

Fandom and Religion: Alienation of Opinion Leaders in the Fandom and Additions to Secondary Communication Theory

-- The TFBOYS 10th Anniversary Concert as an Example

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Abstract: Taking the TFBOYS 10th anniversary event as a trigger, with the irrational polarizing behavior represented by the light board battle and the flag-raising parade, the fan community once again reached the climax of public opinion. Disregarding the idol's rightful owner, the fan community, led by opinion leaders, self-righteously and continuously impacted the social order, and the fandom formed an ideological system similar to that of a religion, and the mechanism of the traditional secondary communication theory in the fandom seemed to be alienated due to the usurpation of the discourse power by the opinion leaders. The purpose of this study is to further explore the similarity between the ideology and religious system of the current fandom in China, and to supplement the secondary communication theory and establish a new model based on the alienation phenomenon of opinion leaders overstepping the power of the main lord in the circle mechanism of the rice circle. Based on the questionnaire survey of fan groups, it can be verified that the ideology of the fandom is similar to the religious system and the opinion leaders do overstep the power of the main lord, but the main lord is not hollowed out. Based on this, supplemented with in-depth interviews, it can be further verified under what conditions the idol becomes a spiritual symbol or even loses the power of the subjective discourse.

Keywords: Fandom, Religion, Opinion Leaders, Secondary Communication Theory.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2023, all kinds of concerts started to restart, and people's demand for entertainment and culture has been rising due to the end of the three-year epidemic. The most popular among many artists is the "TFBOYS Ten-Year Promise" concert. As a domestic "top stream" boy band, its number of people who want to see on the ticketing platform has reached a staggering five million upwards, and the secondary market has sold a ticket for tens of thousands of dollars or even 100,000 yuan. TFBOYS's return to the domestic culture of the fandom has once again been put on hold in the line of sight of the general public, not only in the official announcement of the beginning of the heat unabated market situation, but also in August 4, 2023 began to last until August 6, irrational off-line support behavior.

In past TFBOYS anniversary concert, the most polarizing behavior of the fandom that went against the idol's rightful wishes was the "light board battle". The reason for this is the battle between "group fans" and "only fans", and previous research has suggested that the "light board battle" is a confrontation that dissolves the antagonistic nature of the fandom - a utopian world in which color replaces individuality in the search for friends, but the "light board battle"'s short-lived bridging will lead to greater tearing [1]. The specific embodiment of this "10th anniversary concert" was on Weibo three fan communities of TFBOYS through retouching and other methods to try to create the fact that their idols are the most powerful, so that the competition between different fan communities became more and more intense. But in the 10th anniversary, the split between fans was not just a battle of the lights, but also polarizing behaviors such as

"breaking barriers," "raising flags," "a parade," and "a brawl" that violated the social order. From the Weibo release of information as early as July 15 TFBOYS official Weibo has issued a call, but the various fans are still on the network and offline to participate in irrational support activities, and even under the leadership of the opinion leaders from August 4 onwards in terms of siege gathered outside the arena, the day the Xi'an Municipal Public Security Bureau Baqiao sub-bureau issued a notice of fan fights and assaults. On August 6, under the guidance of opinion leaders, the venue outside the serious out of control, so that the TFBOYS and the three artists personal official Weibo respectively issued a message to comply with the order of the information, but there are still many such as "breaking barriers" type of events. It was not until the appearance of CCTV reporters that the three opinion leaders issued an emergency notice to discourage support activities to maintain the image of the main event. In this case, the relationship between fans and idols has been severed, and the fans' behavior is completely controlled by the opinion leaders, whose ideological system of domesticating them is akin to the "Doctrine of Religion".

Based on this, this study attempts to further explore the similarities between the ideology of fandom and religion in terms of the phenomenon of fandom alienation and polarizing behaviors that emerged from the 10th anniversary of TFBOYS. Since opinion leaders were not just embodied as information mediators in this event, but became the subject of information dissemination, such alienation no longer falls within the scope of traditional secondary communication theory. Therefore, this study will present the hypotheses of the association of the fandom with religion and the addition of secondary communication theory in the fan circle, and verify

them through questionnaires and even interviews.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Public Opinion and Polarization of Fandom

The information processed and released by opinion leaders can contribute to the fermentation of online public opinion into the explosive period, rumors as a kind of public opinion, will also be reflected in the spread of the rice circle, opinion leaders like "station sister" in the usurpation of the discourse power of the main owner, they spread the words even if it is a rumor will be as a public opinion in the network outbreak. The development of online public opinion and social media at the level of emotional expression will impact normal values and social order [2]. The polarizing behavior of TFBOYS fans led by opinion leaders is evidence that irrational behavior can have an impact on the social order. The term "group polarization" was first coined by the French psychologist Sage Moscovici, who saw group polarization as the process by which an opinion stands out from the majority opinion and is gradually polarized [3]. TFBOYS polarization behavior to a large extent is also the fans to maintain the main emotional expression, the reason why the big fans can usurp the main call for large-scale support action, mainly because of its capital can make other fans recognized and empathy, similarly, their own association with the idol in the view of others is also closer, so their emotional infectivity is incredibly powerful, with them as the center, the whole with them at the center, the emotional expression of the whole circle will spread out in a net-like form. Under this logic, those who are held hostage by the opinion leaders become the majority, and the voice of reason gradually fades away, and the "spiral of silence" mechanism drowns out the voices of those who have been following the words of the idol.

2.2. Fandom Ideology and Religion

The reason why the fandom is able to form its own circle, and within its circle it is also divided into many subcultural groups such as "only fans", "group fans", "CP fans" and so on, is that they have their own community structure and system. Individuals within the fandom are bound together by the ideology of the circle, in the same way that religions, such as Christianity, are bound together by the doctrine of the Bible. As early as 1994, studies have shown that film and television fans have become religiously oriented. Star Trek's fandom includes the sacralization of cultural elements, as well as the formation of formalized communities that include "classics" and hierarchies. Fans are simultaneously associated with a popular stigma, which gives fans a sense of persecution and a shared identity with an active group of relatives [4]. The idea of an association with religiosity is not entirely accepted by religious people, and in some Christian groups "fan" has become a pejorative term used to distinguish between those who have a superficial involvement in the faith and "true believers" [5]. Although in the view of Christian groups, fan culture is a blasphemy against the sanctity of traditional religion, they do not deny the similarities between the fandom and religion. From a functionalist perspective, Jennifer Otter Bickerdike thus argues that the structural similarities of fan rituals, pilgrimages, and meaning-making in fan culture present the religious function of pop culture fans [6]. The embodiment of this function also means that the sanctified religion has a substitute in the secular or real society, and the

ideology of the fandom is a religious type of thought system parallel to religion, and this substitutability provides a new entry point for the study of the ideology of the fandom.

The religious character presented by film and television fans is further amplified in today's fandom, which is manifested in an increasingly robust fan registration audit system, a more and more sophisticated fan subgroup community system, and more and more intense fan polarization behaviors. Freud believed that human happiness, freedom, and truth were threatened by religion, which he saw as an illusion that must be abandoned, predicting its eventual demise. And Schenkar argues that both Marx's dialectic and Freud's worldview are treated as alternatives to religion [7]. Freud's religion is based on patriarchal society and the Oedipus episode; religion is a spiritual being projected by the ego's repressed libido breaking through the limits of the superego. Its association with "obsessive-compulsive neurosis" can also be applied to the association with the random. Fans' repressed libido is projected onto the idol, but due to the inaccessibility of the libido, the libido is transferred to the opinion leaders, and when inspired by or deceived by the opinion leaders, the libido erupts into immoral, irrational and emotional behaviors, and as a result, polarized behaviors such as the light board battle and the raising of the flag are able to erupt. Religion can be replaced by materialistic dialectics, then the random should be disciplined by realist principles, but the alienation of opinion leaders makes individuals threatened by the ideology of the fandom.

Fans are ideologically disciplined, internally by the community by the inquiries of the opinion leaders, and externally by the macro-factors by the taming of the logic of capital as altruistic (idolizing the positive owners), data-obsessed subjects [1]. From this perspective, fans will not only be coerced by capital into the closed loop of consumption, but also be coerced by opinion leaders into the exclusive competition of the fandom. The battle of the lights is an act of visualization of the virtual individual but substituting for the individual, all for the service of the idol but not for the will of the idol's behavior, it is a "demystification" of the culture of the fandom on the Internet, constructing a realistic Utopia, but in essence, it is a deepening of the exclusivity of this ideological feature. Opinion leaders should be the extremes wrapped up in the logic of capital, they are thoroughly disciplined by the ideology of the fandom - it becomes their faith, here the ideology is rather more like a kind of totem, and the culture of the fandom becomes a whole new kind of religion (As shown in Figure 1). In this way, liking more than one idol will inevitably become taboo, something to be disciplined and punished. The logic of capital is like the legend of religious origins, rooted in the hearts of the people in the fandom, who can never find the answer to their own behavior, but are always deeply entrenched in it. Idols in this ideology may be more like being worshipped as gods, their voices have been dissolved and become a symbol, it is this symbol that allows the continuation of this "religion", if the idol collapses, this symbol has a negative significance in reality, or the mythological significance of the idol has been dissolved, then the fandom. If the idol collapses, the symbol has a negative meaning in reality, or the mythological significance of the idol is dissolved, then this circle of rice will inevitably collapse.

H1: The ideology of the fandom shows obvious religious characteristics

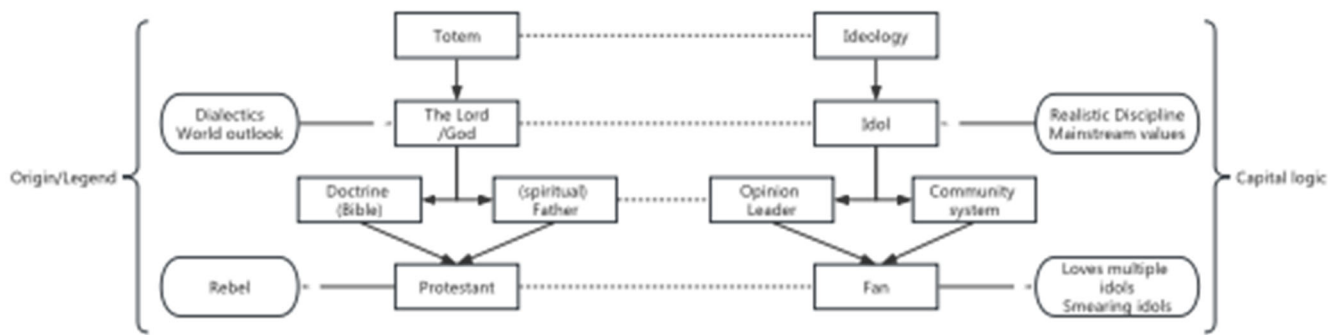


Figure 1. Religious systems—The ideological system of fandom

2.3. Secondary Communication Theory and Opinion Leaders in Fandom

Secondary communication theory is a classic communication theory proposed by American communication scholar Lazarsfeld [8]. According to this theory, in the process of information dissemination from network media to the general public, it needs to go through two stages, i.e., the stage of network media dissemination to opinion leaders and the stage of opinion leaders to the general public, and opinion leaders play a pivotal role in the process of information dissemination and diffusion [9]. The traditional theoretical model of secondary communication is that information is released and then disseminated through mass communication channels to be received by opinion leaders, and then subsequently processed by opinion leaders to be disseminated to the audience in the form of interpersonal communication. In the communication of the fandom, from the case of the 10th anniversary of TFBOYS, opinion leaders such as "Big Fan" and "Station Sister" are not just conveying and processing the information of the idol, but more in the name of defending the status of the idol, overstepping the main body's power of discourse to become the main body of information dissemination, and leading the fandom to engage in irrational behaviors.

Some studies have shown that within each fan sub-community, the relationship between fan members is not equal, and this process of fan self-empowerment can be regarded as a kind of self-idolization, in which the big fans themselves have a certain idol function [10]. The idolization of big fans further confirms the usurpation of the idol. Within the circle of the fandom, the idol gradually becomes spiritualized and loses its actual voice, and the fan actually replaces the idol as the leader of the fan group's action after seizing the sub-community's discourse power through self-empowerment - this means that the opinion leaders are no longer purely a mediator of information, not just a processing and re-dissemination function, and that the theory of secondary communication needs to be corrected in the circle of the fandom.

The alienation of the opinion leaders is no longer as an intermediary, but is directly usurped as a publisher of false information - a revised hypothesis is proposed from the original theory. The characteristics of TFboys' public opinion dissemination are in line with the tendency of the secondary communication theory, but the statement of the idol could not have a large impact on the opinion leader's leadership. On the contrary, if CCTV and other official media take action, the opinion leaders will guide other fans in the circle group to

quickly stop excessive behavior or excessive speech because of the consideration of the impact on the reputation of the main owner, which indicates that the authority of the opinion leaders will still be regulated by the mainstream ideological system.

H2: Alienation of opinion leaders, usurping from communication intermediaries to information subjects

H3: Spiritualization of the idolized orthodox master, loss of subjective power

3. Methods

The study set up a set of online questionnaires to be placed in the circle of friends and TFBOYS fans' group chats in an attempt to understand the perception of fan groups, especially TFBOYS fans, on the phenomenon and behavior of fan communities and fandoms. Questions on gender, age, education and occupation were set for the demographic variables, and a filter was set after the demographic variables in order to differentiate the fandom from the non-fandom. In order to verify the hypothesis of religiousization of the fandom questionnaire is set from the corresponding characteristics of religion and fandom; in order to verify the hypothesis of dissimilation of opinion leaders, the questionnaire aims to understand the degree of contact, cognition, and credibility of opinion leaders in the minds of the fandom community.

A total of 264 people filled out the questionnaire, the number of people in the fandom is 242, accounting for 91.67%, in which the vast majority of TFBOYS fans, the statistical data has a high degree of credibility. In order to more fully verify the hypothesis and the authenticity of the results of the questionnaire, on the basis of the questionnaire survey, this study conducted in-depth interviews with five fans who like TFBOYS and watched the 10th anniversary performance, and the addition of this interview method will strengthen the credibility of the conclusions.

4. Results

For Hypothesis 1, 177 (73.14%) of the fan community considered idols to be a spiritual support or motivation for their efforts in life, which verified that idols have a mythological character similar to the Lord or God in religion. As faithful believers, 137 (56.61%) would feel mentally broken after the collapse of their beliefs (idol collapse), and 126 (52.06%) believe that liking more than one idol is forbidden and needs to be punished, just like apostasy, thus reflecting the religious character. 167 (69.01%) would join a fan community, 157 people (64.88%) would connect with

their idols through opinion leaders, 175 people (72.31%) believe that fan clubs have an exclusive system and auditing system, and 180 people (74.38%) would participate in large-scale support activities. The above data shows that the fan community system is like a religious system, where the ideological system of the community is similar to religious teachings, and opinion leaders act as priests to lead fans to propagate the "doctrine" and fulfill the "rituals", and thus strengthen their connection with their idols. Further, 156 people (64.46%) would stop their supportive behaviors when stopped by official media such as CCTV and People's Daily. This is because CCTV represents official recognition and national recognition, and the voice of the CCTV media will lead to crisis communication behaviors among fans, and CCTV will discipline the ideology of the fandom, which is similar to the way that dialectics will discipline religions. As a result, hypothesis 1 is valid, and the ideology of the fandom shows obvious religious characteristics.

For Hypothesis 2, the questionnaire data indicate that there are fewer people who follow the idol's information through the idol's personal social media (146 selections) than through non-idol channels (a total of 185 selections), and that 181 people, or more than 74% of the fans, will interact with the opinion leaders, join the support clubs, and so on - reflecting the discursive status of the opinion leaders, and that through the social media there were 114 (62.98%) who interacted with opinion leaders, followed by 89 (59.17%) in group chats. The majority of fans believe that opinion leaders will release information before their idols (71.07%) and that the information will conflict with the idol (65.29%), and the overall trend of trust in opinion leaders is higher (mean score of 5.32, above the median) - this can prove that Hypothesis 2 is valid, and that opinion leaders are in the traditional secondary communication theory model based on the usurpation of the idol, replacing the idol as the main body of information release.

For Hypothesis 3, in general, 150 people (61.98%) would be more likely to listen to the voice of the idol and the vast majority of fans (78.1%) would choose to listen to the idol in the event of a conflict between the idol and opinion leaders, and believe that the idol's appeals on social media have an effect (82.23%) - This is not consistent with Hypothesis 3 and is not entirely consistent with the actual situation in the case of TFBOYS. However, in the case of the questionnaire among the non-fandom, 68% believed that fans would disregard their idols to carry out support and other activities, which may be due to the fact that fans in the scene would be affected by the aggregation effect and participate in emotionally polarized behaviors, but since the sample of the non-fandom group is relatively small, it needs to be discussed and verified through interviews.

5. 5 Discussion

In response to the results of the questionnaire survey method, hypothesis 3 - the spiritualization of the idol and the loss of subjective power - does not hold true, in this section, we will add in-depth interviews with five fans who like TFBOYS and watched the 10th anniversary performance to further test the hypothesis that "fans mythologize the meaning of chasing idols and lose their own reality". The interviewees generally believed that "fans mythologize the meaning of stargazing and go beyond their own reality. Fans are influenced by people around them to join in polarizing behaviors, for example, fans are brainwashed by opinion

leaders to fall into a kind of extreme self-motivation, and believe that polarizing behaviors are part of the support". Some studies have shown that the emotions of the scene can lead to the communalization of individual behaviors, thus linking to aggregate behaviors, riots, rabble rousers, mass hysteria, fads or frenzies, rumors, and public opinion are all important manifestations of aggregate behaviors [11]. As a result, the environment of the scene stimulates individuals to act, and the behavior of the group after group behavior occurs is not controlled by individuals in the group, and it is difficult for others outside the group to control it.

However, some interviewees, as "group fans", believe that "fans who do not have tickets to experience the 10th anniversary outside the arena, they are the beginning of polarizing behaviors, creating momentum for polarizing behaviors, and that the competition between 'only fans' is the most intense". Competition between "only fans" will be influenced by the herd mentality and the psychology of comparison, further intensifying the polarizing competitive behavior of different fan groups, and the irrational side is gradually amplified, thus making the scene more and more uncontrollable. The competition between "only fans" is manipulated by the logic of capital, similarly the official social media of the idol owner is also manipulated by the economic company in the opinion of the fans, no matter what the owner posts, the fans think it is the brokerage company that manipulates the account, and the object of their emotional outburst is the brokerage company, and they subjectively believe that their own practice is the best for the idol. They subjectively believe that they are doing what is best for their idol, but if the owner posts videos in a grounded way, for example, it will have a significant effect on stopping the polarizing behavior of the fans.

As a result, hypothesis 3 may be valid under the following conditions: firstly, the fans are affected by the aggregation effect in the scene and become polarized, thus ignoring the words of the owner; secondly, the strong competition between the "only fans" becomes so uncontrolled that it eventually overrides the words of the owner; thirdly, the fans are not ignoring the words of the owner but are venting out their dissatisfaction towards the backing brokerage firms (the capitals).

6. Conclusion

The study of fan culture has always been an important topic in communication research, and this study verifies through questionnaires and interviews that the ideology of the fandom has similarities with the religious system, and is an alternative that parallels religion at the secular level. And it further verifies that in the fan community, the opinion leaders will appear alienation phenomenon, which makes the traditional secondary communication theory show limitations, thus, the secondary communication theory is supplemented. The point that the idol is spiritualized and loses the power of subjectivity in the fan culture needs to be established under specific circumstances, and needs to be analyzed according to specific cases, but it is undeniable that the intervention of brokers as a third party under the logic of capital will make fans and the idol alienated to varying degrees. This study explains the group phenomenon that occurs in the fandom from the TFBOYS case, but the religious overtones that occur in the fandom and the alienation of the opinion leaders leading to polarizing behaviors may not only occur in the rice circle, but similar phenomena may occur in any group, which is

something that needs to be explored in the future research - namely how to map from a single group, the fandom, to a larger group of social circles on a macro level.

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