figure 104 below as an example, artist Y's fans left a series of grateful messages in the comment section of the organisation's Weibo, including sentiments like "You've worked hard, and you've done a great job," "It's really been tough, but things will get better," and "Thank you so much, we will all do even better in the new year."

Considering the official ban on popular platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok in China, coupled with the language barrier that exists between many foreign artists and their Chinese fans, the dedicated effort of fan organisations in processing and disseminating information is of exceptional value to the vast Chinese fan community.



Figure 104: Chinese fans express their gratitude to the organisation.

## 5.9 Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter conceptualises the activities of fan organisations within contemporary Chinese fan culture as labour and introduces the notion of organised fan labour, distinguishing it from the concept of fan labour as previously documented in the literature. It is noteworthy that organised fan labour, as a key category emerging from the grounded theory approach, has been observed to run through the whole process of fan organisation from its establishment to development. Specifically, organised fan labour is categorised into skilled fan labour and managerial fan labour, and the chapter focuses on explaining and contrasting these two types. On this basis, the nature and effects of organised fan labour are analysed in detail: this type of labour is characterised by its unpaid nature. Involvement in organised fan labour can lead to personal crises for members and, in some extreme cases, can have more serious consequences for the development of the organisation. This detailed exploration not only sheds light on the complexities and challenges associated with organised fan labour, but also highlights its significant role in shaping the formation and development of fan organisations in the context of contemporary Chinese fan culture.

Regarding this chapter's contribution to the emergence of the theoretical framework, the researcher argues that in most brand community literature, fans are perceived as consumers of the brand rather than producers. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, fans not only undertake skilled labour within their organisations but also engage in managerial labour, thereby undeniably enhancing the value of human brands. Based on these findings, the researcher further asserts that fan organisations cannot be understood as traditional brand communities as depicted in past literature; the connotation of consumer-formed communities requires further development.



## **Chapter 6: Findings chapter: Chinese fan organisations and local authorities**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Youbin Li, a Chinese male actor, was asked in an interview if he was aware that he had a large and even organised fan organisation supporting his new film. Li interrupted the host's question: "No matter what kind of organisation it was, it should stick to the Communist Party of China as its leader" (Sohu, 2021). This seemingly playful expression actually candidly highlights the special circumstances that Chinese fan organisations encounter, as opposed to what Western fans might face. Throughout the researcher's over a year-long involvement with the fan organisation, explicit references to entities such as "state", "the government" or "the communist party" were rarely mentioned by members. Nevertheless, the pervasive influence of the authorities was evident, exerting a significant influence on the fan organisation's development and ultimately shaping its fate.

The existing literature on brand communities has paid little attention to the interplay between brands and the local political environment, particularly the entanglement with ideology. Interestingly, the researcher's online ethnographic fieldwork witnessed numerous instances of fans as brand consumers making compromises in response to politics. In particular, these policies and regulations have influenced a range of fan practices related to brand promotion.

In this chapter, we focus on the external environment of fan organisations, specifically seeking to understand how the regulations issued by local authorities influences the development of these entities. The first section revisits the contemporary Chinese government's perspective and historical progression regarding social organisations. Subsequently, by examining entertainment ban notices during sensitive periods, a prevalent organisational practice, we illustrate the nuanced stance of Chinese fan organisations towards politically sensitive events. Following this, the concept of fan

nationalism is introduced to contrast with the narrative of fan activism prevalent in Western fan culture. This stark contrast emphasises that in China, fan organisations are not only impotent as progressive forces challenging the political order but sometimes even become part of the state's propaganda machinery. In the final section, the researcher discusses certain practices within fan organisations that contravene national regulations, aiming to illustrate the delicate balance fan organisations in China maintain between aligning with state ideological propaganda and fulfilling their organisational missions.

## **6.2 The background in China**

In China, Article 35 of Chapter 2 of the Constitution provides for freedom of association for citizens of the People's Republic of China. However, at the beginning of the new China, the reference to representing "groups formed spontaneously by citizens" has been largely blurred and includes, among others, social groups, non-profit organisations, civil non-enterprise units, non-governmental organisations. In this context, 'social groups' and 'civil non-enterprise units' are terms commonly used in Chinese legal statutes of the 20th century. Legal texts define social groups as "non-profit social organisations voluntarily formed by Chinese citizens to realise the common will of their members and carry out activities in accordance with their statutes". Meanwhile, the formation of a social group ought to encompass a series of requirements, including registration with the pertinent authorities, a minimum membership of fifty individuals, and legal assets exceeding 100,000 yuan. Similarly, Civil non-enterprise unit is defined as social organisations engaged in non-profit social service activities established by enterprises, public institutions, social groups, and other social forces, as well as individual citizens, using non-state-owned assets.

In 1996, the General Office of the State Council issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Management of Social Groups and Private Non-Enterprise Units". Not only did it

assert that the unrest in China during the transition from spring to summer in 1989 was partly caused by the central members of certain social groups receiving support and influence from hostile forces in the West, but it also outlined the regulatory framework and supervisory mechanisms for these entities (The Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 1996).

Gradually, at the official level, the term 'social groups' and Civil non-enterprise unit were changed to 'civil organisations'. The former Department of Social Groups of the Ministry of Civil Affairs was also renamed the Bureau of Civil Organisation Management. In addition, in April 2000, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the "Interim Measures for Banning Illegal Civil Organisations", which officially adopted the concept of "civil organisations" in China's regulations. Following the enactment of the 'Charity Law' in 2016, the Chinese government has increasingly phased out the use of the term 'civil organisations' in favour of 'social organisations'. As a result, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs established the Bureau of Social Organisation Management, which is tasked with registering, managing and enforcing regulatory oversight of social organisations under the country's jurisdiction (Council on Foundations, 2013). According to the latest statistics released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs for the third quarter of 2023, the number of legally registered social organisations in China has exceeded 880,000.

However, the accuracy of this figure is debatable. Xie (2004) conducted a survey in two provinces in China and found that the number of formally registered social organisations was only 8-13% of the actual number. This suggests that there are a significant number of “illegal social organisations” operating in the country. This situation highlights several fundamental dilemmas facing the Chinese government in managing social organisations: the inherent ambiguity arising from the ill-defined nature of these entities, exacerbated by archaic legal frameworks and inadequate

regulatory mechanisms. In addition, the often transient and small size of many social organisations adds another layer of complexity, further muddying the waters in the Chinese context and making the issue more complicated. Moreover, the above dilemmas have become more pronounced with the widespread adoption of social media platforms in China. Popular mobile messaging applications such as Weibo and WeChat not only permit but also encourage users to create chat groups. In particular, WeChat allows a maximum of 500 members per chat group, while Weibo allows up to 1,000 members. Such feature in these applications objectively provides a fertile ground for the clandestine formation of "illegal social organisations" among netizens.

As highlighted in the literature review section on Chinese celebrity fandom, the development of media communication technology, particularly the rise of mobile internet and social media platforms, has had a profound impact on the organisational dynamics of fan organisations in China. Historically, fan organisations tended to be geographically based, as exemplified by entities such as the Li Yuchun Beijing fan organisation or the Shanghai fan organisation (Yang, 2009). However, the last decade has witnessed a paradigm shift, facilitated by social media platforms, which has effectively erased geographical constraints and enabled the formation of nationally interconnected fan organisations. These emerging online entities occupy a contested space within the Chinese government's regulatory framework, often falling under the nebulous and controversial category of 'social organisations'.

More specifically, the membership of these fan organisations often exceeds fifty people, and they have substantial financial assets, often in excess of one million yuan, accumulated largely through substantial crowdfunding from the wider fan communities. Notably, given the size and financial capacity of these organisations, the Chinese government surprisingly hesitates to take aggressive measures to force them to disband. Addressing this ambiguous stance of the Chinese government, Fung

(2009) posits that the essence of fan activities predominantly revolves around cultural consumption, a domain relatively benign from the perspective of state ideology and political stability. Contrarily, the focus of governmental suppression is principally directed at social organisations that either undermine the state's ideological tenets, carry explicit political undertones, or perpetrate fraud, thereby endangering public safety and financial security (Ministry of Civil Affairs' Bureau of Social Organisation Administration, 2023). As previously mentioned, the several fan organisations I am part of rarely discuss matters beyond the artist themselves. On the surface, the core mission of fan organisations is to engage in organised fan work around the artist, without the intention of engaging in other activities with political agenda. However, as part of contemporary Chinese fan culture, fan organisations are equally cautious about any events within the organisation that may have political implications.

### **6.3 Entertainment Ban Notice**

Within fan organisations, the most common and politically nuanced policy is the 'Entertainment Ban Notice'. That is, fan organisations proactively issue these notices on specific dates, declaring that no information related to celebrities will be disseminated or shared on the following day. In addition, fan organisations call on all members to remind each other in the "Super Topic" section of Weibo, urging them not to post on that day. The researcher manually observed and documented all the date that fan organisations issued Entertainment Ban Notice, and found these special dates generally encompass a set of fixed occasions, such as anniversaries of significant natural disasters: the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day (as known as National Day of Mourning), the Wenchuan Earthquake Memorial Day, the Tangshan Earthquake Memorial Day, the 18 September Incident Memorial Day. Moreover, certain temporary, unexpected events may also be designated as entertainment prohibition days, such as on the day of the memorial service for Jiang Zemin, the former President of China, and Li Keqiang, the former Premier of China.

Typically, such notices are disseminated via Weibo. Figures 105 and 106 showcase the entertainment ban notices issued by fan organisations Y and Z, respectively, on 28 July 2022. Both organisations released their notices in response to the same event—the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. Despite being centred around the same historical event, these notices exhibit both similarities and differences.



Figure 105: Entertainment Ban Notice from Organisation Y followed by members' discussion (Translated in below)

*[7.28 Entertainment Ban Announcement]*

*July 28 marks the 46th anniversary of the Tangshan earthquake, a day to remember and mourn the departed souls and compatriots who lost their lives in the tragedy.*

*Today we will not post anything, tomorrow we will make it up.*

- 1. Prohibit the release of entertaining videos with celebrity's name.*
- 2. Please be careful with your words as it is forbidden to post entertaining content in the "Super Topic".*
- 3. It is forbidden to mention any sensitive topics or words.*
- 4. You can sign in as normal in "Super Topic".*



Figure 106: Entertainment Ban Notice from Organisation Z (Translated in below)

*Today is the forty-sixth anniversary of the Tangshan earthquake, in order to commemorate compatriots, remembering history, today we relase the ban on entertainment for a day. And in order to express deep condolences to the compatriots killed in the massive flooding in Henan Province, the national mourning activities will be held tomorrow, starting at 9:00 a.m., the whole country observed three minutes of silence.*

*During the ban on entertainment:*

- 1. It is strictly prohibited to publish posts with entertainment nature in the Super Topic, if there are inappropriate content, you can privately send us a message.*
- 2. Publishing, commenting on content related to Celebrity Z, or tagging him is strictly prohibited.*
- 3. Super Topic sign-in and daily data beating can be normal.*
- 4. If the artist appears in the "Trending" section of Weibo tomorrow, please give it a cold treatment and follow the organisation's arrangements.*

Comparatively, there are some similarities and differences between the two organisations' entertainment ban notice. The most striking similarity is the extensive use of imperative words such as "prohibit" (禁止 jìnzhǐ) and "strictly forbid" (严禁 Yánjìn). As mentioned earlier, fan organisations often act as the host on Super Topics, a role that gives them the power to delete posts or even block user comments.

In both entertainment ban notices, the organisations emphasised the prohibition on discussing entertainment-related content in Super Topic. Furthermore, Organisation Z specifically reminded all participants that any emerging issues could be 'privately messaged to us', an symbolic expression that highlights the regulatory role fan organisations assume within the fan community during this event, especially through their authoritative governance.

Despite this, subtle differences can be observed between two entertainment ban notices. The primary distinction lies in the content of the two notices, which is not entirely identical; notably, the notice issued by Organisation Z referenced the Henan flood incident, a detail missing from the notice released by Organisation Y. Additionally, further manual searches indicated that this piece of information was also excluded from the notices of several other fan organisations.

#### Field notes (25 April 2023)

The content differentiation in these notifications has made me question the source of the notifications. Who decides when to issue a notification? And who determines the content of the notification? If the notifications are from the platform side or at the national level, why is there differentiation in the content?

How are these dates selected? Generally, leaders within the organisation will remember some key commemorative days, such as the famous Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day and the September 18 Incident Memorial Day. At the same time, members of the organisation might remind each other in group chats and inquire whether the entertainment ban notice should be issued for a specific date. Furthermore, this behaviour is not an isolated action limited to one or two organisations; rather, it is a widespread phenomenon. The observations indicate that all the fan organisations under study adhere to this practice. Moreover, recent research



reveals that similar practices are prevalent in other fan organisations as well (Dan et al., 2023).

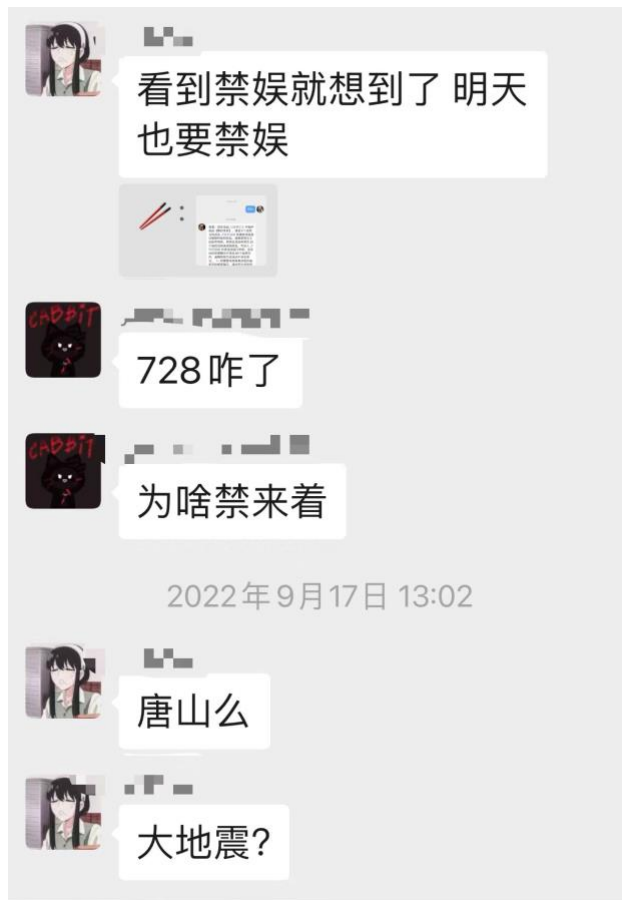


Figure 107: Members of one fan organisation discussed ‘entertainment ban notice’ privately (Translated in below)

*Member A: I saw it and it occurred to me that tomorrow we should release the entertainment ban notice.*

*Member B: why 28/7?*

*Member B: why should we ban it on that day?*

*Member A: Tangshan*

*Member A: The Tangshan earthquake*

Interestingly, the rationale behind the decision by the organisation's leadership to post Entertainment Ban Notice appears to be ambiguous. Among the four leaders

interviewed, one disclosed having received a directive from Weibo staff, which mandated the publication of an entertainment ban notice on their account. Another leader denied receiving any notifications at a national or platform level, stating that the deeper implication of the entertainment ban notice was that failure to ban entertainment content during this sensitive time period would result in account suspension. In contrast, the remaining two leaders reported neither receiving such directives nor possessing awareness of them, indicating that their decision to release the entertainment ban notice was 'spontaneous.' Milk, the former leader of the fan organisation Y, offered the following elucidation:

*It was spontaneous, I'm not sure if there have been regulations issued, but we haven't received any... As for the National Day of Mourning, you've also seen that we reminded in the group chat that entertainment should be prohibited... Such serious matters are not really appropriate for distributing entertainment news.*

The question of whether the Chinese government has issued relevant regulations remains ambiguous. Upon reviewing news reports from the specified dates, it was discovered that the government explicitly stated on occasions such as the National Memorial Day and the passing of Jiang Zemin, that 'broadcasting, television, newspapers, and other media must cease all entertainment reports or programs.' However, for the Wenchuan Earthquake Memorial Day and the memorial service for former Premier Li Keqiang, there was no explicit national prohibition on entertainment activities. Despite this, the response measures of fan organisations were remarkably consistent, collectively choosing to issue entertainment ban notices on these significant dates. However, due to the absence of uniform and strict regulations for some dates, areas of ambiguity consequently emerged. For example, in 2023, Organisation Z did not issue an entertainment ban notice on the anniversary of the July 7 Incident. Similarly, Organisation Y issued an additional entertainment ban

notice during the 2022 Qingming Festival, a traditional Chinese festival for commemorating the deceased. The notice stated, "To express our deep mourning for the martyrs who sacrificed themselves in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the deceased compatriots, entertainment is banned today (April 5)."

As Milk candidly states above, there are moments when the appropriateness of 'entertainment messages' becomes questionable, especially on serious occasions. For this reason, Chinese fan organisations are proactively restricting their activities to the "entertainment domain". While there are examples of Chinese fans' civic engagement, such as Fan Organisation Z's support of sex education initiatives for girls in mountainous areas, such involvement is extremely limited. Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether these activities are driven by a desire to enhance the image of the organisation, and by extension the celebrities it supports, or by a genuine intention to help vulnerable groups.

After synthesizing the researcher's field observations, interviews, and review of previous literature on fan activism, the exploration of the nuanced relationship between fan organisations and the Chinese government unfolds, particularly through examining the multifaceted reasons behind the issuance of entertainment bans by these organisations. First, based on the results of the interviews, one of the reasons why some organisations issue entertainment bans are due to explicit instructions received from social media platforms, with the characteristics of Weibo pages during certain periods serving as evidence for this viewpoint. That is, on the aforementioned National Day of Mourning on 13 December, the Weibo platform itself refrained from recommending any entertainment-related news to its users in its 'Discover' and 'Trending' sections, which are two significant components of the platform. Second, some organisations "spontaneously" issue entertainment bans on specific dates. However, in the absence of explicit instructions from the platform authorities, these

organisations show noticeable differences in their responses, ultimately leading to inconsistent decisions.

Another reason for issuing entertainment bans, which was not mentioned in the interviews, was discovered through observations on Weibo. It was found that some fans of celebrities continued to post news about their idols on certain “days of entertainment ban”, which led to attacks from fans of other celebrities, with the potential to escalate to the celebrities themselves. This implies that fan organisations, whose goals include collectively enhancing the value and protecting the reputation of celebrities as human brands, are keen to avoid such conflicts. Consequently, the leadership within these organisations sometimes chooses to “play it safe” by proactively issuing entertainment bans during periods that are open to interpretation.

Drawing on field observations and interviews, it is argued that the fan organisation in question did not receive explicit instructions from the national authorities to ban the distribution of entertainment news. This assertion is supported by at least two considerations. First, the sheer number of online fan organisations of varying sizes on Weibo presents a logistical challenge to issuing direct orders from the national level. Secondly, it is worth noting that the organisations to which the researcher belongs, along with all other online fan organisations in China, are conspicuously absent from the register of ‘social organisations’ maintained by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs. This omission significantly impedes regulatory oversight of these fan organisations.

From the aforementioned three reasons, it is evident that government authorities do not directly engage in dialogue with any fan organisation. Due to the sheer number of online fan organisations of varying sizes on Weibo, authorities also do not issue commands directly to individual fan organisations. Instead, authorities exert indirect

influence on online fan organisations by regulating and disciplining social media platforms, which in turn affects the behaviour of these organisations rooted in the digital landscape. Moreover, this invisible influence can sometimes extend to the objects of fandom, in this case celebrities active in China, and fundamentally shape the development of fan organisations.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the practice of issuing entertainment bans by fan organisations serves as a ritualised symbol. By releasing such notifications on specific dates, these organisations communicate a norm not only within their own groups but also to the wider fan communities of the celebrity. This norm suggests that, within contemporary Chinese fan culture, personal entertainment consumption should yield to and accommodate significant national events. In the following section, we will discuss the concept of fandom nationalism related to this practice.

#### **6.4 Fandom nationalism in China.**

This chapter's examination of fan nationalism builds on previous discussions of Western fan activism and the distinctly different fan practices in China. So far, the researcher has not observed any potential in fan organisations to transform cultural consumption into political participation, as some literature claims. Moreover, manual research on the Chinese Internet has revealed that fan organisations have even developed a form of fan nationalism (Liao et al., 2022). Particularly, although some western fan scholars such as Jenkins (1992) and Bennett (2012) see the collective actions of fans as a progressive force to challenge the political status quo, the Chinese government's efforts have had considerable success in transforming a significant proportion of fans into advocates of national ideology and the state's propaganda initiatives (Wang and Luo, 2023). An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the Chinese fan organisation of Korean star Choi Siwon.

Back to 2019, South Korean male artist Choi Siwon tweeted his support for the Hong Kong freedom movement, an act that was immediately boycotted and criticised by the Chinese public. Of note, the Chinese government has strict political and moral requirements for artists working in China, regardless of their country of origin. The CAC has also publicly stated that 'scandalous celebrities' will be banned from appearing in public in mainland China if they are involved in sensitive issues, including those with a history of drug abuse, sex scandals or politically incorrect positions. In result, Choi's Chinese fan organisation announced that they were on the side of the country, then proactively shut down their social media accounts and disbanded the whole organisation (Arab News, 2019). In this case, fandom nationalism is evident in the attitudes of Chinese fans towards so-called 'scandalous celebrities'. Moreover, pro-government comments such as 'Be a Chinese first, then a fan' and 'We will not make any concessions when it comes to patriotism' have frequently appeared online during that period.

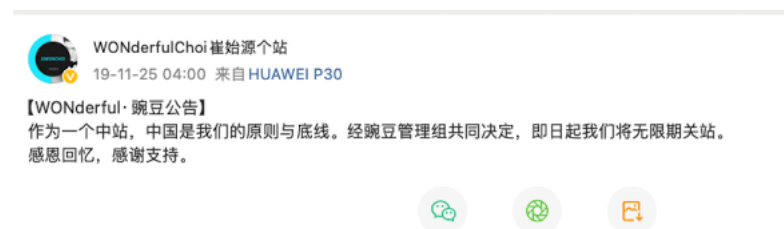


Figure 108: the announcement of the closure of Choi's Chinese fan organisation

*As a Chinese fan organisation, China is our principle and bottom line. After a joint decision by the management group, we will close down indefinitely from now on.*

*Grateful for the memories and the support.*

The above case introduces a central scenario in which ideological differences can lead to an organisation's closure, complementing the argument in section 5.6 that the involvement of fan labour can cause serious internal conflict and potentially lead to

dissolution. Specifically, the ideological divide between the organisation's members and the celebrities they support, highlighting a discord between their nationalism or other ideological beliefs and the objects of their fandom, poses a significant risk to organisational stability.

Before examining the impact of nationalism within fan organisations, it is essential to clarify the concept of nationalism and its unique interpretation in China. Nationalism, inherently a neutral term, can be differentiated in everyday discourse into 'patriotism'—a rational form of nationalism, and 'chauvinism'—an excessively extreme version of nationalism (Liu, 2019). Nationalism is an ambiguous concept, closely linked to its core ideas of national autonomy, national unity, and national identity (Smith, 2013). The discussion of nationalism in the contemporary Chinese context dates back to the Opium War of 1840, after which Western powers began a century of aggression (Anderson, 2006). Prolonged territorial conflicts established a form of nationalism in contemporary China that centred on national independence, a concept that has been repeatedly emphasised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From its inception, the CCP was imbued with strong nationalist sentiments, aiming to ensure national independence and unity. This led the CCP to engage in conflicts with Vietnam and the Soviet Union, both communist nations, toward the end of the last century. In this ideological framework, nationalism in China is not only about territorial integrity but also encompasses cultural and cognitive dimensions. It entails an expectation from the rulers that "citizens identify themselves with the nation and subordinate other interests to those of the state" (Tilly, 1994: 133). Moreover, Chinese nationalism places a particular emphasis on the status of the Communist Party, advocating that all citizens support the 'socialist system and road chosen by all nationalities in China under the leadership of the Communist Party' (Zhao, 1998: 291). Some scholars argue that this "official nationalism" serves as a crucial means for rulers to maintain political legitimacy, especially significant after the Soviet

Union's collapse in 1989, which led to a nadir in the form of communism. During this critical period, nationalist slogans and propaganda were instrumental in uniting the Chinese people (Zhao, 2000).

In comparison with the aforementioned official or elite nationalism, grassroots nationalism has played a key role in the shift of nationalism from being based on traditional mass media to being grounded in contemporary new media. On this basis, the Chinese government has attempted to adopt the concept of soft propaganda, which combines the dissemination of ideology with entertainment-oriented elements to make the propaganda message more appealing, especially to the younger generation (Guo, 2018; Lagerkvist, 2010). For instance, certain online commentators actively steer internet discussions, disseminating information that supports the regime (Han, 2015). Simultaneously, some state departments with official status opt to establish verified accounts on Weibo, proactively engaging in discussions with young netizens and thereby evincing nationalistic sentiments (Esarey, 2015).

Under this influence, the battleground for Chinese nationalists has shifted from outside the U.S. Embassy to the realm of social media. Concurrently, the demographic engaging in nationalist campaigns has evolved from men wielding bricks to women posting comments online (The Economist, 2016). Female fans, emblematic of the younger generation's comfort with the Internet and its cultural complexities, act as savvy social media users and have been heavily involved in numerous nationalist online movements (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). Liu (2019) offered the concept of “fandom nationalism” to describe Chinese fans who employ the techniques and practices of online celebrity adulation within nationalist movements. A prominent example, akin to the 'chart beating' activities of fans on Weibo discussed in the preceding chapter, involves fans idolizing the Chinese government. That is, Chinese online fans with various objects of fandom choose to set aside their difference and



collectively engage in extensive online commentary to promote various facets of China, aiming to elevate the nation's image (Li & Liu, 2020). And such practice is particularly evident when the ideologies of the celebrity fans support clash with national ideologies. For instance, at the end of 2015, Chou Tzu-yu, a female singer born in Taiwan, displayed the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan) instead of the People's Republic of China flag during an event in South Korea and claimed her Taiwanese identity. This act quickly attracted widespread attention in Mainland China, inciting not just intense criticism of Chou Tzu-yu's actions from netizens, including her Chinese fans, but also sparking a nationalist movement on January 20, 2016, on social platforms like Facebook (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). They posted slogans and memos with nationalist connotations on the Facebook pages of Taiwanese leaders such as Tsai Ing-wen, vehemently asserting that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China (Liao et al., 2022). By sharing images of China's beautiful landscapes and cuisine, they aimed to highlight the nation's greatness and prosperity (Buckley and Ramzy, 2016).

#### Field note (14 January 2024)

Regardless of how much research by Jenkins and others has emphasised the potential for Western fans to be a progressive force in political life, as of now, none of this research is reflected in the organisations I've been involved with.

Taken together, although the extant literature suggest that fan activism can transform into progressing enforce in political life, my participant observation suggests that this argument has its limitations, as such a transformation is not a widespread phenomenon in China. Contrary to Western fans, Chinese fan organisations not only infrequently challenge the prevailing political order but also actively collaborate with the state's ideological propaganda, employing online celebrity promotion techniques

in support of the state regime's legitimacy. While the fan organisations associated with the researcher have not engaged in nationalist movements, the experiences of Choi Siwon's fan organisation suggest that Chinese online fans are, to a certain extent, being cultivated as potential nationalists. Activities of fan organisations tend to concentrate on cultural consumption when the human brand they support align with state ideologies. Conversely, when celebrities are perceived as politically incorrect by official standards, not only do members tend to side with the state, but the organisations themselves are at risk of being dissolved.

### **6.5 ‘Clear and Bright’ Campaign: Examining the Regulatory Impact on Fan Organisations**

The previous section explored how the Chinese government influences the development of fan organisations by standardizing the behaviour of celebrities. Unlike China's other formal organisations, the Chinese government does not exercise direct administrative control over these online organisations. Nevertheless, it appears that the Chinese government has found an indirect method of influencing the behaviour of these organisations by regulating the social media platforms on which they are based.

In 2021, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) launched a top-down nationwide campaign called ‘Clear and Bright: rectify the chaos in fandom’ to address the disordered phenomena among online fans at that time (CAC, 2021). This campaign issued five major demands of Chinese celebrity fans, including limiting high youngsters spending, banning fan mudslinging and cyberhunting (Zhang, 2021). A review of the document shows that the government did not directly pose threat to these online organisations, but rather serves to regulate them by exerting pressure on social media platforms. For instance, In the press release announcing the campaign, the CAC mentioned that the platform should ‘effectively fulfil its main responsibility,

further improve the organisation rules and user conventions, and focus on regulating the online behaviour of all participants in the Chinese fandom' (CAC, 2021).

Specifically, the CAC summoned Weibo and imposed administrative penalty around £400,000 for malicious marketing. In response, Weibo claimed to comply with new rules and set up rectification teams to intensify efforts to regulate online fan behaviours (Times, 2021). As a result, fan organisations had to adapt some of their strategies, as artist Z's former fan leader recalls how these regulations affected their organisation:

*'We dare not verbally attack z's competitors on Weibo as we have done in the past, as this would get our accounts banned from the platform. Z's company specifically contacted us to remind us of the new rules. We certainly didn't want to negatively affect the artist, so we became more low-key after that rule was issued.'*

At that time, there were numerous accounts on Weibo specifically targeting other fans and celebrities. These accounts not only used extremely vile words to launch personal attacks on other netizens but also created and spread obscene videos of celebrities to attract public attention (Dan et al., 2023). Moreover, there was a significant amount of abuse and verbal attacks between fans belonging to different fan organisations. In response to this, the Cyber Administration of China proposed the principle of 'who operates, who manages; who benefits, who is responsible,' requiring platforms like Weibo to establish specialized teams to review and handle inappropriate information. As a result, the Weibo team shut down more than 4,000 offensive accounts and removed around 150,000 inappropriate comments (Xinhua News Agency, 2021).

Furthermore, this campaign also had an impact on the fundraising activities of fan organisations. In contemporary Chinese fan culture, there have been instances of extreme crowdfunding behaviours. In 2021, an online talent shows invited fans to

participate in ranking artists by voting. To vote for their favourite contestants, fans were required to purchase a brand beverage co-branded with the show, obtaining a QR code inside the bottle cap or a scratch card inside the packaging box. This prompted fan organisations to initiate large-scale collective beverage purchasing activities. However, due to the vast number of beverages purchased, there emerged a phenomenon where fans were only interested in the bottle caps for voting, leading to the wasteful practice of discarding the beverages in bulk (Dan et al., 2023). This “dumping beverage incident” subsequently sparked significant reactions within mainstream Chinese media. Since similar voting behaviours involved companies behind specific artists, the China Association of Performing Arts issued an announcement on May 12, 2021, prohibiting any commercial crowdfunding activities directed at fans that are initiated or organised by "performing artists themselves or their respective management agencies (Sina Tech, 2021)."

Following this regulation, the initiative of crowdfunding activities transitioned from being company-led to fan organisation-led. In the first findings chapter, we discussed how fan organisation Y delicately packaged a crowdfunding activity as a lottery event, thereby raising funds from a wide range of fans for the birthday celebration of artist Y. Similarly, fan organisation Z engaged in comparable practices, where crowdfunding activities were disguised as lottery events, or funds were raised through the sale of celebrity merchandise to support the celebrity. From a legal perspective, some lawyers believe that this type of crowdfunding is lawful, as Chinese law defines illegal fundraising as the act of individuals or organisations raising funds from the public without following legal procedures, such as issuing stocks or bonds, and promising returns within a certain period. In the context of fan practices, the fan organisation I am involved with has never promised any individual fan any returns, and fans participating in the crowdfunding clearly understand this characteristic (The Papers, 2021). Still, there are still some gray areas that persist. Despite the 2021 "clear

and bright" campaign explicitly prohibiting minors from participating in such crowdfunding activities, observations from the researcher's personal involvement in these activities indicate that no crowdfunding platform strictly enforced age restrictions on participants. Consequently, it can be inferred that a significant portion of participants in crowdfunding activities initiated by fan organisations still includes juveniles. To wit, fan organisations navigate a delicate balancing act, operating in a gray area where they endeavor to support celebrities while adhering to state regulations, skillfully maneuvering within ambiguous boundaries.

Moreover, fan organisations also attempt to meticulously negotiate with authoritative institutions on other regulations to take extra care in their daily activities to avoid potential controversy. For example, resource groups within the organisation are observed to exhibit a heightened level of caution when handling sensitive phrases and topics. That is, when downloading and sharing content from websites banned by the Chinese government, such as Twitter or Instagram, organisation members often obscure the source of the information before posting it on social media platforms within China. As shown in Figure 109, when the fan organisation of artist Y mentioned the source of the shared images, they used the term 'blue bird' instead of Twitter (Twitter's logo is a blue bird). Similarly, Singer T's fan organisation is observed to use 'green star' to refer Weibo, another application banned by Chinese government.



Figure 109: Singer Y’s fan organisation use the term ‘bluebird’ to refer to Twitter on the internet.

For fans, especially those who follow overseas celebrities, accessing blocked foreign websites through VPN to obtain information about their celebrities seems like an unavoidable step. However, this process also violates China's internet censorship mechanism in theory. As a result, fan organisations have to resort to specific measures to circumvent online censorship systems.

## 6.6 Conclusion

The third chapter of findings shifts the perspective to examine the influence of authorities and relevant policies on the development of fan organisations beyond the organisations themselves. Currently, few scholarly attentions in fan studies have been paid to examine the entanglement between fan organisations and local authorities, yet this interaction seems inescapable for Chinese fan organisations, given the state's tendency to closely monitor social organisations. Although fan organisations operate predominantly in the digital realm - considered difficult for direct state supervision and historically marginalized - their recent radical practices have caught the attention of state authorities. These authorities now opt for indirect surveillance, targeting fan organisations through platforms and celebrities. The state strictly regulates social media platforms, such as the popular Weibo among fans, to limit their activities to cultural consumption. At the same time, by regulating the behaviour of celebrities, the authorities aim to ensure that fan behaviour does not pose a threat to the nation's established political order.

Regarding the perception of fans as a potential collective force in political life, the researcher's extensive 18-month fieldwork has shown that Jenkins' and others' optimistic expectations for Western media fans, as well as Fung's (2009) impractical expectations for Chinese musician fans, are dubious. In other words, conceiving of fans' voting rights in talent shows as a form of political action or as a potential force for political progress is a fanciful notion. The Chinese government has co-opted online fans and their formed organisations to a significant extent, as evidenced by numerous instances of Chinese fan organisations actively aligning themselves with the state's ideological propaganda. Nevertheless, some organisational practices operate in the grey areas of government regulation, such as collective fundraising and access to websites banned by the Chinese government.

It is important to highlight two key aspects for the readers. Firstly, this study aims to discuss how Chinese fans, as human brand consumers, form their entities. Secondly, as mentioned in Section 2.8, the existing literature on the formation of brand communities has largely overlooked the influence of the state and ideology. Therefore, the descriptive findings of this chapter illustrate the significant involvement of national policies and ideologies in the formation and development of brand communities in developing countries. These factors profoundly affect the specific practices of fans as consumers, such as the shifts in strategies for promoting human brands. Taken together, the researcher calls for marketing scholars to consider national policy factors in the formation of brand communities. This point will also be elaborated in the next chapter.



## Chapter 7: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

Through an 18-month online ethnographic study of multiple brand communities, the researcher seeks to address *How do Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online, and what characteristics do such consumer collectives exhibit?* In Chapters 4-6, the researcher analyses emerging data from the field to demonstrate that fan communities, often heralded by many marketing scholars as typical brand communities, do not align with the observed reality. Consequently, the researcher introduces the concept of fan organisations, which refers to more disciplined and structured action organisations spontaneously established by a small group of fans with clear organisational strategies and task allocations.

Building on this, the literature on brand communities typically emphasises those initiated by companies, filled with consumer behaviours. This does not align with the ethnographic accounts of fan organisations where fans, as consumers, initiate and engage in collective labour to produce the brand. Thus, the researcher extends the concept of fan organisations to develop the notion of brand organisations.

Taken together, three insights emerge from the findings. The first theoretical contribution of this study lies in its explanation of the entities of Chinese online fans, defining them as fan organisations rather than fan communities. The key difference between the two lies in their organisational structure and the forms of consumption targeted at celebrities, who can be deconstructed as human brands. Compared to fan communities, fan organisations are more disciplined entities, with organised fan labour allocated to clearly defined departments, positions, and corresponding hierarchical structures.

Additionally, while ordinary fans in online communities tend to individually engage in direct consumption form emphasised in prevalent fan studies, such as listening to music, appreciating performances (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992), and purchasing merchandise (Bernard Cova et al., 2007; Fillis and Mackay, 2014; Wohlfeil, 2018), members of fan organisations tend to partake in an alternative form of collective prosumption characterized by organised fan labour, aimed at enhancing the value of celebrities as human brands. On this basis, the researcher has developed the concept of brand organisation based on the study of brand communities and has elaborated on five distinct characteristics that differentiate it from brand communities. These characteristics are productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency, and adaptability.

With this in mind, this study finally addresses the question of how such brand organisations are established. In short, this paper highlights three key constructs that promote the formation of brand organisations: consumers, rituals and brand content. That is, within the organisation, consumers are trained in skills and culture, transforming them into prosumers who are closer to the production side. Building on this, through a series of organisational rituals, including the use of specialised lexicons, these prosumers engage in the daily practices of brand organisations by collecting, processing and distributing brand content. In other words, these contributions address the three gaps previously identified by the researcher in relation to brand communities: the issue of brand classification, the ambiguity surrounding ownership, and the lack of research on the formation process of brand organisations.

In the final section of this chapter, the researcher offers prospects and calls for future fan studies, highlighting that some observed organisational practices, such as decision-making within organisations, have the potential to develop into democratic organisational practices. This suggests that viewing Chinese fan organisations through

an alternative organisational lens might be an important avenue and opportunity for integrating fandom studies into organisational theory research.

## **7.2 The discussion of fan entities**

The first significant theoretical contribution of this study is the elucidation of the collective behaviour of Chinese online fans, defining their entities as the "fan organisation." A fan organisation refers to a spontaneous collective in which online fans, utilising various social media platforms, engage in organised fan labour to enhance the value of human brands. Through extensive and immersive online ethnographic research, the researcher has identified that a typical fan organisation consists of approximately 20 members, who operate within clearly defined functional groups, hold designated titles, and follow standardised workflows. This organisational structure ensures the efficient execution of three main activities: information processing, celebrity promotion, and internal operations.

As mentioned in the literature review section 2.5, previous fan studies have predominantly focused on analysing the behaviours, motivations, and emotions of individual fans, while relatively neglecting the collective actions of fans (Bernard Cova et al., 2007). This gap in the literature has led to a limited understanding of the emergence of certain behaviours among Chinese fans, particularly in relation to collective consumption activities that appear to follow instructions and patterns. Meanwhile, previous studies on fandom have often overlooked the fundamental nature of fans' entities. This oversight has led to significant challenges in understanding the complex and multifaceted behaviours exhibited by fans. In result, terms like "fan communities" (Hills, 2002; Duffet, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Atanasova, 2021; Cristofari and Guitton, 2017; Campbell et al., 2016), "groups" and "circles" (Bacon-Smith, 1992), and "fan clubs" (Lee and Yoo, 2015; Janet Staiger, 2005; McDonald, 2003; Kozinets, 2001) were used interchangeably. Even the most recent

studies on fan collectives continue to confuse and misuse terms like fan communities and fan clubs, which should be clearly distinguished and defined (Zheng and Xiao, 2023; Booth and Williams 2021).

In response to these theoretical gaps, the concept of "fan organisations" emerging from this research reveals that the fundamental reason behind the high productivity and efficiency of Chinese fans lies in the clear task allocation, well-defined workflows, and established regulations of these fan organisations. Additionally, this research contributes terminologically by distinguishing previously conflated concepts in the literature. Particularly, fan organisations are defined as entities that are divided by membership boundaries, while the most common used term fan communities are defined as entities that are divided by identity boundaries.

In the context of the Chinese internet, a 'fan organisation' refers to a more disciplined and structured action organisation that is spontaneously established by a small group of fans with clear organisational strategy and task allocations. In contrast, a 'fan community' refers to a large and loosely group of fans of a celebrity or public figure.

The significance of revealing the essence of fan organisations lies in the fact that these organisations and the collective actions of their members explain why Chinese fans exhibit organised and patterned collective consumption behaviours. Given neither the sharp criticisms and harsh accusations previously directed at extreme Chinese fans nor the perspective of some Western fan scholars who view fandom as a manifestation of "pathological behaviour" can explain the valuable collective consumer activities seen in Chinese fan practices (Zhang, 2021; Jenson, 1992:20; Johnson, 1987). These activities include large-scale fundraising in a short period, organizing offline gatherings, and executing advertising campaigns, all of which hold significant value for celebrities as human brands. On this basis, revealing the nature of fan entities helps readers understand the agents behind a series of fan behaviours.

Many controversial fan activities such as purchasing a full-page advertisement in the New York Times for a celebrity, or fans posting aggressive and abusive comments online, are often overly simplified and attributed to the "fan community." Consequently, the scale of these entities, their decision-making processes, and internal communication mechanisms remain enigmatic. This research, however, suggest that fans, as representatives of a consumer collective, have formed their own organisations to plan and execute these practices. It turns out that collective fundraising activities and digital voting prevalent in Chinese fan culture are not merely individual fan actions. Behind these activities lies meticulous planning and preparation by fan organisations acting in a collective manner. This highlights the coordinated efforts and organisational strategies that underpin these seemingly spontaneous fan activities.

Furthermore, defining fan organisations and highlighting their characteristics lays the groundwork for addressing the core research question: "How are these organisations formed?" In the following chapter, I will first deconstruct the concept of celebrity fans as collective consumers and celebrities as celebrity brands, progressively deconstructing fan organisations as brand organisations. I will then discuss the characteristics of brand organisations and how they are structured.

### **7.3 The discussion of brand organisation**

Building on the definition of the fan organisation, the researcher attempts to incorporate it into the broader discussion of consumer communities. Specifically, the author aims to provide a comprehensive definition of brand organisations by integrating the conceptual meanings of "brand" and "organisation", along with insights drawn from the author's field experience. In section 2.7, the author adopts Kotler's (1991) definition of a brand, which supports the argument that celebrities can be regarded as human brands (Thomson,2006). Furthermore, the author draws upon Schein's (1980:15) definition of formal organisations, which conceptualises an

organisation as “the planned co-ordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common, explicit purpose or goal, through division of labor and function, and through a hierarchy of authority and responsibility.” Taken together, brand organisations are defined as *a form of human association independently and spontaneously established and operated by brand consumers that maintain consistent brand production through a clear internal hierarchy.*

Since brand organisations in this context are established by fans, who are consumers centred around celebrities as human brands, they appear to share many similarities with brand communities including consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Specifically, fans form organisations around celebrities, representing a shared consciousness among fans for the brand. Also, through long-term immersive online ethnography, the researcher observed rituals and traditions within brand organisations (Schau et al., 2009). For instance, as illustrated in section 4.4.3.2, there are customary verbal welcome rituals when new members join group chats. Similarly, brand organisations have developed traditions that are consistently followed by their members, as illustrated by the notifications of bans on entertainment activities at certain periods shown in section 6.3. Furthermore, it is evident that fans within the organisation, particularly the founders, exhibit a strong sense of moral responsibility. In Section 4.2.2, the researcher discusses the dual role of the founder as both a leader and a mentor. To wit, the founder not only establishes and enforces the organisation's internal regulations but also provides continuous and accumulative guidance to the members, including skilled and culturally adaptive training mentioned in section 5.3.

Additionally, brand organisations share other similarities with brand communities, including oppositional brand loyalty and marketplace legitimacy (O’Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). In Section 4.4.3.1, the recruitment criteria for both brand organisations

specify that applicants should exclusively favour the respective human brand and have previously purchased the brand's merchandise. This is akin to how Apple community users reject Microsoft's Windows software or how Saab car users deliberately differentiate themselves from Volvo owners, as mentioned in previous literature (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). In other words, the literature indicates that members of brand communities clearly identify a brand's competitors and reflect this established competitive relationship within the community. Similarly, in brand organisations, this brand rivalry is mirrored in the recruitment criteria, where supporters of rival brands are explicitly excluded.

Furthermore, brand organisations also face the challenge of gaining legitimacy just like brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Interestingly, these organisations do not seek legitimacy or recognition from companies, instead, they aim to establish legitimacy with a broader consumer base. As the researcher mentions in Section 4.4, the formation of fan organisations is rooted in broader fan communities. These fans, who are also consumers of the brand, may sometimes find themselves in conflict with members of fan organisations (brand organisations), as demonstrated in Section 5.6. Consequently, many brand organisation practices are focused on gaining legitimacy within the broader fan community, rather than from the company behind the brand. Toward this end, since the inception of brand organisations, organisation leaders have robustly responded to false accusations from random consumers regarding legitimacy on social media. Additionally, financial disclosures by the organisation's finance department are efforts to gain legitimacy. As demonstrated in Section 4.3.2, brand organisations sometimes even publicly disclose their financial data from the previous year, including all expenditures and revenues related to their activities. Meanwhile, the conflicts between fan organisations and fan communities discussed in section 5.6 can also be interpreted as a failure of brand

organisations to secure legitimacy. As mentioned previously, the loss of legitimacy can lead to the closure of brand organisations in some extreme cases.

Even when accounting for these similarities, brand organisations still exhibit five fundamentally distinct aspects compared to brand communities described in previous literature. The researcher categorises these differences into five types: productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency, and adaptability. Given these significant differences, fan organisations cannot be simply classified as online brand communities. In the following sections, the researcher discusses these five types in detail and using fan organisations as a representative example, proposes the concept of brand organisations. Since the brand organisations the researcher participated in originate from the Chinese internet, these brand organisations similarly exhibit a flexible adaptability to authoritative systems. The following section will first elucidate the five characteristics of brand organisations, laying the foundation for introducing three key constructs of brand organisations. This discussion aims to address the central research question: "How do consumers form brand organisations?"

### *Productivity*

The most notable characteristic of brand organisations is the involvement of internal consumers in the collective production process. Compared to brand communities, brand consumption practices in brand organisations are significantly diminished. In other words, the primary aim of brand organisations is not collective consumption but collective production. Consumers within the organisation assume the role of collective producers, actively participating in the co-creation of the brand's value (Cova and Dalli, 2009). As sections 5.2 to 5.4 demonstrate, brand fans, as consumers, have transformed into producers, engaging in *organised labour* within brand organisations, encompassing both skilled and managerial labour. Sepcificailly,



members of brand organisations engage in more than just appreciation, commentary, or appropriation of celebrity (human brand) texts, as individual fans (consumers) do. Organisational members are more involved in brand production activities, such as translating texts to expand the consumer base or launching advertising campaigns to enhance brand awareness. For example, in section 4.3, the researcher previously illustrated how brand organisations reinvest the profits generated from selling branded merchandise into activities related to brand production. Still, it is important to note that the literature on consumers acting as co-creators of value for brands is no longer novel, as previous studies on brand communities have recognised this phenomenon, using the consumption-production continuum to describe it (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014). Specifically, production and consumption are two ends of a continuum, meaning that neither pure production nor pure consumption exists. In the middle of this continuum lies a more balanced state of "prosumption," where production and consumption are interwoven (Ritzer, 2014; Roberts and Cremin 2019; Tse and Tsang 2021).

As early as the 1980s, Toffler (1980) introduced the concept of the "prosumer." However, as a writer without an academic background, his concept received little attention at the time. An early example of prosumption relates to consumers in fast-food restaurants. In this context, consumers of food brands are not merely consumers; they also engage in activities such as retrieving their trays and carrying them to their tables, which can be considered part of the food production process (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). With the development of brand community research, various indicators have shown that the role of the consumer has changed. As section 2.4 mentioned, the concepts of the "prosumer" or "working consumer" have regained importance. Additionally, Cova and others (2007) have further argued that the power of the community can serve as a potential force to bridge the production-consumption gap. Building on this, with the advent of Web 2.0, digital platforms have begun

utilising consumer-generated data. And such data can be seen as a commodity that reflects consumer preferences and is ultimately sold to advertisers, generating economic value. As Roberts and Cremin (2019) suggested, digital media has fostered new patterns of consumer-producer networks, leading to models that integrate consumer or user expertise into the design and development activities of producers (Potts et al., 2008).

Taken together, even though prosumption behaviours within brand communities have been recognised and acknowledged (which is why many companies value these communities), brand organisations further deepen the degree of collective consumer production. Brand organisations are not established to enhance consumer experience; rather, they exist to elevate brand value. In other words, on the continuum of prosumption, brand organisations can be understood as striving towards the production end to the greatest extent possible, even though they cannot entirely eliminate consumption. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the naming of different sub-groups within fan organisations fully reflects the nature of brand organisations, which is to perform fan labour. As sociologist Dujarier (2008) posits, the actions of fans within brand organisations meet the three criteria that define work as a human activity. Firstly, fans generate social connection through their interactions with other fans within the organisation, thereby meeting the sociological criterion. Secondly, the productive activities of fans within the organisation create value for the brand, satisfying the economic criterion. Lastly, fan practices are organised activities that impact the milieu, fulfilling the ergonomics criterion.

Interestingly, previous literature is rife with controversy regarding whether consumer participation in free labour within brand communities constitutes exploitation (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Some scholars even argue that consumers involved in brand co-creation face the risk of double exploitation (Cova and Dalli, 2007; Cova and Dalli,

2009; Zwick et al., 2008). Firstly, consumers contribute their knowledge, time, and effort to the production process without any financial compensation. Secondly, they must then pay a premium for the products that result from their own labour, as described by marketing professionals. However, as presented in the previous chapter, the interviewed fans, acting as prosumers, derived a sense of satisfaction, recognition, and pleasure from their involvement in brand production activities. These fans were aware of the unpaid nature of their labour before joining the brand organisation. Despite this, my observations show that fans actively participate in the production process, describing it in their own words as a process of '*generating electricity power with love*'. Even though the researcher interprets those fans, to some extent, are exploited as producers within the brand organisation, the fans themselves do not share this view. As Cova and Dalli (2009:334) assert, "exploitation is not a fact, but a feeling."

### *Independence*

Brand organisations exhibit a considerable degree of independence, as they are formed entirely by consumers and often resist corporate intervention in their formation and development, a characteristic that is argued to distinguish them from brand communities. 20 years ago, when the concept of brand communities was first introduced, numerous scholars urged professional marketers to acknowledge the collective power of consumers within these communities (Brodie et al., 2013; Cheung, et al. 2021). As a result, marketers paid heed to this advice, with many companies going so far as to sponsor or host consumer communities directly, imagining them as the ideal form of brand community capable of delivering economic value to the company (McAlexander et al. 2005; Schau et al. 2009; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017).

However, as highlighted in the literature review, the ambiguity of community ownership represents a significant gap in the brand community literature (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). This ambiguity can lead to notable differences in the community's personnel structure, funding sources, and scope of activities. Specifically, unlike company-led brand communities, fan organisations, as brand organisations, are entirely rooted online and recruit other members (consumers) through social media. Consequently, due to the lack of financial support from the companies behind the brands, a significant portion of the necessary funds must be raised through crowdfunding efforts within the large consumer base. These crowdfunding activities are often carefully orchestrated as lottery events, as section 4.3.1 discussed. In some cases, the funds even come directly out of the pockets of the organisation's members, a practice commonly referred to as "generating electricity with love." Moreover, since members of these brand organisations reject corporate intervention, they often have limited access to information about the brand compared to company-sponsored brand communities. In result, brand organisations frequently need to seek the latest brand information from various sources. This also explains the necessity of skilled labour within brand organisations mentioned in 5.3. Specifically, consumers assigned to resource groups are required to proactively seek out and gather information about the brand to enhance its exposure.

Based on the researcher's observations of fan organisations and statements provided by fan leaders, fan organisations reject corporate sponsorship due to the intention of taking away the ownership of the brand. This intention implicitly suggests that fans, as consumers, do not view the company as the owner of the brand, but rather as its steward (Cova and Pace, 2006). When the interests of the brand diverge from those of the company, or when consumers perceive issues with the company's marketing strategies (Deighton, 2005), brand organisations attempt to independently initiate marketing plans for the human brand. Consequently, in fan practices, fans

independently organise birthday events for celebrities and raise funds to purchase advertising spaces in subway and bus stations to carry out brand marketing activities. In other words, the degree of consumer empowerment is further intensified, with fans attempt to steer the human brand according to consumer preferences (Wathieu et al., 2002). This situation, known as brand hijacking (Wipperfurth, 2005; Cova and Pace 2006), is more pronounced in brand organisations. For human brand, a unique category of brands, fans as ardent consumers develop a significant degree of attachment and commitment. Such attachment and commitment indirectly lead to a collective desire among consumers to formulate marketing plans according to their own preferences, rather than following the strategies devised by professional marketers within the company. As O'Guinn and Muniz (2005) put it, a prominent feature of contemporary brand management is the partial loss of control over the brand by the company. The researcher argues that this phenomenon is much more evident in the context of human brands and brand organisations.

### *Hierarchy*

Brand organisations exhibit a more pronounced hierarchical structure compared to brand communities. In early brand community research, the study of hierarchy within communities was quite limited. Katz and Heere (2013, 2015) attempted to address this gap by examining the importance of community initiators. They argued that while an increase in centralised authority might aid in the initial formation of the community, it could hinder its long-term development. However, their study was limited in scope, focusing on a single activity within a football brand community, and was constrained by a relatively short study duration.

Through an 18-month online ethnographic study, the hierarchical nature within human brand organisations became evident on three aspects. Firstly, the entry mechanisms of brand organisations mentioned in 4.4.3.1 reflect their inherent

hierarchical nature. Specifically, the researcher highlights that the process of gaining access to the field was subject to approval by fan leaders. This is because organisation leaders or other members classified as managerial labour hold the passwords to the brand organisation's Weibo accounts, while ordinary members like myself, classified as skilled labour, do not have access. In result, once the leaders of each organisation became aware of my identity, specific research questions, and intentions, they decided to grant me access and invited me to join the organisation's group chat. From my observations, these decisions were made without consulting other members. Similarly, the admission of new members was also at the sole discretion of the organisational leaders, without seeking input from existing members. This clearly reflects the hierarchical nature of brand organisations, where a select few hold the authority over recruitment decisions.

Secondly, distinct hierarchical divisions were observed within the various groups of brand organisations. For example, candidates can directly join groups classified as skilled labour, such as the translation group and the resource group, through online recruitment. In contrast, entry into groups classified as managerial labour, such as the management group and the finance group, is not that easy and straightforward. Based on my observations and interviews with two organisation leaders mentioned in section 4.4.3.1, becoming a member of these managerial groups typically require long-term commitment and investment in the organisation to gain the leaders' recognition and eventual inclusion. In other words, joining the managerial labour often requires the permission and endorsement of the organisational leaders. As a result, those in managerial roles, specifically members of the management and finance groups within the brand organisation, tend to have a deeper understanding and control of brand information. They also possess the authority to initiate and organise marketing activities related to the human brand, a power that I, as a skilled labourer within the organisation, did not have, as my participation in brand organisations consisted primarily of completing assigned tasks.

Additionally, the decision-making process of the organisation's leaders also reflects clear hierarchical attributes. From issuing the "organisation guidelines" in group chats to setting specific standards for recruiting new members, decisions are made unilaterally by the leaders. Although there are some democratic decision-making processes, as mentioned in Section 4.4.3.4, they remain quite limited. Instead, most decisions fall into the category of autocratic decision-making within a black-box-like environment. It is also important to note the specific terminology used within the organisation. For example, fan leaders refer to themselves as "leaders" or "administrators" and use terms like "prohibit" and "dismiss" in group chats, which clearly indicate the hierarchical structure.

### *Consistency*

The productive, independent, and hierarchical characteristics of brand organisations each play a crucial role in ensuring the organisation's consistent interpretation of the celebrity brand. This contrasts with traditional brand communities, which are often characterised by diverse consumer voices. For example, when Star Wars films are re-released, some consumers believe that the new actors ruin the movie, while others feel that the re-release makes the Star Wars universe too close to the real world, diminishing the suspense and immersion that audiences expect (Brown et al., 2003). Similarly, Hewer and Hamilton's (2012) research on the brand community of Kylie Minogue reached comparable conclusions. They found that community members have diverse interpretations of the human brand, leading to varied aim for joining the community. For instance, some members exhibit quasi-religious devotion to Kylie, while others simply listen to her music for entertainment. In such cases, the brand community is considered "malleable and fragmented " (Hewer and Hamilton, 2012:278).

In stark contrast, brand organisations, exemplified by fan organisations, require members to adopt a unified interpretation of the human brand. This is achieved through skilled and managerial labour aimed at enhancing the brand's value. As mentioned in section 4.4.3.3, the action unit of fan organisations is collective. In this case, when communicating with external parties, the organisation typically uses a unified "we" voice on social media. In other words, brand organisations strive to communicate with a consistent voice. Specific examples of this are presented in Section 4.4.3.3, which includes phrases such as " We understand everyone's current feelings " or "We are excited and moved." This consistency ensures that there are limited divergent opinions or behaviours within the organisation, rejecting the heterogeneity characteristic of traditional brand communities (De Valck et al., 2009).

The origin of this consistency can be interpreted as closely related to the other characteristics of brand organisations previously mentioned, including productivity, independence, and hierarchy. Specifically, the productive nature of brand organisations dictates the primary purpose for consumers joining these organisations: rather than merely appreciating the brand or consuming brand-related products, consumers within the organisation primarily engage in activities that contribute to brand value production. This productive characteristic also indicates that brand organisations do not experience the varied aims for joining the community that are seen in groups like the Kylie brand community, thereby ensuring a consistency of purpose among members (Hewer and Hamilton; 2012).

Furthermore, the independence of brand organisations ensures that their specific marketing plans and activities remain free from interference by the companies behind the brands, maintaining a consistent interpretation of the human brand. Finally, the clear hierarchical structure within brand organisations, along with the defined group responsibilities and workflows, ensures that members adhere to the unified directives



of their leaders. This structure significantly reduces the occurrence of dissenting voices within the organisation.

### *Adaptability*

Brand organisations in China demonstrate a unique adaptability to policies enacted by local authorities, a trait not observed in other brand communities. In sections 2.3 and 2.4 of the literature review, the researcher discusses how, historically, the will of the Chinese state has influenced the collective behaviour of fans as consumers. The researcher argues that this profound influence has prompted Chinese online brand organisations to develop unique adaptive strategies to survive and thrive in the current social context. A typical example is brand organisations composed of celebrity fans adapting to local authority policies. When a brand's or company's statements conflict with the mainstream will of the state, these brand organisations do not exhibit so called fan activism as claimed by western fan scholars, positioning themselves as a force for political progress. Instead, these organisations exhibit a necessary fandom nationalism mentioned in section 6.4, aligning themselves with the state rather than the brand (Liao et al., 2022; Wang and Luo, 2023). In other words, when collective consumers are confronted with instances of "celebrity transgression" (Finsterwalder et al., 2017), their preferred method of managing the situation aligns with what Jones and his colleagues describe as "performative indignation," where anger and resentment are primarily expressed within the social sphere (Jones et al., 2022).

In past literature on brand communities, whether luxury brands, mass-market food brands, university brands, or city brands, interactions with authoritative institutions are rarely discussed. However, fan organisations, as brand organisations in China, deliberately align their organisational practices with national policies. For instance, the issue of entertainment notification bans mentioned in section 6.3 may seem unrelated to brand marketing, but failing to comply can have severe consequences for

the organisation. Therefore, brand organisations must subtly adhere to these policy requirements, such as postponing the day's promotional content to the following day to meet policy guidelines, thereby adjusting their marketing strategies. Additionally, as described in section 6.3 and 6.5, national policies such like "Clear and Bright" compel brand organisations to alter their marketing approaches, including refraining from using aggressive language against consumers of other brands or issuing of the entertainment ban notice.

Overall, adaptability is a characteristic unique to Chinese human brand organisations, one that has not been captured in previous literature on brand communities. The researcher argues that this characteristic embodies a distinctly "Chinese characteristic," rooted in the historical context of strict governmental regulation and management of social organisations in China. As discussed in Section 6.2, while the Constitution grants citizens of the People's Republic of China the freedom of association, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has repeatedly introduced policies aimed at regulating these social organisations (Council on Foundations, 2013). As a result, when fans, acting as collective consumers, draw the attention of mainstream Chinese media online, the human brand organisations they establish naturally need to adjust in response to relevant policy requirements. This need for adjustment ultimately reflects the adaptability characteristic of these brand organisations.

#### **7.4 Brand organisation formation**

In the previous sections, 7.2 and 7.3, the researcher first elucidates the nature of fan entities, defining them as online fan organisations. Building on this foundation, the thesis then introduces the concept of brand organisations, drawing from the literature on brand communities, and identifies their five distinct characteristics: productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency, and adaptability. In other words, brand

organisations have evolved from brand communities, representing a specialised form of brand community.

Section 2.8 highlighted three research gaps in the study of brand communities: the narrow scope of brands, the ambiguous ownership of brand communities, and the unclear process of brand community formation origins (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005; Stokburger-Sauer and Wiertz 2015; Heere et al., 2024). To date, the human brand organisations discussed in this thesis have not only addressed the first gap but also contributed to the second gap by demonstrating that these organisations are spontaneously formed by consumers. In this case, this section will further explore and address the third gap, as well as the research question of this study: How are human brand organisations formed? In section 4.2, the researcher provided a chronological account of the formation of brand organisation A. However, the focus of this section is on the constituent elements of brand organisation formation. In other words, what exactly do brand organisations organise? In short, this thesis argues that brand organisations are organised through three key constructs: consumers, rituals, and brand content.

### *Production-Oriented Consumers*

The foundation of brand organisation lies in its consumers, specifically those who are willing to engage in brand production and ultimately enhance the brand's value. These consumers are recruited and trained to become skilled labour and managerial labour, collaboratively participating in the brand creation process and forming the foundation of brand organisations. Specifically, due to the vast number of supporters for human brands in China, brand organisations frequently utilise social media to conditionally recruit members from brand supporters. These consumers undergo a series of informal and accrete trainings to equip them with the necessary production skills, enabling their active participation in the creation of the human brand. Referring to the

previously mentioned characteristics of brand organisation productivity and the consumer-production continuum proposed by Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), consumers within the organisation transition from being prosumer closer to the consumer end to becoming prosumer closer to the producer end (Ritzer, 2014). Taken together, such transformation is driven by the skills and cultural adaptability training provided within the organisation, as mentioned in section 5.4.

In the very limited literature on brand community formation, other consumer behaviours, including participation (Laszlo and Krippner, 1998), evangelising (Schau et al., 2009), and justifying (Kozinets, 2001), have been considered fundamental to community construction (Heere et al., 2024). However, the collective productive capacity of consumers has long been overlooked. This thesis contributes to this field by positing that the involvement of consumers as labourers in the brand production process is fundamental to the formation and development of brand organisations. This perspective highlights a significant distinction between brand organisations and brand communities, as brand organisations place a further emphasis on their role in brand production.

### *Language-Centred Rituals*

Symbolic rituals centred on language and lexicon are organised by consumers to form brand organisations. In brand organisations, consumer practices such as welcoming, sharing, crediting, and celebrating can be viewed as collective rituals (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). These rituals deepen the connections among consumers and foster the development of the organisation. Specifically, when new members join the organisation, they are verbally welcomed and introduced by the leaders, who outline their roles or responsibilities. Other members then follow with expressions of welcome in group chats, solidifying this as a customary ritual within the brand organisation. Simultaneously, brand organisations frequently share information

related to brand content, including texts, images, and videos, within group chats. This sharing not only serves as a means of information dissemination but also acts as a crucial ritual in constructing brand organisations. Additionally, the screen names of members are credited on social media when human brand content is shared, clearly indicating who has participated in the brand production process. Lastly, brand organisations often celebrate marked dates related to the brand, such as the artist's birthday, with offline fan gatherings or charity events serving as a prominent example of such celebratory rituals. Such ritualistic and recurring behaviour allows consumers to express their support in a symbolic manner, thereby deepening the emotional connection between the consumers and the human brand.

Of note, the series of rituals mentioned above is not being observed for the first time. In Section 2.8, the researcher introduces some of the key components of brand communities, including the shared rituals and traditions emphasised by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). For example, fans tend to wear black cotton shirts with specific logos at concerts, while Jeep owners greet each other on the road with the "Wrangler Wave" gesture; these are examples of such rituals. Shared rituals and traditions are vital to the cohesion and durability among consumer collectives, as these practices create and reinforce collective meanings. Also, those rituals are believed to unite members, as they derive satisfaction from participating in repeated rituals and traditions (Laroche et al., 2012). In this respect, brand organisations and brand communities exhibit a significant degree of consistency.

By comparison, while the ritualistic application of lexicon and languages is present in both brand communities and brand organisations, it is particularly central to brand organisations, where it serves as the dominant form of ritualistic practice. Given that the researcher adopts online ethnography grounded in symbolic interactionism as the philosophical foundation, particular attention is paid to the daily conversations within

brand organisations, including the language and lexicon used by members (Fine, 1999). Within this context, terms such as "working hours," "shift scheduling," "ladder," and "transfer," although potentially incomprehensible to individuals outside the organisation, are ritualistically employed within the internal lexicon. This ritualistic language practice not only establishes specific communication norms among organisation members but also partially reflects the internal power structure and workflow. The use of this specialised lexicon aids in reinforcing members' identity within the organisation, as well as maintaining production efficiency and consistency of organisational objectives. Similarly, the issuance of entertainment ban notifications, often accompanied by terms like "prohibition," carries ritualistic symbolic significance. On one hand, the use of such serious language conveys a sense of normative regulation; on the other, it underscores the hierarchical status of brand organisations within the broader consumer base of the brand.

In other words, while the existing literature on brand communities already highlights the importance of rituals and traditions (Schau et al., 2009; Bernard Cova et al., 2007), this study further emphasises the role of linguistic ritualisation in fostering the development of online brand organisations. Although brand organisations may share rituals similar to offline celebrations of brand-related events, the majority of the observed rituals in this study are rooted in the ritualisation of language within online interactions.

### ***Brand content***

Brand content is another key element in the formation of brand organisations. In Section 2.4, the researcher examines the influence of media on the evolution of celebrity fandom in China. In modern Chinese fan culture, an ever-growing volume of celebrity information is being shared online as brand content, presented in various formats such as text, images, and videos, and widely circulated across the internet.

Specifically, consumers collect, process, and distribute brand content, thereby constructing the brand organisation. Technically speaking, the skilled labour, composed of multiple groups responsible for information processing and brand promotion, organises a series of activities centred around brand content. In the limited literature on brand communities' formation, a key construct closely related to brand content is the belief system, which serves as a formalized agreement (Lucas, 1992; Heere et al., 2024). This formalized agreement is the fundamental reason that initially attracts members to gather. Such an agreement often stems from unique expectations regarding the brand. For instance, members of the Beamish community gather due to their shared love for Irish beer and the bonds of male camaraderie (O'Sullivan et al., 2011), while the belief system of the Harley-Davidson brand community is associated with the nostalgic sense of freedom that motorcycles bring to their owners (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

In the formation of human brand organisations, the belief system can be understood as the collective commitment of the organisation's members to the brand content. This study posits that such commitment encompasses both consumption practices, such as the collection of information, and production practices, including the processing and distribution of information (Kozinets et al., 2008). In other words, organisation members are dedicated to gathering texts, images, and videos related to the brand. When processing this content, they transform and adapt these materials into formats that are more accessible and appealing to the Chinese audience, thereby illustrating the productive capabilities of the brand organisation.. Furthermore, they circumvent the firewall imposed by the Chinese government to disseminate these materials widely through the Chinese internet, which reflects the brand organisation's adaptability to policy and regulatory frameworks.

## **7.5 Research limitation and further study**

### **7.5.1 Research limitation**

While this paper makes several significant contributions, it is also subject to several limitations, primarily due to factors such as the researcher's role in the organisations and time constraints. First and foremost, it is important for readers to recognise that this study is rooted in the researcher's position as a constructivist grounded theorist, adhering to the principles of symbolic interactionism. This implies that the researcher does not intend to generalise the theoretical model regarding the construction of brand organisations, as the researcher's positionality, which includes aspects such as gender, class, age and educational background, actively participated in the development of the framework. (Rhoads, 1997; Charmaz et al., 2018). For instance, due to the researcher's previous educational background in human resource management, there was a particular focus on the people within the organisation. This research standpoint influenced the researcher's specific attention to the labour dynamics within brand organisations. Meanwhile, the conclusion of this research must consider the specific role that the researcher occupied within the brand organisation, specifically as a translator, rather than a position responsible for finance, recruitment, or other roles that might appear more significant. Therefore, the conclusions presented in this study are primarily based on the perspective of the researcher as a Chinese-English translator.

Simultaneously, as discussed by the researcher in Section 3.10 on reflexivity, researchers must critically assess the relationship between themselves and the potential research outcomes. For instance, when reflecting on questions such as "What is the nature of my relationship with the research subjects?" and "How does this relationship impact the research?" (Haynes, 2012: 78), I realised that my research motivations included a desire to highlight the collective wisdom of fans in organising and governing their organisations. That is, from a reflexive perspective, given that my



research sample is "an object that is the target of popular suspicion and ridicule," this mindset may have inevitably led me to defend the behaviours of fans (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017: 13).

Additionally, as some marketing scholars have pointed out, research on brand communities should clearly distinguish between different types of brands (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005; Heere et al., 2024). This means that a human brand and a beverage brand may develop their communities in fundamentally different ways. This study specifically examines the elements of human brand construction within the Chinese context; therefore, its conclusions may not be directly applicable to other types of brands or different cultural settings (Cova and Pace, 2006).

### **7.5.2 Avenues for further study: the lens from alternative organisation**

Another potential contribution emerging from the findings pertains to alternative organisations. Although not fully discussed in the paper, the researcher believes this could serve as a potential direction for future research and calls upon organisational theorists to give it due attention. As Parker and Parker (2017:1375) suggested, the most evident way to engage in social reform is "is through the documentation and elaboration of alternative organisations that do things differently." Alternative organisation is not a novel concept, with early attempts tracing back to Follett's (1918) work on group organisation, which challenged the traditional hierarchical systems in organisations. Previous waves of alternative organisations experimentation have predominantly concentrated on western contexts, with empirical scrutiny spotlighting regions such as the UK and Europe (Bryer, 2020; Kokkinidis, 2015). Although the definition of what constitutes an alternative organisation is diverse, fundamentally, alternative organisations encompass members' expectations for more just societal configurations (Shanahan, 2023; Parker et al., 2013).

As an essential component in critical management studies, alternative organisations are often seen as a counterforce to mainstream organisations fostered by capitalism (Alvesson et al., 2009). In the entertainment industry dominated by celebrities in China, this kind of adversarial relationship can also be captured: artists as human brand, are the most valuable resources of an entertainment company invested by capitalists, normally have a dedicated team to ensure their productivity and commercial value to the company. These company employees are typically seen as traditional waged labour, directly hired and paid by the entertainment company. These employees are responsible for every aspect of the artist's career, including arranging the artists' work, promoting their creative outputs such as albums and films, managing media and public relations, and handling any legal issues that may arise.

In contrast, human brand organisations formed by fans are spontaneous and voluntary, characterized by their non-profit and unpaid efforts. The fundamental difference between these organisations and a traditional company is that they arise from a love and support for the brand, not from direct financial incentives. Members of brand organisations often spontaneously organise activities and promotions, even going beyond the duties of company employees, to support the artists they idolize. Their efforts are driven by personal passion rather than professional requirements or material reward. On this account, unlike the waged labour of company employees, the labour of brand organisations fundamentally rejects the possibility of becoming a source of capitalist production (Marx, 1976; Smith, 1976).

In previous literature on brand communities, discussions regarding alternative organisational practices have been notably absent. However, in this study, we identified a series of potential alternative practices and characteristics within Chinese brand organisations. Despite the leaders of fan organisations maintaining certain centralized and authoritarian practices, such as implementing stringent rules without

consulting the members within the organisation, the discoveries of decentralized decision-making processes, non-profit-oriented labour models, and the transparency regarding the financial conditions within these organisations all demonstrate the potential of Chinese fan organisations to serve as alternative entities (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017).

According to Alakavuklar (2023), brand organisations can be aptly classified as alternative substitute organisations. Within this framework, organisational members typically have neither the intention nor the ability to fundamentally alter the dominant production-consumption dynamic, which is characterized by the fact that artists are discovered and cultivated by entertainment companies. These artists, after their debut, are commodified and serve as a means of generating profit for the respective company. However, consumers in the organisations exhibit cooperative labour relations akin to a community kitchen (Dahlman et al., 2022; Parker & Parker, 2017), members are committed to improving such production-consumption relationships.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter theoretically addresses the research question of *How do Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online, and what characteristics do such consumer collectives exhibit?* To answer this question, the researcher first defines these entities and then deconstructs the concept of fans as consumers and fan organisations as brand organisations, ultimately situating the research question within the field of marketing. A notable contribution is the researcher's response to the significant gap identified regarding the formation of

brand communities (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005; Stokburger-Sauer and Wiertz, 2015; Heere et al., 2024). While there is growing interest in collective consumption behaviours and the emerging concept of brand communities, few studies explore how such consumer collectives are formed. Building on the concept of brand communities, this paper defines brand organisations as a form of human association independently and spontaneously established and operated by brand consumers that maintain consistent brand production through a clear internal hierarchy.

In my view, marketing scholars have successfully deconstructed the two tension-filled subjects in media and cultural studies: celebrities and fans. By redefining these subjects as human brands and consumers, respectively, they have seamlessly integrated them into mainstream marketing discussions. Some scholars have also recognised the numerous overlaps between consumer research and fan studies (Kozinets et al., 2008), still, mainstream organisational researchers have not paid attention to the controversial yet uniquely active group of fans. As a result, for a long time, discussions about fans within the broader context of business schools have been confined to marketing theory. This oversight by organisational theorists has led to the academic potential of fans as active agents being largely overlooked. With these insights, this chapter ultimately addresses the research question of "how consumers of human brands, form their own entities online?" The researcher approaches this by identifying three key constructs within brand organisations: production-oriented consumers, language-centred rituals, and brand content, highlighting them as essential elements in the formation of brand organisations. At the same time, the authors suggest five distinguishing characteristics of brand organisations that differentiate them from brand communities. These are productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency and adaptability.

In interpretive consumer research, scholars seek to understand consumers' lifestyles by adopting their perspectives (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). The understanding of consumer groups has progressively deepened from the initial introduction of the brand community concept (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), later expanding into the notion of the brand public, a media space sustained by specific practices (such as the use of hashtags), shaped by diverse meanings rather than shared values, and driven more by emotions than by interactions (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). This study advances interpretive consumer research through a long-term netnographic investigation by introducing the concept of the brand organization, which stands alongside the established notions of brand communities and brand publics. Building upon the foundation of brand communities, this concept is distinguished by five key attributes—productivity, independence, hierarchy, consistency, and adaptability—offering a nuanced perspective on brand-related consumer dynamics.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Overall summary**

This thesis was driven by a profound curiosity about the collective consumption behaviours exhibited by Chinese celebrity fans and the gaps identified in existing marketing theories regarding brand communities. The research aimed to explore how Chinese celebrity fans, as consumers of human brands, form their own entities online and the characteristics these consumer collectives exhibit. The phenomenon of fan-organised consumption in China, particularly in the digital age, presents a unique case for understanding the dynamics of collective consumer behaviour, which is increasingly relevant in both fandom studies and marketing research.

The study began by framing the research questions around the formation and characteristics of these collective consumer units, drawing attention to the lack of clear theoretical explanations in both fandom and marketing literature. To address these questions, a methodological approach combining symbolic interactionism and constructivist grounded theory was employed. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the social processes involved in the formation and operation of fan organisations, facilitated by a blend of netnography and semi-structured interviews. Over an 18-month period, the research delved into the online environments where fan organisations operate, offering a detailed examination of their structures, activities, and the ways they sustain and propagate the human brands they support.

The findings of this research contribute significantly to both fandom studies and marketing literature. One of the key contributions is the clarification of the terminological confusion in fandom studies, particularly the distinction between fan communities and fan organisations. This clarification helps in understanding the

organised and highly productive nature of these groups, which had previously been oversimplified in existing literature.

Most importantly, the research introduces the concept of "brand organisations," which builds on the existing idea of brand communities but emphasises the independence, hierarchy, productivity, consistency, and adaptability. Building on this analysis, the researcher argues that production-oriented consumers, language-centred rituals, and brand content are the essential elements that collectively shape the structure of a brand organisation. The identification of these characteristics offers a new lens through which to view collective consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of human brands. The study also highlights the pivotal role of consumers in co-creating brand value, transforming from passive recipients to active collective producer in the brand's lifecycle. Rituals, brand content, and the intricate hierarchies within these organisations further illuminate the complex social dynamics that sustain and grow these organisations.

This study addresses three significant gaps in the research on brand communities. Firstly, human brands have received relatively little attention in prior studies, despite the recognition of celebrities as human brands and the unique contributions of fans as consumers to these brands (Thomson, 2006). This research not only examines the development of human brands in China but also underscores the substantial consumer engagement with these brands, highlighting an increasing focus by marketers on this particular category. Secondly, earlier scholars have not clearly defined the issue of ownership in brand community research, leading to a blurring of distinctions between consumer-initiated and company-sponsored communities (Brodie et al., 2013). This study elaborates on the differences between the two, arguing that this distinction is crucial for differentiating brand organisations from brand communities and revealing that consumer-initiated brand organisations are more vulnerable to brand hijacking, a

phenomenon often overlooked by marketers (Wipperfurth, 2005). Thirdly, the existing literature predominantly focuses on mature brand communities, often neglecting the early stages and formation processes (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz, 2015). This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how consumers of human brands construct their organisations, thereby providing new insights into the formation and dynamics of these communities.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the concept of brand organisations offers a promising new direction for future research. It encourages scholars to explore these formations through the lens of organisational theory, potentially integrating fandom studies into broader discussions within organisational studies. The adaptability and democratic practices observed in these brand organisations indicate that they could serve as models for alternative forms of organisation, especially in environments with restrictive information and governance contexts.

In conclusion, this research not only fills important gaps in the understanding of human brand and collective consumer behaviour but also provides a robust framework for future inquiries into the organisational structures and brand organisations. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how human brands are supported and propagated in contemporary consumer culture, particularly within the unique sociopolitical and digital landscape of China.

## **8.2 Practical implications**

This study also makes several contributions for business practice. Firstly, as fans, who are consumers of human brands, have long been stigmatised, many companies behind these brands have not implemented targeted marketing strategies for fan consumers. Through long-term online ethnographic participant observation of fan organisations, this research illustrates the diverse consumption practices within these groups and



underscores their significant co-creative roles in brand production. This also suggests that marketing strategies for human brands can be shaped and executed not only by the company's professional marketers but also by consumers who are inclined to engage in value-enhancing activities for the brand. However, based on the researcher's observations, due to a lack of interaction between brand organisations and the companies themselves, with some brand organisations even deliberately rejecting company interference, cooperative efforts between these organisations and companies have yet to be observed.

Interestingly, previous research on collective consumer behaviour has often emphasised the opportunities it presents to companies, such as the potential to use online communities for brand development, improving customer relationships and fostering loyalty - factors that offer significant value to companies looking to launch new products or brands (Hajli et al., 2017). However, the practical contribution of this paper is to remind companies that in certain circumstances, corporate marketers should not overlook the collective challenge of consumers. This is particularly important when there is a discrepancy between consumer and firm views of the brand, especially when consumers perceive the firm's marketing strategies as failing. In such cases, incidents of brand hijacking are not uncommon. It is important to note that the emergence of research areas such as consumer communities or brand communities stems from the efforts of academics and practitioners to foster collective consumer commitment, engagement and, ultimately, brand equity. However, if brand hijacking is common and brand organisations do not support the company's specific marketing strategies for human brands, the results may be significantly different from the original intent behind the concept of brand communities.

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## Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Table

Fan Organisation	Informant	Age at time	Interview Date	Duration	Employment status	Role in the brand organisation
Org A	Kaka	23	12/04/2024	33 min	College Student	Planning Group
	Celia	22	25/02/2023	35 min	Full-time employee	Resource Group
	Bryant	24	25/02/2023	21 min	College Student	Resource Group
	U	24	30/04/2024	23 min	College Student	Planning Group
	Xiaocai	23	31/12/2022	27 min	College Student	Founder and leader
Org I	Paru	24	15/08/2022	30 min	Full-time employee	Leader
Org T	Jiyu	25	26/02/2023	31 min	Full-time employee	Leader
			30/07/2022	47 min		Leader
Org Y	Kikoo	23	06/05/2023	26 min	Full-time employee	Planning Group
	TT	23	24/08/2022	35 min	College Student	Leader
Org Z	Waiwai	24	24/02/2023	39 min	Full-time employee	Leader
			27/07/2022	59 min		Leader

Appendix B: An Example of an excerpt from an Interview Transcript (Interview with Waiwai, 27/07/2022)

Original text	Document after translated
说话人 2 10:45 你现在从策划组上升到管理之后，你 现在大概要做什么呢。	Speaker 2 10:45

<p>说话人 1 10:55          现在的话你我可能之前就了解策划都比较多，但是你上升你现在坐这个位置的话，可能其他一组你都得去了解，就有些事你也得都是他们下面去做啥的，然后其实最啥的一点就是你要跟公司那边就是说有一些消息给那边有沟通那个消息得互通，粉丝这边可能一些事情也得通过我们去告知公司那边，差不多就是这样一个状况。</p> <p>说话人 2 11:34          所以你现在管理着多少个组，就是除了应援组之外，你们有多少。</p> <p>说话人 1 11:42          我数一下，我看一下我看一下有多少个组？差不多七八位组。</p> <p>说话人 2 11:59          七八个组都要向你汇报是吗，感觉工作量还挺大的。</p> <p>说话人 1 12:04          对，但是但是有些事其实你也不用就是，每件事都去管着吗？可能有一些比较重要的是你可能得知道，但是一般来说他们自己可以运作的话，也不需要去多嘴啥的，反正因为自己也有自己的事情，不可能说一天 24 小时都开始手机去处理一些事情。</p> <p>说话人 2 12:31          你感觉就是你在不同的时期，在你支持的明星上花的时间是不是越来越多了？</p> <p>说话人 1 12:43          那还用说肯定要的。</p>	<p>Now that you've moved up from the promotion team to management, what are your main responsibilities?</p> <p>Speaker 1 10:55          Well, before, I mainly focused on understanding the promotion tasks, but now that I've moved up to this position, I need to be familiar with other teams as well. I have to know what each group is doing and oversee their tasks. The most important part, though, is communication with the company. We need to ensure that certain information is exchanged both ways. Fans might raise certain issues, and we need to communicate those to the company. So, it's essentially about bridging that communication gap.</p> <p>Speaker 2 11:34          How many teams are you managing now? Aside from the promotion team, how many do you oversee?</p> <p>Speaker 1 11:42          Let me count... let me think... there are about seven or eight teams.</p>
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	<p>Speaker 2 11:59</p> <p>So, all seven or eight teams report to you? That sounds like a heavy workload.</p> <p>Speaker 1 12:04</p> <p>Yes, but not every single matter needs my attention. For more critical issues, I need to be informed, but for things they can handle on their own, I don't have to intervene. Everyone has their own responsibilities, and I can't spend 24 hours a day glued to my phone dealing with everything.</p> <p>Speaker 2 12:31</p> <p>Do you feel like the time you've spent supporting the celebrity has increased over the different stages?</p> <p>Speaker 1 12:43</p> <p>Of course! It definitely has.</p>
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Appendix C: A screenshot of the author's coding of the above conversation using NVivo, with the display on the right showing different categories from the same transcript.

7.27Waiwai.m...  
7.27Waiwai.mp3-transcript

Coding StripesHighlightCodeAnnotationsCode PanelEdit

说话人2 10:45  
你现在从策划上升到管理之后，你现在大概要做什么呢。

说话人1 10:55  
现可能之前就了解应援都比较多，但是你上升你现在坐这个位置的话，可能其他组你都得去了解，就有些事你也得都是他们下面去做啥的，然后其实最啥的一点就是你要跟公司那边就是说有一些消息给那边有沟通那个消息得互通，粉丝这边可能一些事情也得通过我们去告知公司那边，差不多就是这样一个状况。

说话人2 11:34  
所以你现在管理着多少个组，就是除了应援组之外，你们有多少。

说话人1 11:42  
我数一下，我看一下我看一下有多少个组？差不多七八个组。

说话人2 11:59  
七八个组都要向你汇报是吗，你感觉工作量还挺大的。

说话人1 12:04  
对，但是但是有些事其实你也不用就是，每件事都去管着吗？可能有一些比较重要的是你可能得知道，但是一般来说他们自己可以运作的话，也不需要去多嘴傻的，反正因为自己也有自己的事情，不可能说一天24小时都开始手机去处理一些事情。

说话人2 12:31  
你感觉就是你在不同的时期，在你支持的明星上花的时间是不是越来越多了？

说话人1 12:43  
那还要说肯定要。

CODE STRIPES

Fan Labour

Coding Density

• 管理 Management department

• 应援组 Support team

• 成员加入

• 职位变动 Position change

• 和公司

• Org size

• number of departments

• number of people

• 初始阶段 Initial stage

• Org value

• profit?

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