“My baby should feel no wronged!”: Digital fandoms and emotional capitalism in China

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Abstract
As the digitalization of fandom and the fandomization of digital platforms have both been discussed recently, this study intends to analyze how the logic of digital fandom was formalized in fans’ everyday media practices. Specifically, the study examines the new trends of digital fandoms in China from the perspective of emotional capitalism. Based on long-termed participated observation and semi-structural interviews, the study argues that the emotional engagement of digital fan practice was legitimated by the incarnation of virtual fan objects, the datafication of emotional labor, and the re-imagination of multi-social relationships.

Keywords
Digital fandom, China, emotional capitalism, digitalization, multi-social interaction

Introduction
In the age of digitalization, the online territories of fandoms largely overlapped and were divided just by blurred and fragile boundaries. A somewhat problematic routine in fandom studies, especially those following the case study approach, is that the unit of analysis has always been a singular fandom and the surrounding culture (e.g., Sherlock fans and its fandom). Although such studies are valuable in terms of their in-depth research of specific fan community and fan performance, the horizontal lens applied might be limited especially when speaking to the digital fandom. The performative participations and the meanings of “being fan” in a particular fandom can be constructed, not only by the cult fans who dedicate to this fan object from the beginning but also...
by the mobile fans who enter the fandom with distinctive fan performances they encountered before. For instance, the Sherlock fandom in mainland China carries more characteristics of the Japanese ACG (anime-comics-games) culture than the features of the Western TV fandom originated from the Star Trek fandom (Jenkins, 1992), because the show attracted a lot of Japanese ACG fans into the fandoms when it got hit in China. In this case, The Chinese Sherlock fandom was not entirely shaped by the early English drama fans who have adapted certain forms of participation most likely from the foreign fandoms in Tumblr or AO3. Instead, it was negotiated by both the “original” fans and the transferring fans, who entered the fandom with their own traditions cultivated in other fandoms. The fandom is thus not a pre-existing one, which remains unchanged, inviting others to come and obey. Rather, the digital fandom is always a dynamic and negotiated one, dealing with complex and interconnected conversations among multiple participants, values, norms, and performances.

To study digital fandom is thus to examine how those boundaries were located, rebuilt, emphasized, or erased by socio-technological actors. Facilitated by algorithms and digital technologies, the fandom has become a “networked network” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 187) in which various fan-related participants, interactive relations, performances, and subjectivities complexly tangled. The tension between individuals, community, and various patterns of participation or fan tradition constructs the shape of digital fandom, as different patterns of fan participations can only be formalized in conflict, power combats, and the claimed rationale of legitimacy. In this shifting, the fandomization of digital industry (Fung, 2019) and the digitalization of fandom (Yin, 2020) have both be observed as new phenomenon in the digital era. This article depicts how the logic of digital fandom reshaped the so-called “traditional” fan culture, arguing that the influence of emotional capitalism on digital fandoms lies in the incarnation of virtual fan object, the embodying emotional engagement, and the reconstruction of multi-social network.

**Digitalizing fandom: participation, productivity, and sociality**

The socio-cultural logic underlying digital fandom has been discussed as gig economy led by relational labor (Baym, 2018), digi-gratis economy rather than gift economy oriented by playful interaction (Booth, 2016), and platformized algorithmic culture (Yin, 2020). In reviewing the typology of fan productivity suggested by Fiske (1992), Sandvoss (2011) concluded three ways that the Internet might have changed the fandom. In terms of the textual productivity, Sandvoss argued that the Internet has increased the visibility of textual productivity to the media producers and professionals, and diversified the accesses in which fans perceive and communicate with the media texts and the producers. In other words, fan participation, if not being proliferated, then has at least been highlighted by the emerging digital technology. Similar to other scholars (see Caldwell, 2008; Hills & Greco, 2015; Hills, 2017; Jenkins, 2006; Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017; Turner, 2011), Sandvoss also suggested that the digitalization has eroded the clear line of demarcation between the producers and consumers. Consequently, the standard of authenticity might not efficiently differentiate the fans from the audience today. In addition, Sandvoss indicated that the logic of commodification has merged into all forms of cultural productions, including subcultural fandom. Accordingly, the commercially motivated performance further blurred the boundary between professionals and fan’s textual productivity, as the goals of both productions might point to the private pleasure and commercial success at the same time.

In terms of the enunciative productivity, digital technology served as new tools and spaces for fans to build community and formalize identity. Meanwhile, it provided alternative ways of communication for various actors including fans, producers, celebrities, and professionals as well (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Hodkinson, 2006; Sandvoss, 2011). The Internet has obscured the
“nonreciprocal quasi-interaction” between the celebrity and fan (Thompson, 1995) and constructed an alternative communicative space in which the para-social interaction was practiced and perceived (Redmond, 2014). Yet, as Sandvoss (2011) emphasized, any single communication or digital technology did not proliferate the formation of fan communities. Instead, the community was formed and categorized in fan cultures before the emergence of the Internet. Thus, the influence of increasing interactivity and communication facilitated by the digital technology did not necessarily lie in breeding brand new forms of the fan community, but in formalizing new fashions of norms, values, and relevant interpersonal network.

As for the impact of digitalization on the semiotic productivity, Sandvoss (2011) argued that the changing online textual field had differentiated itself from the offline environment. It embraced the sheer accessibility of texts online and promoted the easy sharing and availability of fan productivity (Sandvoss, 2011). In this process, fans could easily consume their fan objects and perceive the sense of intimacy, from which they explored the intense feelings of enjoyments, security, and belonging. Again, the influence of digital technology should not be read as something that drove new forms of fan desire or productivity. Slightly, it reshaped and was shaped by the pre-existing fan cultures at the same time. As Sandvoss (2011) indicated, the online fan activities now served “as an illustration of social and cultural shaping the medium: the contemporary face of the internet and the shift towards Web 2.0... reflect the range of activities in which popular audiences already engaged before the diffusion of online media” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 70–71). As digital technology increased the visibility of particular fannish patterns of textual productions, such activities were shaping how individuals, especially the so-called active audience, use the media at the same time.

Moreover, the fandom is becoming more and more mainstream, as it has been socially accepted in terms of some particular patterns of participation (Hills & Greco, 2015; Sandvoss et al., 2017; Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014). For instance, the production of UGC (user-generated-content) shared certain similarities with fan productions, especially when coming to genres such as user-generated movie trailers. The boundary between fans and audience has been blurred (Turner, 2011), which led to the phenomenon of “fanization” in many aspects of social life (Sandvoss et al., 2017). It seems that media fans were seen today more as normalized cultural practitioners rather than as stigmatized identities. Nevertheless, as (Hills and Greco, 2015) pointed out, certain fan cultures and fan objects might still be pathologized at the same time when the market valued the others. Such kind of discrimination and differentiation was conducted both through the top-down and down-top channels, debating continually by the fan tactics and industrial strategies. The development of digital technology further complicated such discrimination, as the definition of fans became problematic again in the digital era. In such discrimination, the “ordinary fans” depicted by Sandvoss and Kearns (2014) became “invisible” and marginalized, while the visible fans became dominant and mainstream with the help of the industry. Although scholars such as Sandvoss and the others argued for a more general definition of fandom to include the invisible fans, there has been a mechanism, which was not necessarily recognized by the scholars but was meaningful inside the fandom in deciding the borderline of each category of fans. In other words, the development of digital technology and the cultural industry did not only significantly influence the discrimination of fans and fan cultures, but also on how fans themselves interpret, discuss, and even legitimate such discrimination.

Developing multi-social interaction online

The impact of digital media on fan culture and fan community has always been formed as one of the crucial topics in both fandom studies and new media studies. In the past decade, abundant literatures have discussed how new interactive modes on social media influenced the form of affective closeness
and thus the shifting communicative practice between fan and fan objects (e.g., Booth, 2016; Hills & Greco, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Turner, 2004). The very common elaboration towards such discussion focused on how social media, in terms of its engaging interactive nature, realized the imagined intimacy between individual fan and the increasingly personalized public figure of celebrity (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). Meanwhile, as (Hills and Greco, 2015) pointed out, digital media have also changed the interactive practices among fans, in which the imagined relationship and thus the related socialized interactions involved also with the fan others inside or between various fan communities.

In exploring how fan community is formed and maintained, earlier studies paid more attention to the collective and subversive value of fan community as a creative whole (e.g., Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001), while later studies, usually from the Bourdieusian perspectives, focused more on the internal hierarchy shaped by the flow of shared knowledge and cultural capitals (e.g., Hellekson & Busse, 2006). The psychoanalysis camp, then, observed fan community as affectively bonded group of individual units motivated by complex psychological dynamic (e.g., Hills, 2002, 2017; Sandvoss, 2011). In this case, although the focus has been seemingly shifted more towards the relationship between individual fan and his/her fan object, the interaction among fans still acts as significant part implying how fans realize and perform such imaginary relationship in practice, especially in the digital era. Fan community remains as crucial topic in understanding fan participation as well as fan culture.

Celebrity fandom is one of the fandoms in which the sense of community plays significant role in constructing its fan culture and its relation to the industry. Although the imagination and pursue of fan-celebrity intimacy certainly plays a key role among celebrity fans, such intimacy is not always imagined or experienced only through fan-celebrity interaction. As van Krieken (2012) has pointed out, in celebrity fandom, fan object interaction was always shaped by two models of fan attention, including the focuses on the object or celebrity, and on fan’s social network around. Drawing on van Krieken’s ordering of fan interaction, Hills (2016) argued that affective attachment acts as “a kind of fan-cultural ‘glue,’ binding fan communities together, as para-social interactions become a kind of currency for group affiliations and exchanges as well as underpinning individuals’ self-identities” (p. 471). He thus criticized the notion of "para-social relationship" debated in fandom studies, firstly for its problematic dichotomy of “fantasy” and “realness” in depicting fan object relation and secondly for its conclusion of a dyadic relationship only between individual fan and celebrity. According to Hills, the fan interaction should be “multi-social,” as “there is no one clear ‘object’-relation… fans can simultaneously draw on celebrities as a resource within their self-narratives and share and perform these narratives with multiple fan others” (p. 471).

The multi-social interaction raised by Hills refers to the interaction “underpinning fan-fan interactions while also being subordinated to specific fan-cultural discourses/authenticities” (2016, p. 479). In other words, the relationship between fan and fan object is not only played by the engagement in communication between celebrity and fans but is also realized and performed through interactions among fans themselves. Both fan-celebrity and fan-fan interaction, in this sense, are constructed by fantasy as well as actual social practices, and thus serve as underlying and fundamental basis for fan community in terms of fans’ linguistic uniqueness, communicative patterns, and actions.

The emergence of digital media further reinforces the multi-social interactions in celebrity fandom, as it facilitates the increasingly intimate fan-celebrity interactions and fan-fan communicative events at the same time (Baym, 2000). The digital and interactive technology might even create new community with unique linguistic and speech tradition (Baym, 1993). Digital fandom, thus, becomes a computer-mediated community involving in considerably routinized speech code and social norms that might be unique in the digital era. This study also intends to see how certain
multi-social interactions in Chinese celebrity fandom are socially, culturally, and meanwhile technically formalized in the digital era. That is to explore, how certain fan-fan interactive techniques, some of which might already existed before but never became formalized into normative norms, are now shaped into rules, and are thus reflected in fans interactive patterns and linguistic uniqueness.

**Digitalizing fandom in emotional capitalism**

The authenticity of emotion has always been the epicenter in the intensive consumer culture and especially celebrity culture, which formulates the virtual fan object as embodied emotional apparatus in the economies of intimacy (Redmond, 2016). In 2007, Illouz proposed the concept of emotional capitalism, arguing that the economic action bridged with the emotional actions in managing both production and consumption. She argued that the capitalist culture, paralleling with the consumer culture, was merged into the intensive emotional life. Her perspectives have always been understood as a critical review against the classic sociological notion of the bureaucratic rationality as the dominance in the e-emotional capitalism, whereas the capitalist picture depicted by Illouz is a synthetization of two seemingly opposing discourses: The cultural practices are becoming intensively rational and emotional simultaneously (Illouz, 2008, 2017). The emotional and economic practices are interrelated and interacted in the emotional capitalism, shaping “a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (Illouz, 2007, p. 18). In her views, emotion was the energy that provokes the act, and was thus embodied as a practice that underlies the process of identity construction and maintaining. The fandom, especially the celebrity culture associating closely to the capital and market, might be the most straightforward one that intends to transform the emotional relationships of fan object into the economic relationship. As Redmond (2016) stated, the politics of celebrity culture were cultivated exactly in the adoration. The regulation of expression was formed to present the “authentic” emotion in the process of embodying the fan-object relation. Redmond (2016) interpreted it as an offshoot of the capitalism and liquid modernity, which disciplined the participants to “feel but in limited ways creating the conditions for the manufacturing of the neoliberal self that restricts and channels our egos so that we work well, consume well, reproduce well” (p. 352). The emotion has been coded into rational thinking, so that it becomes more authentic and “natural” than ever in various practices of consumption (Illouz, 2017).

In this sense, the concept of emotional capitalism distinguishes itself from Bourdieuan notions of social and cultural capitals. Cottingham (2016, p. 452) conceptualized emotional capital as “a tripartite concept composed of emotion-based knowledge, management skills, and capacities to feel that links self-processes and resources to group membership and social location.” The combination of emotion and capital has turned the emotion into socialization sources, which echoes to Illouz’s concern of how emotion can be exploited, quantified, and commercialized. Specifically, Illouz considered the emotion as “the combination of the ways a culture becomes ‘preoccupied’ with certain emotions and devises specific ‘techniques’—linguistic, scientific, ritual—to apprehend them” (2008, p. 14). That is to say, the practitioners presumed that the individuals were equal in the corporation so that the people must cooperate more to achieve the collective goal efficiently. The emotional styles such as “equality” and “cooperation” normalize the particular techniques of emotion expression in social practice and thus construct new patterns of sociality and emotionality in the community (Illouz, Gilon, & Shachak, 2014). This notion of emotional engagement can be very relevant to the affective labor of commercialized fandoms (Jenkins, 2006). Nevertheless, the question becomes how certain emotion was explored and formalized as a primary for practice rather
than how affection motivates actions of labor as earlier discussions commonly focused on. In other words, shifting from Bourdieu to Illouz when studying fandoms is to see how digital capitalism works in the most affective spheres online.

**Methodology**

The current study was designed based on the affective-discursive (Hills, 2016) and multi-sited case studies approach (Bailey, 2005); the primary methods included participated observation, semi-structural interviews, in complementary with autoethnography. The online observation was conducted primarily on Sina Weibo, the largest social media platform in China, from 2017 to 2020. The initial sites include celebrity fandoms, ACG fandoms, eSports fandoms, and Anglo-American fandoms, which are the four popular and major fandoms on Weibo. As the four major sites for analysis are chosen firstly due to theoretical considerations and the convenience and possibility of reaching, the article by no means aims to examine the massive picture of Chinese fandom comprehensively. Bailey, in explanation of his choice of sites, triangulated his three sites on three levels, namely the “media, space and the more elusive field of cultural connotation” (2005, p. 9).

Following these three notions, the four fan sites were chosen to cover different texts, traditions, and cultural implications. Nevertheless, as digital fans traveled from fandom to fandom frequently, the observation has reached relatively small and marginalized fandoms, including the cross-talking fandom, the Michael Jackson fandom, Rock and Roll fandom, and even the panda fandom. In general, the observation process has perfectly depicted the picture of trans-fandom where the flow of fan individuals was easily recognized.

Specifically, the observation was conducted first by following fan individuals, relevant Super Topics (discussion board around the fan objects), and hashtags online. In addition, the author tracked how fans react to the trending topics about the fan objects (e.g., trending news about a celebrity) and how they interact with other participants on Weibo. The author also attended a few interactive online groups on constant messaging platforms such as QQ and Wechat to observe the communicative practices of fans. The offline observation has been conducted since 2016. Events for observation include both the public fan events and the relatively private or small-scale gathering of fans. The public events include the popular comic concerts, celebrity’s commercial event, and the offline eSports tournaments.

The study also conducted 20 semi-structural interviews with key informants including fan celebrities and fan participants. The interviewees were chosen considering the fan period, degree of participation, and self-reported affection. Interviewees were selected through 1) theoretical sampling of active members based on author’s long-termed observations in the field, 2) snowball sampling after the first round of interview, and 3) convenient sampling based on online voluntary registrations. All interviewees were born between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, engaging in multiple fandoms including ACG, eSports, K-pop, J-pop, domestic celebrities, Anglo-American films, and TV dramas. Considering of the specificity of online fandoms, interviews were done partially by online communication, with a few face-to-face and telephone interviews (see Appendix A).

**The incarnation of fan object**

Both the digitalization and convergence of fandoms lead to the incarnation of fan objects, or the homogeneous assimilation of the more “virtual” fan culture and the celebrity culture. Zack described the invasion of ACG fandom by the celebrity fan culture as the phenomenon whereby “the ‘logic’ of ‘idol fan’ is now ruling the ACG fandom. People now like the characters in the same way as idol
fans loving their idols” (Personal interview, August 2, 2017). What is the so-called idol fan logic characterized? The idols, or celebrities in a broader sense, are presented easily as real people with actual flesh and career (Yin & Xie, 2018). They can benefit from the market and might fail at the same time. As stated by interviewees like Lin, who engaged actively in participation of data contribution, one significant motivation of their devotion is that “my baby should feel no wronged (我崽不能受委屈)” (Personal interview with Lin, August 14, 2018). The grievance here means not the feeling of being treated unfairly. The “feeling other’s feeling” in the case of celebrity culture is a constructed of intimacy after all (Redmond, 2014). The “grievance” here involves the actual rewards in money and resources that is transformed into the discourse of feeling. To a large extent, the fan labor, either material or immaterial, is made sense by fans in such affective discourse. Fans are thus depicted frequently as pathological fanatics who devoted to and obsessed with fan objects because of fantasies of intimacy. Many studies of celebrity fandom presume that the imagination of intimacy relates to real people (i.e., celebrities and idols; see Yang, 2012). The affective relationship between fans and fan objects has been explained by fans’ support of idols’ careers, both economically and culturally. Such rhetoric should be understood as an affectively rendered interaction between fan and the celebrity body facilitated mainly by the digital and social media. In concerning and taking part in the celebrity’s real career, the fans can intimate, feel, and touch the object of their desire through material rewards such as salary, celebratory opportunity, and commercial investment (Redmond, 2014). Simultaneously, fans are able to experience the semiotic connection between fan object through their own feelings and thus bodies. The diffusion of the idol fan logic reflects this embodiment of imagination by incarnating all the fan objects as actual persons and discursively materializing the imaginary “rewards” that can be transformed into the affective factors in practice.

Examples can be observed firstly in the ACG fandom. For ACG fans, the imaginary relationship between fans and virtual objects were primarily embodied by consumption or textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992). Such a relationship is relatively free from regulations other than those agreed by the communal moral economy because the fan objects were virtual, could be shaped based on the scripts in fans’ minds (Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Zheng, 2016). Lovers of ACG usually maintain an affective connection with a fan object for a limited time. They fall in love quickly with new characters without the guilt of betrayal, because these are not real figures and will not get hurt. In this sense, ACG fans construct fan identification in more individualistic and self-fulfilling ways. When being asked, “Do you think your identification (as an ACG fan) is different from others in your own experience?” a typical answer was as follows: “I don’t think so. Previously in the underground, I did not have extra energy to bother with that. I do not interact with others, I read my own beloved things” (Personal interview with Sarna, July 26, 2017). In this sense, the fan-object relation in the ACG fan culture is constructed directly, involving only the fan and the fan object. Although the fan object itself is always virtual and therefore inaccessible (Sandvoss, 2005), the collection of relevant transitional materials can still easily satisfy the fans. Nevertheless, the so-called logic of idol fan, based on the relationship between fans and real or almost-real figures, creates the following experience for fans: “I think an idol should have achievement. He will make his fans feel proud of him… the sense of achieving in progress with the idol is essential” (Personal interview with Max, September 22, 2017). The change of ACG fandom today seems to echo the idol fan tradition. As interviewees such as Zack, Sarna, and Seven all reported, ACG fans started to fight with others online to “protect the character’s honor” or to complain that the authors mistreated the characters. Such a change, as I find, could be explained by the different meanings associated with different incarnations of fan objects within different fan cultures.

The incarnation of fan objects creates different embodied imagination, feeling, and real-life connections between fans and fan objects. It does not only distinguish real people from fictional
figures but also sets boundaries of imagination, feeling, and perceived outcomes of prosumption. In the ACG fandom today, it is quite difficult for various participants to balance the boundary between virtual and real object relating. For example, the coupling would be forbidden by some idol fans, while we may expect a relatively flexible treatment of characters in the ACG fandom. However, recent ACG lovers have started to dispute character pairs and character treatment in their communities. It is increasingly common to see animation fans fighting with each other only because of the different couples they support. The actualization of affect, in some senses, rules the fandom today. Likewise, consumption activities manifest the boundaries presumed by the relationship between fans and fan objects.

The incarnation is also encouraged by the industry, who ultimately benefits from the fans labor. In the digital era, the act of purchase carries a shifting meaning today from collection to contribution (Zhang & Negus, 2020). In the current ACG fandom, consuming ACG products is to spend money for particular characters, even though the virtual characters would never actually benefit from it. For ACG fans like SZ, “consumption was just consumption in the past, but now it has changed. I spent money on The King’s Avatar because I liked it. But now they buy things to compete with fans of other characters. If you never bought a thing, you’re not qualified to call yourself as a fan” (Personal interview, September 18, 2017). The industry encouraged this trend, as the virtual characters in The King’s Avatar started to endorse actual products nowadays. Figure 1 shows the deodorant product endorsed by the protagonist of The King’s Avatar. It was a real commercial endorsement instead of any kind of special-themed promotion, as the deodorant product has branded the virtual character with the title of “celebrity endorser.” The promotion team even designed an autograph of the character on the bottle. In such promotion, the character has been extracted from his semiotic context, which is the novel content. Instead, he is promoted purely as a celebrity figure, just like the celebrities in real life.

Such branding strategy further constructs the connection between the virtual fan object and the material rewards, and thus opens more opportunities to engage the fans with affective practices. Fans would buy these products to prove the popularity of the character, creating a sense of pride and belongings. These practices also formulate specific rationales to treat the unreal fan objects as embodied individuals who might “feel grievance.” Thus, the ways that fans relate themselves toward the characters have changed from the self-fulfilling consumption to the mediated contribution. “When I first followed The King’s Avatar online, everything was normal. If the fans really liked particular characters or the couples, they just produced fan works around them.” Recollected by SZ, “I haven’t followed the fandom for a while, but when I returned to this fan community, I found that the newcomers really treated the characters like the idols” (Personal interview, September 18, 2017). Fans would start a quarrel when they think the outlook of the character in the animation was not as fashionable as other characters. Manifestos such as “he is the protagonist so that he deserves the best” are commonly seen in such quarrel. Fans would also attack another fan because of her fan-pic, which is believed to disrespect the protagonist by drawing him as a puffy man. Zack was surprised when she observed this quarrel: “A puffy, listless, but charming professional gamer—that’s how he was described in the novel. He was not some handsome and perfect entertaining idol. Seriously, kindly making fun of it doesn’t mean that one doesn’t like him” (Personal interview, August 2, 2017). Nevertheless, the fans who attacked the fan-pic insisted that the character was a respectful man who did not deserve such a parody. A fan wrote in the Weibo comment: “As a professional player, he made the effort to win the game, not to get (the mocking)” (Observed on Weibo, June 2017).

It is not hard to sensor the subtle difference between the two campaigns. The quarrel and underlying rationale are not merely a disagreement around the interpretation of the character. It is even hardly an interpretive or textual conflict occurring commonly in the fannish interpretive community (Jenkins, 1992) or interpretive fair (Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014). For fans, the anxiety does not entirely come from the possibility of misreading. Instead, it comes from the possibility that
the character might be hurt or lose anything. In this sense, the phrases of “deserve” and “worth” indicate a sense of economical and rational, as the fans calculate the cost of the effort and time for the character so that they feel “unworthy” for him. Nevertheless, they are emotional in another sense, because the reward is wholly imagined and unreal. The phrase—“worth” here implies a strong sense of emotional value and return. The incarnation of fan object creates a regulated and abstinent pleasure, which is intensively affective but economical at the same time. The abstinence of the pleasure redefines the legitimacy of affect or desire, and calls forth of numerous fan norms to regulate the “unworthy” practices. In its nascent stage, the rules of ACG fandom, especially in terms of fan work creation, were mostly moral (Hadas, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Ríos & Rivera, 2018).

Multi-social interaction and fan celebrities

The fan-object relation is interconnected with fan-fan relations and other interpersonal relations in the online fan network. Especially in the trans-fandom (Hills, 2014), where fan individuals...
frequently travel from one fan field to another, the interpersonal relations are constantly realized, imagined, and practiced. In this continuous process of interaction, fans position themselves in different communities, negotiating the most “proper” way to perform their identities in the specific fan network. Empirically, fans concluded several possible routines to predict other’s behaviors based on this multi-social interaction, and accordingly organize their own behaviors in advance. This imaginary interpersonal relation largely determines the settings, aims, and norms of fan practices, which ultimately changes how fans define and express their affection. The changing imagination of the multi-social interaction on specific platform has thus legitimated fan performances, which are formalized and normalized as new patterns of fan practices in the digital fan culture.

As Sandvoss (2011) suggested, social media have facilitated the fan participants in expanding their readership with fan objects. Some studies have pointed out fans’ increasingly closer distance to media life due to their need for resources and “poaching elements” (Duits, Zwaan, & Reijnders, 2014; Jenkins, 1992, 2006). For instance, Tao recalled her experience of becoming the fan of a celebrity 10 years ago. The way she identified herself as a fan was to search and collect all the relevant news and interviews in the past years, and summarized the information into one complicated table. “It took me almost a month.” Said Tao, “After I finished the table, I have known every public agenda of him in the past 2 years. That made me super satisfied. I felt like being closer to him” (Personal interview, November 11, 2018). Other interviewees similarly told the stories about becoming and transferring as fans in the pre-social media era. Unsurprisingly, the affective fan-object relations were almost embodied through the non-interactive practices such as information searching, posters/products collection, or private fan production. While in the digital era, fans are developing new ways to establish the connection between fan selves and the fan objects. That is to mediate this para-social connection of fan object with the social connection with fan others, especially those fan celebrities who seem to “be closer” to the fan object.

Facilitated by social media, people easily identify their online followers or whom they follow, even when entering a new fandom. For the newcomers, the very first and easiest way to set foot in a new fandom is to follow some insiders online. Momo described how she entered the eSports fandom in 2017: “I searched the team on Weibo, and found the Super Topic board. Then I located several fans to follow when scanning through the Super Topic board. After following them, I got to know the basic network in this fandom, and then I would know whom to follow next” (Personal interview, June 11, 2018). Her experience reveals a common routine for fans to enter a new fandom. They start their own fan experience by recognizing and following important nodes in the fan network and further learn to know the fandom through developing interpersonal communications. To engage in the fandom more rapidly, most of the new fans would first identify fan celebrities who have many followers, because “the information they posted are usually more comprehensive and reliable” (Personal interview with Momo, June 11, 2018). Meanwhile, some of the fan celebrities might “teach” the newcomers to participate in certain fan practices. “I saw a famous fan posted in the Super Topic board, telling the new comers what to do.” Lin recalled how she entered the voting fan group, “She posted the QQ number of the voting group, so I thought ‘okay, that’s the thing I could do at this point’, and applied to join the group” (Personal interview, June 11, 2018). As the opinion leaders, the fan celebrities become the significant communicative nodes in online fandom. The starting point of fan engagement in the fandom today highly depends on the fans one follows.

As the social media also facilitate efficient techniques for self-branding, fan celebrities can easily generate their own followers. They are considered as the fans who might “represent” the fandom and even fan object. On the one hand, fan individuals might regard the fan celebrities as the reference of fandom. While on the other hand, they would always require the fan celebrities to “behave properly.” As Momo explained: “You have to be wise enough if you are influential to the
community. If you are managing some celebrity’s fan club, it means that you’re closer to the celebrity. You should make sure that you have the capability and the determination to handle all the stuff” (Personal interview, June 11, 2018). When I asked her about the difference between fan-celebrity and fan organizations, she replied:

They’re similar in my opinion. The only difference is that a fan celebrity is an individual, whereas the fan organization is collective. They are both representative of the community and even the idols. For instance, when people think about an e-Sport player, they would think of his most famous fan, and vice versa. That fan should be particularly careful because she is on behalf of that player now (Personal interview, June 11, 2018).

The phrases such as “on behalf of” and “representative” interestingly indicate how fans might develop certain affective attachment to the fan celebrities who are considered as an accessible mediation between the fan individuals and the unachievable fan object. “Strangely, sometimes I feel like people are devoting themselves more to the fan celebrities rather than the fan object.” Said Light, who was a long-termed fan of Jay Chou (Personal interview, August 13, 2018). SW expressed a similar thought when talking about the fandom of a celebrity, in which fans always portrayed one of the celebrity’s colleagues as an enemy: “(The celebrity) never said that he disliked that colleague, but the fan celebrities did. They said we should hate the colleague for (the celebrity’s) own good, and everyone just believed them” (Personal interview, May 12, 2019). Apparently in these cases, the fan celebrities are not regarded just as the fellow fans. Instead, they have become an alternative fan object in fandom with its own hierarchy, acting as an affective hub to connect the fan individuals and the fan object.

In some ways, the abstract relationship between fan and fan object is partially embodied by establishing actual social connection between fan and the fan-celebrity. This change of communal structure shifts the focus of embodiment from embodying fascination with fan objects to showing off fans’ love and fan-like relationships with others concerning the increasingly prominent roles of fan networks (Morrissey, 2008). Nevertheless, the significance of networks in fan practice is not a fixed or pre-existing one but rather a dynamic and increasingly important one. In the past, fan practices concentrated mostly on official or self-made products. In digital fandoms, the networks shifted into focal points of fan-object relationships. Aurore compares fan participation in the ACG forum with fan participation in Weibo:

On a forum, you just communicate with fans who share same interests with you. When any of them don’t like this animation, they just disappear and you’d never see them again. While on Weibo, when you follow an author because he/she draws fan-pics of an animation, you may also encounter his/her creation of fan-art of another animation, and then you might pay attention to this new thing (Personal interview, September 21, 2017).

The sustainability of a discussion of fan objects, whether in a media feed or in the fan-object encounters, relies on the networking individuals located in various fandoms. As Momo has mentioned, “You’re now the fan of other fans, not the fan of the object you like” (Personal interview, June 11, 2018).

**Emotional style and the imagination of interpersonal relationship**

The shifting imaginary multi-social interaction is affectively operated by fans as a way to consolidate the fan-object connection. It is driven emotionally by the sense of protection, which is
considered as a collective goal for the fan participants. Although the protective fan practices are commonly seen in the celebrity fandoms, they were hardly primary in fandoms such as ACG and Anglo-American fandoms. Nevertheless, along with the incarnation of fan objects and the shifting fan relations, this sense of “protection” legitimated its significance by convincing the fans with the imaginary multi-social relations, in which the fan objects, no matter virtual or real, always exposed to the danger of being trolled. Such an imaginary network has constructed an “emotional style” that is presumed by fan participants before they conduct any practice.

According to Illouz (2007), the emotional style was produced by the new imagination of interpersonal relationship. In other words, the emotional style is formed with the interaction between selves and the others. In the case of online fandom, the emotional protection is exactly constructed in the formulation of the multi-social interaction. The new imagination of the relationships among multiple participants not only shapes the affective fact but also the “preoccupied” emotions of protection. The interpersonal relationship around fandom is believed to be a very hostile one, in which the primary social interactions occurred mostly between fans and the imaginary antagonists. In social interactions, fans make sense of their practice based on the prediction of other’s behavior, while the prediction per se relies largely on the imaginary interpersonal relationship online. For example, fans are suspicious to the language because they are afraid of “providing materials for the haters.” To a large extent, the fear comes from the affective fact constructed by the imaginary reality in which the fandom is always under the surveillance of the haters and the net media accounts. To survive from the surveillance, fans censor and regulate themselves with formal and informal rules to prevent the potential negative influence. In the most cases, the fan object is almost absent in this multi-social communicative event, as the interaction is mainly around fans and other participants. Nevertheless, the fan object is always a semiotic victim in this interaction. Fans believe that the trolling would ultimately harm the fan object, because the “hostile participants” always equal the fans to the fan objects. Orange explained why she agreed to regulate the fans in a fandom: “You can’t just selfishly do everything for your own pleasure, because all the consequences you’ve caused would be bear by (the fan object). If the stupid things done by fans appeared in the Trending Topic board, it is (the fan object) who would be mocked and humiliated, not you” (Personal interview, June 5, 2019). With such kind of subjectivity, the fans transfer the multi-social interaction into a way of fan-object interaction by emphasizing the sense of protection. The fan object, who was initially absent in the multi-social interaction, is thus back to the stage.

Fans strategically protect themselves and the fan objects from the potential attack of antagonists in practice. Almost all other participants, including the net marketing media and the other fandoms, are considered as rivals who might attack the fan object for self-interests. The manifesto like “no one is friend except for our own people” is commonly seen in celebrity fandoms, which further consolidates the communal boundary and the sense of territory. Gradually, the hostile ways of thinking become dominant among fans participants who intend to reason almost everything happened in fandom to the plot of antagonists. Once in my observation, there was a fan club that announced to shut down its Weibo account. Before the announcement, they were blamed by other fans for posting fan works produced by a fan who liked this celebrity and also one of his “antagonist.” When I asked about this in the interview, a fan engaging in the same fandom said:

I doubted that the fan club has already sell their Weibo account to (the antagonist’s) team. These days there were some net marketing accounts spreading the rumor that (my idol) was losing his fans. What a coincidence that this fan club announced to shut down exactly at this moment! This fan club has operated for almost a year. I don’t believe they would make stupid mistake like this (Personal interview, June 5, 2019).
She further explained to me that the antagonists would possibly offer high price to buy the famous fan accounts, pretending to be the fan for a while, and conduct harmful action when the time comes. Without reliable evidence, fans like her have portrayed the hostile online multi-social relationship in mind.

The protective emotional style is thus reinforced and constantly stimulated by this imagination of social relationships. Fans who do not buy the imagination of the hostile relationship might not legitimate certain practices driven by the presumed protective emotional style. Nevertheless, with the help of social media and platform algorism, the visibility of the hostile interaction between fandoms and other participants indeed increases on platforms like Weibo. Consequently, the imagination of the multi-social interaction becomes very persuasive when a fan actually witnessed incidents such as trolling or quarrel. “It’s like brainwashing.” Said Orange, “I used to find this ridiculous when I saw (the quarrel) happening in other fandoms. But when it happened to me, I just couldn’t help to believe that everyone else was trying to ‘harm’ (my fan object). Even though I knew it might be imaginary in most cases” (Personal interview, June 5, 2019). In this sense, the emergence of the protective emotional style and the imaginary multi-social interaction speaks to the consistent fan-object attachment rather than create new senses of affection. The re-imagining of multi-social interactions online has created certain emotional style that legitimated certain fan performances, yet it has not radically changed the “affective key” in the fan-object relation. Instead, the new relating imagination is made sense exactly by the pre-existing affective attachment, which convinces the fans to adopt and embrace the new patterns of fan participation as powerful embodiment of the fan-object connection.

Conclusion

This article argues that the practice of affective fan-object relationship is changing along with the shifts of media technology and interpersonal imaginations, constructed in the sense of emotional capitalism. First, the incarnation of fan objects creates a sense of authenticity, which further allows the fans to actualize the abstract affect or desire with material and economic rewards. It is also an aspect revealing the notion of emotional capitalism, which transforms the emotional into a commodity. The emotional meaning of consumption is exploited to legitimate the economic actions that might not be accepted by fans before.

The second aspect of the emotional capitalism of digital fandoms lies in the re-imagination of the multi-social relationship and emotional style. The emerging network of fans and objects, fans and fans further gives forth to the production of authenticity in the imaginary fan-object relationship. The sense of realness shapes the fan objects, which might be virtual or non-human, into embodied figures who are accessible and made flesh. The authenticity is both economical and emotional. On the one hand, the possibilities of gains and losses shape the rational calculation that links the fan’s own expression and practices to the economic value or reward of the objects. While on the other hand, as the emotional capitalism is transforming emotional into the commodity, the emotional meaning of consumption is exploited to legitimate the economic actions that might not be accepted by fans before. The affective fan-object relationship is thus embodied paradoxically with the pursuit of love and pleasure as well as the economic rationality.

The discussion of digital fandom in terms of emotional capital implies a complex negotiation of the object-relating embodiment in digital fandoms, revealing how fans deal with the crossing, overlapping, and even conflict fan performances. The formalization of digital fan practice is not constructed merely by fan subjectivity or the so-called industrial rules. It complicatesly involves strong sense of fan agency as well as the cultural structure at the same time. It also indicates how fans mediate the fan-object relationship in use of media and digital technology.
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## Appendix A

### List of Interviews.

| ID | Birth | Sex | Fan object | Interview date | Duration | Method              |
|----|-------|-----|------------|----------------|----------|---------------------|
| 01 | Sarna | 1989 | M          | ACG            | 2017/07/26 | 1:10/               | Audio recording     |
| 02 | Zack  | 1991 | F          | ACG/J-pop     | 2017/08/02 | 2:00/               | Instant messenger   |
|    |       |      |            | English film and TV |         |                     |                     |
| 03 | SZ    | 1993 | F          | ACG           | 2017/09/18 | 3:00/               | Instant messenger   |
| 04 | Seven | 1989 | F          | ACG/domestic idol | 2017/09/19 | 3:20/               | Instant messenger   |
| 05 | Murphy| 1989 | F          | ACG           | 2017/09/19 | 2:30/               | Instant messenger   |
| 06 | Aurore| 1989 | F          | ACG/J-pop    | 2017/09/21 | 2:15/               | Instant messenger   |
| 07 | Max   | 1990 | F          | ACG/K-pop    | 2017/09/22 | 1:50/               | Instant messenger   |
| 08 | Light | 1995 | F          | C-pop/eSports/ACG | 2018/08/13 | 2:07/               | Instant messenger   |
| 09 | Gina  | 1997 | F          | eSports/K-pop | 2018/08/14 | 1:46/               | Instant messenger   |
| 10 | Lin   | 1998 | F          | eSports/domestic idol | 2018/08/14 | 1:28/               | Instant messenger   |
| 11 | Tao   | 1990 | F          | Domestic idol | 2018/11/11 | 2:19/               | Audio recording     |
| 12 | Doll  | 1997 | F          | Western pop music/domestic idol | 2019/01/22 | 1:04/               | Audio recording     |
| 13 | JP    | 1990 | F          | J-pop/cross talk comedy | 2019/02/27 | 1:56/               | Audio recording     |
| 14 | Lamb  | 1988 | F          | Japanese actor/ACG | 2019/02/28 | 1:40/               | Audio recording     |
| 15 | Xuan  | 1988 | F          | Domestic idol | 2018/12/07 | 0:42/               | Audio recording     |
| 16 | Momo  | 1995 | F          | eSports/sports/K-pop | 2018/06/11 | 1:21/               | Face-to-face (HK)   |
| 17 | QZ    | 1996 | M          | eSports/K-pop | 2019/04/08 | 1:36/               | Audio recording     |
| 18 | Bear  | 1989 | M          | ACG/J-pop/classic music | 2019/02/23 | 1:30/               | Face-to-face (SH)   |
| 19 | SW    | 1994 | M          | Domestic actor | 2019/05/12 | 1:54/               | Instant messenger   |
| 20 | Orange| 1991 | F          | Domestic actor | 2019/06/05 | 2:05/               | Instant messenger   |