# THE MANY-FACED FANDOM: *CESUO*'S COLLECTIVE PERSONA ON WEIBO

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## Introduction

The study examines *Cesuo* [Chinese pinyin of 'toilet'], a type of social bot account on Weibo, differs from algorithm-driven bots as it's manually managed by real users who set up site conventions, review and post users' submissions, and promote opinion coordination. As an emerging mode of information exchange and group interaction in Chinese Internet culture, *Cesuo* is especially active in fandom. It serves as both an organizational structure and an information dissemination tool, offering insights into how individual fans regulate collective personas and providing a new organizational model for fan communities in the platform media era. *Cesuo* can be seen as a type of fandom collective persona. Furthermore, it can be viewed as a type of Nonhuman Online Persona (NHOP), which is a coherent digital assemblage that has no direct connection to individual human identities. NHOP encompasses entities such as brands, locations, and artificial intelligence (Connell et al., 2024), and in the context of this research, includes collective fan performances conducted through individual social media accounts.

Using NHOP from persona studies perspective, the research investigates how *Cesuo* operates, its role in fan community building, and the power dynamics it establishes. By analyzing two representative *Cesuo* accounts and conducting semi-structured interviews, the study identifies three key characteristics of *Cesuo*: its anonymity and collective identity performance, its usage of fan slang as a form of community regulation, and its paratextual production and emotional bonding. Ultimately, the study argues that *Cesuo* enables alternative forms of digital fandom, emphasizing emotional connection and shared agency over individualized fan identity.

## Literature Review: Persona-inflected Fandom and NHOP

Persona-inflected fandom integrates persona studies and fan studies to explore individual-collective dynamics in digital spaces. An online persona as a collection of digital objects publicly exhibiting individuality within collectives (Marshall, Moore, and Barbour 2019, p. 3). The creation of shared fandom accounts like *Cesuo* reflects the collectively constructed persona described by Marshall, Moore, and Barbour (2015), where a persona emerges from collective intent, manifests as an interactive interface, and serves communal purposes. This leads to the concept of Non-Human Online Personas (NHOPs), which are digital entities not directly linked to a human. NHOPs also adhere to Moore, Barbour, and Lee's (2017, p. 1) five persona dimensions: public, mediatized, performative, collective, and intentional. Persona studies increasingly

examine NHOP formation across various media, including podcasts, robots, and video game protagonists, and illustrate NHOPs as dispersed and collectively constructed rather than singularly curated identities (Connell & Moore, 2023; Holland, 2021; Connell, 2024).

Paratexts are central to NHOP assemblages. Genette (1991) defines paratexts as the "packaging" surrounding a core text. Ng's (2018) symbolic capital model incorporates industry professionals and fans in paratext production, highlighting fan-generated content's influence. Paratextual practices shape audience engagement (Moore et al., 2017; Moore, 2020) and foster fan communities (Highfield, 2016). Parody Twitter accounts function as NHOPs, producing memes and image macros as paratexts, offering fictionalized interpretations of figures and events, and engaging audiences through character-based responses (Highfield, 2016). These NHOPs exemplify fandom's evolving digital and collective persona dynamics.

## Methodology

This study focuses two *Cesuo* accounts for case studies, first is @HYFSHE (Have You Fem-Self-Shippers Had Enough), a *Cesuo* account opposing self-shipping as fandom practice, second one is @SPASC (School of Performing Arts at Senior Centre), a *Cesuo* dedicated to fans of older male actors.

Data was generated from two accounts explicitly labeled as *Cesuo* on their home page. All published content, account names, background images, and pinned Weibo content were manually collected from these two accounts from January 1, 2024, to July 31, 2024. Based on the ethical approval for this research, the data collection initially only collected textual content to ensure anonymity and, at the same time, relied on textual and video clues to exclude posts suspected to be from minors (under 18 years old) and other content involving pornography or violence. A total of 200 posts with their interactive contents and frequencies (comments, forwards, likes) were collected from the two accounts. The data was coded and thematically categorized in Nvivo14.

## Theme 1: Anonymity as a Tool for Collective Persona Performance

One of Cesuo's defining features is anonymity, which allows fans to engage in discussions without fear of personal exposure. Unlike traditional fandom spaces where users build individual online identities, *Cesuo* followers contribute without direct attribution, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging. This anonymity is maintained through strict submission guidelines that remove personal identifiers, also via third-party tools (such as anonymous survey platforms) for content submission, lastly, a "bot-like" performance that even though a human administrator runs the account, they interact in a way that mimics automated responses. *Cesuo* admins sometimes break character, revealing a playful and human side through humorous responses or self-referential jokes. This paradox—being both an anonymous bot and a recognizable presence—helps strengthen community engagement. Anonymity also protects marginalized fans who might otherwise face harassment or censorship. Since Chinese social media is heavily moderated, *Cesuo* provides a safer, decentralized way for fans to communicate and organize.

## Theme 2: Fan Slang as a Community Regulation Mechanism

Another key characteristic of *Cesuo* is its use of specialized fan slang, which functions as both a cultural marker and a censorship workaround. Fan communities develop their own linguistic codes to establish group identity. Also the slang could be a tactic to avoid navigate censorship, last but not least, it could facilitate humor and self-expression since slang often includes wordplay, abbreviations, and emoji-based codes.

The study links this slang-based communication to Wittgenstein's language game theory, which argues that language derives meaning from its use within specific communities. By adopting exclusive slang, *Cesuo* creates a semi-private linguistic environment where only insiders can fully understand and participate.

**Theme 3: Emotional Connection and Fan Paratexts**

Beyond anonymity and slang, *Cesuo* fosters deep emotional engagement through paratextual fan production. Paratexts are fan-generated materials—such as memes, short fiction, or digital edits—that reinterpret or expand upon original media texts. *Cesuo* facilitates the collaborative creation and circulation of these paratexts, reinforcing community bonds and strengthening fan identity. Unlike traditional fan spaces where individual creators gain status and recognition, *Cesuo* paratexts are produced anonymously, shifting the focus from personal validation to collective enjoyment. The study highlights that emotional connection, rather than individual reputation, is the primary driver of participation.

**Conclusion**

The study argues that *Cesuo* represents a paradigm shift in fan identity construction. Unlike conventional celebrity fandoms, where individual fans seek status and recognition, *Cesuo* as NHOP fosters three objects, first is a collective value orientation persona, where personal identity is secondary to group participation. Second, a unique linguistic and cultural framework, reinforced through slang and in-group communication. Lastly, an emotionally resonant space, where shared feelings, experiences, and paratexts take precedence over personal clout.

**Acknowledgment**

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