

Powered by Love: A Study on Symbolic Consumption of Idol-Endorsed Products

-- A Comparative Analysis of College Students with Different Levels of Fandom Engagement

Xinyu Lei^{1, a}

¹School of Foreign Studies, Hunan University of Science and Technology, Chongqing 400000, China

^aleixinyu 13@gmail.com

Abstract

The rise of fan economies and idol endorsement models has made "spending for love" a defining phenomenon in youth cultural consumption. As the main force in fan economies, the consumption behaviour of college students has attracted a lot of attention. This paper will be based on interviews. According to the Audience Spectrum Theory proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), the three categories of college student fans are: core fans, casual fans and bystanders. Three typical cases from each group will be introduced in detail. The purpose is to study the different reasons for consumption, various interpretations of symbolic meanings, and various strategies for identity construction among the three types of college student fans who buy products recommended by their idols.

Keywords

Symbolic consumption Affective economy Identity College student fans Idol endorsement.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the promotion of digital media technology and the industrialisation of the entertainment sector, the "fan economy" has begun to play an important role in the cultural consumption market. Now, "Consuming for Love" has emerged as an iconic phenomenon of young people's cultural consumption, and idol-endorsed products act as crucial symbolic links connecting emotional ties and the decision to purchase. Among college students, the main force behind the fan economy, there are many long-ignored differences in their consumption behaviour. Most studies have treated the group of "fans" as uniform and have failed to discover the systematic differences in symbolic consumption among people with different levels of engagement (core fans, casual fans, etc.). Therefore, this paper will use a comparative method to explore the differences in motivation, interpretation of symbolic meaning and construction of identity among the three groups of college students who are fans of idol-endorsed products. It will add to the theoretical basis of understanding the inner workings of the fan economy and provide some specific references for related activities.

1.2. Research Questions

Research Question: What are the similarities and differences in consumption motivation, interpretation of symbolic meaning and identity construction strategy among the three types

of college student fans of products promoted by their idols: core fans, casual fans and bystanders? Secondary research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the consumption behavior patterns (frequency, product categories, decision-making methods) for the three types of fans?
2. How do the three types of fans understand the symbol of buying their favourite idol's endorsements?
3. How do the three types of fans understand the symbolic meaning behind buying the endorsements of their favourite idols?

1.3. Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance:

1. This paper adds to the research on fan communities by not treating all "fans" in the same way as before. At the three levels of core, casual and observer, we can study different groups in the fan community in more detail to provide precise and flexible analysis of the complex fan ecosystem.
2. Strengthened the "differentiation" connotation of the theory of symbolic consumption: Baudrillard believes that the essence of consumption is symbolic competition of differences. Through close group comparisons, this study has empirically demonstrated that the same symbolic carrier (products endorsed by idols) can be imbued with all sorts of distinct symbolic values and carry different weights and meanings based on the position of the consuming subject (college student fans) in the fan hierarchy.

Practical significance:

1. Aids in the optimisation and differentiation of brand marketing communication and strategy, so as to make better use of marketing resources.
2. It can help parents, teachers and the general public form a reasonable view of youth fandom culture, dispel the stereotype that college students are "blindly fanatical" or "wasteful spenders", and provide an evidence-based basis for discussion rather than moralistic criticism; thus, they can communicate with young people more effectively and guide them to develop good consumption habits and a rational attitude towards idols.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fan studies: From passive Audiences to Differentiated participation

The first research on fan culture started in 1992, and then Henry Jenkins proposed the definition of fans as "poachers of popular culture" and pointed out that these people have their own interpretations of existing texts. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) put forward a model of audiences in the work "Audience: A Social Theory of Performance and Imagination", which is a continuum of consumers, fans, enthusiasts, aficionados and small-scale producers; Hills (2002) suggested that there are social hierarchies among fan communities [3], and this idea has been carried forward in later studies. Wan Anlun and Wang Jingning (2021) classified the three types of internet fans as core fans, casual fans and bystanders [4]. Wang Yixuan (2019) believes that the three parts of the structure of fan communities are the "leading core fans, participating casual fans and bystander influence" [5].

2.2. Symbolic Consumption Theory

Baudrillard (1970) believed that in modern society, consumption has moved away from the use-value orientation of things and towards seeking symbolic significance. Commodities have become symbols of social identity, cultural taste and group affiliation, and the essence of consumption is now the competition for distinct symbols [6]. In this study, idol-endorsed products are typical "symbolic objects", and the purchase of such products fundamentally

involves consuming the symbolic meaning associated with the idol that is attached to the product.

2.3. Affective Economy Theory

According to the theory of affect economy, fans' emotions, enthusiasm and community labour in the digital media era can be systematically measured, managed and monetised by capital (Berlant, 2011; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013)[7][8], and "Powered by Love" is a representative case of this affect economy; fans have turned "love" into "electricity" (consumption power).

2.4. Identity Construction Theory

Goffman's (1959) "dramaturgical theory" believes that the social world is a stage for living, and we all present ourselves to others through "front-stage" behaviour [9]. Therefore, in this paper, the act of buying products endorsed by idols is considered one of the main ways fans perform and assert their status on the "fan identity spectrum".

3. Method

3.1. Research Methodology

Interviews will be carried out in this paper. Based on the audience spectrum theory by Abercrombie and Longhurst in 1998, the three levels of "Core-General-Passersby" were set up. Purposeful sampling was carried out in the three tiers of the super topic, consumption patterns and self-identity. Nine college students were chosen as the fans. A four-part outline was used for the discussion of the semi-structured interview guide in this paper; it included, but was not limited to: consumption behaviour, symbolic significance, community participation and identity construction. Each interview was about 15 minutes long and was fully audio-recorded and transcribed. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Information

ID	Fan Type	Super Topic Level	Gender	Institution
A01	Core Fan	11	Female	South China Normal University
A02	Core Fan	11	Female	Yantai University
A03	Core Fan	13	Female	Shanxi Business and Technology College
B01	Regular Fan	9	Female	Yangtze Normal University
B02	Regular Fan	9	Female	Inner Mongolia University of Science and Technology
B03	Regular Fan	9	Female	Pingdingshan University
C01	Casual Fan	1	Female	Zhejiang Normal University
C02	Casual Fan	1	Female	Harbin Medical University
C03	Casual Fan	2	Female	Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics

Table 2. Interview Questions

1. "When was the last time you bought a product endorsed by your idol? What specific product was it?"
2. "What made you decide to buy it? Which factor was most important: your affection for the idol, the product's necessity, or the price being right?"
3. "For the same bottle of water, what's the fundamental difference between the regular version and the idol-endorsed version for you?"
"If you had to make a comparison, what would this endorsed product be most like? (Choose one of three options)" A. "Souvenir (collectible value)" B. "Support ticket (voting for the idol)" C. "Community pass (proving fan identity)"
5. "How much of what you paid was for the 'idol-endorsed' label?"
6. "Do you share your purchase afterward? Where? Why/why not?"
7. "When you see calls to 'boost sales' in fan communities, how do you feel? Does it pressure you?"
8. "What defines a 'true fan' in your fandom? Is buying endorsements mandatory?"
9. "Describe your fandom identity in one word: die-hard fan / career-focused fan / laid-back fan / casual fan? Why this word?"
10. "Does your spending behavior align with this self-identified role?"
11. "Forget all the niceties—what's your real motivation for buying endorsements?" A. Emotional fulfillment (joy from supporting my idol) B. Identity validation (gaining status within the fandom) C. Practical need (already needed the product) D. Habit/impulse (didn't think much about it)

4. Research Findings

4.1. Common Characteristics of Three Types of Fan Consumption Behavior: "On-Demand Purchasing" Emerges as a Universal Orientation

Interviews with nine college student fans at varying levels of engagement revealed that regardless of their Super Topic tier, their consumption behavior consistently exhibited the rational characteristic of "on-demand purchasing."

"When I first started idol fandom in middle school, I didn't care about product practicality and blindly bought whatever my idols endorsed. By college, I spent less time on fandom and focused more on product utility." (B03)

College students should practice thrift and frugality. With limited living expenses, they need to weigh how much of their budget goes toward branded products. Money doesn't grow on trees. In my view, chasing sales figures isn't particularly important. If you have the money, buy it; if you're a student and can't afford it, then forget it. (A02)

All three groups of fans have this trait, and it can be seen that "pay-as-you-go" is now a basic approach for college students to purchase goods recommended by their idols. In the study of fan consumption behaviour, attention should also be paid to the general changes in people's attitudes towards consumption.

4.2. Core Fans: Dedicated Supporters Who Go All Out

Although it is a "pay-as-you-go" system, many of the main fans still buy idol-endorsed products. They do not care about the practical uses of these products; they only want to collect them. They are regarded as the "votes of support" for their idols and "tickets to the fan community".

"When my idol promotes a product, I feel as if I am using the same thing, and it is also a way for me to show my support for him. It makes me very happy." (A01)

"When it comes to the necessities of daily life, what I need most, I will always choose the product recommended by him without hesitation. For example, when it comes to shampoo and other household products, I will definitely use the brands he recommends, even if my mother says that they are very difficult to use." (A02)

"The main reason for buying this product is definitely to support the endorser, though I do give it a quick look to see if it's any good, haha. But in the end, I pretty much always end up buying it anyway." (A03)

"Community tickets are pretty important to me. I have friends on Weibo who like the same idol as me. If everyone else buys them and posts their receipts, it feels weird if you don't buy and share yours. Sometimes you need screenshots to prove you did." (A03)

4.3. Casual Fans: "Qualified Fans" with Selective Support

Casual fans base their spending on personal needs, balancing "supporting their idol" with "rational consumption." Their purchases aim to uphold the self-identity of a "qualified fan," avoiding being labeled as freeloaders while resisting moral pressure. Products serve both as practical items and as "votes of support" for their idol.

First, I'd check if I have the money to buy it. If I do, and the product he endorses is something I need, then I'd go ahead and buy it. (B03)

I feel that if you don't spend money on your idol, others will see you as a freeloader. While I personally don't want spending to be the standard, the entire fandom ecosystem demands that you spend money on your idol before acknowledging your fan status.

"I'd buy it if it supports my idol and the product is genuinely useful. If I were just considering practicality, there are better options out there than my idol's endorsed products. But somehow, the ones they endorse just hit the spot." (B02)

4.4. Casual Fans: Rarely engage as fans, offering occasional or minimal support

Casual fans' consumption is highly incidental, often driven by personal needs and a favorable impression of the idol. The product itself takes precedence, with the idol endorsement serving as a "bonus feature."

"I first consider the product's price, then its practicality, and only lastly the idol factor. Among similar products, I'll choose the one endorsed by my idol." (C01)

"Among the same bottled water choices, the one endorsed by the idol has more emotional appeal and can make one feel slightly happier." (C03)

"As I don't have a particular favourite idol, I do not intentionally support anyone. If I like it, I will buy one; otherwise, I won't." (C02)

5. Reflection

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) propose that the higher the level of fan engagement, the more people are likely to spend money. According to this study, however, there was no difference in the fans' adherence to the "pay-as-you-go" idea among Super Topic tiers. It can be seen that fan-grouping should be based on various factors other than how much money fans spend.

6. Conclusion

The three types of fans of college students were analysed in this paper, and the following conclusions were drawn:

1. College student fans have different ways of buying idol-endorsed products according to their level of fandom.
2. Purchase according to need is a general consumption norm for all fan tiers. Regardless of forum rank, all fans are driven by the demand for self-gratification.
3. Consumption driven by love" has internal differences in the sphere of idol-endorsed products due to various fan groups. The fundamental causes of the differences are systematic differentiations in the levels of emotional commodification, weighting of symbolic values and aims of identity construction.

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