

# A Study of the Identity and Discourse Power of Nurturing Idol Fans Groups

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**Abstract:** This study explores the formation of internal discourse power of fans, i.e., the process of identity acquisition and power differentiation of fans in the community, through in-depth interviews and online ethnography of fans of Teens in Times (TNT) in related super-groups. The case studies were conducted to explore the external discourse of fan communities, i.e., proximity to idols, ways, and possibilities of influencing corporate or idol decisions, and involvement in business practices. The results show that: (1) class, power, and responsibility are clearly differentiated in fan communities, and fans determine their own status in the community based on their own circumstances; (2) internal and external discourse power of fans is determined by class; (3) companies do not care much about fans' opinions due to the stickiness of nurturing fans; and (4) nurturing idols depend on the commercial value provided by fans in the long-term.

**Keywords:** Nurturing idols, Fans discourse power, Fans hierarchy, Fans' identities.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1970s, the French film "Cherchez l'idole" was introduced to Japan, and this was the first time that Japanese people defined an idol as a good-looking person who had worked in the entertainment industry as a teenager and was able to work across various art forms. In 1975, Johnny & Associates (J&A) was established in Japan, and the professional training of idols' artistic skills, album releases, concerts, etc., became an unprecedented trend in Japan, and this was the official rise of the nurturing idol system. After the idol culture spread to Korea, entertainment companies such as S.M. Entertainment emerged. Famous male groups such as H.O.T became popular in Asia, and since then the word "idol" has been formally defined as a person who engages in acting and is admired and sought after by people by showing personal charms. The idol industry in China generally started with the debut of the Taiwanese idol group The Little Tigers. The company that later launched the most famous Chinese idol group TFBOYS borrowed the idol production model from Japan and South Korea and officially opened up the idol market in China. At the same time, although there are singers and actors in Europe and the United States, such as Justin Bieber, who have become famous in their teens, they are generally considered not to be identical to the Asian idol culture, and therefore will not be the focus of this paper. The term "nurturing idols" is usually defined as idols who have had some exposure since they were relatively young and have become strong and mature singers and dancers into the eyes of their fans. In Asia, there are three main models of nurturing idols, namely, the J&A system, the "48 system", and the Korean "101" system. The most important feature of the J&A model is the young age of the reserve idols (trainees). Fans can pay membership fees to win tickets to idols' performances, watch exclusive videos and the company's own dramas and variety shows, and witness the growth of idols. For female idols under the 48 model, they have the biggest advantage of being "face-to-face" with their fans. The high frequency of public performance theater and "handshake events" can maintain their exposure and ensure a high income. Unlike the

previous two, the Korean 101 model shortens the process of turning an idol from a "man in the street" to a "shining star" within a few months in shows, giving fans a high level of involvement through voting in a short period of time. However, there is very little coverage of the idol's daily life under this model. The similarity between the three genres is that they all sell idol-related merchandise such as photo books, posters, and cards to generate revenue and lead the fan economy.

## 2. The History and Evolution of Fans Culture and Fans Discourse Power

Previous studies related to this study mainly cover two parts: fan culture and discourse power. Compared with Chinese scholars, Western scholars have carried out research on these two aspects earlier.

### 2.1. Fans' productivity and characteristics of nurturing idol fan groups

John Fiske first proposed the idea of "fandom" to describe fan groups, which "typically associates with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates --pop music, romance novels, comics", and is a "common feature of popular culture in industrial societies" [1]. According to Fiske, the three kinds of productivity that fans engage in with the texts they are a fan of. Firstly, semiotic productivity, which requires people to read and understand the text. Secondly, enunciative productivity, which involves communication and discussion around the ideas from semiotic productivity. Thirdly, fans create their own texts after complex interactions with the original texts, which is called textual productivity. Therefore, "Fan productivity is not limited to the production of new texts: it also participates in the construction of the original text and thus turns the commercial narrative or performance into popular culture" [1]. Based on these former theories, Henry Jenkins later proposed the concept of "textual poacher", in which fans appropriated popular texts and reinterpreted, deconstructed, and processed them. At the same time, he proposed the concept of "participatory culture",

which suggests that fans consume culture and produce culture at the same time [2]. The increasing prevalence of the internet increases enunciative and textual productivities, thus the monopoly of traditional media content production has been ceded to fans [3]. With the popularity of social media such as Instagram and microblogging, fan groups, or groups formed based on the same or similar interests, hobbies, and aspirations among their members, are gradually formed [4]. "Nurturing idol is one of the manifestations of the development of fan culture through the 'media-based' era to the 'audience-based' era" [5]. Unlike the early talent shows, companies that choose the nurturing model usually release videos of the trainee's daily singing and dancing practices, as well as their starring roles in web series and variety shows via the Internet. Audiences witness the growth of the trainee in these materials and become fans of one or more trainees to help them to become real idols with other fans in the community. As a result, fans have a say in whether or not a trainee will become an idol. This competitive mechanism has led to the fan community going from a simple "group chat" to an informal organization to better help trainees. "These fans have never met each other, are unfamiliar with each other, but have good team spirit, organization, and efficiency" [4]. These organizations tend to have community characteristics such as classified, niche, and enclosed [6].

## **2.2. Definition of discourse power and factors that give fans discourse power**

The definition of discourse power "has a long history of being debated among Chinese academics and policymakers. The implications of the term can therefore best be understood in its specific context..." [7]. Under this context, the definition of discourse power is the importance of one's words or ideas. In the digital age, the traditional way of discourse has been greatly overturned, and power has been increasingly devolved from the ruling class, which is inextricably linked to the growing power of fans' discourse both within and outside the community (toward idols and idol companies). In the case of one of China's earliest talent shows, Supergirl, a fan culture based on classes was already taking shape, but without the influence of new media, fans had little say in the development of their idols after their debut and were unable to speak directly to the idol's company to express their ideas. The emergence of the Internet has allowed the emergence of four drivers of fan discourse in the idol formation model, namely technological empowerment, emotional empowerment, group empowerment, and capital empowerment [2]. New media graphics technology enhances the social context of information dissemination, which in turn increases the contribution of fans to the promotion of their idols and strengthens the bond between idols and fans, which is empowered by technology. Fans are protective due to competition in the industry and "mother-fan" like attributes. This emotional identification with the idol is emotional empowerment. At the same time, the demand for emotional rewards arising from emotional labor such as voting for the idol's newly released song is also an important source of emotional empowerment. Group empowerment is reflected in the fact that fan organizations led by "big fans" can use group power to help idols and gain a voice. Fans' online purchases of idol-related products, such as albums, are an important economic source for idols and companies, and therefore constitute capital empowerment.

Based on the above-mentioned review of nurturing fan

culture, it can be found that after decades of development, research on the characteristics of nurturing fan communities and the way fans gain discourse power through the Internet is relatively mature. However, there is a lack of more in-depth and comprehensive research on the ways and specific types of identity acquisition within fan communities; the ways and possibilities of fan groups to influence corporate decisions; and the constraints of current national policies on nurturing idols and fans; which will therefore be the focus of this study.

## **3. The Internal Acquisition of Identity and Discourse Power Within the Fan Group**

In a fan community, each fan is given an identity based on his or her own situation, and the process of acquiring an identity leads to community hierarchy. According to the experience of online ethnography, fan communities are divided into four hierarchies. The official fan club is at the top of the hierarchy and is equivalent to the idol's "civil PR department", leading "colleagues" from different subordinate departments to do whatever they can to help the idol. They also serve as a link between the fans and the idol's company. They often have the contact information of the company's staff in order to communicate fan questions and suggestions.

### **3.1. The first class --- The supreme leader of official fan clubs**

The president of the fan club has the highest power. Their selection process has many similarities to political elections. In General, candidates need to prove their absolute loyalty to the idol himself and their experience to be qualified for the position. The official Weibo account of Haoxiang Yan's (a member of TNT) fan club, for example, published the announcement about recruitment in a Weibo post on June 16, 2022, in which the requirements for the presidential candidates were clearly stated. (See Figure 1 for details) The first, third, fourth, and fifth of these requirements are a test of fan loyalty. First of all, the first and the third article can ensure that the candidate does not have any affection for other celebrities and has been a member of this fan community for at least 100 days. The fourth and fifth criteria ensure that the candidate is willing to give his or her time and money to help the idol. The second and sixth rules guarantee the candidate's ability. Being at least 20 years old and not having to prepare for any exams shows that the candidate has enough time to communicate with fans and the company and keep an eye on the idol and lead fans to do what is good for the idol. The process includes a public announcement of resumes, fan voting and review, and live fan interviews. The process is democratic and transparent, representing the discourse power from fans in the lowest class. The three candidates with the highest number of votes will become the three main decision makers, with no affiliation and a division of power, so that power is balanced out. This division of labor is similar to the division of legislative, executive, and judicial powers in the United States, which ensures the impartiality of the fan club's actions. At the same time, an election committee composed of 12 outstanding fans whose ability and loyalty are highly recognized by fans will be in charge of the election. This organization is a second layer of guarantee for the fairness of the vote, as it prevents the current fan club executives from interfering with the results of the vote due to their personal relationships. In summary, becoming the president of the

support group means becoming a leader among fans, a symbol of ability and loyalty.



Figure 1. Yan's fan club recruitment announcement

### 3.2. The second class --- Members of official fan clubs

Standing at the second level are the members of fan clubs, who do not have the final say, but can maximize fan discourse through a rigorous system. Each department has different responsibilities, according to the official recruitment notice of Yan Haoxiang's fan club, the departments include online promotions, data, production, group chat management, copywriting, account maintenance, and support. The online promotion department is responsible for contacting users with influence on various platforms and calling on other fans to like and comment on these positive posts about the idol. The data team is responsible for managing the super groups, calling fans to report those posts that are unfavorable to the idol, and commenting first on any posts about the idol's new songs, events, business ads, etc. that are favorable to the idol, so as to prove the idol's high popularity, fan vitality, and commercial value, and to attract potential fans. The production department is responsible for the production of pictures and videos for all activities and promotions. The group management team is responsible for the daily maintenance of the official fan group chats, including the review of the group's personnel and control of the group's speech. Copywriting team is responsible for the text part of any post. The account maintenance department is responsible for the operation of the fan club's official accounts on various platforms. The support department is responsible for planning, coordinating, and following up on the implementation of online and offline support activities, as well as docking with advertisers and artists for promotion projects. These positions are also highly competitive, except that there is no voting, and the supreme leaders of the fan club read the candidates' resumes and select them. These staff members have the right to manage and guide the majority of a fan group and contribute more to their idols through their creativity, communication skills, and responsibility than other fans.

### 3.3. The third class --- "disperse fans" producing emotional value for other fans

The third class is those fans who do not belong to fan clubs but can provide emotional value to other fans by regularly taking pictures of idols offline or writing articles related to idols (such as fanfiction). They are strongly involved in the production and construction of idol-related texts, and they also have a personalized perception and imagination of the

"use value" of idols and have begun to hold the discourse power in the spreading process. At the same time, the products produced by these fans are profitable. When the fan club needs money to carry out support activities, they will pay these "producers" to buy the idol's photos that the fans have not seen before, and then make photobooks and sell them to the fans at a higher price. For fan writers, their articles that are popular on professional article platforms are "rewarded" by their fans, which could become their main source of income.

### 3.4. The fourth class --- fans without any positions or special skills

The fourth class of fans is constituted of those who do not have any position or "product". Most of them follow the direction of the fan club and use various ways to enhance their idols on various platforms. However, this category of fans is divided into more sub-classes by their account levels in the super groups and the level of completion of the tasks assigned by the fan club. The higher the level and the more tasks they complete, the more power they have. For example, many fans set the requirement to have a super group level greater than or equal to 9 when drawing prizes in super groups, and fans who do not complete any assigned tasks or buy idol-related products are blamed. Thus, when a large group of fans does not have any special skills that make them superior to other fans, the "amount of love" they have for their idols is concretized to become the criteria for their classification.

No one will assign any of these identities to any of the fans. Those who become fans in the top three levels need to have the ability, time, and passion, and those who lack any of them will become fans in the bottom level. Netizen "CONCH-Galaxy-PENGUIN" is a representative of the lack of ability, she said, "I don't want to be a member of the fan club because my management skills are not very good and I'm afraid of making wrong decisions and misleading fans." The netizen "eat a grass" is a representative of the lack of time, she said, "I am a student, and not yet adult, so I can't spend a lot of time on Weibo every day. Thus, although I want to join the fan club, I definitely have no time." For fans who lack enthusiasm, supergroups are just platforms to communicate with other fans without doing any of the tasks set out by the upper echelon of fans and without wanting to be part of a fan club. In an interview with a fan who goes by the screen name "Long Home", she said, "I don't want to be part of a fan club, I'm a "solo fan" and only do what I feel happy about." She also admitted that her enthusiasm is gradually dissipating --- "I like them for almost 3 years, the enthusiasm is much weaker than at the beginning. I feel like they have become a part of my life." This indicates that for the less passionate fans, their emotional commitment is more personal, and they don't care about their "status" in the fan base.

## 4. The External Discourse Power of the Fan Group

The external discourse of the fan community is divided into three main parts - proximity to the idol, ways and possibilities to influence the decisions of the idol and the company, and participation in business practices.

### 4.1. Differences in fans' proximity to idols

In terms of internal classes, supreme leaders of fan clubs and new photo producers are the closest to the idols. Photo

producers can often meet idols in person at events and performances, and have communication channels with idols, even become friends with idols. The supreme leaders can have more contact with the company and have some exclusive privileges. For example, netizen "eat a grass" recalled, "I would love to be one of the top people in the fan club because they can call TNT when they are live streaming, and I was really jealous." This implies that those who have more discourse power within the fan community have higher accessibility to their idols, and it is one of the reasons why fans want to be in the "upper class".

## 4.2. Case study of two main ways for fans to influence decisions made by idols and their companies

### 4.2.1. Online announcement on idols' rights protection

The picture below (Figure. 2) is a right protection announcement from the fan club of Zhang (TNT member) because a teammate who ranked lower than Zhang got external resources (opportunities to appear on shows that are not produced by TNT's company) before Zhang did. The fourth paragraph of the statement clearly states that the fan club released the statement after repeatedly communicating with the company privately without success. The statement was released on April 9, 2021, and the company did not respond to the issue until June 23. The two-and-a-half-month response interval proves that although the fan club has helped the idol in many ways, the company does not take the fan club itself, or fans' opinions, very seriously. Zhang's fans were dissatisfied with every sentence the company responded to and expressed their emotions by sending posts on Weibo and mentioning the company, but there were no other reactions from the company. This demonstrates that this channel of communication could not solve the conflict between fans and the company at all. In this case, the conflict is that the fans want their idol to get the resources that he deserves, but the company thinks that the group's development is more important and that getting the other members of the group known by the audience will help the group as a whole. According to the results of this right protection announcement, the lower ranked member still got the resources (although his footage was deleted due to national policy), it can be inferred that when the fans and the company's ideas are in serious disagreement, the company will ignore the fans' opinions and let the idol continue to develop on "right path" designed by the company.

### 4.2.2. Fans concerns expressed through commenting on the company's posts

The second way fans can influence the company's decisions is by expressing their concerns by commenting on any posts made by the company's official Weibo account. As the 5th-floor comment (See Figure 3 for details) says, "Where is Zhang's show? Fans need to see him." But there are also comments that simply remind the company to "treat Ma better", as the first-floor comment says. Contrary to the first approach, such bottom-class fan suggestions and dissatisfaction do not receive a response from the company, and therefore have less influence on the company's decisions.

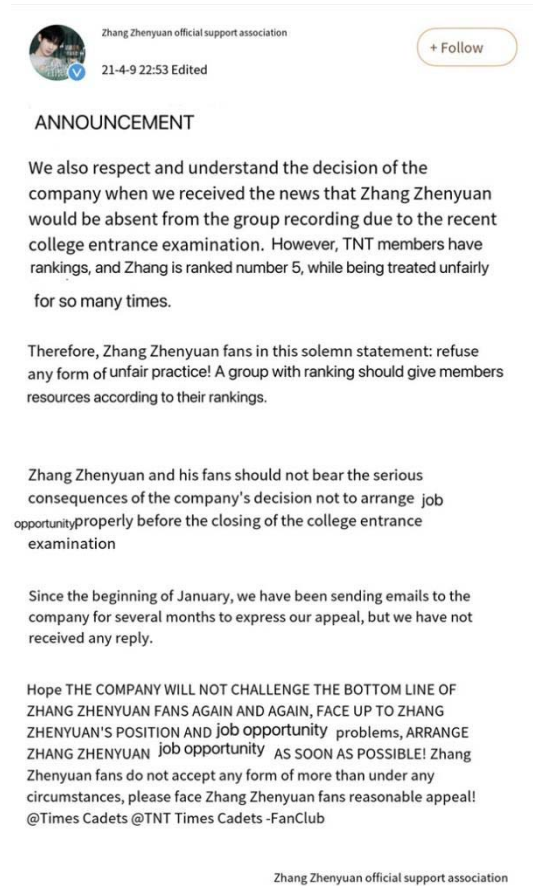


Figure 2. Zhang's fan club's announcement of right protection



Figure 3. Fans' comments under a company's post

The analysis of these two approaches shows that the company does not care about its fans, and that this "not caring" attitude is due in large part to the high stickiness of fans that is unique to nurturing idols. As mentioned earlier, unlike other fans, a large proportion of nurturing idols' fans have been with the idol since idols were children unknown to anyone, watching them grow physically and mentally. Even those who become fans after their idols have grown up and become famous can still feel the feeling of "nurturing" by watching the company's full record of their idols' growth. As a result, nurturing fans have one of the most stable and long-lasting relationships among human beings, namely, parental

love. They have a mother-child emotional bond with their idols, so that the company's attitude does not affect their feelings for the idols themselves as much as for other types of idols.

### 4.3. The commercial value of fans

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## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the identity and power within the fan community are clearly differentiated, and fans in higher classes have more internal discourse power. Through the hierarchy of efficient and large-scale actions, fans can gain external discourse power, such as receiving official feedback from companies by expressing demands through statements, and "making up data" to link the commercial value of stars to fan liveness. Idols often need to rely on the fans to complete

the profit mechanism. This dependency is long-term and unintermittent for idols. However, the high level of fan adhesion is often established at the beginning of the idols' debut, and fans in higher classes such as the new photo producers are also using the idol for profit so that fans and idols form a "two-way dependency" relationship. Therefore, it does not require much "maintenance" to ensure that the fans continue to pay for the company and the idol.

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