

Cyberbullying in Fandom

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Abstract: Young fans of C-POP/K-POP (Chinese pop/Korean pop) are a huge part of users of social media and part of diverse fandom that has not only a strong sense of belonging to a community, but there are also serious issues. This study aims to investigate the elements of psychological motivations of cyberbullying in toxic Fandom and the characteristic feature of Cyberbullying in Fandom. This study included a thoroughly designed questionnaire, randomly collected samples, and reviews from previous research related to Cyberbullying. The result indicates that both Emotional Value and a Sense of Responsibility can be known as the factors that cause respondents to participate in Cyberbullying. Furthermore, the psychological effects and the solutions to the problems were also discussed in the research.

Keywords: cyberbullying, fandom, psychology, young generation, C-POP

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the public has seen a significant rise in Internet and social media usage. To the most recent statistical report done by the China Internet Network Information Center, there are currently 1,032 million users on the Internet, and 34.9% of these users are under the age of 30. The netizens spend around 28.5 hours weekly on Internet, showing how prominent social media has become in Chinese daily life. What accompanied the rise of social media, was the rise of the entertainment industry online. From the early survival shows to choose the champion among singers to the emergence of K-POP in China, more and more people are involved in fandom. Fandom is the collective identity fans share which creates a psychological connection with the common in-group identity [1].

While having a model to look up to and the benefits it brings to have to sense of belonging to a community, there are also serious issues and consequences in fandoms. The social media platform has been regarded as a “virtual playground” for underage, and without proper supervision, aggressive behaviors accelerate quickly [2]. “According to the Pew Internet Project, eighty-eight percent of 12-17-year-olds have witnessed some form of online cruelty” [2]. This does not only happen in America but in the KPOP community as well. Studies have found that fans aged 15 to 22 can become both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying in fandoms takes the forms of hate speech, hacking, spamming, and fan war. The frequent fan wars that occur on Chinese

social media platforms (for instance, Weibo and Douban) in part are rooted in the negative practices that are seen as necessary for the in-group [2]. In this case, the in-group would be people that admire the same idols, singers, actors, or bands.

Everyone on the Internet is anonymous, which would lower personal restraints on actions like cyberbullying others. Anonymous nature of the virtual world makes it even harder to detect who is the real person behind conflicts without any actual consequences of attacking others [3]. In addition, the composition of fandom is complex. The fans vary in gender, age, education level, and level of engagement in fandom. Therefore, the study is interested in factors that correlate with people becoming perpetrators of cyberbullying.

This report will primarily focus on whether there are correlations between how many contributions people have done to their idols and the possibility of involving cyberbullying other people in Fandom. In addition, does the possibility of cyberbullying in Fandom differentiate between different ages?

In this study, we decided to establish a questionnaire to collect data from Chinese young people who are interested in Fandom. We posted the questionnaire on Weibo, WeChat, and DouBan, which are social media sites the majority of fans in China typically utilize, and which ones are home to the largest and most active fan groups. In this work, participants include middle school students, high school students, and university students.

In this study, we will use previous studies and the data we have collected through the questionnaire to examine whether certain factors are likely to cause Cyberbullying in Fandom. In addition, we would like to discover what is the public attitudes and reactions to this phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What Is Cyberbullying in Fandom?

“Cyberbullying” can be commonly understood as “any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others.” This behaviour can occur when people send messages to one another that are hostile or aggressive [4]. Cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying by the way it appeared. Cyberbullying is characterized by the medium used, which includes numerous internet applications including instant messengers and social networking sites [5]. Cyberbullying in Fandom in China, as cyberbullying in other fields, usually occurs in cyberplaces, especially on social media, such as DouBan, Bilibili, Youtube, WeChat, and Weibo. However, this phenomenon is extremely detrimental to people’s psychological health, and it can even be acknowledged as a factor that can cause an increase in suicide rates. Moreover, according to professor S. Hinduja, the experience of bullying at school or in the community is correlated with increased suicidal thoughts [6]. There are many tragedies in that celebrities decided to commit suicide or suffered from depression because of chronic cyberbullying. Therefore, it is quite important to know what factors that increase the probability of Cyberbullying in Fandom, and what is public attitudes toward that.

2.2. What Are the Forms of Cyberbullying in Fandom?

According to Alison M. Smith, there are three types of internet harassment:

(1) Cyberstalking

The term “cyberstalking” is used to describe stalking that takes place through electronic means, such as the Internet, email, or instant messaging. Furthermore, the Cyberstalker usually sends threatening messages.

(2) Cyber-harassment

Cyber harassment encompasses “insults, hate speech, spamming, identity theft, and online sexual assault.” [1].

(3) Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is often defined as the use of the Internet to humiliate adolescents and young people [7].

(4) Trolling

Trolls seek anybody to cause disturbance online [8].

Moreover, the term “cyberbullying” is used to describe a wide range of online behaviors that are intended to hurt another person, such as sending threatening or harassing messages, posting videos, or “text” and “bombs”, mass blocking of messengers, collective rejection of friend requests, stalking, and spreading rumours. In addition, the situations of Cyberbullying in Fandom are the same [7]. Therefore, we decided to conduct a survey to know which factors can cause cyberbullying and what is the general attitudes to Cyberbullying in Fandom. Moreover, should Cyberbullying in Fandom be prevented?

3. Research Question

Testing the hypothesis that age and involvement in Fan activities can be two main factors that may correlate with the participation in cyberbullying in fandom. Furthermore, using the questionnaire examines psychological motives that make people participate in cyberbullying in fandom.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The data was collected by a survey conducted in August 2022. The data eventually got 100 effective random samples approximately, including 73 females, and 25 males.

4.2. Procedures

In this study, we use a questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire was posted on three social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo, and DouBan). All of the answers were anonymous. The samples of the questionnaire were collected randomly. Participants were asked a series of questions that examine their relationships and familiarity with Fandom. These questions are highly related to the current study. Participants were asked about their degree of participation in common Fan activities, such as going to concerts, buying albums, and voting for celebrities. Precisely, the variable we use in this study is age and their investments in idols.

Questions are divided into two different parts of the questionnaire. The first part of this questionnaire contains “basic information”, which refers to age, gender, how many years they have been a fan of celebrities, their involvement in Fandom activities, and how many contributions and investments they have made to their idols. In another part of the questionnaire, we have established two different scenarios, and then the participants will answer the questions related to the scenarios. The scenarios depicted two typical situations of Cyberbullying that frequently occur in Chinese Fandom. The participants only need to answer “approve” or “disapprove”, and choose from the reasons given which they think are most or least likely to engage or not engage in Cyberbullying.

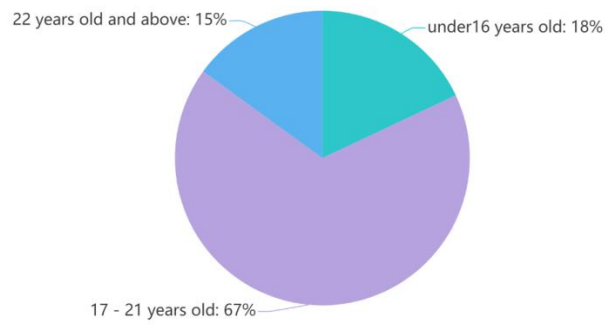


Figure 1: Age range of respondents.

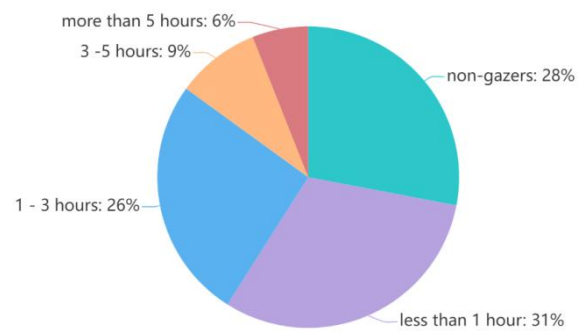


Figure 2: The average number of hours spent on star chasing per day.

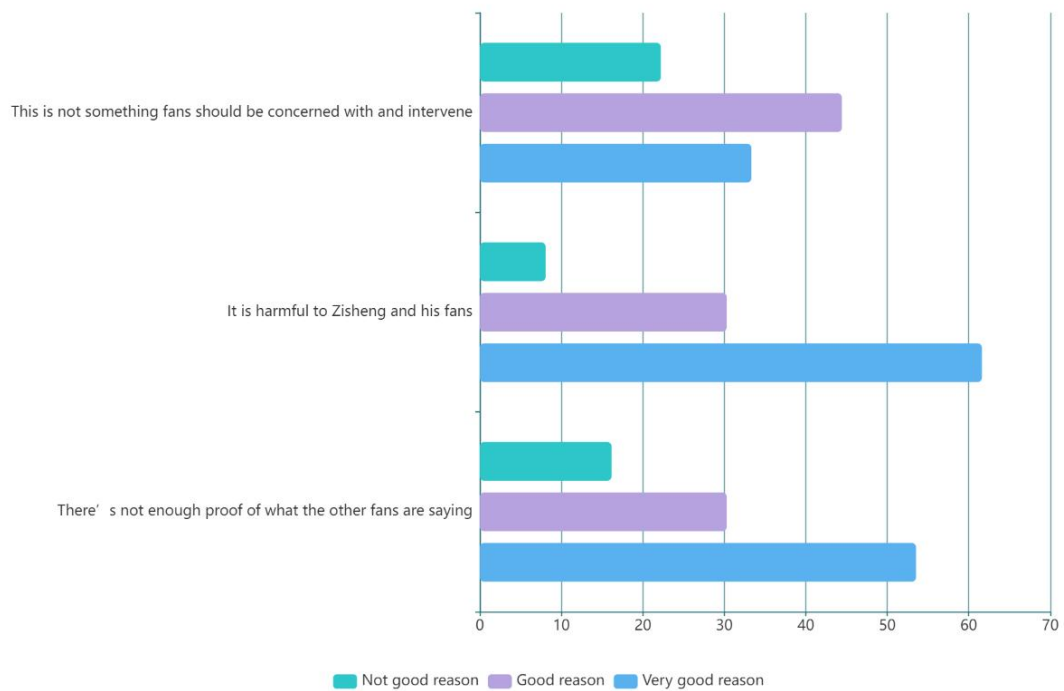


Figure 3: Scenario 1, disapproved.

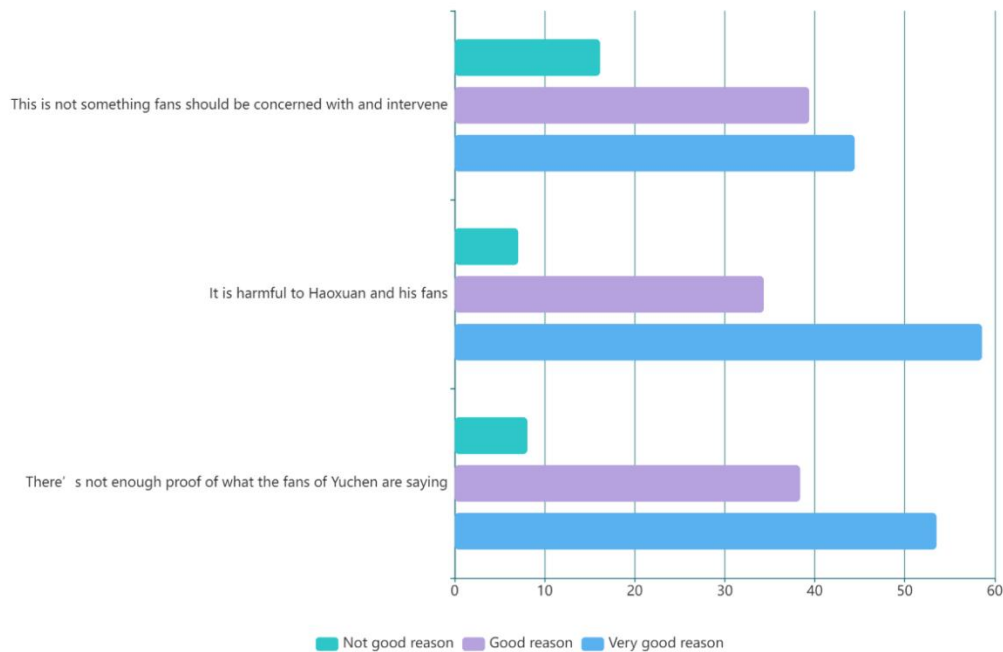


Figure 4: Scenario2, disapproved.

4.3. Measures

We based on the ages of participants to illustrate the variance and f and p values by using SPSS Data Analysis. From P-value, we can see the significant difference between each question. The F-value is the statistic of the F-test, which is the ratio of the sum of squared deviations between and within groups to the degrees of freedom. It is mainly used to test the significance of mean difference, to separate relevant factors and estimate their effect on the total variation, to analyze the interaction between factors, and to test the Equality of Variances.

5. Data and Analysis

We based on the ages of participants to illustrate the variance and f and p values by using SPSS Data Analysis. From P-value, we can see the significant difference between each question. The F-value is the statistic of the F-test, which is the ratio of the sum of squared deviations between and within groups to the degrees of freedom. It is mainly used to test the significance of mean difference, to separate relevant factors and estimate their effect on the total variation, to analyze the interaction between factors, and to test the Equality of Variances. We use SPSS to analyze the data because it breaks down a complex process into simple steps. This technique can “organize the provided data and then compiles the data set to produce suitable output” [9].

We present the data in a pie graph to show respondents' age range, gender distribution, time length of star chasing, average time spent on star chasing per day, and their attitudes to each scenario. We choose the pie chart because it can directly and clearly show the distribution of each option. We also present the data in horizontal bar charts, including possible reasons for their attitudes and behaviors, and things respondents have done for star chasing. Bar charts can clearly show the times of each option being mentioned.

These graphs turn the digital data into the easiest and clearest visuals for the audience, helping them grasp the most important information as quickly as possible. There are two scenarios in the questionnaire that both ask how the participants would react to fandom war. Even though the

questions are the same, the two scenarios are different in terms of motivation. Scenario one is self-spontaneous behavior whereas scenario two is influenced by a big-name fan who induces fans to start the fandom war.

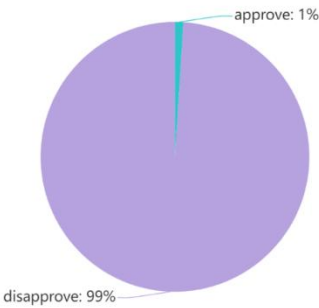


Figure 5: Respondents’ attitudes in Scenario 1.

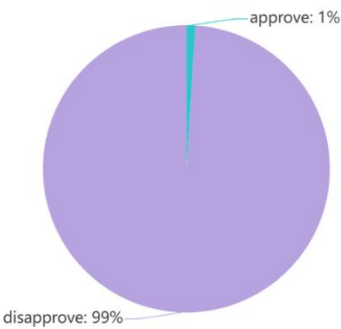


Figure 6: Respondents’ attitudes in Scenario 2.

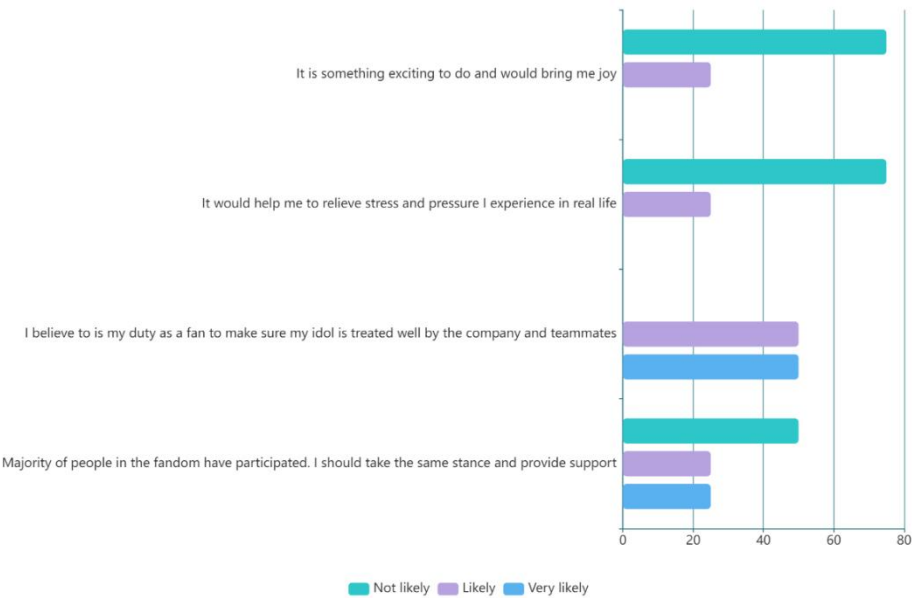


Figure 7: Scenario 1, choose to participate.

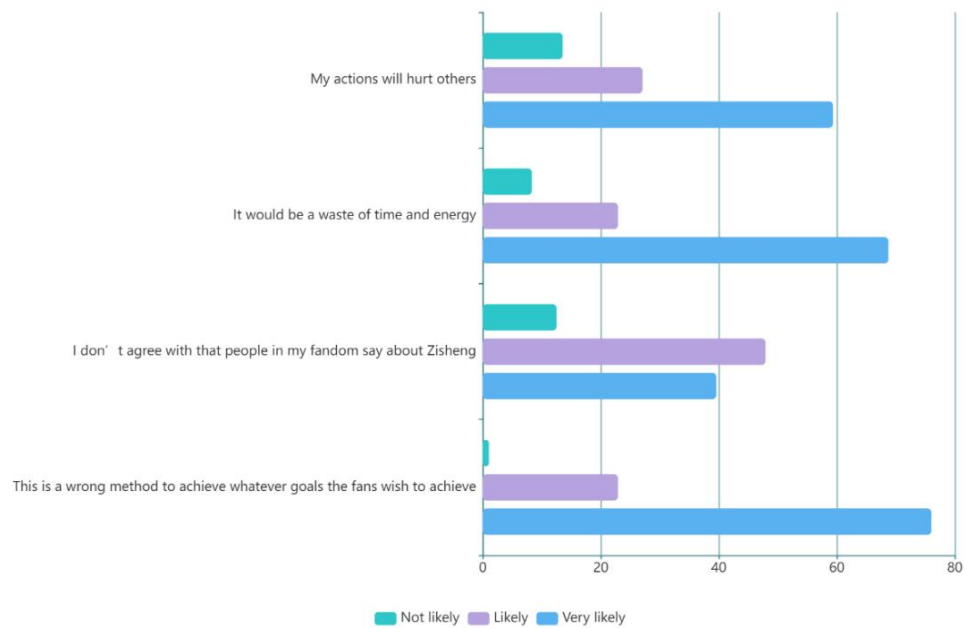


Figure 8: Scenario 1, choose not to participate.



Figure 9: Scenario 2, choose to participate.

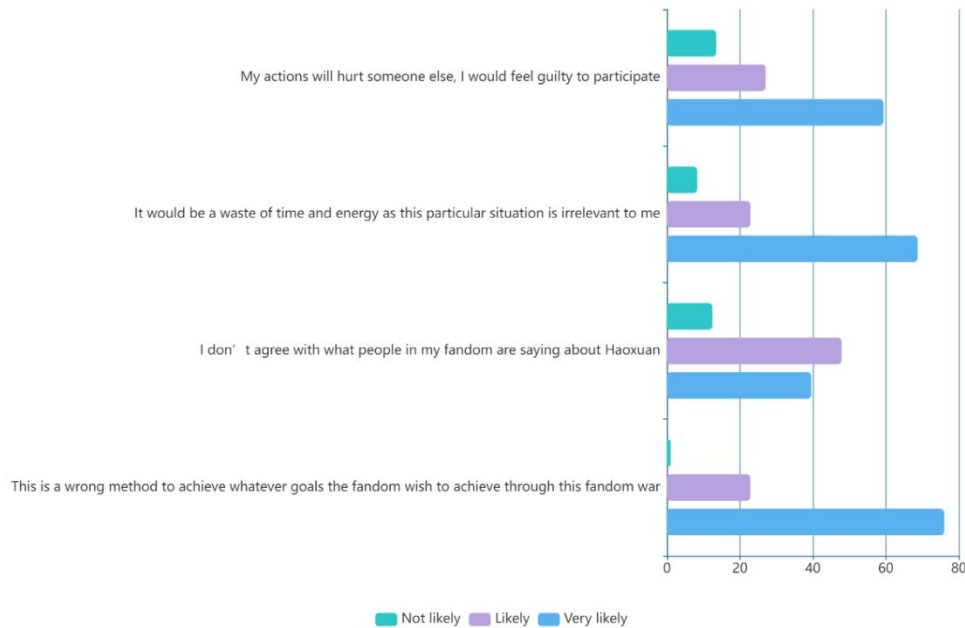


Figure 10: Scenario 2, choose not to participate.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to identify what elements can be part of the psychological motivations of cyberbullying in toxic fandom and what is the characteristic feature of Cyberbullying in Fandom. This study included a thoroughly designed questionnaire, randomly collected samples, and reviews from previous research related to Cyberbullying.

The result of the questionnaire illustrates these two factors that correlate with the possibility and probability of specific groups of people's participations in Cyberbullying:

- (1) Age differences
- (2) Different involvement degrees in Fan activities.

As the result shows, respondents age of who approve and tend to take part in Cyberbullying in Fandom are between 17-21(6 people out of 8 people who choose to participate in Cyberbullying in Fandom are in the age range of 17-21) and 22 (2 people out of 8 people). Also, the result provides evidence that indicates individuals who purchase more in Fan activities, including buying albums, going to live concerts, and voting for idols are more likely to participate in Cyberbullying actions. As reported by the result of the questionnaire, two factors directly cause respondents to participate in Cyberbullying:

- (3) Emotional value
- (4) Sense of responsibility.

According to what the questionnaire shows, many of the respondents (60% of respondents who will participate in Cyberbullying in the first scenario, 75% of respondents who will participate in Cyberbullying in the second scenario) who choose to participate in Cyberbullying in Fandom admit that engaging in Cyberbullying can help them to release the pressure that they have experienced in real life. In addition, the result of the questionnaire provides evidence that another important factor that may explain why some of the respondents would choose to take part in Cyberbullying is the sense of responsibility. As the result suggests, respondents claim that they feel they have a responsibility to fight for their idols to let their idols be treated fairly by the entertainment company. Furthermore, the result implies that there are connections between involvement degrees and a sense

of responsibility. The more Fan activities an individual has engaged in, the stronger the sense of responsibility they have under their self-understanding.

Based on the result of the questionnaire shows, some psychological effects can be inferred as potential elements that influence a fan group's behavior. One of the most significant psychological effects that have been shown among answers is "Groupthink". "Groupthink" is a psychological phenomenon that refers to individuals seeking group agreement [10]. According to the result, 20%-25% of respondents don't agree with the reason that the negative opinions and sayings of people in the same fan group about other celebrities are biased or wrong, even if they decided not to participate in Cyberbullying actions. This may indicate that there is a "Groupthink" effect in Fandom. People in the same fan group are more likely to agree with the people who are in the same group, and they are less frequently against each other's opinions when they are judging the group of people who are known as out-groups.

7. Conclusion and Evaluation

From the discussion, the study discovered that people above the age of 17 are more likely to approve of actions taken by fans in toxic fandoms and become perpetrators themselves. In addition, a sense of responsibility and duty to the fandom seems to be a significant factor that drives individuals to cyberbully others in the fandom. This suggests that a possible solution to the issue of toxic fandom is to first let people realize that cyberbullying has serious consequences, and this is a negative behavior. This can be done through the education system and influencers speaking out about such issues. In addition, measures need to be taken by big-name fans or fan clubs to reduce groupthink- telling the fans to evaluate the situation logically and calmly instead of blindly following the group.

From the data analysis and discussion, a few possible future study directions and further analysis are needed. First, as this is a correlational study, cause-and-effect relationships cannot be established. Therefore, there can be experiments conducted in the future that can pinpoint the factors that directly cause people to cyberbully others in fandom. In addition, as the study method we have chosen, which is a questionnaire, is voluntary based, participants may not be telling what they truly think as they may not want to show others that they have the tendency to cyberbully others even under the condition that the questionnaire is completely anonymous. A possible solution for this issue is to conduct an observational study to observe participants' online behavior. For example, we can observe what times or situations he or she will participate in fan wars and emotional responses to such fan wars.

Another limitation of this study is that the result cannot be generalized to the wider population of Chinese adolescents and young adults. The reasons are that the gender ratio (73% female, 25% male, 2% wish not to tell) is highly unbalanced. Therefore, for the result to be generalized, there need to be more male participants. In addition, the questionnaire result may reflect a limited scope of view as many participants of the questionnaire are similar to the researcher in terms of age, cultural background, and experience with fandom. Therefore, it cannot represent the whole population.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: English Version of the Questionnaire Including the Two Scenarios

Basic Information

1. Which of the age range do you belong?
 - Under 16 years old
 - 17-21 years old
 - 22 years old and above
2. Which gender do you identify with?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Prefer not to tell
3. How long have you been a fan of a celebrity (includes but not limited to idols, singers, actors, bands of both inside and outside China)?
 - I'm not fan of any celebrity
 - Less than one year
 - 1-3 years
 - 4 years and above
4. How long, on average, do you spend on activities related to the celebrity a day?
 - Less than an hour
 - 1-3 hours
 - 3-5 hours
 - More than 5 hours
5. What have you done for your celebrity (Choose all that apply)?
 - Buy albums and merchandise
 - Voting and streaming
 - Watch their performances, reality shows, dramas
 - Go to concerts, musical festivals, and fan signs
 - None of the above

The scenarios are based on actual events

Scenario 1

Background information:

An entertainment company that uses “Idol cultivation” model announced the official debut of a new group. Zisheng, a relatively young member in the group, joined the company for a shorter

time comparing to his teammates. However, he still made the debut.

Fans' action and reaction:

Zisheng was put under pressure and denigration by his teammates' fans. The specific actions those fans took were: accused Zisheng of "gaining popularity through utilizing his teammates", "creating a pitiful persona to gain empathy", "stealing what others deserve", and photoshopping post-mortem photos of Zisheng. Because of the anonymity of the Internet, Teammates' fans also spread rumors and overly exaggerated statements about Zisheng- it has become an entertaining thing to do to criticize Zisheng. The consequences include some teammates' fans started to purposefully crash into the car Zisheng is in. Zisheng's fans were displeased and outraged, therefore started attack Zisheng's teammates and other fans online. This led to "internet trolling" by both sides. Fans of different idols would harass and verbal abuse others in comment section or private message.

1. What is your attitude towards what the fans of other idols did to Zisheng and Zisheng's fans?

- Approve

- Disapprove

2. Please rate how good do you consider each of these reasons to approve.

	Not good reason	Good reason	Very good reason
Zisheng shouldn't be able to debut. Fans are just expressing their opinions.			
This is the only way fans can get their idol to be treated fairly by the company and teammates			
Members of the same group compete against each other, therefore the public disliking Zisheng would benefit the idol of other fans			

3. Please rate how good do you consider each of these reasons to disapprove.

	Not good reason	Good reason	Very good reason
This is not something fans should be concerned with and intervene			
It is harmful to Zisheng and Zisheng's fans			
There's not enough proof of what the other fans are saying			

4. Disregarding your answer in the previous question. Imagine you are fans of Zisheng's teammates, would you participate in the "fandom war"? Please rate how likely you are going/not going to participate for each reason.

Yes, I would participate:

	Not likely	Likely	Very likely
It's something exciting to do and would bring me joy			
It would help me to relieve the stress and			

pressure I experience in real life			
I believe it's my duty as a fan to make sure my idol is treated well and equally by the company and teammates			
Majority of people in the fandom have participated. I should take the same stance as my fandom and provide support			
Others			

No, I would not participate:

	Not likely	Likely	Very likely
My actions will hurt someone else, I would feel guilty to participate			
It would be a waste of time and energy as this particular situation is irrelevant to me			
I don't agree with what people in my fandom are saying about Zisheng			
This is a wrong method to achieve whatever goals the fandom wish to achieve through this fandom war			
Others			

Scenario 2

Background information:

Haoxuan and Yuchen are members of the same group. In the newest episode of the group's variety show, Haoxuan and Yuchen competes against each other. In a task that requires Haoxuan and Yuchen to have body contact, they both showed strong desire to win. Then, Haoxuan slapped and hit Yuchen, causing Yuchen to loose balance and fall over- Haoxuan is the winner. At the same time, the teammates who watched B fall in a comical way started laughing.

Fans' action and reaction:

A big name fan of Yuchen screen recorded this and posted it on Weibo (a social media platform in China) and the caption was "What does this mean. Won the game but also exposed the true side to everyone. Only I worry about my darling." This post attracted the attention of many fans of Yuchen, they commented: "Who pushed Yuchen? Get out of the group", "Such an obvious exclusion and Yuchen", "Still laughing? Doesn't even know to offer a hand? Wow, teammate is not even as important as a game", "Feel unworthy for Yuchen. Loves the team so much, yet this is what he got" and many other comments.

A big name fan of Haoxuan saw this post and posted "Some people are being a snowflake again. I'm not saying who". Fans of Haoxuan commented "Stop being such a snowflake. Treating the game seriously and creating good variety show shows that they respect the audience", "Is

Yuchen made of china? Lost balance and fell to the ground is purposed isolation?”, “What’s the point of talking about this. Teammate’s fans must be blind, they can’t see how well Haoxuan treats everyone in daily life”, “Who are you to comment on friends playing together? Does teammate’s fans live by the Pacific?”

Yuchen’s fans insist that Yuchen is being bullied and isolated in the group, and demands that Haoxuan’s fans apologized. Haoxuan’s fans insist that Yuchen’s fans are being nosy and minding insignificant things too much. So both sides started to use insulting words, make insulting hashtags, and photoshop post-mortem photos of each other’s idol. In the end, the fandom war lasted several days until new episode of variety show came out.

1. What is your attitude towards what the fans of Yuchen did to the Haoxuan and Haoxuan’s fans?

- Approve
- Disapprove

2. Please rate how good do you consider each of these reasons to approve.

	Not good reason	Good reason	Very good reason
It’s Haoxuan’s fault that he slapped and hit Yuchen. Fans can and should demand an apology.			
This is the only way fans can get their idol to be treated fairly by the company and teammates			
Members of the same group compete against each other, therefore the public disliking Haoxuan would benefit the idol of other fans			

3. Please rate how good do you consider each of these reasons to disapprove.

	Not good reason	Good reason	Very good reason
This is not somethings fans should be concerned with and intervene			
It is harmful to Haoxuan and Haoxuan’s fans			
There’s not enough proof of what the fans of Yuchen are saying			

4. Disregarding your answer in the previous question. Imagine you are fans of Yuchen’s teammates, would you participate in the “fandom war”? Please rate how likely you are going/not going to participate for each reason.

Yes, I would participate:

	Not likely	Likely	Very likely
It’s something exciting to do and would bring me joy			
It would help me to relieve the stress and pressure I experience in			

real life			
I believe it's my duty as a fan to make sure my idol is treated well and equally by the company and teammates			
Majority of people in the fandom have participated. I should take the same stance as my fandom and provide support			
Others			

No, I would not participate:

	Not likely	Likely	Very likely
My actions will hurt someone else, I would feel guilty to participate			
It would be a waste of time and energy as this particular situation is irrelevant to me			
I don't agree with what people in my fandom are saying about Haoxuan			
This is a wrong method to achieve whatever goals the fandom wish to achieve through this fandom war			
Others			