

Identity, Stance, and Intra-Fandom Conflict: A Discourse Analysis of Solo and Team Fans in a Chinese Idol Fandom

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Abstract. With the increasing prominence of digital fan cultures, online fandoms have become key sites for identity performance, ideological alignment, and internal contestation. This study investigates how distinct fan identities – namely, team fans (supporters of the entire idol group) and solo fans (supporters of a specific member) – are constructed and negotiated through online discourse during moments of controversy. Focusing on a Chinese idol group, the analysis draws on user-generated comments from Weibo following a public conflict. Using discourse analysis, the study reveals how linguistic strategies such as stance-taking, boundary marking, and evaluative language are employed to articulate divergent identities. Team fans tend to emphasize unity, emotional restraint, and brand preservation, while solo fans adopt adversarial narratives rooted in exclusive loyalty and moral critique. These patterns illustrate how identity positioning influences affective hierarchies and intra-fandom polarization. The findings contribute to broader understandings of digital identity politics and the sociolinguistics of online fan conflict.

Keywords: fandom identity, intra-group conflict, discourse analysis, Chinese social media, digital fandom culture

1. Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has transformed youth culture in China, fostering new forms of identity expression, mediated intimacy, and organized fandoms. More than entertainment, fanquans function as a structured social system with distinctive language, networks, and hierarchies. Within this expanding landscape, fan communities often appear cohesive from the outside. However, emerging research and online ethnographies suggest a high degree of internal differentiation, especially in fandoms surrounding multi-member idol groups. Fans may align with the group as a whole (team fans) or with specific members (solo fans), and these alignments often entail distinct emotional investments, discursive strategies, and ideological commitments. These internal divisions are not trivial: they can lead to loyalty conflicts, boundary disputes, and moments of public fragmentation – particularly during high-profile controversies, or “fan wars.”

Existing literature has explored fandom from multiple perspectives, including cultural production [1,2], in-group language systems [3], and collective practices [4]. However, most studies implicitly treat fandoms as ideologically unified. Less attention has been paid to how sub-group identities are constructed, differentiated, and contested within the same fandom – especially in the Chinese

context. In particular, little is known about how discourse mediates identity positioning and conflict escalation among fans during controversial incidents.

Thus, this paper will explore how digital fan discourse becomes a site for identity construction and ideological contestation. It aims to address the following research questions:

a) How do team fans and solo fans construct their identities through online discourse in the context of fandom controversy?

b) In what ways do these identity positions influence the stances and linguistic behaviors adopted during intra-fandom conflict?

2. Theoretical framework

This study draws on Bucholtz and Hall's view [5] of identity as socially constructed through discourse, particularly the principles of adequation (alignment to signal shared identity) and distinction (differentiation to mark boundaries). These concepts explain how fans build solidarity or opposition through linguistic strategies.

Englebretson's stance theory [6] is also central, highlighting how speakers evaluate events, align with others, and position themselves socially. In fandom contexts, stance-taking performs ideological work – affirming alliances, expressing moral judgment, or rejecting opposing views.

Thus, both frameworks will guide the analysis of how team fans and solo fans construct, contest, and reinforce identities during conflict. They position fan identity not as fixed but as emergent, interactional, and responsive to controversy.

3. Data and method

3.1. Data

The “Endless Summer” controversy erupted in August 2022 when behind-the-scenes footage from a Chinese idol group (Group X) showed Member A calling out Member B for a rule violation. In the released edited version, Member A's remarks were removed, which solo fans interpreted as favoritism. The dispute quickly polarized into solo vs. team fan camps.

One hundred public Weibo comments posted within a week of the incident were collected via keyword and hashtag searches. Only posts that clearly expressed either solo or team fan identity were included; commercial, off-topic, and bot-generated content were excluded. All usernames were anonymized.

3.2. Method

Using discourse analysis, the study examined how fans constructed identity and stance through language. Analysis focused on pronoun use, evaluative terms, stance markers, and boundary-making devices. Comments were grouped into team fan and solo fan categories, with representative examples selected for closer examination.

4. Data analysis

This section examines how team fans and solo fans construct fan identities through discourse during the “Endless Summer” controversy. Drawing on five representative comments from each group, the analysis traces how users engage in stance-taking, boundary marking, and affective positioning to perform either collective loyalty or exclusive allegiance.

4.1. Team fans: constructing identity through collective loyalty and de-escalation

The discourse of team fans – those who support Group X as a whole – reveals a range of identity performances shaped by varying levels of emotional engagement, ideological framing, and boundary work. Rather than presenting a unified front, team fan comments display a progressive stance trajectory, moving from distancing to moral alignment and ultimately toward ideological reframing. This layered discourse reflects an effort to preserve collective identity and group cohesion amid internal controversy.

(a) Distancing: Avoiding Alignment Through Expressed Uncertainty

“Up till now, I still don’t know what the ‘Endless Summer’ incident is about.”

This comment exemplifies distancing, a discursive strategy through which the speaker disclaims knowledge to avoid ideological commitment. By signaling confusion or ignorance, the fan sidesteps having to take a stance on the controversy, effectively positioning themselves outside the polarization. This strategy performs identity through non-alignment, echoing what Bucholtz and Hall [5] describe as the erasure of oppositional identities in order to preserve an image of neutrality.

(b) Defensive Loyalty: Asserting Collective Authenticity

“Stop using the Endless Summer event to emotionally manipulate fans. Real team fans have always supported all the members.”

This comment adopts a defensive and normative tone, drawing a clear line between “real” team fans and others. The use of “real” functions as a boundary-making device, asserting that true group loyalty is consistent and non-selective. The imperative structure “stop using” signals moral fatigue and perceived emotional exploitation. Here, identity is performed through moral legitimation and exclusion, reinforcing collective integrity while rejecting the emotional framing advanced by solo fans.

(c) Drawing Moral Boundaries: Distinguishing In-group from Betrayers

“The other member’s fans were kicking him while he was down. Real team fans didn’t spread rumors, did they?”

This comment makes explicit accusations, portraying solo fans of other members (e.g., supporters of Member B) as aggressors. The phrase “kicking him while he was down” invokes strong moral condemnation, while the rhetorical question reinforces the idea of team fan innocence. The speaker distinguishes between performative support and authentic loyalty, framing the latter as morally superior. This illustrates what stance theory refers to as affective alignment – using language to express emotional solidarity and ethical positioning.

(d) Ideological Reframing: Transforming Individual Harm into Collective Threat

“After that wave of rumors, I only felt stronger about loving the group, because next time, it might not just be Member A who gets attacked.”

This comment marks the final phase in the stance trajectory: the reframing of individual harm as collective vulnerability. The speaker acknowledges that Member A was targeted but quickly generalizes the threat to the group as a whole. This is a strategic discursive move that externalizes blame and broadens emotional stakes, transforming the incident from a solo fan grievance into a shared protective impulse. The use of “next time” situates the incident within a narrative of ongoing risk, reinforcing group cohesion against external hostility.

This progressive stance trajectory supports the argument that team fans, while diverse in tone, are unified in their discursive prioritization of group cohesion over individual advocacy. Their identity is performed not through overt aggression, but through emotional control, boundary enforcement, and narrative redirection – mechanisms that aim to de-escalate internal conflict and preserve the symbolic unity of Group X.

4.2. Solo fans: constructing loyalty through affective intensification and opposition

In contrast to the discourse of team fans, solo fans of Member A construct their identities around exclusive allegiance, moral grievance, and oppositional stance-taking. Their comments reveal a marked affective intensity that escalates from resigned disillusionment to overt ideological confrontation. Across this trajectory, solo fans frame themselves as the authentic victims and defenders of Member A, and simultaneously as critics of institutional neglect and collective hypocrisy. This discursive posture not only reinforces in-group solidarity but also explicitly rejects the legitimacy of team fan discourse.

(a) Declarative Identity: Loyalty as Exclusive Belonging

“Now you understand why we solo fans of Member A are battle-hardened. We only love Member A!”

This comment performs identity through direct declaration. The phrase “we only love him” serves a dual function: it affirms exclusive loyalty while simultaneously rejecting the idea of group-wide support. The speaker invokes the metaphor of a “battle-hardened” fandom, constructing an image of resilience in the face of perceived adversity. Here, identity is enacted not only through affective attachment but also through a militant stance, signaling a history of emotional struggle and defensive action.

(b) Exposing Contradiction: Moral Dissection of Group Ideology

“When some team fans say ‘Group X will always be together’, don’t they think it ironic?”

This rhetorical question critiques the core value proposition of team fans – unity – by exposing a perceived gap between discourse and behavior. The speaker accuses team fans of discursive hypocrisy, framing their inaction or silence during the controversy as incompatible with their professed group loyalty. The performative nature of the question invites reflection but also asserts moral superiority, as the speaker positions solo fans as more emotionally honest and ethically consistent.

(c) Reframing Betrayal: Loyalty Through Opposition

“Weren’t even team fans trashing Member A during Endless Summer? Don’t pretend you’ve always supported him? Team fans always claim, ‘Group X’ will be together forever’, but in fact, they had long resented Member A.”

This comment moves into explicit accusation, challenging the narrative of team fan loyalty by highlighting what the speaker perceives as historical betrayal. The rhetorical use of “even team fans” amplifies the sense of injustice, suggesting that the group’s most vocal proponents failed Member A when it mattered most. The speaker enacts identity through the lens of historical memory, presenting solo fans as the only group whose loyalty remained unbroken. This reinforces the binary logic of “true loyalty vs. false allegiance”, constructing team fans as not only mistaken but morally compromised.

Ideological Critique: Structural Exclusion and Exploitation

“This kind of silent exclusion – this instinctive ostracization – is what team fans have mastered most skillfully. Member A’s achievements must be shared, his flaws scrutinized, and the malice toward him is never even hidden.”

This final comment represents the most ideologically complex position. It critiques what the speaker perceives as structural asymmetry within the fan culture of Group X. The parallel syntax emphasizes systemic exclusion: Member A is simultaneously appropriated when successful and isolated when under scrutiny. This strategy of linguistic parallelism reinforces the speaker’s ideological stance, portraying solo fans not just as emotionally loyal, but as cognitively aware of

systemic injustice. The comment reframes the controversy as evidence of deep-rooted inequity, and not merely as a momentary fan dispute.

Solo fans construct their identities through a discursive intensification of loyalty, grievance, and opposition. This trajectory progresses from, for example, declarative allegiance (“we only love him”), through irony and moral critique (undermining team fan narratives), and to systemic accusation (framing the incident as institutional betrayal). Rather than seeking group unity, solo fans use stance-taking to amplify internal division, portraying themselves as ethically consistent in contrast to an emotionally detached and hypocritical majority. Their discourse is affectively charged, ideologically pointed, and rooted in narratives of exclusion and vigilance. These findings support the broader claim that solo fan identity is performed through oppositional stance, driven not only by admiration but by a felt obligation to defend the individual against group neglect. This oppositionality is central to their group identity and emotional cohesion.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how team fans and solo fans discursively constructed identity during the “Endless Summer” controversy. Findings show that fan identity is not a fixed affiliation but an interactional performance shaped by stance-taking, boundary work, and ideological framing. Team fans tended to manage the conflict through emotional regulation, ambiguity, and collective reframing. Their progression – from distancing to portraying individual harm as a group threat – illustrates Bucholtz & Hall’s principle [5] of adequation, minimizing internal rifts to protect the imagined unity of Group X. Solo fans, in contrast, intensified affective commitment and moral opposition. Moving from declarations of loyalty to critiques of systemic exclusion, they consistently enacted distinction, rejecting group-wide solidarity in favor of defending Member A. This aligns with Englebreton’s stance model [6], where evaluations and alignments serve to draw moral and social boundaries. These findings extend fandom research by shifting attention inward, showing that digital fandoms sustain themselves not only through shared passion but also through managed conflict. Language here is a tool of inclusion and exclusion, discipline and dissent. Internal disagreements, far from being peripheral, are central to the maintenance of fan identities and hierarchies.

But of course, some limitations of this study still exist, it draws on a single platform, a short time frame (one week), and one fandom context. Therefore, future research could compare discourse across platforms, track conflicts longitudinally, or explore multilingual and transnational fandoms. Platform algorithms and moderation policies also merit investigation for their role in amplifying particular stances.

In conclusion, the “Endless Summer” incident reveals how online fan identities are actively negotiated and contested in real time. Through stance-taking, fans not only respond to controversy but also reshape the symbolic boundaries of their community. Intra-fandom conflict, while divisive, is also a productive site where collective identity is tested, reaffirmed, and redefined.

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