Behind 'gift-giving':

The motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content in online fan communities

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, fans, a special group of audiences, are more and more involved in re-mixing, re-defining, and re-producing media products. The proliferation of fan-generated digital content on social media platforms is not only a result of the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), but also a cultural phenomenon demonstrating participatory fandom in cyberspace (Jenkins, 1992a, 1992b, 2006). The aim of this study is to explore the motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content in fan communities on Sina Weibo and to pursue implications on the dynamics within fan communities.

Despite abundant research on both fandom and practices with "gift-giving" characteristics, there is a lack of study combing these two together and focusing on the cultural and social value of the sharing behaviours in fan communities. Through semi-structured interviewing and thematic analysis, this study attempts to answer two research questions: (1) How are fan communities associated with the sharing of fan-generated digital content? (2) What are the natures of the motivations? Are they self-centered, other-oriented, or, reciprocal? The findings show that "love for idols", "creating new topics", "gaining feedback", and "social bonding" are the main motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content. The sharing of fan-generated content is often motivated by a mixture of incentives, which is accompanied with the creation of cultural and social value.

The main limitation of this research lies in the demographics. A larger sample involving more male participants and fans from diverse backgrounds is to be expected for future research on similar topics, which may bring out unexpected findings contributing to a more complete understanding of fandom in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the proliferation of fan-generated content on social media platforms has become a new focus of academic research. Fan-generated digital products, which include fan fictions, fan pictures, fan-made videos, are "usually undertaken as complement to, rather than in competition with, the authentic canonical work of the original author" (Tan, 2013: 95). Fans, who were initially viewed as passive consumers of media products, are gradually taking the roles of active producers in the digital age. Using their knowledge and specialties, fans interpret, re-mix and re-create the original media products in their own ways, which demonstrates their active participation in and interaction with mass media culture (Fiske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jenkins, 2006).

As a sign signalling the era of participatory fandom, the increase of fan-generated digital content has been studied from the political economics perspective. Many fandom studies concentrate on the relations between consumption and production and the implications on a media convergence, including the studies of "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 1992a, 2006), "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980) and "free labour" (Terranova, 2000). Furthermore, some studies focus on the distribution of fan-generated content and highlight the voluntary natured "gifting" process in which monetary returns are not key motives (Booth, 2010). Along with "gift-economy" (Mauss, 1990), "common-based peer production" (Benkler, 2006), and "Digi-Gratis economy" (Booth, 2010), the sharing of fan-generated digital content has shown that in many cases commercial profit is not the dominating factor in practices with "give-giving" characteristics. There is always a range of incentives behind the voluntary digital content contributing practices.

However, the sharing of fan-generated digital content is different from other forms of voluntary digital content production and distribution. First, the people engaged in the sharing process are fans who have a good amount of knowledge and information about the object(s) of fandom, which means the possession of fan knowledge and emotional involvements may become important elements influencing fans' behaviours. Second, the sharing of fan-generated digital content per se cannot be simply understood as a way for fans to showcase their products and entertain themselves. In fact, fans value the process of sharing as a means to form fan communities and to interact with other fans. Fan communities turn independent and individual activities into social activities, in which members interact with each other and identify themselves (Lei, 2012). The sharing of fan-generated digital content is always associated with the establishment and maintenance of fan communities. Through sharing fan-made products, fans approach like-mined people, obtain

feedback and resonances, and establish relationships with members of fan communities (Hellekson, 2009). In this sense, instead of focusing on the sharing of fan-generated digital content on an individual level, this study pays more attention to fan communities and their influences on fans' behaviours, interactions and relationships.

The reasons for sharing fan-generated digital content are complicated and multifaceted. This study takes fans that are currently fan community members on Sina Weibo[1] as research objects. Through exploring the motivations for sharing, this study intends to unveil the connections between sharing and the relations within fan communities. Previous studies related to fandom and online practices with "gift-giving" characteristics will be reviewed in the theoretical chapter of this dissertation. In this chapter, the conceptual framework and research questions will also be given. The author intends to find: how do the voluntary gift-givers, namely the fan producers, perceive their sharing behaviour? What are the undiscovered facts of the motivations for sharing? How to understand the sharing as a practice that has effects on the whole community? These questions point to the main direction of this study. In the methodological chapter, the justification and application of semi-structured interviewing and thematic analysis adopted in this study will be given. Then, in the results and discussion chapter, the results gained from the interviews will be presented and analysed. The conclusion part will summarize the main findings and implications, which will be followed by an evaluation of this study and suggestions for future research in the similar field.

THEORY

Fans and fan communities

In academic literature, fans are often characterized as individuals who have strong time, emotional or even financial commitments to specific "media texts, icons, stars, or sports teams" (MacDonald, 1998: 135). However, fans and their behaviour are more complex than this straightforward description. Tracing back to early studies of fans allows us to unravel three main strands perceiving fans and fandom in different ways.

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[1] Sina Weibo: The most visited and popular micro-blogging service in China, which allows users to post, comment and share micro-blogs. Users can establish online communities on Sina Weibo. Members of a community are able to post information exclusively to people in the same group. The size of a community on Sina Weibo varies from under 10 to 600,000.

The first strand of fandom studies were significantly influenced by the legacy of mass culture critique. Frankfurt School scholars Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) criticize the all-pervasive mass culture production and consumption that erodes the value of arts. Fans, who are also consumers of mass culture, are inevitably perceived as obsessed and passive audiences (Jensen, 1992). From the perspective of mass culture critique, fans are victims manipulated by mass culture and seduced by mass media into the most obsessive and slavish forms of cultural consumption (Jenkins, 1992a; Jensen, 1992). Grossberg (1992) argues that in the early studies of fandom, the dominant view insists that fans are defined as passive and deviate "cultural dopes" that indiscriminatingly admire and adulate the products or people manufactured by cultural industries.

Fandom is examined from another perspective in the second strand of studies. Generally, fans are depicted as people who seek compensation for things lacking. Psychologically, through perceiving the lives of the famous, fans form their identities and fulfil their dreams of autonomy and intimacy (Schickel, 1985). Similarly, Milgram (1977) also argues that fans go to extremes in their feelings, beliefs and actions in order to protect their fragile self-esteem system. The theory of compensation is also applied to the sociological analysis of fandom. Fiske (1992) develops Bourdieu's (1984) theories of cultural and social capital in his analysis of fan culture. He argues that the model includes the movement of acquiring and losing capital and changing ones' position. Fans produce cultural capital (information about cultural artefacts), through which they compensate for insufficient social capital (personal networks).

Both strands portray fans and fandom in a relatively negative way. Fandom was studied as emblematic of pathological zeal rather than a normal and everyday cultural phenomenon. According to the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980), audiences not only receive the reading that the encoder of mass media texts expect them to accept, but also interpret media texts in negotiable ways or even make meanings against the dominant reading. The third strand of analysis mirrors participatory and active fans. Among the limited early studies of fandom that depict fans as active participators instead of passive sufferers, Fiske (1989), Grossberg (1992) and Jenkins (1992a) are the ones who notice fan's active interpretation of and engagements with popular culture. Fans make conscious and selective choices when they are given media texts (Jenkins, 1992a), actively appropriate popular cultural content by giving them new and original meanings (Grossberg, 1992), and make use of the self-empowerment to make meanings of their social experiences and identities from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity (Fiske, 1989). Fans are redefined as "consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate" (Jenkins, 1992a: 214).

"Being a fan can be a solitary, private pursuit, or a richly collective sociality." (Kelly, 2004: 10) Kelly (2004) argues that fans always create and maintain fan communities in order to produce meanings, pleasures, and shared practices. Fan communities, in which like-minded people participate based on shard interests, common language, norms and mutual trusts (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Haythornthwaite, 2007), provide space for fans to exchange information, make connections, achieve self-disclosure and identification (Baym, 2000). Most importantly, fan communities facilitate the flow of cultural capital and social capital. Hills (2002) argues that fans with high level of cultural capital are likely to possess a higher level of social capital. In contrast, it is unlikely to see fans with a high level of social capital and relatively low cultural capital. The dynamics of cultural and social capital may suggest the structures of fan communities.

In the digital age, fan communities pool the knowledge with ease and provide information that no single fan can fully gather (Jenkins, 2002). And most importantly, there is an increase of the interaction and connection between fans that are not easily reachable before the Internet mediated environment came into being (Rheingold, 1993; Benkler, 2006). The development of social media platforms makes it easier for fans to approach other fans, to carry out discussion across time and space, and to bond together (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999). Moreover, the social relations in online fan communities need a closer examination. Baym (1995, 2000) stresses that even though many fans never know each other in their personal lives (offline), they are still bonded together (online) by the shared common knowledge and interests. Also, fans often develop offline relationships, which make the social relations within fan communities more flexible and dynamic.

Fan-generated digital content sharing in fan communities

Although fans are integrated into fan communities through texts, it is the practices engendered in communities that are meaningful to the fans (Booth, 2013). Fiske (1992) employs the term "enunciative productivity" to describe the process in which the meanings made can be shared by face-to-face or other forms of oral communications within a certain community. For example, "fan talk", which is "the generation and circulation of certain meanings of the object of fandom within a local community" (Fiske, 1992: 38), is an activity where much of the pleasure comes from. Through discussing and exchanging the feelings about the object(s) of fandom with other fans, fans gain pleasure and gratification. Online fan communities offer virtual environments where meanings and desires can be placed and fans' reproduction of mass culture products can be distributed and shared (Leung, 2008). Given the inseparable relationship between fans and fan communities, fandom studies cannot view

fans as isolated individuals and exclusively focus on the end products. Fan cultural production and distribution need to be understood in relation to fan communities (Jenkins, 1992a; Booth, 2010).

The sharing of fan-generated products is common in fan communities. Early in the late 20th century, there emerged diverse genres of products produced by fans, even though most of them were not in digital forms. For instance, Thorn (2004) studies the history of the development of "Dōjinshi"[2], and discovers that "Dōjinshi" gained enormous popularity among fan community members and sold well in local book markets. Furthermore, Baker (2013) discovers that rock fans exchange concert tickets, self-designed T-shirts and even bootlegs in fan communities. He uses the term "material culture" to refer to the exchanging and sharing, which is helpful in strengthening bonds between fans and holding the community together.

In the digital age, "material culture" is taking a new look in the cyber sphere. With the development of ICTs, the production and distribution of the fan-generated digital products have reached a new level. Interestingly, fan-generated digital content is usually not priced nor exchanged for monetary returns. Products are givens like gifts on social media platforms and circulated within fan communities. Fiske (1992) uses the term the "economy of fandom" to refer to the accumulation and circulation of cultural capital through fans' displaying of knowledge, performance documentation and association with performers. In fact, the "economy of fandom" has many similarities with other types of economy. For example "gift-economy", which refers to the non-monetary and non-profitable exchange of gifts, is the one where presents are exchanged reciprocally and obligatorily (Mauss, 1990). However, the gifting of digital content is nuanced. First, in his studies on the difference between online gifting and traditional gifting, Skågeby (2010) argues, traditional gifting is based on direct reciprocity within close-knit and relatively small "circles", while online gifting has the potential of bonding unfamiliar people together on a much larger scale. In cyberspace, gifts are always given to a large unknown group, which makes obligation less possible (Kollock, 1999). Second, in gift economy, the giving of gifts is accompanied with the giver losing tangible object and the deficit of object during transfer. However, the digital gifts are intangible and infinitely reproducible, which means the exchange of gifts does not include losing but only gaining. Therefore, "Digi-Gratis economy" (Booth, 2010) is coined to differentiate the online gift-giving practices from traditional gift economy.

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[2] 'Dōjinshi' refers the reproduction of media products (usually Manga or animations) using the same characters from the original works. 'Dōjinshis' are usually in the forms of fiction and Manga.

Another economy to be discussed is "common-based peer production". Benkler (2006) coins the term to refer to the production in which loosely connected participants work collectively so as to produce the knowledge commons. "Common-based peer production" model sheds light on the analysis of a certain type of fan production, namely the fan-subbing[3] practice that is performed through collaboration (Meng & Wu, 2013). However, individual fan production is clearly distinguished with the model that Benkler (2006) provided. Nevertheless, the studies of "gift economy", "Digi-Gratis economy", and "common-based peer production" all provide great values for the understanding of "economy of fandom".

The motivations for sharing in fan community

Dholakiaa, Bagozzia, and Pearo (2004) provides a social influence model of virtual community participation, which suggests that "purposive value", "self-discovery", "maintaining interpersonal interactivity", "social enhancement", "entertainment value" (p.243) are the main motivations for online community participation. In fact, there is usually a mixture of motivations for sharing digital products as gifts (Gaffin & Heitkötter, 1994). From the perspective of fandom, fans" flame and the passion of the object(s) of fandom are important impetuses for them to gift the products (Humphreys et al., 2005). However, in some cases, people are inclined to comply with the extrinsic reward rather than maintain their intrinsic motivation (Benkler, 2006). Fiske (1992) contends that fan-generated texts are not produced for profits because instead of targeting the mass-market, fans narrowcast the texts within their own communities. Apparently, fan communities play key roles in the study of motivations.

It is regrettable that there is a lack of studies focusing on the motivations for sharing self-created digital content in fan communities. But the abundant research on many other forms of dissemination and sharing of user-generated content with "gift-giving" characteristics may extend the understanding of the gifting practices situated in fandom context. Three themes of motivations are found as the most frequently mentioned ones in previous literatures of non-profitable sharing of digital content.

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[3] Fan-subbing is usually a voluntary and collective practice in which fans make and disseminate subtitled translations of foreign media products (for instance, films and programmes) in the digital realm.

Psychological benefits

The gifting of knowledge gives producers "psychological well-being and gratification" (Benkler, 2006: 6). Psychological benefit is a sort of intangible return in response to the gifts given (Veale, 2003). Psychological benefits can be important incentives for people to contribute in voluntary knowledge-contribution works. The sense of fulfilment, recognition and gratification all belong to this type of motivation.

First, "fans are motivated by epistemaphilia-not simply a pleasure in knowing but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge" (Baym, 2000: 282). Fans feel needed when their products are shared by a large number of people. Kollock (1999) argues that when contributors realize that they have effects on the community, they become more willing to continue the voluntary work. The sense of mission and fulfilment make fans believe that they can have an impact on the whole group, which fulfils them demand of being needed.

Second, the display of competency is a main motivation for voluntary participating practices, which is always closely associated with self-esteem and self-confident enhancement. In the context of fandom, this effect is strengthened. Sandvoss (2005) invokes that the relationship between fans and their object of fandom should be understood based on fans" self-reflective reading and narcissistic pleasures. Fans are in fact fascinated by the extensions of themselves. Through transforming self-recognition to consistent and intense emotional investments to the object(s) of fandom, fans realize the release of emotional desires and obtain gratification from the collective experience with fan community members (Lei, 2012).

All in all, fans achieve self-reflection and gratification through actively making sense of object(s) of fandom (Fiske, 1992; Kelly, 2004). The psychological benefits coming from the process of sharing can be extremely valuable to fans. In light of this, although fans do not usually get monetary returns through sharing, they are mentally and psychologically compensated.

Social connectedness

Essentially, gaining positive social connectedness is an important motivation for gifting knowledge and informational labour (Benkler, 2006). Gifts have the value of building ties and reinforcing the connections (Skågeby, 2010).

There are two types of connections among individuals, namely "explicit connection" (individuals are linked based on well-defined relationship) and "implicit connection" (individuals are linked based on loosely defined affinities or similarities) (Smith, 2008: 17). Fans are "empathetic and indulgent merging with others" who also have physical-spiritual commingling with the stars (Kelly, 2004: 10). Finding and staying with like-minded people make fans feel secure and help them build strong ties with each other. The connections among fan community members are more likely to be implicit ones, which are based on shared interests and hobbies (Smith, 2008). The sharing of amateur or personal products is a mode of interpersonal interaction, which "served as an instrument of communication and as a means of sharing experience" (Van Dijck, 2008: 59). Van Dijck (2007) uses the concept "mediated memories" to explain the linkage between personal collections and collectivity and their joint power in shaping media associated memory. In the context of fandom, forming collective memories and establishing mutual emotional attachments are perceived as motivations having social purposes.

The non-profitable gift-giving is also crucial for initiating, building and sustaining the whole community (Markus, 1990; Scott, 2009). The sharing of fan-generated digital content opens up conversations between fans, which may evolve into the building of social ties. It is common for online fans to go offline and become friends in the real world because the sharing of culture capital invests in the generation of social capital (Hills, 2002). In this sense, individual contributions made in the online sphere can be motivated by the inclination to connect fan community members and solidify the community as a whole.

Reputation building

Rather than financial rewards, immaterial rewards like reputation constitute the key incentives for online voluntary contributions (Ito, 2012). Although scholars insist on the empowerment of fans and the flattened structure of online communities where knowledge and information are shared as gifts (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 1992a, 2002, 2006), there emerges another view defending the existence of hierarchies. MacDonald (1998) argues a fan's position within a fan community to a great extent is determined by the knowledge of the object(s) of fandom, the amount of participation in fan conventions, and the possession of channels to access the celebrity or other related media products.

In Ganz-Blättler's (1999) account, some of the fans use their cultural capital to gain or maintain their own statuses while some fans invest their cultural capital to benefit the community. Napier (2007) coins the term "subcultural capital" to describe the knowledge of

fandom which allows fans to gain statuses and prestigious privileges. For instance, esoteric knowledge and resources are open to participating members who always contribute to the community (Okabe, 2012). Also, more experienced members are authorized to amass knowledge and provide guidance to the less experienced ones (Okabe, 2012). In online fan communities, the reputations that "create and allocate forms of recognition, hierarchy, privilege, and authority within the community" (David, 2007: 179), are usually formed according to the amount of time one has been in a member of fan community and the number and quality of postings one creates (James, 2010). Thus, to achieve a higher status in fan community and win other fans' respects may also be key motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content.

Conceptual framework

The previous studies of fandom and fan-generated content shed light on the relations between consumption and production, fans' perceptions and interpretations of media texts, and the interaction and dynamics within fan communities. This study will be based on the fruitful findings from previous studies and exclusively focus on the fans of idols[4] so as to support a more focused study.

This research's key focuses are the motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content in fan communities on Sina Weibo. As discussed above, the sharing of fan-generated digital content can be perceived a practice with "gift-giving" characteristics in which the gifts (fan-generated digital content) are gifted to a certain member(s) or most commonly, to the whole group. This research learned from the "gift-giving" framework developed by Skågeby (2010). Besides, Bourdieu's (1984) social and cultural capital study, which was developed in fan cultural context by Fiske (1992) and Hills (2002), is also selected as a supplementary framework in this study.

Figure 1 (next page) illustrates the nature of online gifting and how they are connected in a framework. In Figure 1, the horizontal line, which records whether a motivation is more self-giving or self-oriented, is roughly divided into three parts, namely altruism, reciprocity, and egoism. It is worthwhile to mark that there are overlapping parts of the three divisions. The boundaries between altruism and reciprocity, reciprocity and egoism may be ambiguous.

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[4] Idols refer to the stars (for example, singers), who are influential in popular media realm. This study focuses exclusively on fans of idols because other fans (for instance, sports fan and Manga fans) may have different traits and attitudes. It is more sensible to notice the differences between different types of fans than regarding them as in the same group.

Figure 1. The nature of online "gifting"
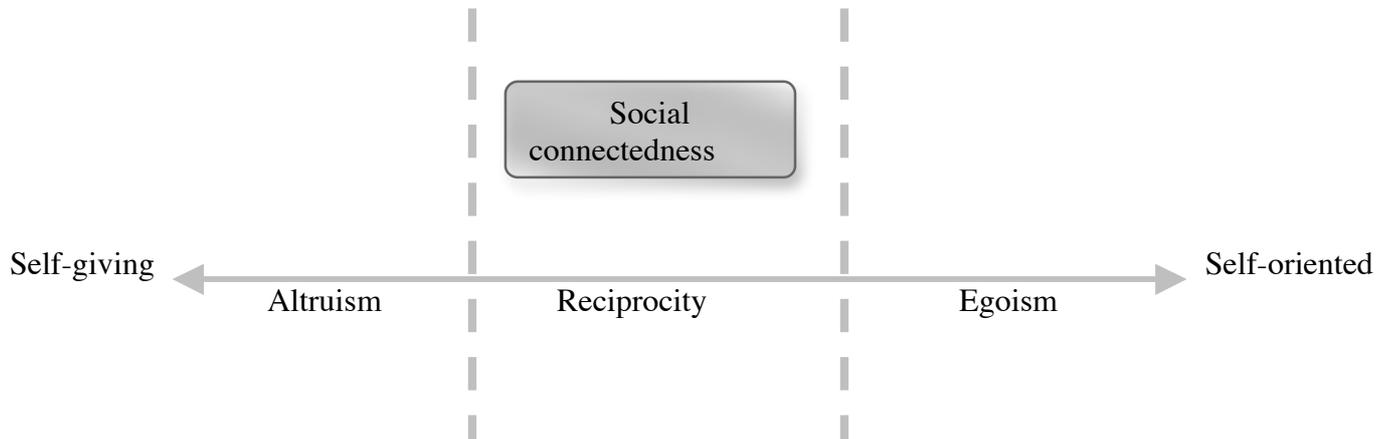
Online gift-giving always facilitates reciprocity (Veale, 2003), however, it can be both self-interested and somewhat altruistic (Tschider, 2006). Altruism refers to the most self-giving behaviours, which present the virtues of generosity, kindness and benevolence (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006). Reciprocity is located in between of the two extreme situations, which is described as "the motivation or process of returning gifts —— to treat others as you have been, or wish to be, treated yourself" (Skågeby, 2010: 171). Reciprocity is important for fans to make connections and build their networks in fan community (Hellekson, 2009), which indicates positive sentiments toward others, including "gratitude, consideration, empathy, liking, fairness and a sense of community" (Kolm, 2000: 2). The motivations that are more self-oriented can be placed in the category of egoism. To give an example, the motivation of seeking for social connectedness discussed in the previous part is identified as a reciprocal motivation and located in the middle of the figure above.

Through exploring motivations for the sharing of fan-generated digital content, the researcher may gain valuable results on cultural and social aspects. It should be stressed that Bourdieu (1984) offers the studies of cultural and social capital with regards to class. Cultural and social capital's functions of excluding lower classes and distinguishing different classes are emphasized in his analysis. However, class is not the focus of this research. To make a distinction, it may be more appropriate to use "culture value" and "social value" in this study.

**Figure 2.** Cultural and social dynamics of online communities
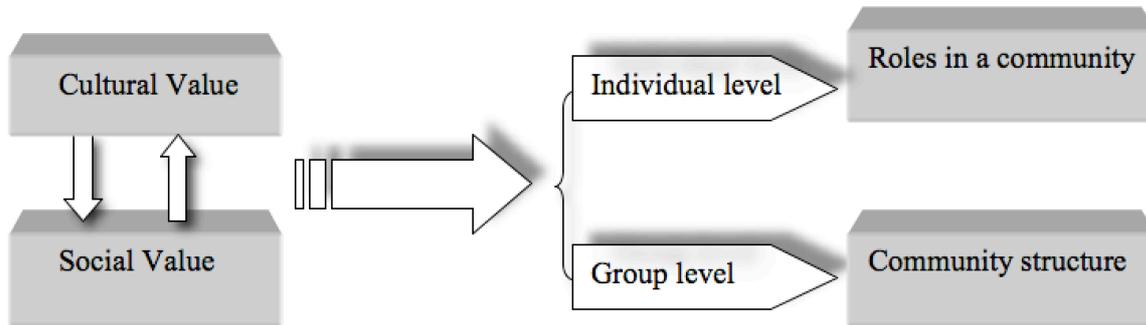
Figure 2 illustrates that the creation of cultural value may converts into social value; and in return, social value may foster the creation and accumulation of cultural value. The correlations of social and cultural value collectively influence individuals' roles and the structures of fan communities.

The objectives of the research

The main research question is: *what are fans' motivations for sharing self-created products within fan community on social media platforms.* The researcher attempts to place the research in the context of fan culture and go beyond the previous research on fans and fandom. Basically, the focuses of this research are the motivations underlying the sharing process. However, the research is not limited to the studying of "why", but went a step further to probe the implications of the dynamics of cultural and social value by answering two sub-questions.

Q1: How are fan communities associated with the sharing of fan-generated digital content?

Being a fan means commitments to idols and the possession of knowledge of popular culture. In a fan community, the disclosure of knowledge, expertise and emotional involvements is closely associated with the dynamic relations within fan community. There may be motivations linked with the relations of fan community members and the atmosphere of the whole community. The objective is to find out what the motivations are and how they reflect the relations with a community.

Q2: What are the natures of the motivations? Are they self-centered, other-oriented, or, reciprocal?

The giving of fan-generated digital content is free. However, this does not necessarily mean it is done exclusively for community members. It is difficult to draw the line between "pure self-centred" and "other-oriented". The sharing may mutually benefit the giver and receiver, which can be perceived as reciprocal. Or, the motivation can be both self-centred and reciprocal. This sub-question attempts to explore the natures of the motivations in order to have an in-depth understanding of the sharing.

There are quite a lot of studies on participatory fandom and digital gift-giving. However, very few studies combined them together. To fill the vacancy, this research takes a different perspective and situated the study of digital gift-giving in the fandom context. In fact, the proliferation of fan-generated digital content and the non-profitable sharing signal a new mode of fandom and new forms relations within fan community, which inspire the author to take a closer look at the yet fully explored territory.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to this research, many studies of fandom and fan community adopted interviewing as the methodology. As a frequently used qualitative research methodology, interviewing has advantages in exploring in-depth thoughts, ideas, opinions, motivations and attitudes (Stroh, 2000; Berger, 2011) than other research methodologies. For instance, survey can provide information of a large and diverse demography, but it is not an ideal methodology for the pursuit of detailed, in-depth, and emotionally loaded answers. Ethnography is good for the observation of people's behaviours, but not ideal for the exploration of online behaviours driven by mental activities. The objectives of this research are to understand motivations and to probe explanations for fans behaviours. In light of this, interviewing was considered as the most suitable methodology to explore answers for the research questions.

In this research, individual interviewing instead of focus group was conducted. The idea of doing focus group was eventually given up mainly for two reasons. First, focus group makes it possible for respondents to hear other people's opinions and get enlightened from the discussion. However, for this research, the original personal opinions are more valuable. Extended narratives are more likely to be harvested from one-to-one interviews (Michell,

1999). Second, collective interviewing may not provide a nice environment for participants to express their ideas freely on equal terms, especially for fans that are to provide emotionally loaded information. For example, even if the participants of a focus group are fascinated with the same idols, they may have different or even contradictive opinions towards fandom. The advantageous consequence may be the generation of unexpected ideas. However, the differences may lead to possible antagonistic or even offensive views that significantly hinder the expression genuine opinions and attitudes. Given all the considerations, the researcher decided to implement individual interviews, which is more time-consuming but more effective in understanding different cases.

The reasons to undertake semi-structured interviewing instead of structured interviewing are twofold. First, comparing with structured interviewing, which usually sticks to a rigid protocol or interview schedule (Esterberg, 2002), semi-structured interviewing is much more flexible. Each interview can be adjusted to different situation, which allows the respondents to make clarification on issues that are more important to them (Esterberg, 2002). Second, semi-structured interviewing is effective in eliciting fans opinions and attitudes, which is suitable for exploring motivations and incentives. It is widely recognized that semi-structured interviewing resembles natural conversation and open-ended dialogue (Dembo, Leviton & Wright, 1956; Deacon et al., 1999). Whenever unexpected answers emerge, the interviewer can always ask follow-up questions and probe valuable information.

However, the disadvantages of semi-structured interviewing should be taken into account. The quality of interviews may not be stable. In the pilot study conducted in April 2013, some respondents provided a lot of useful information, while some respondents felt embarrassed to talk about fandom face-to-face and give emotionally loaded information. Besides, the quality of interviews highly depends on the interviewees' ability of expression. For instance, respondents may find it hard to verbalize their feelings. Some strategies and techniques were adopted in this research to deal with these issues appeared in pilot study. To quickly achieve rapport and establish a "suitably relaxed and encouraging relationship" (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1992: 108), which encourages respondents to actively participant share views and yield useful information, is a key element for the success of interviews (Bryman, 2012). In this research, in order to establish rapport with respondents, the researcher started from getting acquainted with the respondents. Before the questions being asked, the researcher carried out some small-talks with the respondents to reduce the uneasiness. Also, the researcher used the language that fans always speak to communicate. For instance, a fan may call the report from live concert "Repo" and the official fan magazines "Za" (short for zazhi in Chinese, which means magazines). When the respondents heard these words, they found

resonances and appeared to be more willing to continue the conversations. When the conversation got stuck, the researcher usually changed the way of phrasing and tried to make the questions more straightforward and understandable. The researcher also tried to build a scenario to make it easier for respondent to recall the experiences.

Sampling

Snowball sampling is adopted in this research. This sampling technique is widely used in the study of closed and informal groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). It works as a small initial sample "snowballing" into a large sample to provide enough data for analysis (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002). Fans who make and share celebrity-related digital products constitute a relatively small group, which makes it more difficult to spot fans that meet the criteria (idols' fan community member and fan-generated digital content maker). Moreover, some fans are not willing to expose themselves to the public. In this case, snowball sampling is a legitimated method to approach fans who literally belong to hard-to-reach group (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). With the helps from personal contacts and the "finding community" application of Sina Weibo, three initial contacts were found. The researcher sent messages the initial contacts on Sina Weibo and asked them to name more fans that meet the criteria of this research. By repeating doing this, the researcher approached more qualified participants.

Snowball sampling does not come without drawbacks. The most severe shortcoming of this sampling technique is the possible biases buried from the very beginning. "It is impossible to know how representative the final sample is of the population from which it was drawn." (Hoyle *et al.,* 2002: 188) To avoid this type of drawback, the initial respondents were strictly selected in participant recruiting stage. The researcher communicated with all the initial contacts before they recommended others to see if they met all the criteria. The second type of drawback, which is more difficult to eliminate, is the similarity of respondents. The participants are very likely to come from the same social network, which may result in similar answers. Having several different starting points is helpful to broaden the range of respondents and achieve variety in the social context of respondents (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011). The initial seeds were found in three different fan communities, which were proved to be useful in generating diverse answers.

Interview schedule

The interviews took place in a café in Chaoyang District, Beijing. Before each interview, the researcher made a brief introduction of the study, which provided "a particular social context for the interview communication" (Warren, 2002: 91). As an important ethical requirement for qualitative research, informed consent ensures the participants to decide whether and how to participate with full knowledge of the risks and benefits of the study (Endacott, 2004). All the participants of this research signed consent forms. Also, all the participants were informed that they were free to depart the interviews at any point. Participants were also guaranteed that they would stay anonymous the entire process and their words would not be cited in the dissertation unless agreed. All the interviews were recorded using a micro recorder and a cell phone to back up, which was also approved by the participants.

Interview guide

The interview guide covers questions about background information (age, educational background, occupation, and personal interests), social media using habits, fandom, experiences in making fan products, and fan community. In comparison with the pilot study, in this research, the parts of background information and social media using habits were shorten, while as the most important part, namely the part of fan community was boosted.

Interview guide worked more as a reminder than a script. Much flexibility was given in each interview according to different answers and responses. Follow-up questions were asked when answers that were seldom repeated emerged. For instance, a respondent mentioned the "invisible hierarchies" of fan communities. The researcher promptly caught this phrase and probed more details and examples about it by asking follow-up questions about the structure of fan communities and the rating system. These questions were not initially on the topic guide, but they provided a new angle to examine the situation.

Coding and thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was adopted as the method to "analyse classifications and present themes related to data" (Alhojailan, 2012: 10). The benefits of undertaking thematic analysis are threefold. First, thematic analysis can be both inductive and deductive (Hayes, 1997; Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is can be used for the identification of preliminary anticipated themes from the reviewing of prior research in the same field and unexpected

themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, thematic analysis allows for exploring both explicit and implicit meanings of the data (Namey, Guest, Thairu, and Johnson, 2008). Therefore, the analysis moves beyond discovering and counting repeated words. Third, the researcher can compare and contrast themes in order to view the whole picture (Alhojailan, 2012).

Coding and analysis are not two completely independent processes. Actually, coding is embedded in the whole process of thematic analysis. This research simplified the six-phase analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) into 5 stages.

Stage 1: Getting familiar with the data
This step contains transcribing and "repeated reading" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 93). All the 15 records of interviews were transcribed into written forms. Thorough transcription was conducted in accordance with verbatim (Poland, 2002), which means all verbal (and some nonverbal like laughing, pausing, etc.) utterances were transcribed. The researcher read the transcripts line-by-line two times and tried to identify the frequently occurred words and phrases. In this stage, the researcher got familiar with the data and had a general understanding of the texts.

Stage 2: Identifying initial codes
Coding was conducted in this step. The researcher paid more attention to several key topics that emerged frequently and used different colour pens to highlight the initial codes. Both deductive codes (from theories in literatures of the same field) and inductive codes (from the data) were generalized. The extracts of data representing different codes were sorted into separate computer files.

Stage 3: Searching for themes
After all data was initially coded and collated (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the researcher embarked on sorting coded into broader level of themes. Some codes were combined together to form overarching themes, while some codes were used to form sub-themes. Codes that could not fall to any of the themes were put in a file in case they might be of great value in the next steps. The themes should be related to the research focus (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, the researcher reorganized the themes according to the interests of this study and combined the themes that have many things in common into more recapitulative ones.

Stage 4: Refinement of themes

In stage 3, themes were generated. Stage 4 mainly involved the reviewing and examination of themes. For example, the researcher examined all the themes and evaluated if they were coherent, distinctive, clarified and meaningful (Braun and Clarke, 2006). There were focuses in this phase: whether the themes reflected the whole data set and if there were other codes to be fit into the existing themes or form other themes.

Stage 5: Naming themes

Names were given to each theme. The refining was still on going in this stage. The defining of themes focused on how the themes were related to the research questions and possible implications behind them. The assumptions and implications underpinning the themes are substantially important and valuable (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The interpretations made by the person conducting thematic analysis affect the validity and credibility to a great extent, which means the themes are likely prone to mistakes (Alhojailan, 2012). To address this problem, an outside reviewer was involved in coding and analysis process. The themes displayed in next chapter were agreed by both of the reviewers (the researcher and the outside reviewer).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 15 fans aged 19 to 30 attended the interviews (See Appendix I). They came from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. The obvious disparities suggested that shared demographic characteristics were often not what online communities are based on (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Interestingly, the participants are predominantly females, which may result from two factors. First, neutrality in gender is hardly to be achieved in fandom research. As Jenkins (2006) argues, the creative works based on original genres, especially the ones explore relationships between characters are near-preserve of females. The whole group of fans who fascinate for idols and have ever shared self-created digital content may be overwhelmingly female-dominated. Second, the sampling technique may have affected the results. The researcher encountered difficulties when finding a male initial contact. Thus, the 3 initial seeds are all females. Many participants reported that they could not think of male fans meeting the criteria. Then the researcher enlarged the sample and eventually found a few male candidates. The disparity of gender should be noticed, but it does not constitute a major issue since gender difference is not a key focus of this research.

Theme of love for idols

The love for idols was discovered as a driving force for fans to gift fan-generated content. Being a fan does not only mean the consumption of media products but also the commitments and dedications. It is the internal compulsion that accelerates the expression of emotions. Fans have the impulsion to announce their commitment to idols. They are spontaneously doing things for idols, although they are unlikely to get feedbacks directly from idols. Especially on celebrities' birthdays or anniversaries, there were a large number of fan-generated digital products on Sina Weibo. Fans consider these special days as ideal occasions to contribute to idols.

> I think the top reason will be 'love'. People selflessly contribute when they fall in love with someone. Likewise, I love my idols so I would like to express my love and to support them in this way. (Respondent 11)

> When idols' birthdays are coming, there are loads of fan-made things on Weibo. I cannot fully explain why we make products on those days. In my case, I can only say that I feel the obligation to do something. It will be ideal if they can see the products and like them. There is no problem if they cannot see the products. Anyway I gave my best wishes. (Respondent 8)

Some respondents treated producing and sharing as their hobbies and parts of their lives.

> It is one of my hobbies, my interest. I am always motivated to produce and share. Like artists, they create when they feel like creating. I cannot give the precise reason. I just grab the inspiration and do it. I guess it is out of the love for idols. (Respondent 12)

A couple of respondents also mentioned that they had less extrinsic incentives than the pure joy coming from making contributions to idols.

> In the world of idols, everything is like in a vacuum, so pure and clean. The sharing is not contaminated by the utilitarian society. We enjoy what we are doing for idols. Sharing is such a nice thing to do. (Respondent 9)

> Of course it is because of love! It may sounds ridiculous to ordinary people. But my love for idols is not superficial. It has nothing to do with heterosexual love. It is more

like something spiritual that make me feel happy from the bottom of my heart. (Respondent 13)

To express the love for idols can be categorized as an intrinsic motivation, which stem from the internal demands than external forces. This theme indicates that the fascination for idols plays an important role in the sharing of fan-generated digital content. However, although many respondents mentioned this motivation, they could not make it more explicit and concrete. Many respondents failed to verbalize how the love for idols motivates them to share gratis. It is the state of mind of immersing in the world of idols motives them to share, which has much to do emotional involvements. The motivation of expressing the love for idols reflects to what extent fans involve themselves in popular culture and how the cultural influences from a mediated world affect fans' perceptions and behaviours. Although most of the respondents acknowledge that it is very unlikely to get any response from idols, they still generously contribute their time and efforts to support idols. This type of others-oriented motivation can be marked as relatively altruistic.

Theme of new topics

The extent to which fans are engaged in media texts differentiates them from ordinary audiences (Fiske, 1992). All the participants of this research spend at least 2 hours every day on Sina Weibo. The main purpose for them to use Sina Weibo is to search for information about idols. According to Pinchot (1995), rather than losing value, information gains value through being shared. A motivation for sharing fan-generated digital content discovered in this research is the creation of new topics. Topics are of great importance to fan communities, which foster the discussions and interactions that online communities organize around (Baym, 2000).

Fans who share celebrity related digital content are in pursuit of creating fresher and ampler topics as new materials for the consumption of popular culture. These new topics usually derive from original media products. However, they are more or less commingled with fans own interpretations, perceptions and imaginations. For instance, from the interviews the research acknowledged that many of the fans that had ever created digital content attempted to portray the scenarios imagined by them. Respondent 3 says "the scenes that I wrote were the ones that idols would hardly present or I had very little chances to see. So I presented those scenes by myself". Similarly, Respondent 7 says that writing fan-fictions is a way to keep creative and realize what they want idols to do in an imagined world. The products reflect fans' imaginations, which are extensions of the original media texts.

Humour is a significant element of fan-generated digital content. The sense of humour discovered both in the shared products and follow-up comments demonstrate fans' differentiated interpretations and the welcoming, affective and relaxing environment of fan communities. Respondent 2 mentions, "we discuss my fiction together. I feel extremely happy doing this. We always discuss some hilarious points and the stories behind what I wrote".

Respondent 6 says, "we discover new 'Duanzi' from my fictions. They can be more interesting than the programmes from the official source". "Duanzi" refers to the jokes extracted from the creations. Creating humorous "Duanzi" is a means for fans to show their fascination for the celebrities, to release pleasure and to communicate with other members of fan community. Humour serves as an important ingredient to enhance social affiliation (Jenkins, 1992b) and to create an accepting and caring group atmosphere (Morreall, 1993).

The sharing of fan-generated digital content provides new materials of idols for both the providers and receivers. These materials fulfil fans' needs to interpret media products on their own terms. More importantly, fans always gain more pleasures from fan-generated digital content than authorized media products. The sharing of fan-generated digital content reflects the creation of cultural value, which has the potential of gathering like-minded people and nourishing social relations.

Theme of feedback

Gift-giving practices always require paybacks to sustain. In "gift economy", the giving of gift is always accompanied with the expectation to get returns (Skågeby, 2010). In fan community, reciprocity usually takes the forms of simply replying and giving feedbacks (Booth, 2010). According to the results from the interviews, three sub-themes, namely compliments, suggestions and encouragements were found under the theme of feedback.

Compliment
Compliment is a common type of feedback. To fans, compliments represent the recognitions from other fans in the same community. On one hand, compliments reflect the quality of their products; on the other hand, compliments indicate the intimate and affective relationships between fan community members. Fans who get compliments from other members always feel a great sense of fulfilment and gratification.

> People said they liked my fiction and shared my products. I was excited to hear that. I think those comments are the best returns for my contribution. (Respondent 3)

> Other fans' praises are the most uplifting things to me. Sometimes my friends almost 'forced' me to create. Some of them use the pictures I drew as profile pictures. I cannot believe that they like my pictures so much! (Respondent 13)

> People who liked my products more often than not would disseminate them on Sina Weibo, which made me very proud of myself. I became more and more willing to create and share. (Respondent 14)

It indicates that compliments always appear along with actions proving their appreciations. For example, members always disseminate, download or make use of the products created by other fans. The compliments from other fans drive fans to be more productive and prolific.

Suggestions

Fans share their products not only for compliments, but also for suggestions beneficial for improvements and progresses. It was found that fan producers always attempt to make better products through trial and error. Some fans take the creation seriously in pursuit of the improvements of their ability and creativity. In the form of sharing, they communicate with and learn from more experienced fan producers.

> I want suggestions. I remember once I drew a picture of idols and shared on Weibo. I '@' the members of our community. One girl told me that the colour could be more vivid. Then she taught me how to use Photoshop to beauty up my picture. I was really grateful. In conventional views, these kinds of activities are time-consuming and meaningless. But this example proves that we can acquire knowledge and get benefits from sharing. (Respondent 8)

As Okabe (2012) suggests, there is a kind of "mentorship" in fan community. Fans who have specialties can provide effective guidance to new-starters. However, from the narratives of many respondents, the guides and teaching are quite informal. Although fan producers want some suggestions and training, they do not deliberately ask for them. Learning is more like a spontaneous process.

Encouragements

This sub-theme is similar to the first one, namely "compliments". However, the researcher found it necessary to distinguish these two given some nuances discovered. First, encouragements are always reciprocal. The giving of encouragement is always viewed as a

ceremonious act. Second, encouragements do not necessarily reflect the quality of products. In some cases the recipients of fan-generated digital content do not genuinely appreciate the products. Nevertheless, in order not to discourage the sharers ceremoniously give encouragements as responses.

> I know my fictions are not great. But they said they enjoyed reading my fictions. They are very considerate and caring. (Respondent 12)

> Their encouragements touched me. Actually just the words from them were enough to me. When they produced something, I also gave encouragements. That is mutual. (Respondent 0)

The reciprocal encouragements are embedded in the process of establishing and maintaining relationships. Hellekson (2009) argues that the exchange of fan-generated digital content has symbolic meaning, which is crucial for the cohesion of fan community. Fans' giving encouragements as feedbacks is a way to respond to the contributions and to express their consideration and sympathy for members.

Social bonding

Fans like to bond with other fans so that they have partners to share information and to develop mutual emotional attachments. Fans used the "emotional capital" (Sedgwick, 1985) obtained from fan community to rebuild their social and emotional lives (Yang and Bao, 2012). The bonding value of fan-generated digital content is noticeable in this research. There are three sub-themes found under the theme of bonding. First, expanding fan community, which means to attract other fans and enlarge the size of existing fan community. Second, some products are shared to certain people to strengthen the already existing ties. Third, the sharing of fan-generated digital content guarantees a certain amount of exposure of fans themselves, which functions as holding fan communities together.

Expanding fan community
Participation in fan community helps to relate self to others and makes fans willing to maintain the "ecology" of the whole community (Yang & Bao, 2012: 16). The answers from the interviews suggest that fans are keen on attracting and approaching like-mined people, who have many things in common with them. For instance, respondent 4 says, "I like sharing. I want my endeavours to be seen by other fans. Also, I can meet people who like my products." Respondent 6 mentions "I was on my own when I started being a KK fan. It was quite lonely. So I decided to expand the 'circle' by sharing my fictions."

To fans, gifting the products is an effective way of getting in touch with other like-minded fans. The discussion of the fan-generated digital content helps fans to bond with others and expand the size of fan community. Although most of them were strangers from the very beginning, the similarities discovered in terms of fandom shortened the distance. In some cases, online gifting even functions as a way to provide supports when approaching other fans (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008).

> It is magical. We all have different experiences. Also, the age gap can be as large as nine! However, we can easily understand each other. There are some points that only we can share and understand. I am very shy and not sociable. But when I saw a girl, who was also a fan of EITO, saying she was very sad on Weibo, I spontaneously showed sympathy for her. I cut and pasted the most classic scenes of the idols' programmes and made a video. I share it on Weibo and '@' her. She was surprised. She asked me why I did that. I told her that I always treated her as a friend although we never talked before. (Respondent 9)

The sharing of fan-generated digital content reflects fans intentions of showing affinities, providing supports and bonding with like-minded people. The primarily established online relationships may pave the road for face-to-face meeting offline (Kendall, 2011). According to Baker (2013), the flows of materials illuminate the process of information exchange and fans' moving from online to offline, which also indicate the change of cultural value and social value.

> I have offline connections with other members. Our friendship started from sharing the fan fictions. We found more and more similarities not only in fandom, but also in taste, lifestyle, and many other things. (Respondent 9)

The expanding of fan community does not only happen in online realm. Most of the participants of this research have social connections offline, which may be resulted from their sharing and in return encourage them to create and share more products.

Consolidate relations

The low-cast, mass-publishing and mass-reproductive nature of Internet fosters the production and distribution of online gifts for approximately zero cost (Veale, 2003). Fan-generated digital content is always considered as an ideal present for fans. 'Where commodity exchange is focused on transfer in which objects of equivalent exchange value are reciprocally transacted, gift exchange seeks to establish a relationship between subjects in which the

actual objects transferred are incidental to the value of relationship established.' (Schrift, 1997: 2) In fan communities, the sharing of fan-generated digital content can also be an effective way to consolidate relations with particular members.

> Another reason to share is kind of purposive. Like birthday present something. (The interviewer asked: Why do you want to give you products as birthday gift?) Because we have the same hobby! [Laughing] I know they will like my gifts. And, my products don't cost a lot, haha. (Respondent 1)

> Sometimes I give them out as gifts. One year ago I wrote the framework of my fiction and edited a photo of idols. Those products were made for a friend in my community. It was her birthday. I shared it on Weibo and specially '@' her to let her know. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 5 also claimed that after she met members offline, the gift-giving became more common. From online to offline, fan community members become more familiar with each other. The great leap of relationship is generally accompanied with more frequent gift-giving practices.

> We hold parties quite often. Actually, we have become good friends. Our online communications are like the communications between friends made offline. So I found it necessary to give them gifts on some big occasions. It is like what I do to my classmates. (Respondent 11)

Gift-giving behaviours strengthen ties and reinforce the connections (Skågeby, 2010). However, sometimes giving of presents does not derive from internal emotional needs. A couple of fans mentioned that gift-giving has become an obligation or even liability.

> I found I had to do this. This month is A's birthday, next month is B's birthday. I all need to make video gifts. You know this is the form of gift-giving in fan community. (Respondent 2)

All in all, the gift-giving has network level effects, which "adds value to network relations and represent the social capital inherent in network" (Haythornthwaite, 2007: 127). Gift-giving implies reciprocity and sentimental connections in fan communities.

Holding fan community together

Bauman (2001) argues that "price" should be paid for the privilege of being in a community. In fan community, "price" can be understood as fans' participation, commitment, and reciprocal actions. Fans exchange the symbolic presents they made in order to enhance the cohesion of the communities (Hellekson, 2009). The sharing of fan-generated digital content keeps actives fans visible in fan community, which gives individuals a sense of belonging and maintains the whole group.

> I feel that I belong to the community when I share the Photoshop products. I treasure the feeling of staying in a group. This becomes another main reason for me to share. (Respondent 11)

> But to some extent it (sharing) can make our relationship better. It's a lot of fun. And when I share to other fans, more often than not I find similarities of us. In return, if they find resources, they will always share them with me. In this way our relationships do turn better. (Respondent 1)

Many respondents admitted that although some people may be more active in maintaining the community, they are not considered as having higher positions than others. The structure of fan community is spontaneously formed and hinges on the members' identities (Lei, 2012). The researcher discovered that fan communities on Sina Weibo, most of which are non-official ones, have a rather flatten structure.

> I think it is not proper to use 'position' here. In formal fan communities, there is something called position. But in our non-official community, there is no such thing. If you have to know, probably 'speciality' is more appropriate. We are equal. We are just good at different things. (Respondent 1)

> We don't have hierarchies. Anyway it is not a formal community. No one takes it seriously. I don't think there is someone who shares just for reputation or the so-called higher position. (Respondent 10)

However, an unexpected finding was that fan community was rather fragile. Respondent 5 says, "we were very close at the very beginning. But with the decrease of fan products shared, the community is becoming quiet". To be more specific, fans are loosely connected. The pause of sharing is likely to result in the collapse of fan community.

Although the sharing of fan products enlivens the atmosphere of fan community and make individuals more visible, the relations between members are still fickle. The exposure of fan-

generated digital content is closely connected with the "life" of fan community. Once the input of cultural products ceases, the social connectedness is also affected.

Concluding discussion

The discovered commonly occurring themes, namely "love for idols", "new topics", "feedback", and "social bonding" are placed in the Figure 3. The horizontal dimension is the same with the one in Figure 1. To make linkage between the creation of cultural value and social value, the vertical dimension is added to the model. There are important points to be made with respect to the figure below. First, the figure aims to highlight the differences between the motivations and to give an overall view of the whole picture. The distance between the themes in the figure cannot be measured because the figure only reports the relative locations of them. Second, high cultural value does not necessarily mean low social value. They can be both high and low. The inclination to cultural value pole indicates a relatively higher cultural value than social value, and vice versa.

Figure 3. The motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content
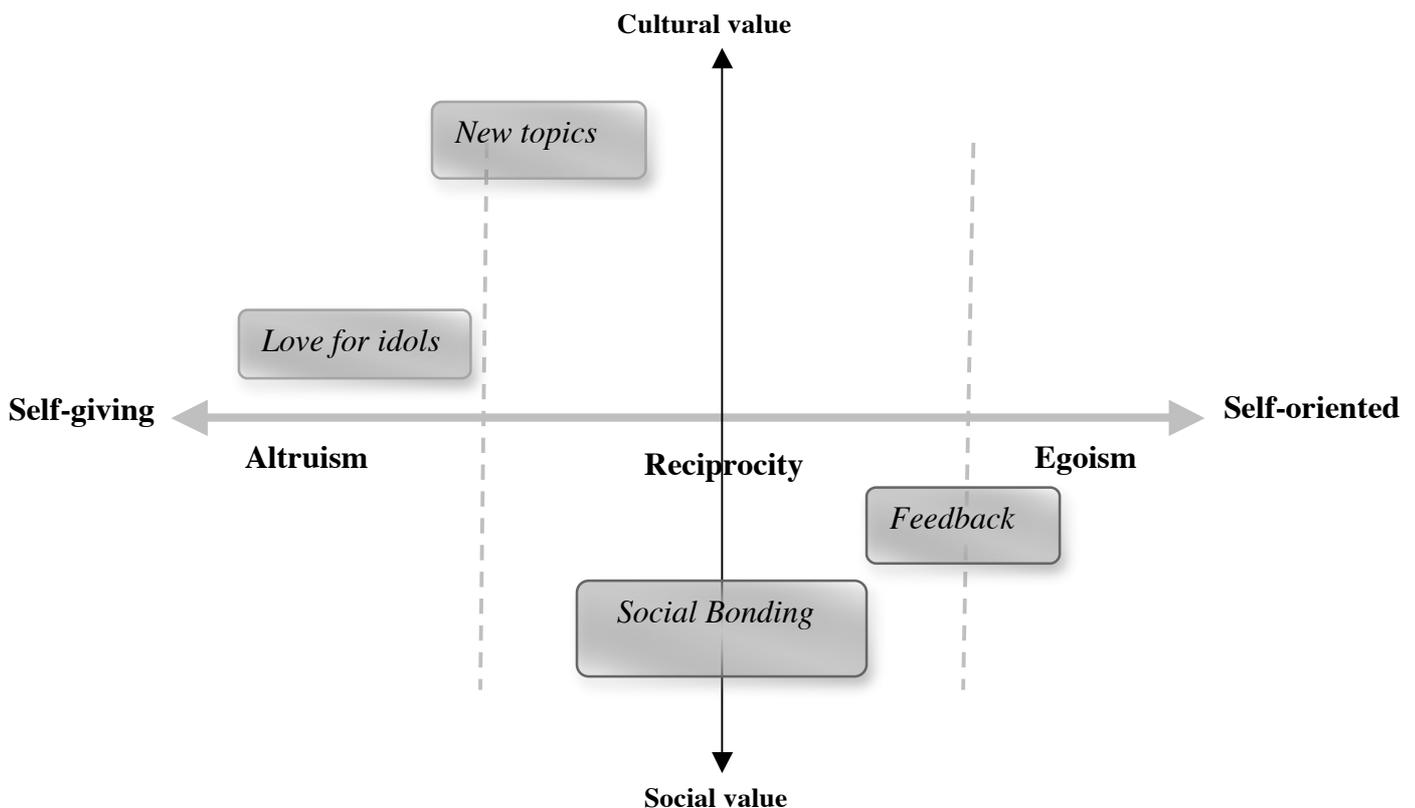
In the figure above, two themes were considered have more cultural value than social value, which explains the reason that "new topics" and "love for idols" were located in the top half of

the figure above. In contrast, "feedback" and "social bonding" are more associated with the dynamics of fan community, which help fans foster their identification with the community and give them the sense of belonging (Lei, 2012). The internal compulsion to support idols, the willingness to express the intense emotions, the possession of fan knowledge, and the needs to create extensions of authorized media products collectively motivate fans to pursue and to display the creation of cultural value through the sharing of fan-generated digital content. At the meantime, the building and maintenance of social connectedness within fan community demonstrate the social value of sharing, which are reflected on social similarity, shared activities and emotional attachments (Belliveau, O' Reilly and Wade, 1996).

The figure shows that most of the motivations have reciprocal characteristics. In gift-giving practices, reciprocity can take the form of giving direct gifts, feedbacks, and intangible rewards including self-esteem, recognition and reputation (Veale, 2003). Social capital always fosters reciprocity (Smith, 2008). Motivations highly related to social value like "social bonding", is regarded as reciprocal. Some themes are situated on the dividing of different types of motivations, which means they have dual features. For instance, the theme of "new topics" demonstrates fans' altruistic behaviours as generously creating interesting topics for the pleasures of other fans. At the meantime, the contributors also harvest pleasure and gratification from the discussion of new topics. In most of the cases, fan-generated digital products are accessible for the whole community. The reciprocity comes more often from a group as a whole than from individual gift-receivers, which indicates loose reciprocation (Veale, 2003). In light of this, the sharing of fan-generated digital content should be understood as having a group effect. The relatively reciprocal nature of the motivations discovered suggests that the sharing of fan-generated digital content is intertwined with the dynamics of fan community. Sharing is a way for fans to interact with community members and provide mutual benefits.

The sharing of fan-generated digital content indicates the reconstruction of meanings and reproducing of cultural value by fans themselves. Also, it was discovered that the input of cultural value might potentially bring out the output of social value. For example, the creation of new topics not only entertains the creators, but also benefits others and helps fans to approach like-minded people. In this sense, social connectedness may be the ultimate motivation for fans to share. In contrast, the stop of the injection of fresh cultural value is likely to result in the instability or even the disintegration of fan communities. On the social value aspect, the accumulation of social value may also stimulate the creation of cultural value. For instance, fans that are already friends in community create the products so as to keep the friendship, which can be understood as the accumulation of cultural capital driven

by the maintenance of social capital. Also, the compliments and encouragements from fan community members may also accelerate the producing and sharing of new topics.

The dynamics of cultural and social value have mutual influences and collectively affect the roles of community members and the whole structure of a community. Fan community members play different roles. The most prolific fan producers tend to play significant roles in establishing group recognition (Baym, 1993). The less participatory ones are less visible in community and may end up being marginalized.

> We have leaders. They play active roles in organizing parties holding the community together. They are always the ones who also share a lot of original creations. (Respondent 5)

> I am not very active in participating activities that are not related to idols. I don't hang out frequently with members. Anyway I don't make as many products as others. (Respondent 7)

The above narratives suggest that people's awareness of their roles and other members' roles in a community. However, the roles are not unchangeable. The changes of motivations to some extent reflect the changes of roles.

> From the very beginning I shared occasionally just to see if people like my creations. But the longer I stayed in the community, the stronger my sense of responsibility became. I found it necessary to share more and to take the leading role. (Respondent 4)

This respondent changed her role from a sharer to a leader, which is associated with the change of motivations. With the building of social network, the investment of cultural value increases. The change of cultural and social value alters fans' role in a community and update fan's identification of themselves and others.

An unexpected finding shed light on the structure of Sina Weibo fan communities. In many of the voluntary knowledge contributing practices, reputation is a key factor. James (2010) argues that the amount of time of being a member of fan community, the number of postings shared, the amount of successful contacts with celebrity all contribute to fans' status in community. Interestingly, none of participants of this research listed the pursuit of reputation as a motivation for them to share fan-generated digital content. However, this finding does not necessarily mean fan community has a perfectly horizontal structure.

Participants mentioned that some fan producers acted superior to others, which indicated the possible existence of hierarchies.

> Some fans from other communities do that. For instance, the ones who occupy more resources and who are more gifted in creating sometimes can be very patronizing. I think they share the products for reputation. Otherwise, they would not act in that way. I think there are some 'invisible hierarchies'. (Respondent 8)

> It has something to do with the idols. I always feel that 'like idols, like fans'. If the idols are very arrogant, then their fans are likely to be the same. Our community is very harmonious, but I know some communities have pyramidal structures. In those communities, reputation is valued. (Respondent 9)

The existence of patronizing actions implies that the structure of fan community may not be as flatten as most of the respondents described. The "invisible hierarchies" suggest that the unequal statuses of fans may not be clearly declared but still exist in a community. However, as respondent 9 mentioned, the structure may vary for community to community. Fan community is an important group for fans. They avoid associating fandom with profitable and utilitarian things in order to keep fandom as "pure" as possible, which may explain why fans did not regard building reputation as a key motivation. However, from their narratives, the researcher discovered that reputation might lure fans into the pursuit of power over other fans, which end up with the loss of "purity" and a non-egalitarian structure.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on fans' motivations for sharing idols related digital products made by themselves, this study revealed that the motivations are multiple, relatively reciprocal and often associated with the dynamic relationships within fan communities. Instead of utilitarian reasons, fans are driven by the internal demands for the expression of strong emotions, the creation of interesting information sources, and more in-depth and intimate interaction with other fans no matter in forms of feedback exchanging, present-giving or new topics discussing. Besides, the expansion and maintenance of fan community require continuous input, which were discovered as important motivations for contributing. In this sense, cultural and social value becomes significant elements in the sharing of fan- products. Although fans do not gain any monetary returns through sharing, they harvest the gratification, pleasure, and social connectedness, which satisfy their emotional and social needs.

Commodification is marked by various forms of de-contextualization, while the de-commodified sharing of fan-generated digital content demonstrates multiple forms of re-contextualization through which meanings are shared and social ties are revitalized (Jenkins, 2002). However, the non-profitable behaviours do not imply the realization of an ideally stable and democratic sharing system. "Fans and fan communities are in a constant state of flux" (Ross and Nightingale, 2003: 121). The social ties within a fan community can be perceived as implicit connections and are always associated with the change of the extent to which they fascinate about and contribute to the object(s) of fandom. The structure of fan communities is more flattened in comparison with commercial organizations. However, the purposive motivations discovered in this research may suggest a non-egalitarian community in which some participations and contributions are more valued than others.

Limitations

This research can be improved in terms of sampling and data analysis. First, demographic unbalance appears to be a limitation of this research. Most of the participants are females, which made the sample less representative. The reasons for the demographic limitations can be attributed to the field of study and sampling technique adopted.

The analysis of data was incredibly crucial for the generation of results. The method adopted, thematic analysis, strongly relies on the interpreters' background knowledge and thinking habits. After all there is no certain manner of conducting thematic analysis, which makes the credibility of thematic analysis an issue (Bryman, 2012). Also, the figures illustrating the themes may also be flawed. The classification and evaluation of themes was largely based on the researcher's personal points of view, which may need more academic evidences to support.

Further research

If research in the similar field is to be conducted in the future, more attentions can be given to structures of online fan community. For instance, how does the loose structure of Weibo fan community influenced the way in which fans share and bond? Furthermore, future research can involve a much larger sample, which has more demographic diversities. Who participate have strong influences on fan community (Baym, 2000). The differences lying in gender, educational and occupational background, and age may provide potentially different

and unexpected findings and results. The lack of male fans suggests that gender difference may be significant in online fan community. In this sense, the comparison between male fans and female fans in digital realm can also be a new focus of future research.

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