

Analysis of the Socioeconomic Contributions of Fans Behavior Influenced by Star Effect in the Era of Mass Audiences

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Abstract. In 2005, the domestic talent show Melody Makers burst onto the scene, igniting a nationwide craze for star worship. The term "idol" gradually entered the public consciousness. This phenomenon transcended mere entertainment, representing a distinct fans culture that evolved into a fans economy centered on idol worship. In today's era of online popularity metrics, this fanbase's consumption mindset has shifted from "I need it" to "It's related to my idol". Evidently, the star effect profoundly influences fans' behavior across all facets of social life while simultaneously driving economic growth in various sectors. This paper primarily explores the contributions of fans to China's socioeconomic landscape driven by the star effect in the era of traffic. Focusing on three major industries (tourism, retail, and film), it employs methods such as questionnaire surveys and case studies to investigate these impacts. Ultimately, it demonstrates that fans consumption driven by emotional bonds has become an undeniable industrial force in contemporary society.

Keywords: star effect, fans, age of traffic, socioeconomic landscape

1. Introduction

In the age of traffic, for stars to achieve genuine impact, they primarily rely on fans' support. Fans often engage in consumption during their fervent pursuit of idols, giving rise to a massive fans-driven industry. Consequently, under the influence of star effect, fans have generated significant economic benefits across various sectors in China. Currently, traditional biases and controversies surrounding stars and fans behavior persist in Chinese society. Many perceive stars solely as entertainers for acting, singing, or dancing, while fervent fans' activities are often viewed as "crazy" and incomprehensible to the average person. However, contemporary stars are evolving from providers of emotional value into leaders of economic consumption, and fans' behavior is shifting from purely emotional attachment to substantial economic support.

Based on the current socioeconomic context, this paper analyzes the driving force of stars and fans on China's socioeconomic development from three major industries—tourism, retail, and film. By integrating survey data and stars' case studies, it aims to reduce societal prejudice and negative

attitudes toward this industry and its practices, while highlighting the positive impact of the entertainment sector from a macro perspective.

2. Theoretical foundation

The mechanisms underlying the star effect are explained by two widely accepted theories: the Source Model and the Meaning Transfer Model. The Source Model posits that stars provide consumers with two crucial sources of perceived value. First, stars are a source of trust because their expertise and credibility foster consumer trust in the product. Second, stars are a source of attractiveness, because their popularity enhances the product's appeal to consumers. The Meaning Transfer Model, proposed by Grant (1989), addresses limitations in explaining star endorsements through the Source Credibility and Source Attractiveness models. The Meaning Transfer Model explains how meaning is transferred from stars to products, and then from products to consumers. The meaning transfer process involves three stages: meaning formation, meaning transfer, and meaning acquisition. Meaning formation refers to a specific cultural environment endowing stars with symbolic meaning, where stars become symbols of certain genders, ages, social statuses, personalities, or lifestyles. Meaning transfer occurs when a star and a product appear together, causing the star's symbolic meaning or image to transfer to the product, endowing it with certain attributes. Meaning acquisition refers to consumers gaining symbolic meaning and reconstructing their self-image through the use and consumption of such products. Grant identifies three modes to assess the depth of star-product connections, ranked from deepest to shallowest: Explicit Mode, where the star endorses the product; Implicit Mode, where the star uses the product; Co-present Mode, where the star merely appears alongside the product [1].

The theory of meaning transfer models suggests that stars imbue entities and virtual objects associated with them—including but not limited to endorsed products, visited locations, and featured works—with symbolic significance. This endows such objects with emotional value beyond their intrinsic worth. When fans pay for this emotional value, consumption occurs. This emotional value is invariably greater than or equal to the actual value of the product, thereby increasing the profit margin of such consumption. Consequently, this contributes to the promotion of social and economic development.

3. The economic growth driven by the star effect

3.1. The economic contribution of the star effect to the tourism industry

With the rise of idol-chasing culture, fans-driven tourism has emerged as a novel travel trend. This group's travel motivation centers on following stars' footsteps—whether attending concerts, music festivals, or visiting locations associated with their idols. Their choice of destination is primarily determined by the connection to their favorite stars. Xie Yanjun posits that the fundamental essence of tourism lies in pursuing pleasurable leisure experiences, which inherently involve the interaction between travelers' physical presence and specific contexts [2]. For fans, the travel experience in idol-chasing tourism is deeply intertwined with emotional attachment, transforming travel destinations into direct bridges connecting them to their offline relationship with stars. In this context, travel destinations become extensions of star-related entities. Similar to famous residences, the humanistic value bestowed upon these places far exceeds their natural value, imbuing them with profound significance. stars actively promote their hometowns during public engagements, conveying affection for their roots to fans. This sparks travel interest among followers and boosts

local cultural tourism. The star effect propels fans from the digital realm into physical spaces, the vivid and three-dimensional spatial experience allows fans to satisfy their emotional needs more directly, both physically and psychologically, while gaining a sense of identity and belonging within the actual setting.

Concerts are the primary events driving fans travel. The economic value generated by a single concert extends beyond ticket sales alone, as it directly fuels local economic development through associated spending on transportation, dining, and lodging. In 2023, the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism released data on Jay Chou's concert tour: the events drew a total audience of 185,000 attendees, with 38% being local residents and 62% from other regions. The concerts generated cumulative comprehensive spending exceeding 3 billion yuan. Data shows that from September 6 to 11, Tianjin's overall tourism orders increased by 11.7% compared to the previous week and surged by 77.4% compared to the same period in 2019. Tourism visits rose by 8.57% week-on-week and grew by 70.5% year-on-year. Order value climbed by 35.3% week-on-week and soared by 130.2% year-on-year. Specifically, hotel booking value surged 91% week-on-week and 318.8% year-on-year; average room rates climbed 25.9% week-on-week and 42.7% year-on-year; and ticket booking value soared 439.4% week-on-week and 2431.8% year-on-year [3]. Official figures reveal that fans support for concerts has significantly boosted economic revenues across various local industries.

The emergence of star hotspots indirectly draws fans' travel attention. When fans plan trips, they prioritize locations visited by their idols, achieving psychological closeness through cross-temporal overlap in identical settings. The summer 2025 hit drama "Revenged Love" propelled actor Ziyu into the public eye. As public interest deepened, his hometown Lianyungang sparked a wave of pilgrimages. Fans flocked to shops mentioned in Ziyu's early vlogs, plastering walls with sticky notes and photo cards bearing messages. This indirect immersion in their idol's daily life through shared living spaces not only created a sense of connection but also boosted the economy of this small city. Entertainment marketing accounts for cultural tourism destinations across the country also attract traffic by linking stars to local areas through their representative works and historical experiences.

3.2. The economic contribution of the star effect to the retail industry

3.2.1. Star endorsements

Star endorsements have become a key marketing strategy for brands today. At its core, this approach leverages the star power of stars to associate them with products that align with the company's image, thereby attaching the star's value to the product itself [4]. For the general public, endorsers embody the abstract image of a brand. A star whose persona aligns with the brand positioning helps shape its social image, attracting attention while enhancing its approachability and credibility, thereby bridging the gap between the brand and consumers. Unlike the public perspective, fans' motivation to purchase star-endorsed products extends beyond recognition of the product's value or brand positioning. It stems from devotion and admiration for the star. Fans transfer this emotional attachment to the endorsed products, achieving personal fulfillment and identity affirmation through consumption.

According to survey statistics, 67% of fans surveyed stated they would purchase any endorsed product within their budget. This indicates that a significant portion of the fanbase prioritizes supporting their idols over the product's actual content. When asked about their purchasing motives, 74% of respondents cited boosting sales for their idol's endorsements as their primary goal. Most

brands release sales reports within specific timeframes—such as within seconds, one minute, or one hour—after star-endorsed products go on sale. For limited-edition items, they report the time taken to sell out. Fans often rush to purchase to achieve "impressive" official sales figures. They believe these favorable sales numbers enhance the star's commercial value, paving the way for future opportunities—thus fulfilling their inner desire to elevate their idol's status.

Products endorsed by stars often feature exclusive packaging designs and autographs, which significantly fuel fans' desire to purchase. Terms like "limited edition", "limited-time offer" and "custom-made" confer heightened value in the eyes of fans, transforming these items into collectibles rather than mere functional goods.

3.2.2. Star merchandise

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics divides signs into two components: the signifier and the signified. The symbolic nature of entertainment star merchandise is highly pronounced. Applying semiotics to explain this, the signifier is the product itself, while the signified is the meaning it symbolizes [5]. Ryan C contends that in today's increasingly digital age, some fans still harbour a profound attachment to physical artefacts. For these enthusiasts, collecting merchandise represents not merely the acquisition of objects, but rather the preservation of emotional capital—such as sentimental bonds or cherished memories [6]. In today's fans economy, merchandise has become a vital component, significantly driving socioeconomic development.

Star merchandise can be broadly categorized into two types: the first consists of limited-edition items given away when endorsed products are sold. Primarily serving promotional and display purposes, these items aim to boost fans' purchasing interest and act as catalysts for sales. They typically include simple, small products like trading cards, refrigerator magnets, and display stands. The other category consists of merchandise specifically crafted for fans, driven primarily by emotional consumption. This includes lifestyle items like apparel and luggage, as well as non-daily goods such as figurines, plush dolls, posters, and albums. Primary sales channels include official platforms operated by star management agencies, fans clubs, pop-up stores and fan-made creations.

Fans clubs typically produce star merchandise not primarily for profit, but to foster emotional connections between fans and idols or promote the star's image. In contrast, merchandise released by star agencies often carries profit motives. For instance, Times Peak's proprietary app "T-FAMILY" requires fans to pay a 298-yuan annual membership fee to become premium members before gaining access to purchase related star merchandise. Furthermore, each membership only grants access to merchandise for one generation of members. Fans wishing to purchase merchandise for multiple generations must purchase additional memberships. Despite the steep prices, fans remain willing to pay, because compared to fans-made or fans-produced items, "official" merchandise carries greater authority and collectible value.

Fans-made merchandise typically features smaller production runs, greater variety, and more diverse designs compared to the aforementioned categories. Fans independently design and produce concept art and prototypes for products. They promote these through social platforms like Weibo, RedNote and TikTok, as well as fans communities. Production commences once a target number of participants is reached within a specified timeframe. The success of these merchandise releases relies heavily on fans design capabilities and initial promotional efforts. Typically, the required group size ranges from dozens to hundreds of participants, making it a small-scale sales activity. Fans selectively purchase items based on their personal preferences and needs.

3.2.3. Star-Worn styles

"Star-Worn styles" specifically refer to clothing items identical to those worn by characters in currently popular TV shows or by top stars, which become hot sellers on online e-commerce platforms. This represents a classic "viral hit" phenomenon in online sales [7]. This can extend the meaning of "same style". In videos, photos, livestreams released by stars, or in TV dramas and variety shows, numerous products appear that are not formally endorsed. These include items gifted by brands, personal belongings of stars, or randomly placed decorative objects, such as clothing, accessories, toys, and various daily necessities. Such products often require no promotional efforts from merchants. Riding the wave of star and media popularity, fans spontaneously search for and purchase the same items. The resulting short-term supply shortages can generate astonishing online sales figures. These random and incidental consumption opportunities have boosted the economies of many non-endorsed brands, small businesses, and workshops, allowing them to temporarily capture targeted consumer groups through this method.

3.3. The economic contribution of the star effect to the film industry

The traffic economy represents a major trend in contemporary society, closely intertwined with recent socioeconomic development, the growth of the internet industry, and the self-promotion strategies of stars [8]. Renowned film personalities heighten public interest and encourage audiences to attend screenings, most crucially to pay for them. Hollywood studios regard superstars as indispensable to a film's success [9]. The economic contribution of the star effect to the film and television industry has evolved beyond being a mere "box office guarantee" transforming into a complex industrial chain that spans content production, data manufacturing, and derivative consumption. Fans communities profoundly influence the industry's revenue structure and business models through diverse channels.

For the film industry, fans contributions primarily manifest in pre-release promotion and foundational support for box office and viewership. During the pre-release phase, fans spontaneously promote their idols' works for free. For instance, before the release of the film *Shanghai Fortress*, any Weibo post mentioning Lu Han would see comments like "Looking forward to Lu Han's film *Shanghai Fortress* on August 9th" receive overwhelming likes. This flood of promotion generated massive attention for the film even before its release. Consequently, many directors prioritize popularity as a key factor in casting decisions. Even Teng Huatao, director of *Shanghai Fortress*, openly stated that Lu Han's robust fans base was the primary reason for casting him as lead. Post-release, fans attendance further solidified the film's box office performance. Although *"Jade Dynasty"*, starring Xiao Zhan, was originally a low-budget web film, it was adapted for the big screen due to his growing popularity. On its opening day, Xiao Zhan's fans booked entire theaters in 44 cities to show their support for their idol. Similarly, the film *Resurrection* achieved a pre-sale box office of 120 million yuan, largely driven by the popularity of its lead actor, Yi Yangqianxi.

4. Revelations and challenges

With the evolution of media technology, compared to traditional media such as newspapers and radio, the interactive, decentralised, and instantaneous nature of online communication has established it as an entirely new mode of dissemination, ultimately becoming the dominant form of information transmission [10]. The star effect leverages online communication to influence fans

communities, thereby generating diverse forms of consumer behaviour. This thesis contends that a favourable social atmosphere and consumer environment cannot be achieved without the concerted efforts of society, stars, and fans alike. Society should attach greater importance to stars and the entertainment industry, provide a broader and safer operational environment, strengthen cross-sector cooperation, and effectively convert online traffic into economic value. Concurrently, stars must enhance their personal cultivation, uphold proper conduct and conduct themselves with integrity, projecting positive energy to society through constructive role modelling to better serve the public good. Fans also should pursue their aspirations within ethical and legal boundaries, achieving their spiritual fulfillment through lawful and reasonable means, thereby fostering superior developmental prospects for their idols.

5. Conclusion

In summary, under the influence of the star effect, fans communities play a significant supporting role in the socioeconomic development of various sectors across China through direct or indirect consumption behaviour. It is hoped that this study will help mitigate public prejudice and stereotypes towards the entertainment industry, fostering a more positive perspective on its contributions to China's socioeconomic progress. The primary research methodology employed in this study is case analysis. Given the specific research questions and the challenges associated with accessing materials and data, extensive field research or alternative methodologies for relevant validation were not undertaken. Future studies concerning stars and their fans communities may adopt a more macro perspective, transforming "the revelry of one group" into "a shared experience for the whole society".

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