

# Fans, Capital, and Affection: A Game of Love and Money

**Kexin Li<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, Yile Liu<sup>1,b</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Shanghai Weiyu International High School, Shanghai, 200231, China*

<sup>2</sup>*Nanjing Zhonghua High School, Nanjing, 210000, China*

*a. rosalyynn0419@163.com, b. Ella\_YileLIU@outlook.com*

*\*corresponding author*

## **Abstract:**

This paper explores fan culture's emotional projection and consumption behavior among female consumers and how brands can leverage the fan economy for marketing. Taking the beauty industry as an example, the paper analyzes how celebrity endorsement can transform female fans' affections into consumption power, pointing out that fan culture has evolved into a complex fandom economy, with capital and platforms colluding to transform fans' affections into commercial interests. The fan economy has a special impact on women, whose purchasing decisions are often influenced by community dynamics and expectations of their idols. The emotional connection of the fan economy should be built based on rational consumption and mutual respect, especially focusing on women's unique needs and psychological feelings, to truly realize its value and promote the diversified development of social culture.

**Keywords:** Fan economy, Affection consumption, Capital operation

## **1. Introduction**

For female consumers, fan culture is an entertainment phenomenon and a reflection of emotional projection and consumer behavior. They are not only concerned about the practical function of the product but also integrate emotions into the consumption behavior and pay for their loved ones and loved things. This emotional consumption behavior is especially significant among women, who are willing to invest a lot of time and money in their favorite idols and brands and regard it as a way of emotional expression.

To understand fan culture, it is necessary to look beyond the traditional "audience" perspective and consider fans as independent individuals with emotional needs. Fan culture has gradually evolved into

a complex fandom economy driven by commercial interests. Capital and platforms conspire to transform fans' affections into commercial interests, turning effective consumption into fan exploitation.

Taking the beauty industry as an example, the article analyzes how brands use celebrity endorsement and blogger marketing to transform fans' emotions into consumption power. The significance of this article lies in the fact that it analyzes the fan economy in a broader socio-cultural context from the perspective of communication, explores the complex relationship between fans, capital, and culture, and provides new ideas for understanding contemporary cultural consumption.

## 2. The Fan Economy Behind Male Celebrity Endorsements of Beauty Products

According to Fiske's (2010) understanding, the fan can be defined as a general term for individuals and groups constructing fandom objects and plenary labels to satisfy psychological needs through organized, communicative behaviors around relevant fandom.

### 2.1 . Literature Review

The research on fans is a cultural research paradigm, which benefits from the Frankfurt School's critical paradigm of viewing audiences as victims of Ford's assembly line industrial culture and is also deeply influenced by the cultural research paradigm of "ritual resistance" of active audiences in the subcultural theory of the Birmingham School in the United Kingdom. The former sees fans as blind and mindless, while the latter gives fans an active, dynamic, and creative reproduction role (Jenkins, 2012). These studies are confined to fan textual information, emotional symbols, and discourse systems, neglecting discussing fan-economic relations. Another perspective is the political economy of the communication paradigm, which argues that fan culture is the result of the collusion between capital and platforms to alienate fans, turning affections into labor (Negri & Hardt, 1999) and trapping fans in a closed loop of exploitation that includes "creating stars on screen, developing fandom and loyal fans, expanding influence, and finally profiting on fans." According to Mel Stanfill, the fan is a constructed concept that can be arbitrarily shaped by others (capital, officials, media, etc.) and arbitrarily dressed up by researchers (Stanfill, 2019).

Using fans as an affective tendency to describe the subject of consumption indicates that fans have been distinguished from ordinary consumers. From the point of the purpose of consumption, ordinary consumers are more interested in the practical value of the product and consume its function. Their consumption behavior is influenced by many factors, such as appearance, price, origin, etc., and there is no emotional connection with the product. Fans produce a fascinating emotion because of someone or something, so their love for the product and input to the consumption are higher; this emotional consumption behavior on the consumer subject has an important impact, which produces the significance of the consumer culture.

### 2.2 . Western Trend

In the 2021 *Women's Quality of Life Trends Insight Report* released by CBNDData, the women's consumer market

broke \$10 trillion. Chinese Women are most willing to spend on products that enhance their appearance, with clothing, shoes, bags, and beauty care products topping the list of women's favorites. The ratio of male to female beauty users in China is close to 1:5 (RED, 2024).

While the target consumers of these products are mostly women, male celebrities endorsing "female" products are nothing new. Taking beauty products as an example, as early as the mid-1990s, the Japanese beauty brand Kanebo invited Takuya Kimura, who became famous for his role in the TV opera *Long Vacation*, to endorse its lipsticks, and within just two months, it achieved a record sale of 3 million units (Hongrui, 2018).

As time passes, beauty brands appoint male spokespeople more frequently and with a distinct geography. In the U.S., where male beauty bloggers are more popular than male celebrities, Dior Beauty, Covergirl, and Maybelline have also engaged with them in recent years, appointing Sean Garrette, James Charles, and Manny Gutierrez, respectively, as male spokespeople for their brands.

Most of these bloggers are champions of diversity and inclusion, with Sean Garrette representing equity for people of color and James Charles and Manny Gutierrez representing the queer and drag culture. By tying in with these opinion leaders, brands can quickly assert their standpoints and win favor with consumers seeking emotional expression.

In addition, compared to celebrities, beauty bloggers are better able to act as brand endorsers because of their deep expertise. They can explain a product's benefits, who it is for, and how consumers can incorporate it into their daily skincare and makeup routine.

### 2.3 . Chinese Situation

#### 2.3.1 . Developing Loyal Fans

In contrast, brands in the Chinese market prefer to communicate with consumers through influential idols. Since Lu Han became the face of Lancôme Greater China in 2016, there has been a boom in male celebrity endorsement of beauty brands in China. According to CBNDData (2021), from 2017 to 2020, the number in China soared from less than 50 to 200, an increase of more than four times.

*2019 Sina Weibo Celebrity White Papers* shows that the distribution of female users of entertainment stars' microblogging active fans accounts for 81.6%, of which 74.4% are young women aged 20 to 29, which happens to be the main group of beauty consumers. Their willingness to consume celebrity-related products is also increasing

year by year.

British scholar Hills (2003) found that in transforming the media industry from broadcasting to narrowcasting, loyal fans are most likely to become consumers under a strong attraction. If companies want to make a profit, they don't have to maximize the number of average consumers; they create and cater to a certain number of the most loyal ones.

Therefore, in China, male celebrities can not only increase sales figures for brands but also achieve strong and continuous exposure. Female fans are attached and active, usually browsing social media for celebrity-related content, which is a huge benefit for brands promoting their products. Hiring a spokesperson at the same price is more cost-effective than purchasing direct advertising resources, as it generates more spontaneous retweets and positive reception.

### 2.3.2 . Fans' Participation in the Construction

At the same time, China's fandom economy has a highly organized stargazing model, showing more community, organization, professionalism, interest, and online and offline composite. It is a more mature idol-centered fan economy model. The talent show is a typical case in point. The voting mechanism brings fans into the cultural production chain of the idol, which not only generates income for the show and idols but also creates a psychological sense among fans that their support is important.

Shrewd merchants naturally caught on to this and capitalized on the sentiment of mutual comparison among fans of various families, designing serial traps to keep them consuming. In May 2021, a talent show called *Youth With You Three* and its sponsor Mengniu set the QR code for voting in the milk bottle cap, so videos circulated on the Internet of fans buying large quantities of milk and not drinking them but only keeping the caps to scan the code to vote, and even hiring people to pour the milk specially. Under the rules of specific programs and the culture of Chinese fandom, fans form deformed self-sacrificing psychology that fans do not work hard enough to make idols unable to continue their career. Fan consumption and the commercial income of idols are bound. Under the invisible rule of "only fans spend money, idols have endorsements," many fans buy many products that exceed their needs, wasting resources.

Therefore, even though fans are women, and choosing beauty products endorsed by women better reflects the product's suitability, they are still willing to pay for their male idols. Some brand marketing in China does not cater to the aesthetics of Chinese consumers, such as MAC,

endorsed by Wenhan Li; Makeup Forever, endorsed by Chenyu Hua; and Shiseido, endorsed by Xuan Huang, which arranges makeup and styling for celebrities that not suitable for them, and the advertisements, which are supposed to be about celebrities leaving a beautiful image and brands showing off the advantages of their products, have produced the opposite effect, as the Chinese public lose consumer desire because of the advertisements. But there will always be fans to pay for them no matter how well they are presented.

### 2.3.3 . Fans' Promotion of the Economy

Under post-Fordist production conditions, elastic capital accumulation requires producers to pay close attention to consumer reactions during product design, production, and marketing to capture better-changing market demands. Many companies recognize that the affective investment of fans in their products is a valuable form of affective capital. The value of a brand lies in the lasting affective connection that fans (consumers) develop with the brand. In addition, fans willingly spend much time and energy on their favorite objects to satisfy their emotional needs. Their unpaid labor constitutes the main source of value in the new online economy. Currently, the user-driven Web 2.0 model mostly relies on fans (users) to contribute to popularity, traffic, and content, and the attention of fans has become a key factor in the development and growth of online communities.

In addition to its certain degree of fame and users of large brands, China has a lot of niche brands that rely on the hiring of celebrity spokespersons into the public eye, such as SASELOMO hiring the UNINE and Dr. Plant hiring William Chan, through the celebrity effect to occupy a place in China's skincare market successfully. The goal should be for the brand to not only benefit from the influence of celebrities but also to develop a unique brand reputation and provide qualified productions that maintain a healthy relationship with the public.

## 3. Conclusion

Through studying fan culture, this paper reveals the complex dilemmas fan groups face under the operation of capital. It discusses the strategies and effectiveness of brands utilizing the "fan economy" for marketing.

As a new type of economic model, the fan economy reflects consumers' emotional commitment and value recognition of products. Female consumers, in particular, often show stronger emotional commitment and a sense of community belonging in the fan economy. Brands have achieved their product promotion and marketing goals

by capitalizing on the high attachment, activity, and consumption power of their fan base.

However, some brands in China rely excessively on influential idols, ignoring consumers' own needs and the product's value, which tends to lead to the short-termination and utilitarian nation of the brand image and fails to establish a long-term emotional connection with consumers and female consumers are more likely to feel this empty connection. The commercial operation of the fan economy has led to the alienation of some fan groups, especially women, into "data workers," whose behavior has been overly manipulated and exploited to increase exposure and commercial performance of celebrities and brands, losing their rational judgment.

The essence of the fan economy should not be the "harvesting" of capital but the emotional connection between consumers, idols, and brands. When this emotional connection is based on rational consumption and mutual respect, with special emphasis on the experience and feelings of female consumers, the fan economy can truly realize its value and promote the development of social and cultural diversity.

## References

- [1] Maganioti, A.E., Chrissanthi, H.D., Charalabos, P.C., Andreas, R.D., George, P.N. and Christos, C.N. (2010) Cointegration of Event-Related Potential (ERP) Signals in Experiments with Different Electromagnetic Field (EMF) Conditions. *Health*, 2, 400-406.
- [2] Booterabi, F., Haapasalo, J., Smith, E., Haapasalo, H. and Parkkila, S. (2011) Carbonic Anhydrase VII—A Potential Prognostic Marker in Gliomas. *Health*, 3, 6-12.
- [3] Glendinning, I. (2013). Comparison of policies for Academic Integrity in Higher Education across the European Union. Retrieved from <http://ketlib.lib.unipi.gr/xmlui/bitstream/handle%20European%20Union.pdf?sequence=2>
- [4] CBNDData. (2021). 2021 Beauty Market Celebrity Marketing Insights Report. Retrieved from 2021 美妆市场明星营销观察报告 | CBNDData
- [5] CBNDData. (2021). 2021 Women's Quality of Life Trend Insight Report. Retrieved from 2021 女性品质生活趋势洞察报告 | CBNDData
- [6] Fiske, J. (2010). *Understanding popular culture*. Routledge.
- [7] Hills, M. (2003). *Fan cultures*. Routledge.
- [8] Hongrui, L. (2018). Love me, love my lipstick. Retrieved from Love me, love my lipstick - Chinadaily.com.cn
- [9] Jenkins, H. (2012). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- [10] Negri, A., & Hardt, M. (1999). Value and affect. *boundary* 2, 26(2), 77-88.
- [11] RED. (2024). Chinese Beauty Industry White Paper. Retrieved from 小红书 2024 中国美妆行业白皮书 | CBNDData
- [12] Stanfill, M. (2019). *Exploiting fandom: How the media industry seeks to manipulate fans*. University of Iowa Press.
- [13] Sina. 2019 Sina Weibo Celebrity White Papers. Retrieved from 新浪微博联合艾漫数据发布“2019明星白皮书”(文末提供白皮书完整版)\_ 篇章 (sohu.com)