

Recreating Fantasy: Fan culture in fan-made merchandise and advertising on Chinese social media

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Abstract. Fandom has long been recognized as a dynamic and participatory culture. In the context of Chinese social media Weibo, this study investigates the fan-made merchandise and advertising landscape within the pop culture fan community, and explores how fan producers and consumers interact in the creation, promotion, and acquisition of fan-made merchandise by delving into the intricacies of product design, advertisement composition and its impact on audience feedback. With data collected from text analysis, the result of regression and statistic results show that fan producers exhibit a strong preference for merchandise featuring specific character images, emphasizing the ornamental aspects of their creations. Advertisement posts on social media serve as platforms for artistic self-expression, while the consumers prioritize concise product information. This dynamic interaction fosters collaborative value creation in the modern fan community, offering participants a chance to modify and add onto the original content as well as construct their own identity.

1. Introduction

As early as 1990, Fiske suggested that audiences are not passive consumers but resistant readers and consumers who adapt culture. The participation mode of fans in popular culture is not static; they never just sit back and passively receive information. They actively create and export value on existing texts. With the development of networks and productivity, fans have more room for expression. Whether it is due to the convenient environment of resource aggregation, the pursuit of identity in virtual communities, or more accessible technology, unlike the traditional static mode of participation, fans today are eager to utilize their own creativity to reproduce the cultural products they are passionate about [1].

For fans of pop fiction works, usually animes, comics, games and novels (hereinafter “ACGN”), there are countless ways to engage in cultural reproduction, from the most typical virtual forms of cross-media creation, including fan arts, fan fictions, fan games and so on to cosplay events and large conventions taking place in offline communities. Many fan studies have focused as well on the psychology of fan creators, participation patterns, the uniqueness of medium in fan creations, and even the dynamic of fan communities in a sociological sense, examining in depth the interactions between fans on a linguistic, textual, and value level. However, the form of the physical economy within fan communities – merchandise designed, produced and sold by fans, and purchased by fans – seems to be an unexplored area.

In fact, the size of the market for fan-made merchandise is substantial. In May 2023, the 29th

Comicup, the largest anime convention in China, which featured goods exclusively from fan creations, drew more than 300,000 creators and consumers to the event. Similar events that focus primarily on the sales of fan creations also include Comiket in Japan, with a history of more than 40 years. Besides self-published print works, the merchandise sold at the convention is often small and cheap objects with fan-created illustrations, sold at or near cost. The conventions clearly reflect the duality of the identity of the fans in them – as both producers and consumers. However, since profit is not the primary goal of the fans, such activities are not considered commercial; the physical exchange of money and goods actually constitutes a way of exchanging values and ideas.

Fans' enthusiasm for merchandise does not spring up in a sudden. While the characters and plots of the works are completely fictional and intangible, what does a physical object beyond the screen and paper mean? From an inward perspective, merchandise maintains and derives the experiences fans have in their works into reality, leaving traces of their fantasies in their lives and fulfilling their imaginations; from an outward perspective, merchandise has its aspect of fashion [2]. It is a means for fans to establish and show off their own identity. As the Troika study puts it, fandom is a relationship between an individual and an object [3]. Consumption of merchandise expresses one's fandom, which indicates who they are, so the existence of peripheral merchandise is crucial for fans to have a recognizable identity [4].

Combining these two aspects, the act of consuming merchandise is completely self-centered, but the situation is slightly more complicated for the producers of fan merchandise. On the one hand, since profit is not the main

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objective, fan producers, unlike officials, do not need to rack their brains to cater to popular tastes when designing goods. Just as creating fan arts, they can produce from their own interests and use production as a channel for self-expression, leaving their own unique imprint on the merchandise. On the other hand, due to the existence of production costs, they cannot completely free themselves from sales concerns, and appropriate strategies to attract consumers are still necessary.

To fulfill such a demand, advertising of fan merchandise was born. Fan producers post on social media showcasing the items they will be selling, and then spread them with the power of the community to increase exposure. With the growth of the fan peripheral economy and iterations of social media affordance, this type of advertising has evolved into a unique form and been integrated as part of fan culture. Unlike typical commercials, they constitute communication. Producers output their preferences and ideas in advertisements, and every choice and decision serve their need for expression while pursuing better diffusion.

The purpose of this study is to explore how fan culture is reflected in the way fans think, act, and value by observing the tendencies of fan producers as a group in making decisions on the design of merchandise, crafting advertisements, and feedback on social media as a form of communication.

2. Weibo as the platform of observation

Weibo, initially released in 2009 as a product of the Web2.0 era, has become one of the most popular and commonly used social platforms in China, with nearly 600 million monthly active users. Not only serves as a mainstream platform for information sharing by those from official agencies to individuals, Weibo has also built a virtual community with its characteristics of remarkable immediacy and interactivity [5]. While Weibo carries the basic affordance of repost, comment, and likes, its functions of tagging, topic and subscription allow users with the same interest to get into contact with each other in a common cyber space, especially enhancing the sense of belonging and dependence of subcultural groups with weak discourse power and limited member connections in reality. Therefore, Weibo makes the habitat of ACGN fans. By April 2020, there are 2.92 pan-ACGN-fans who discuss their beloved works on their homepages or in exclusive topics, follow their favorite fan artists, appreciate their works and interact with them on Weibo, constructing the energetic dynamic of the community.

The mechanics of posting, browsing and display of Weibo fit the needs of ACGN fans. The current version of Weibo supports sending up to 18 images per post. In the preview of a single post on the user's screen, some of the content will be folded in order to reduce the length, but the first 9 images will be shown in the form of nine squares, and regardless of the image-text ratio in a post, images always take a larger screen area than text does. This layout gives fan arts, usually in anime style, plenty of room to play to their strengths. Fanart creators are given more space to show their works, and the general audience

is able to view clearer and more eye-catching creations. When Li talks about the application of anime design in advertising, he mentions the novelty and uniqueness of the picture language, as well as the wide imagination space and rich interest it offers, which means the accentuated images not only have an innate appeal to the ACGN fans built around visual content, but also becomes the appropriate promotion platform for merchandise [6].

The result is the common occurrence of advertisements of fan-made merchandise on Weibo, taking the advantage of its both depth and width in communication. Fan artists make their works into a variety of products, posting for promotion and sell them, which is often called "paid exchange" by participants, on a small scale within the fan community, As not only followers would be notified instantly for new posts, but posts would also be pushed to the home page of other users with similar interests by the algorithm, posting on Weibo is effective in increasing the exposure of the merchandise with the concentrated fan groups and the easy display, communication and diffusion.

The highly active ACGN fan community and a large number of fan-made merchandise promotion posts on Weibo provide rich, real and up-to-date samples. Therefore, Weibo is chosen as the platform to conduct observation for this research.

3. Research design

3.1 Method

This research adopts the content analysis as the primary method to study the original fan-made merchandise advertisements on Weibo, including aspects of design of products in the advertisement, composition of the advertisement itself, and the feedback received after posting, so as to explore the choices and values of fans as producers. In the context of the Weibo ACG fan community, the concepts have unique connotations. Therefore, constructs and corresponding operationalizations in this research are stated below.

3.2 Variables

In this research, the preferences of fan producers will be investigated in product design and advertisement composition, each aspect containing three features as variables. Also, the feedback each advertisement post gained is also quantified to estimate the relation between the communication effect and choices producers made on the advertisement. Table 1 shows the concepts functioning as variables in the research and their definition.

Table 1. Variables and definitions

Product Design	Image Feature (Figure/Concept) The characteristic of the illustration used on the merchandise. Divided as concrete figures as the subject, or abstract signs and concepts and scenes as the subject.
	Refinement (Raw/Refined) The part of design completed through technical processing during mass production, not included in the original illustration, but can significantly improve the appearance of the merchandise. E.g., surfaces coated with laser film to obtain bright visual effects.
	Practicality (Practical/Non-practical) The function of the merchandise. Divided into low practicality as merchandise with mere decorative functions and high practicality as including uses beyond.
Advertisement Composition	Preview Format (Assemblage/Sole Image) Whether the image preview of the post preview is presented as multiple small pictures combined to form a complete larger picture, or the pictures are independent of each other.
	Graphic Design (With/Without) Whether the pictures of the advertisement involve a certain level of visual design, such as considerations on font, composition, color, shape and decoration.
	Text Length (Short/Long) In addition to the name and necessary descriptions, whether the advertisement includes more than 50 characters of promotional text.
Feedback	The number of reposts, comments and likes the post receives. The index reflecting the effective impact the advertisement achieves on the audience.

3.3 Data sources

The advertisement posts examined in the research are all collected from Weibo, and are limited to the advertisements of merchandise sold on Comicup 29 conference (CP29) for the following reasons: 1) Large database. According to the conference official, CP29 has a total of about 87,000 fan merchandise on sale. 2) Stability. Its related traffic has become static after 5 months. 3) Homogeneity. The time, context, and distribution of goods tend to be similar, eliminating distractive factors beforehand. 4) Basic exposure. The heat of the conference has a positive impact on the advertising posts marked with relevant tags, and they serve more effectively in studying feedback with a certain level of exposure.

On this basis, in order to further eliminate the interference caused by the uneven or low popularity of the

IP, in data collection, random sampling is done among the 4 most popular IPs in CP29. According to the official booth map, the IPs with the most booths at the exhibition are Ensemble Stars! (about 475 booth numbers), Arknights (about 340 booth numbers), Final Fantasy (about 246 booth numbers) and Haikyuu!! (About 163 booth numbers). Finally, 970 merchandise and their advertisements are included as samples in the research and coded according to the above operational definitions.

3.4 Analysis models

The research starts with descriptive statistics on Product Design and Advertising Composition, the number and frequency of each decision by fan-made merchandise producers is statistically recorded and visualized into bar charts to compare and interpret the tendency of choice.

For the aspect of Feedback, three indexes of feedback - reposts, comments and likes - are weighted according to their status of importance from 3 to 1, to quantify the total feedback value an advertisement post receives. After the linear regression model is used to examine and exclude the influence brought by the number of followers of the poster's account, the value will be associated with the choices studied in the first two aspects. Based on the type of data collected for each aspect, linear regression models for Product Design and compare means for Advertising Composition, will apply to explore the relation between the choice of the fan-made merchandise producer and the feedback gained.

4. Results

4.1 Product design

The Choice of Fan-made Merchandise on Product Design

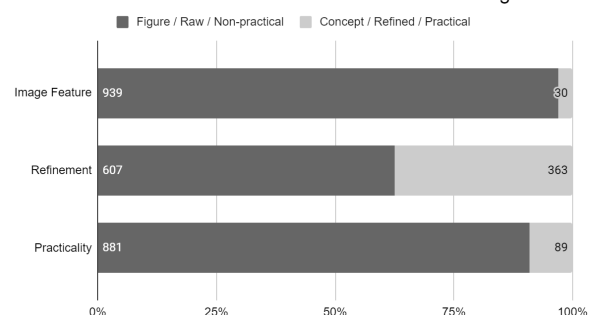


Fig. 1. The Choice of Fan-made Merchandise on Product Design

Part 4.1 calculates and compares the proportion of merchandise under each choice of Product Design by looking at the statistical data of merchandise, and establishes the basis for summarizing the common habits and preferences of the fan-made merchandise producers as a whole. Fig. 1 shows that most of the fan products in the sample are printed with specific figures and have no practical use. More than half of the merchandise are not processed, highlighting the art itself, but there are still a

certain percentage of merchandise that choose to add technological refinement to achieve better visual effects.

4.2 Advertisement composition

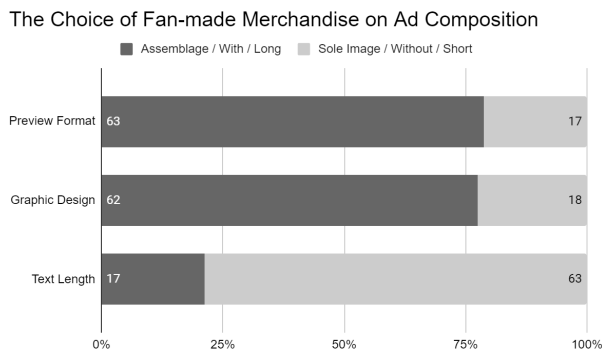


Fig. 2. The Choice of Fan-made Merchandise on Advertisement Composition

Part 4.2 calculates and compares the proportion of advertisement posts under each choice of Advertisement Composition with the aim to make a sketch of the preferred and commonly used strategy fan producers adopt when promoting their merchandise. Fig. 2 shows that over 75% of advertisement posts in the sample takes the format of Assemblage for preview, have a certain extent of graphic design and uses short text.

4.3 Feedback

4.3.1 Feedback vs. Number of fans

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Feedback value vs. Number of fans

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.4419187587
R Square	0.1952921893
Adjusted R Square	0.1849754225
Standard Error	1109.739037
Observations	80
Significance F	0.00004064114464
Coefficient	0.01694375554
P-value	0.00004064114497
Lower 95%	0.009190627795
Upper 95%	0.02469688329

First, in order to confirm the influence of the number of fans that the poster's account owns on the response of the advertisement post, a scatter plot is made according to the number of fans of each poster recorded and the feedback value obtained by weighted calculation, and the regression line is calculated. As shown in Table. 2, although R^2 is only around 0.195, representing less than 20% of the actual data matches the line, but as $p = 0.05$,

coefficient = 0.0169, there is still a weak positive correlation indicated between variables, that is, the number of fans has a slight positive effect on the feedback parameters of posts.

Therefore, in order to further study the separate relations between Product Design, Advertisement Composition and Feedback in the environment excluding disparity caused by the number of fans, all samples are divided into groups by the interval of number of fans (n), including $n \geq 100000$, $100000 > n \geq 10000$, $10000 > n \geq 5000$, $5000 > n \geq 1000$, $1000 > n \geq 100$ and $n < 100$, to counteract as much as possible the interference of number of fans. Among them, only 6 samples exist in the group of $n \geq 100000$, and only 3 samples exist in the group of $n < 100$. The two groups are thus not taken into following research for the data insufficient to form a universal conclusion.

4.3.2 Feedback vs. Product design

For the aspect of Product Design, the research starts with exploring whether the three elements of "Figure", "Refined" and "Practical" are more conducive to bringing positive effects to the feedback of advertising posts, that is, in the real context, whether the three choices of design can arouse more audience's attention and interest on the post.

The corresponding choices made in each sample are denoted as 1, and the opposite is denoted as 0. After calculating the mean of the corresponding choices in the merchandise displayed in each advertisement post, the data is mapped into a scatter plot, and the relation between each choice and Feedback Value is computed using multiple regression.

This process is repeated for each group, aiming to arrive at a consistent pattern.

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Feedback value vs. Product Design in group $100000 > n \geq 10000$

Regression Statistics			
	Figure	Refinement	Practicality
Multiple R	0.3661993304		
R Square	0.1341019496		
Adjusted R Square	-0.1906098193		
Standard Error	1423.04339		
Observations	12		
Significance F	0.7483271806		
Coefficient	-11865.20508	909.1105779	-965.466155
P-value	0.7257174658	0.6702534867	0.776655513
Lower 95%	-87156.30679	-3834.827237	-8552.6498
Upper 95%	63425.89663	5653.048393	6621.71749

Table 4. Regression Analysis of Feedback value vs. Product Design in group 10000>n≥5000

Regression Statistics			
	Figure	Refinement	Practicality
Multiple R	0.6039514463		
R Square	0.3647573495		
Adjusted R Square	0.0471360243		
Standard Error	559.3593202		
Observations	10		
Significance F	0.4031111961		
Coefficient	-960.1945246	990.725786	-972.7400519
P-value	0.3816405756	0.3412733216	0.6106891806
Lower 95%	-3449.239114	-1355.211684	-5406.460295
Upper 95%	1528.850065	3336.663256	3460.980191

Table 5. Regression Analysis of Feedback value vs. Product Design in group 5000>n≥1000

Regression Statistics			
	Figure	Refinement	Practicality
Multiple R	0.3910984018		
R Square	0.1529579599		
Adjusted R Square	0.01921447984		
Standard Error	234.4375737		
Observations	23		
Significance F	0.3569094945		
Coefficient	-186.9960238	88.26407729	454.986228
P-value	0.5493130202	0.6751321991	0.2200847822
Lower 95%	-828.9782756	-345.7328852	522.2610397
Upper 95%	1528.850065	-1316.413203	323.0930666

Table 6. Regression Analysis of Feedback value vs. Product Design in group 1000>n≥100

Regression Statistics			
	Figure	Refinement	Practicality
Multiple R	0.3468790896		
R Square	0.1203251028		
Adjusted R Square	0.0003694350265		
Standard Error	144.9394439		
Observations	26		
Significance F	0.4100673032		
Coefficient	370.9698501	-0.05249893873	198.6721666
P-value	0.2306787192	0.9996620498	0.1950933088
Lower 95%	-253.1156194	-254.2011758	-109.6459849
Upper 95%	995.0553197	254.0961779	506.9903181

As shown in Tables 3-6, the P-values for all groups remain greater than 0.05, and R² appears to be low, no correlation between the variables can be inferred from this model, and the Feedback in the research sample tends not

to be affected by the choices made in terms of Product Design.

4.3.3 Feedback vs. Advertisement composition

In order to examine the effect of advertisement composition on its feedback, in each group, the means of the Feedback Value under the corresponding choice are taken respectively for comparison.

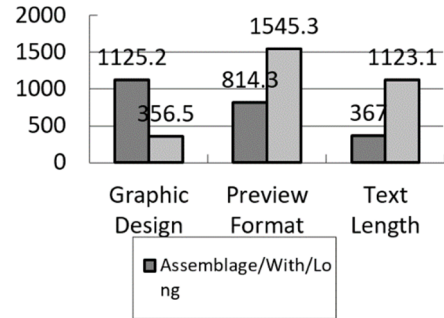


Fig. 3. Feedback Value vs. Advertisement Composition in group 100000>n≥10000

Fig. 3 reveals that in this group, choices of Assemblage and Short text show marked advantage in the resulting Feedback. However, the audience seems insensitive to the use of graphic design as it does not lead to more active responses than those without graphic design.

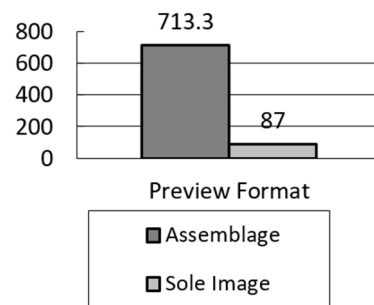


Fig. 4. Feedback Value vs. Advertisement Composition in group 10000>n≥5000

This group does not include choices of Without for Graphic Design and Long for Text Length, so only Preview Format is examined. See Fig. 4.

In this group, Assemblage exhibits a clear attraction to feedback compared to Sole Image.

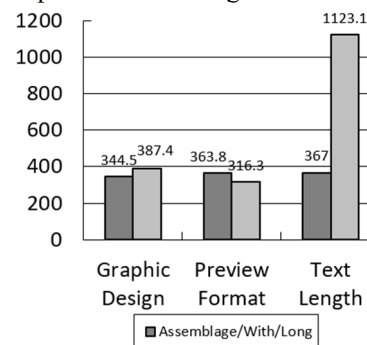


Fig. 5. Feedback Value vs. Advertisement Composition in group 5000>n≥1000

In this group, as Fig. 5 shows, the choices regarding Preview Format and Graphic Design have an almost balanced impact on Feedback Values, with Assemblage and Without graphic design typography slightly lower than their counterparts. At the same time, the association between Short text and higher Feedback Values remains significant.

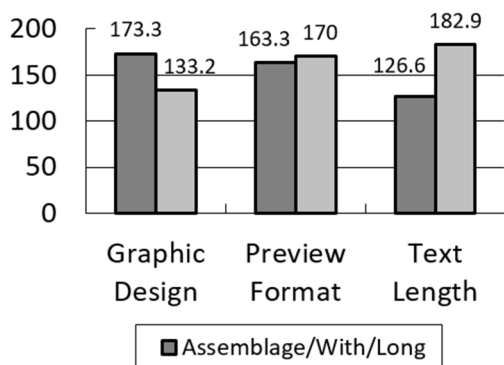


Fig. 6. Feedback Value vs. Advertisement Composition in group 1000 > n ≥ 100

In this group, Fig. 6 shows that Assemblage tends to exceed Sole Image to a limited extent in gaining feedback, while the results for choices of Graphic Design are almost even. Short texts still show remarkable advantages over long texts.

In the majority of cases, Assemblage and Short text are more successful in capturing the audience and prompting them to provide effective feedback, whereas well-designed image layouts do not show clear appeal, and even slightly lag behind those advertisement posts without graphic design.

5. Discussion

From the results of the study, it is clear that fan producers have certain tendencies in general when it comes to product design. Explicit character images are favored over abstract conceptual motifs. This is different from the pattern identified by previous researchers for the relationship between fan level and preference for explicit/invisible signals [7]. Cultural re-creators, often seen as high fan levels, do not favor the subtle visual cues that are supposed to highlight their uniqueness and differentiation over mainstream fans. This divergence perhaps stems from the differences in the types of merchandise. While previous studies have focused on official merchandise, such as T-shirts, the results of Practicality show that fan-made merchandise consists mainly of low-cost badges, plastic pendants, and postcards that are not practical. Although they share the function of being carried around and marking identity, fan merchandise emphasizes more on the ornamental nature of the items. In the process of printing and shaping the art fan producers create into reality, the touchable objects take on the role of a medium, giving substance to an otherwise unbodied and intangible creation. Materialization is undoubtedly welcomed by both groups. It does more than satisfy consumerist fetishism; it deepens the satisfaction fans derive from the original fan art work.

By giving digital fan art real-life significance in a more direct way, it recognizes the passion and output of fan artists, and for fan consumers, purchasing it allows them to acquire a copy or a part of their favorite fan art work. Therefore, the production of fan merchandise is a recreation of the value of the fan art itself, above the cultural reproduction by the fan art of the original text.

Precisely because the mind of the fan merchandise producers is projected onto their goods, the character-centered design reflects the way they approach the work. More interested in specific characters than in transforming and recreating representative elements that condense the whole work or plot, their passion for the work is further refined, falling on one or a few individual characters, and then, by manifesting their love for the character, they express their fandom. With the Cool Japan strategy in the 1980s, the trend of consuming "characters" took shape in the merchandise market. The "character economy" centered on virtual visual images rose to prominence and soon became the mainstay of the toy market of ACGN IPs [8]. By the time that culture has matured and consumerism has become the background sound of the times, fans are skilled at finding the characters they resonate with the most in their work, adoring and pursuing them as if they were picking out potato chip flavors in a supermarket aisle. As the fan works are considered to be interpretation of the original text, fans are choosing a more personalized perspective to interpret the work, not looking top-down at the whole picture, but focusing on a particular character, a cross-section of the work, devoting more attention to them and creating more value from them [2]. Fans break down, transform and repurpose the original text in character according to their own ideas, resulting in new content [9]. When each piece of merchandise with a printed individual character is assembled, they in turn reorganize the work with fresh significance, completing deconstruction and reinvention in a modernist way.

In this sense, the adoption of refinement in fan merchandise is tied to the motivations of the producer. The refinement allows the merchandise to be more visually appealing than with merely the original pattern. The choices made by the producers reveal whether or not they have a desire to go further than self-expression in terms of aesthetics. More than half of the merchandise in the research is free of refinement, preserving the original appearance of the fan art, reflecting the fact that most producers are satisfied with the message conveyed by the art itself. At the same time, a notable percentage of producers chose to strive for excellence, which means that for a large number of producers, "production" itself is also a part of conveying fandom's passion.

Then, from the results of advertisement compositions, the respective habits of the producers and consumers are summarized. The vast majority of producers put great amounts of effort into nice-looking layouts and using stylized embellishments to enhance the visual impact of their ad posts, even though they actually have little effect on the gain in feedback. It seems that the audience for this endeavor is the producers themselves, not the consumers. This breaks with the political construct of traditional advertising. The producers use numerous decorative

symbols to fill the pages of their promotional images, but none of them are signifiers in the sense that Kettemann mentions – they do not convey a meaning to the viewers to stimulate an impulse for them to consume [10]. Their meaning actually arises for the producers themselves. They represent a refined, aesthetically pleasing, well-designed artistic pursuit that the producer wants to possess as their own identity. It is to this end that they put in the labor of production to exchange. They are the ones who buy the values in the advertisements. By contrast, real consumers care little about the ingenuity of advertising posts. Only one kind of information here passes between producers and consumers through advertising: the fact of the goods themselves. The consumer's need for that knowledge is so simple, direct and exclusive – they prefer a broad preview image in the form of an assemblage that can be captured at a glance on the homepage of Weibo, and text as brief as possible, except for the necessary description. The most prominent function of ad posts for fan merchandise is to evoke attention, not to add value. The meaning that the public usually seeks in ordinary commercial advertisements has been fulfilled by the fandom, and the posts themselves have become non-utilitarian derivative creations, allowing the producers the freedom to express themselves in them, while the consumers are attracted by the no more than the quality of the goods [1].

Around fan merchandise, the community builds a mutually beneficial communication. Producers and consumers build their identities and interpret themselves in their own ways through the use of commodities, while at the same time satisfying and maintaining each other's needs. Consumers have the right to make their own choices, and the lack of publicity stunts is relatively fair to the different producers. Their interaction is a process of collaborative value creation.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the energetic ACGN community and the fan culture behind it through fan-made goods and their advertisements on Chinese social media. Through quantitative analyses of product design, advertising composition and its impact on feedback, it provides an attempt to interpret the behavior of fan producers and consumers in this unique cultural landscape. Fan producers show a clear preference for product design. Concrete character images are prioritized over abstract, generalized symbols, and the focus tends to favor decorative goods over utilitarian items. Re-imagining and reinterpreting characters is central to the creative expression of fan producers. On the other hand, the motives of the advertisements are distinct from the traditional ones. While fan producers put a great deal of effort into designing visually appealing advertisements, it is found that consumers primarily seek concise information about the product itself. The major function of advertising posts is to attract attention and increase exposure instead of selling meanings, which sets them apart from typical commercials. Consumers express their preferences by choosing goods that resonate with them,

while fan producers invest their creative energies in producing unique designs and advertisements, which ultimately become a platform for self-expression where both parties mutually benefit from each other's efforts to re-create value based on works of pop culture, forming a vibrant social model.

While serving as an illuminating glimpse into the real economy in fan culture, the study focuses primarily on an objective analysis of conclusive data and phenomena. Possible future investigations into the subjective thoughts and motivations of fan producers and consumers could reveal more about the behavioral logic behind their decisions about fan merchandise, thus helping to understand the distinctive ACGN culture. Meanwhile, there are more potential topics to be explored in the field, such as whether fans in different regions change their attitudes toward fan merchandise due to differences in copyright laws, community morals, or cultures may be able to help construct a corner of fandom ethnography.

Modern fandom culture has a wide variety of practices, with fans responding enthusiastically to the original works while their unique creativity continues to rewrite the texts and give them new connotations, and they themselves construct, communicate, and continually refine their own identities in the process. It is an attempt to dissolve the capitalist shackles that have long surrounded the creation and exchange of value with affinity, and purely and non-utilitarianly use their labor to realize and bring to others the meaning of production itself.

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