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TO GENERATE DATA AT ALL COSTS FOR TRAFFIC CELEBRITIES: THE REMAKING OF CHINESE NEW POOR THROUGH DATA-DRIVEN FAN CULTURE

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To be a qualified fan, you always need to work on data (for the celebrity). You either boost his or her online visibility on social media or pay money to exaggerate the commercial sales. Otherwise, how dare you claim yourself as a fan?

-Wang, 22, college student, a long-time fan of TFBoys

Introduction

The logic that only contributing to data to some extent can justify a fan's identity now prevails among the Chinese fan communities. For example, when Xiao Zhan, one of China's most sought-after "traffic celebrities" released his digital single, his fans set consumption quotas for each other to manifest their loyalty. The most widely shared standard indicated that students should each buy at least 105 copies of the track, while those with a job should buy at least 1,005. Such multiple purchases hardly render any material benefits to the fans, but in most cases only function to inflate the sales data of the celebrity and exaggerate his or her actual popularity. Though a few elite and middle-class fans could easily satisfy their consumerist desire for being economically powerful, many more—who are seduced by the *communitas* of fan activism—are actually unable or not yet fully prepared to afford this lifestyle. Repeatedly purchasing hundreds or thousands of the same digital track as well as the other commodities endorsed by celebrities depleted many ordinary fans' energy and even pushed some already socio-economically disadvantaged ones into over-indebtedness.

"Traffic celebrity," or its Chinese term, *liuliang mingxing*, is the specific genre of media products to simultaneously accommodate individual fans' yearning for participation and the industrial demand to maximize revenue from platform data. It refers to the new type of pop idols who can effectively stimulate their fans' constant contribution to the increase of Internet traffic and commercial sales data in numerous ways. Concentrating on fans of traffic celebrities, this article aims at understanding how datafication affects people's consumption and even reconfigures the intertwining socio-economic and techno-cultural

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inequalities in contemporary China. I pay special attention to the experiences of fans who are seduced by this data-driven fan culture but still lack the economic power to afford such an excessive way of consumption. This research examines (1) how and why socio-economically disadvantaged fans adeptly utilize various digital platforms (including but not limited to social media, virtual credit cards, online loans, e-commerce etc.) to attach themselves to the digitalized consumer society; (2) how digital platforms, especially their different datafication mechanisms, at the same time, discipline and exploit these fans in return; (3) how the other social actors such as the state authorities and the informal online lending market are involved in bringing more precarity to the already disadvantaged social groups. In doing so, I try to illustrate how digital platforms not just profoundly intertwine with existing unequal social structures but also become nexus to embody nonelite and non-middleclass fans as the “new poor” of today’s China, as a transitional consumer society (Bauman, 2005).

Theoretical framework

This study locates in the overlapping areas among fandom studies, platform studies, and the critical sociology of inequalities in a consumer society. First, contemporary fans are neither fully empowered nor merely exploited by either digital platforms or the so-called power of consumers. When they share thoughts and establish connections with each other, the entertainment and Internet industry also take advantage of them and encourage them to consume in circumscribed, industry-useful ways (Stanfill, 2019). Second, despite being proclaimed as the fundamental fuel of platform-based economy like oil for an industrial society, data never exists like natural resources but is essentially manufactured (Gitelman, 2013). Like their global counterparts, China-based digital platforms also rely on the systematic collection, monetization, and circulation of users’ data as a critical new resource to generate revenues (Zuboff, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Nonetheless, it will be oversimplified to assume fans as the victims of platform data metrics because they also utilize and manipulate the system to achieve their own ends.

To unpack the entangled remaking of Chinese new poor through data-drive fan culture, this study investigates how different actors manifest distinguished types of agencies in the process. Rather than restricted to human being’s motivations and subjectivities, I follow Latour’s (2005) definition of agency and concentrate on the interactions and traceable impacts of both human and non-human actors. These actors include: fans with divergent backgrounds, digital platforms and their distinguished data metrics, institutions that afford digital transactions, and the government.

Method

During my ethnography from December 2019 to May 2021 in multiple online fan communities of different traffic celebrities, I collected data from the following three sources. First, I actively participated in these communities and observed how fans (1) engaged on the platforms; (2) interpreted their understandings of various data metrics; (3) intentionally gamed with not just social media data metrics but also quantified data in broader context for example sales charts or charitable charts in commercial and public domains. Second, I conducted several rounds of interviews with 12 fans who perceived themselves as insufficient fans/consumers. Third, I also sought information from news reports, blogs, commentaries, business reports and policy documents.

Findings and conclusions

I trace the three identities from these fans' self-expression: (1) a gendered labor in the digital data sweatshop; (2) a tactic but flawed consumer; and (3) a warrior in the fierce data competition to understand how they are seduced, repressed, to some extent included, and then depleted in the traffic celebrity's fan culture. I argue the three sub-identities together embody them as the new poor in the transitional Chinese society.

First, social media data metrics not just directly extract fans' labor value when they manipulate data for specific traffic celebrities, they also serve as a disciplining apparatus in shaping individual fans' ways of engagement. More importantly, datafication of social media platforms reinforces the power of quantification in reshaping new poor fans' perception of autonomy and future. That said, though they clearly sense the powerlessness individually, by intentionally turning oneself into data in a collective fan space, they depend these data metrics to interpret their impacts and meanings on traffic celebrities as a media product with symbolic meanings. These impacts of data metrics are not restricted to the virtual sphere but significantly expand to commercial consumptions and public domain.

At the same time, digital platforms provide some temporary strategies for the new poor fans to pretend to be qualified consumers and delay their pain through virtual credit cards and online loans. However, the illusory inclusion could hardly solve the problem but only assists in creating a larger poverty trap where all the social costs will only be borne by individual fans. Ironically, disadvantaged fans engage in the production of traffic celebrities in pursuit for being heard, while the pursuit turns out to exploit and traps them in the end with remarkable economic and social costs. Moreover, even though digital platforms bring hopes for them to engage in communities and act collectively, the datafication mechanisms actually generate endless competitions and enlarges conflict among the new poor, leaving them more fragmented with little possibility to construct solidarity or collective consciousness.