
Toxic Fandom: Digital Labor in Chinese Social Media¹

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Background

Generally speaking, a fandom is a subcultural community of fans characterized by a sense of camaraderie with others who share a common interest regarding a piece of popular media, a fictional character, a celebrity, etc. We can think of fandoms as the expression of a “participatory culture,”² which involves engagement in shaping texts within an informal community characterized by reciprocity, social interaction, and diversity. Each member of the community contributes with their time and creativity, resulting in the production, circulation, and integration of information and creation, such as fan art, fanfiction, etc.

In today's digital media environment, fandoms have become increasingly mainstream as the emotional proximity constructed by online social media finds affinity with the intimacy needs of fan communities.³ While fans can find joy and a sense of belonging and fulfillment when part of a fandom, digital platforms also benefit from such participation by collecting, merging, and analyzing large amounts of data for profit. When fans voluntarily click and browse, comment, and interact with posts for fun, these actions are commodified by numerous social media partners known as data brokers,⁴ eventually blurring the line between leisure and a new kind of digital unpaid work.

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² Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge, 1992.

³ Zheng, Xiqing. “Similar Structure and Intimacy of Online Fan Communities and Online Social Platforms. 网络粉丝社群和网络社交平台的同构性和亲密性” *Journal of Guangzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 5, 2023, pp. 70-80.

⁴ Crain, Matthew. "The Limits of Transparency: Data Brokers and Commodification." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 88-104.

Data brokers generally refer to companies that specialize in the collection, analysis and exchange of personal information in the digital environment for profit.

Scholars call the various forms of labor on online platforms unpaid digital labor. This typically assumes the form of voluntary free labor, also referred to as “playbor” (play/labor).⁵ In a playbor condition within a

fandom, a fan can enjoy voluntarily supporting their idol, even while their social media traces are being monetized and converted into profit by others. Social media platforms and data brokers profit out of digital labor not only by collecting user data and behavior,⁶ but also extracting data from the spontaneous creation, distribution, and community-building efforts of users.

This case study focuses on fandoms in contemporary China, where fans form highly organized groups on social media platforms and willingly invest their personal time and money to increase the popularity of their idols. According to a report by iResearch Consulting Group in 2020, the market value

Digital Labor or Unpaid Digital Labor refers to users' free contributions, such as content creation, data generation, and community management, monetized by digital platforms without direct compensation. It is also known as free labor or playbor.

of China's celebrity fan economy was estimated at over 4 trillion yuan (US \$619.2 billion) in 2019.⁷ On Weibo, China's equivalent of X (formerly Twitter), the record for the most shared post of all time was held by a boy band member, whose birthday post was shared more than 40 million times by fans.⁸ Operated by Sina Corporation since 2009, Weibo became the largest social media platform for Chinese fandom around 2015.⁹ Such success is due to Weibo's

⁵ Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text*, vol. 18, no. 263, 2000, pp. 33-58; Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge, 2014.

⁶ Similar to digital labor, Dallas Smythe proposed the concept of audience labor, suggesting that the reason users can "freely" enjoy a vast amount of audiovisual resources in broadcast television programs is that their time and attention spent listening to/watching the programs are sold to advertisers as an "audience commodity." See Smythe, D. W. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1977, pp. 1-27.

⁷ iResearch. "2020 China Celebrity Economy Business Model and Trend Research Report." iResearch, 24 July 2020, www.iresearch.com.cn/Detail/report?id=3623&isfree=0. Accessed 18 June 2024.

⁸ The most reposts of a Weibo™ post is 42,776,438 reposts achieved on a post originally made by Wang Junkai (China) on 21 September 2014. The number of reposts was verified on 19 June 2015. See <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2015/6/lead-singer-wang-junkai-of-chinese-boyband-tfboys-gets-record-breaking-number-of-386087>

⁹ Tong, Qi. "The Data War of Fan Circle Girls: Digital Labor, Emotional Consumption, and Neoliberalism. 饭圈女孩的流量战争: 数据劳动、情感消费与新自由主义" *Journal of Guangzhou University: Social Science Edition*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2020, pp. 72-79.

numerous strategies and ample functions for hosting diverse fan communities, as will be further discussed.

Behind these massive numbers and the rapidly growing development is the emergency of “toxic fandoms.” Fans’ affection for their idols has gradually transformed fandoms into masses of excessive admirers and high volume consumers, who voluntarily provide continuous and overwhelmingly unpaid digital labor.¹⁰ Toxic fandoms can be understood as a series of concerning digital labor activities, such as fans devoting their time and money to improve their favorites’ rankings on various lists initiated and operated by social media platforms such as Weibo, pooling their money to over-purchase products endorsed by their idols, spamming bot-like positive comments on social media to modify or hijack public opinion, etc.¹¹ These actions not only disrupt the media environment, but also put the fans into a playbor condition. Beneath the surface of collective ritual and joy, these fans can also get trapped into exhaustion and helplessness from the endless data labor required to keep their idols on top of the platforms’ rankings.

Case Study

Browsing the celebrity's homepage and social media posts, making sure that each visit lasts more than 15 seconds, reposting the promo post several times, and leaving kudos for positive comments under recent posts—this is the initial daily routine for a celebrity Chinese fan on Weibo. After that, this fan will move on to other tasks, such as checking in with the “Super Topic” community daily,¹² reporting negative comments based on information they find, completing various voting tasks to support their idol, and so on. The activities fans undertake to support their idols are so complex and varied that it is difficult to list them all. At its core, the logic of all the activities is to promote their idols knowing that their behaviors will become quantifiable data and comparable numbers. These numbers signal a star’s social influence and commercial value. A win in numbers represents a star’s success and future opportunities.

¹⁰ Yin, Yiyi. "An Emergent Algorithmic Culture: The Data-ization of Online Fandom in China." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020, pp. 475-492.

¹¹ These activities are considered typically troubling and originated from Chinese online fandom. See Ge, Liang, and Erika Ningxin Wang. “Scapegoating Fandom: Digital Colonialism, Capitalism, and Chinese Party-State Power.” *criticalasianstudies.org* Commentary Board, 16 May 2022; <https://doi.org/10.52698/XMVR6735>.

¹² A Super Topic is a Reddit-like community page feature via a tag on Weibo that brings together people with common interests via #keywords#. These tags are ranked according to traffic data and updated in real time. Unlike regular Weibo topics, where users can post and express opinions immediately after searching, Super Topics have stricter management rules to exclude those who are not passionate enough about a particular topic, usually a celebrity.

Within the fandom world, fans have coined a term for these numbers: “traffic data” (liuliang 流量). They describe popular stars as “carrying traffic data” and, conversely, call for “not giving them traffic data” when boycotting certain public figures. In other words, for fans, traffic data is not only an indicator of celebrity popularity, but also a clear measure by which fans’ digital market can be compared.¹³

What does traffic data actually mean and how does it work? On the surface, traffic data refers to user visits to a website over a period of time. Specific metrics can include unique visitors, repeat visitors, and page views. In addition, certain user behaviors, such as time spent on a page, referring sites, and search engines or keywords used, are also part of traffic data. Since the birth of the Internet industry, traffic data has been a core standard for measuring the commercial value of a website.¹⁴

On Weibo, traffic data has rendered one of the most significant connections between fans and their idols, which is eventually converted into the platform’s profit. Based on that, the platform, functioning as a data broker, has developed many functions designed to regulate and mobilize fandom activities in order to stimulate traffic data production. Weibo strategically quantifies casual users into visible data and ranks them according to different patterns and rankings, such as the top 50 of Super Topic, providing multiple routes for fans to contribute digital labor and encouraging such activities.

Fans have been disciplined to routinize digital labor in their daily activities on Weibo and have continuously learned the most efficient way to use Weibo based on the shifting algorithmic rules.¹⁵ As shown in Figure 1, the ranking of user-generated data on Weibo is determined by the complex coding of multiple indices. Each index pertains to a particular category of online practice. For instance, the “interactive index” is determined by the number of kudos, reposts, and comments regarding content posted by users, whereas the “social impact index” is determined by the number of views of Weibo posts containing a user’s full name. Again, these

¹³ Tong, Qi. "The Data War of Fan Circle Girls: Digital Labor, Emotional Consumption, and Neoliberalism. 饭圈女孩的流量战争: 数据劳动、情感消费与新自由主义" *Journal of Guangzhou University: Social Science Edition*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2020, pp. 72-79.

¹⁴ Gao, Hanning. "The War of 'Digital Labor': The Chaos of 'Fan Circles' and the Production Mechanism of the Idol Industry in the Internet Age. “数字劳工”们的战争: 饭圈乱象与互联网时代的偶像工业生产机制" *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, no. 4, 2022, pp. 163-174.

¹⁵ Yin, Yiyi. "An Emergent Algorithmic Culture: The Data-ization of Online Fandom in China." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020, pp. 475-492.

indices are displayed on Weibo to inform fans of the formal rules of algorithmic games and encourage them to play accordingly to add up to their idols' commercial value.

Figure 1. The data indicators on one celebrity's Weibo¹⁶



These algorithmic dynamics, designed to stimulate profitable data production, have gradually been internalized by fandom as a way of proving a fan's love. As aspects of affective contribution, the norm of online interaction on Weibo is transformed into the duties of online fan communities. Celebrity fans determine the most economical posting format in order to contribute effectively to all indices, as for example: “#Super Topic + emoticon + #hashtag + text containing at least 15 characters + @celebrity.”¹⁷ Accordingly, they also have to attune their interaction with their idols as ways of showing love. According to the report “2018 Weibo Fans White Paper,” 41.6% of fans have a role in data production within official fan clubs on Weibo, and 84.1% of fans have participated in data-groups' activities.¹⁸

¹⁶ Yin, Yiyi. "An Emergent Algorithmic Culture: The Data-ization of Online Fandom in China." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020, p. 483. The screenshot shows the traffic data of a celebrity on the New Star Ranking on Weibo, which can be seen by any visitor.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “2018 Twitter Fans White Paper.” *AIMAN Data*, 23 Dec. 2018. Reposted on *Digitaling*, <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/187928.html>. Accessed 10 July 2024.

The core daily activity for Chinese celebrity fans is called “hitting the charts” (datou 打投), which includes fans dedicating themselves to voting, reposting, commenting, or even spending real money to inflate their idols’ metrics. Within the fandom, big fans (dafen 大粉), who are discourse leaders with a large number of followers, organize and assign various data-related tasks to fans who want to participate in the fandom. Fans can be assigned to strategy groups, voting groups, commenting groups, financial groups, etc. With such strict management, fans can even organize to eliminate negative information about their idols by playing with Weibo’s strict reporting mechanism, which deletes massively reported content. This potential to influence public discourse through data hijacking has led to a common practice known as “comment control” (kongping 控评). On Weibo, comments are not sorted by the time they are posted, but by the number of kudos they receive. The most common way to control comments is for fans to post a template of “positive comments” in the comment section, often promoting the star’s career achievements. Then, organized by the fandom community, many fans add kudos to these comments, filling the visible timeline with these positive remarks.¹⁹

Competition and comparison fuel conflict, especially in the idol industry, where imagined intimacy of a celebrity is a key selling point and clashes and disputes among fans become inevitable.²⁰ In June 2021, the Cyber Administration of China (CAC) launched the “clean-up” campaign against harming fandom activities in the country. The stated goal of the campaign is to control the collective behaviors of fans, including “hitting the charts,” excessive consumption of endorsed products, intense fan conflicts, and so on.²¹ Although such critiques harshly condemn fans and their behaviors and blame them for disrupting everyday social life, many scholars counter this rhetoric by arguing that fans are at the very end of the entertainment industry’s food chain and are vulnerable to exploitation.²²

Analysis shows that the fandom targeted by critics is actually a large, well-organized, fast-moving group connected primarily through Weibo. They support their idols through ritualized data labor and collective emotional consumption, driven by platform algorithms, big

¹⁹ Activity details are collected from interviews with fans. Shared with permission.

²⁰ Gao, Hanning. "The War of 'Digital Labor': The Chaos of 'Fan Circles' and the Production Mechanism of the Idol Industry in the Internet Age. “数字劳工”们的战争: 饭圈乱象与互联网时代的偶像工业生产机制" *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, no. 4, 2022, pp. 172-174.

²¹ “Central Cyberspace Administration of China Launches ‘Clean-up’: Rectification of Fandom Chaos' Special Action.” *Central Cyberspace Administration of China*, 15 June 2021, https://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-06/08/c_1624735580427196.htm. Accessed 10 July 2024.

²² Ge and Wang (2020); Tong(2020); Gao(2022); Yin(2020); Yin(2021). See footnotes above.

data, and the digital economy.²³ In essence, toxic fandom is a system that cannot profit without exploiting fans' digital labor—and when fomenting conflict among digital workers, more traffic data is produced and more profit is generated. It relies on fans' extensive investments (time, money, and emotion) while being plagued by inevitable internal conflicts. It seems unfair to make users culpable if they are led by the design of the platforms into a situation where mutual strife is the only way to go. Toxic fandom ends up being the product resultant of leisure activities transformed into digital labor, and fans' love for their idols converted into a platform's profit.

Processing Questions

- 1) What is a fandom?
- 2) What is digital labor in the context of online platforms? What is its relation to the concept of playbor?
- 3) What are some examples of digital labor that fans engage on social media like Weibo?
- 4) What are some of the ways that social media platforms convert fan engagement into profitable data?
- 5) What is “hitting the chart”? What is the significance of traffic data in these activities?
- 6) What is toxic fandom? and What is the relationship between toxic fandom and digital labor?
- 7) What are the goals of the Cyber Administration of China's campaign against toxic fandom?

Thematic Reflection and Discussion

Datafication and Data Ethics

Datafication refers to the transformation of people's action into online quantified data, enabling new forms of surveillance, control, and economic advantage by data brokers. Considering toxic fandoms as an example of datafication, ethical concerns arise regarding the privacy of users, the transparency of data collection processes, and the fairness of profiting from users' unpaid labor.

- 1) How do social media platforms like Weibo contribute to datafication?

²³ Tong, Qi. "The Data War of Fan Circle Girls: Digital Labor, Emotional Consumption, and Neoliberalism. 饭圈女孩的流量战争: 数据劳动、情感消费与新自由主义" *Journal of Guangzhou University: Social Science Edition*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2020, pp. 72-73.

- 2) How does the datafication of fan activities on platforms like Weibo impact fan's behavior and autonomy?
- 3) What are some of the ethical issues that arise from the monetization of fan data by social media platforms?
- 4) In your opinion, how can platforms ensure transparency and fairness in their data collection and usage practices?

Emotional Digital Labor

Fans' digital labor is often driven by emotional investment and a sense of community, which not rarely consumes fans' time, money, and dedication as well. Understanding digital labor involves examining the blurred boundaries between work and play and the ways in which platforms capitalize on user engagement.

- 1) What are some of the social, psychological, and economic consequences of fans' emotional digital labor?
- 2) How does the emotional investment of fans contribute to their conversion into digital laborers?
- 3) In your opinion, is it fair or not that digital platforms design their algorithms to incentivize more fan engagement, and consequently, more emotional labor? Why?
- 4) What strategies can fans and platforms adopt to recognize and fairly address digital labor?

Regulation

In response to the issues of toxic fandom and exploitation of digital labor, regulatory actions, such as the Cyber Administration of China's "clean-up" campaign, have been initiated. These measures aim to curb harmful behaviors and to protect users. However, some defend that the rhetoric of criticizing fandom as toxic can put the blame on users' behaviors, limit user freedoms, and overlook the role of digital platforms and their design.

- 1) What kind of regulatory measures could be used to address the root causes of toxicity and digital labor in fandoms?
- 2) Design a flyer for a campaign aiming at increasing awareness of social media users about toxic fandoms. Think of the main message you want to convey and how you can convey this message effectively.

