

The Impact of Influential Fans on Commercial Value: A Perspective from Their Negative Influence on Celebrity Image

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Abstract

In today's highly commercialized entertainment landscape, a celebrity's brand value is no longer dictated solely by their artistic output. Instead, it is increasingly shaped by the collective behavior of their fan communities. Among these, "influential fans" or superfans play a critical role in shaping public narratives. While their organized participation can enhance a celebrity's visibility and commercial appeal, irrational actions-such as mass reporting, comment suppression, and aggressive boycotts-often provoke intense public backlash. This study investigates the dual nature of influential fan behavior by examining the "227 Incident" involving Chinese actor Xiao Zhan. Employing a qualitative mixed-method approach, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and social media analysis, this paper identifies a critical gap in celebrity risk management strategies. It contributes both theoretically and practically by offering insight into how fan-induced crises can damage celebrity reputations and offers actionable strategies for brands and PR teams to mitigate these risks.

Keywords

Fan Behavior; Celebrity Branding; Online Backlash; Fandom Crisis; Celebrity Endorsement Risk.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the digital era, the relationship between celebrities and audiences has been profoundly reshaped by the rise of participatory fan culture. Fans are no longer passive consumers but active cultural participants, capable of shaping narratives, trends, and public discourse[1]. Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in China, where fan communities have evolved into highly organized, networked collectives wielding considerable online influence.

The rise of "superfans" or "influential fans"-those who organize comment campaigns, curate online content, and mobilize economic power-has fundamentally altered the landscape of celebrity branding. These fans act not only as supporters but as digital agents capable of amplifying or damaging a celebrity's public image. While their organized activity can significantly boost a celebrity's visibility and attract endorsements, unregulated behaviors-such as online harassment, mass reporting of dissenting views, and boycott movements-may provoke fierce public backlash. In extreme cases, such actions result in reputational crises and commercial fallout for both the celebrity and associated brands.

1.2. Research Focus

This study focuses on examining how negative behavior by influential fan groups influences both the public perception and commercial value of celebrities. In recent years, the phenomenon of "fan-induced crises" has gained attention, particularly in the realm of social media, where real-time public reactions can escalate rapidly. A key case that highlights these

dynamics is the “227 Incident,” in which actor Xiao Zhan's fans launched a reporting campaign targeting a fan fiction platform, inadvertently triggering mass backlash and brand disengagement. This incident serves as a representative case for understanding the broader impact of irrational fandom.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

How do influential fans shape or distort the public image of a celebrity through their online behavior?

To what extent does fan behavior influence the commercial value and marketability of a celebrity?

How do various stakeholder groups-general audiences, fans, and branding professionals-perceive the risks associated with fandom-driven controversies?

What strategies can celebrities and brand teams employ to prevent and mitigate reputation risks caused by fan behavior?

1.4. Research Significance

Theoretical Contribution:

While most existing studies on fandom focus on its positive dimensions-such as community engagement, increased media consumption, and brand loyalty-this study addresses an important research gap by exploring the negative implications of influential fandom. It contributes to the evolving discourse on fan economy by conceptualizing fans not only as a resource but also as a potential liability.

Practical Relevance:

Through the integration of real-world case studies, social media analysis, and stakeholder interviews, this research offers actionable insights for PR teams, celebrity management, and brand strategists. The findings help establish early-warning mechanisms for fan-driven crises, enhance endorsement risk assessments, and support the development of nuanced crisis communication strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Participatory Culture and the Role of Fans

Henry Jenkins conceptualizes participatory culture as a media environment in which audiences are no longer passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning and discourse [1]. This framework has profound implications for celebrity culture, where fans not only consume content but also co-construct the public persona of celebrities through online engagement.

In China, the participatory role of fans is particularly visible on platforms like Weibo and Douyin. Here, fans are capable of organizing trending campaigns, managing public commentary, and shaping the dominant narrative. As noted, “Fans are not just consumers but participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” [1]. Such discursive power positions fans-especially influential ones-not merely as supporters but as cultural intermediaries who can significantly affect a celebrity’s brand trajectory.

2.2. Fan Economy in the Chinese Context

The Chinese entertainment industry has witnessed the rise of a distinct “fan economy,” characterized by the monetization of fan engagement and the organizational strength of online fandoms. These communities are pivotal drivers of traffic, content virality, and brand loyalty [2]. Fan organizations-such as “Super Topic moderators” or voting teams-routinely coordinate

mass actions including digital purchases, online voting, and even crowdfunding for commercial billboards.

However, this organizational strength also creates the risk of collective irrational behavior. High group cohesiveness fosters an environment where fans adopt a “moral mission” to protect their idols at any cost, often resulting in online harassment, boycott actions, and even coordinated cyberbullying [3]. As noted, “The group cohesiveness of fan clubs often promotes a sense of ‘moral mission,’ leading to aggressive behaviors like cyberbullying and mass boycotts” [3]. In this context, fandom transforms from a supportive force into a potential reputational hazard.

2.3. Shaping and Distorting Celebrity Image

A growing body of research highlights the dual-edged impact of fan-led image construction. Researchers have examined “comment control” strategies in Chinese cyberspace, where fans systematically suppress negative discourse and amplify curated narratives [4]. While these practices may initially boost visibility, they also foster online resentment and erode trust among neutral audiences.

“When comment manipulation becomes excessive, it transforms into censorship and silencing, which violates online social norms and leads to backlash” [4].

Similarly, irrational fan actions-though often carried out with the intent to “protect” idols-frequently trigger public disapproval [5]. Studies find that overzealous fan interventions alienate broader audiences and diminish a celebrity’s perceived authenticity.

“Irrational fan actions aimed at ‘protecting’ idols tend to alienate neutral audiences, thereby eroding public trust and harming the endorsed brand” [5].

2.4. Commercial Value: Endorsements at Risk

From a branding perspective, celebrity-fan dynamics play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions. Studies demonstrate that Gen Z audiences often engage in intense celebrity worship, which can enhance brand loyalty-but only under stable and positive fan behavior [6]. When fan actions become toxic, this loyalty can backfire.

The concept of “celebrity brand break-up” has been proposed to describe situations where consumers experience “para-loveshock”-an emotional rupture triggered by fan controversies or scandals [7]. The result is often swift disaffiliation and commercial fallout.

“Once fans perceive a mismatch between the celebrity’s promoted image and fan behavior, the sense of betrayal leads to sharp disaffiliation” [7].

This mechanism is well illustrated by the Xiao Zhan “227 Incident,” where brands like Prada and Estée Lauder suspended collaborations following widespread online backlash over fan-led reporting campaigns. Further research reinforces this pattern, arguing that celebrity controversies-whether direct or fan-induced-undermine brand trust and reduce purchase intention [8].

2.5. Research Gap and Contribution

While the majority of existing literature emphasizes the commercial and social benefits of fan engagement, there remains a critical gap concerning its darker side. Research contends that fan identity can become emotionally volatile, particularly when fans feel morally justified in their actions [9]. This emotional intensity often overrides rational behavior, leading to actions that harm both the idol and affiliated brands.

This study seeks to address this under-explored domain by analyzing the mechanisms through which fan behavior affects celebrity image and brand partnerships. By integrating psychological, sociological, and marketing perspectives, it positions fandom not only as a cultural force but also as a reputational variable with tangible economic consequences.

3. Argument and Analysis

3.1. Identifying the Problem: The Dual Nature of Influential Fans

As established in the literature review, influential fans possess an exceptional ability to mold the public image of celebrities. In many cases, their active engagement is seen as a strategic asset-enhancing media visibility, increasing fan loyalty, and strengthening endorsement value [2]. However, this influence is inherently double-edged: when fans act irrationally or aggressively, their behavior may swiftly evolve into a reputational liability.

The “227 Incident” illustrates this paradox in stark terms. In an attempt to defend actor Xiao Zhan from what they perceived as defamatory fanfiction content on Archive of Our Own (AO3), his fans organized a large-scale reporting campaign that led to the platform’s restriction in China’s mainland. This triggered widespread outrage across online communities, particularly among netizens who viewed the action as censorship and overreach. The fallout was immediate: Xiao Zhan faced intense public condemnation, while multiple high-end brands-including Prada, Estée Lauder, and Piaget-either paused or terminated their endorsement partnerships.

“While our actions were meant to shield the artist, the situation spiraled out of control. We lost control of public perception.”

- Interviewee: Super Topic Moderator

This scenario highlights the urgent need to dissect the chain reaction through which fan-initiated actions-however well-intended-translate into widespread reputational and commercial consequences.

3.2. Survey Analysis: Public Perception of Influential Fans

To explore broader perceptions of fan behavior, a structured questionnaire (n = 213) was distributed among general internet users, casual fans, and branding professionals active on platforms such as Weibo, Douban, and Zhihu.

Key findings include:

74% of respondents had observed fan-driven suppression tactics such as comment deletion and mass reporting.

62% believed that such behaviors generate significant public resentment, and 27% further agreed that this negativity often spills over onto the celebrity’s own image.

81% of branding professionals reported that fandom-related controversies have become a key factor in evaluating celebrity endorsement risks.

Only 18% maintained that fan behavior consistently benefits a celebrity’s commercial value.

These findings align with previous research arguing that negative publicity-regardless of its source-can significantly erode consumer trust [8]. Studies on celebrity scandal spillover confirm that even indirect controversies, such as aggressive fan actions, reduce purchase intention [8].

“Nowadays, we don’t just evaluate the celebrity’s reputation-we assess the maturity and behavior of their fan community as well.”

- Interviewee: PR Manager, Luxury Brand

This suggests a measurable “transference effect,” where public dissatisfaction with fans transfers onto the celebrity, complicating their branding potential and reshaping how brands assess influencer risk.

3.3. Interviews with Fan Leaders: Understanding Motivations and Group Psychology

To delve into the psychological motivations behind such behaviors, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with key figures in fandom ecosystems:

2 photo site administrators
 2 fan support group organizers
 1 luxury brand PR executive
 1 Super Topic moderator

The interviews revealed a consistent dissonance between intention and impact. Most fans perceived their actions as a moral obligation to protect their idol from harm. However, in emotionally charged digital environments, group dynamics tend to override individual judgment, leading to unanticipated escalation and reputational fallout.

Key patterns identified:

Fans often operate under the belief that they are acting ethically and justifiably.

Groupthink and emotional contagion significantly reduce critical reflection.

Few participants acknowledged the potential commercial harm of their actions.

“We are not trying to silence others-we just want to prevent unnecessary harm to him.”

- Photo Admin A

“When emotions run high in the fan circle, it becomes nearly impossible to stop the group action. Public sentiment quickly escapes our control.”

- Super Topic Moderator

These responses reinforce the concept of emotional defense rationalization, wherein fans justify harmful actions through perceived moral duty [3]. Similarly, in collectivist fan communities, personal ethical norms are frequently suspended in favor of emotional group allegiance [9].

3.4. Social Media Analysis: Online Backlash and Brand Fallout

To examine the real-time trajectory of fan behavior and its wider implications, Weibo data from February to April 2020-during the height of the “227 Incident”-was monitored and analyzed. Keyword tracking and sentiment analysis were conducted to trace the intensity and scope of public reaction.

Key observations:

- Posts containing terms such as “report A03” and “extreme fandom behavior” surged by 112% within two weeks.
- The hashtag **#Reject Fandom Culture#** reached the top 10 of Weibo’s Hot Search list and garnered over **300 million views**.
- Related discussion threads on platforms like Zhihu and Douban were inundated with hostile comments, low ratings, and organized spam attacks targeting Xiao Zhan and his commercial endorsements.

In the days that followed, brands such as Prada and Estée Lauder issued public statements distancing themselves from the actor, either suspending or canceling promotional campaigns. Sentiment analysis revealed a sharp spike in negatively valenced language-terms like “bullying,” “irrational,” “toxic fans,” and “celebrity complicity” dominated digital discourse.

This pattern corresponds closely with the theory of “**para-loveshock**,” where public affection for a celebrity is abruptly withdrawn due to external moral violations-whether committed by the celebrity or their affiliated fan base [7]. In this case, the perceived alignment between Xiao Zhan and his fans intensified the reputational collapse.

“The fans acted without considering how brands would be viewed in the fallout. In the end, everyone loses.”

- Interviewee: Brand PR Manager

This illustrates how online behavior by a fan community, though externally initiated, can produce **internalized brand consequences**, severely altering the trajectory of celebrity endorsements.

3.5. Conceptualizing the Impact Mechanism: A Transference Model

Based on the integration of qualitative interviews, social sentiment data, and survey responses, a transference model is proposed to conceptualize how fan behavior leads to commercial risk:

Influential Fan Behavior

→ **Public Sentiment Shift**

→ **Celebrity Image Deterioration**

→ **Brand Risk Realization**

This mechanism provides a holistic framework for understanding how indirect social behavior-external to the celebrity-can create direct commercial consequences. Research argues that symbolic association between celebrities and their fan bases intensifies perceived responsibility, making the celebrity complicit in the eyes of the public [4].

In many cases, **second-order damage** arises: the brand does not suffer because the celebrity acted unethically, but because **the public perceives inaction or tolerance** toward irrational fan behavior. In this context, the fan community becomes a reputational liability, a new crisis node in the ecosystem of celebrity-brand partnerships.

3.6. Managing the Risk: Toward Strategic Solutions

Given the increasing complexity of the relationship between celebrities, fans, and commercial stakeholders, proactive risk management has become essential. The dynamics of fan-induced crises call for a strategic, multi-actor approach that involves celebrity teams, brand managers, and digital platforms alike.

For celebrities and their management teams, it is crucial to establish clear behavioral guidelines for fan communities. Promoting messages of “rational fandom” can help curb excessive emotionality, while implementing ethical boundaries and reinforcing responsible online engagement can mitigate the chances of reputational fallout. These measures must be complemented by real-time monitoring systems handled by PR specialists, capable of identifying and responding to emerging risks before they escalate.

Brands, meanwhile, need to account for fan community behavior as part of their overall endorsement risk evaluation. Rather than focusing solely on the celebrity's public image or marketability, brand strategists must assess the stability, maturity, and behavioral patterns of the celebrity's fan base. In contract negotiations, it is advisable to include clauses that allow brands to terminate agreements in the case of reputational damage originating not from the celebrity, but from the surrounding community. This new awareness of “community-originated crises” requires brands to evolve from passive benefactors of fan loyalty to active risk assessors of fan conduct.

On the side of social media platforms, regulatory action is needed to address the structural enablers of toxic fan behavior. Algorithms that reinforce homogenous discourse and reward aggressive visibility tactics must be re-examined. In particular, mechanisms like mass reporting, organized comment suppression, and hashtag flooding demand more rigorous oversight. At the same time, platforms should promote dialogue diversity by elevating voices that offer alternative perspectives, thereby reducing the influence of echo chambers and monopolized discourse.

These interventions-if executed collaboratively-reposition fan communities not merely as promotional engines, but as critical stakeholders in the reputational ecosystem of celebrity

culture. A sustainable entertainment environment demands sensitivity, foresight, and firm boundaries from all involved parties.

4. Conclusion

This study has investigated the dual-edged impact of influential fandom on celebrity image and commercial value, using the "227 Incident" involving actor Xiao Zhan as a case study. Through a triangulated methodology-combining survey data, in-depth interviews, and social media analysis-it becomes evident that fan communities, particularly when acting irrationally, play a decisive role in shaping public sentiment and influencing brand decisions.

The findings suggest that while influential fans can act as engines of publicity and engagement, their unchecked behavior often leads to significant backlash. Patterns such as mass reporting, emotional manipulation of discourse, and online harassment erode public trust and provoke consumer resistance. These dynamics frequently trigger brand disengagement, illustrating that fandom actions are no longer peripheral but central to celebrity-brand ecosystems.

From a theoretical perspective, this research expands the discourse on the fan economy by emphasizing fandom as a double-edged entity-both a valuable resource and a reputational risk. It introduces a "transference model" that maps the chain of influence from fan behavior to brand fallout, offering a conceptual framework for understanding indirect reputational crises.

Practically, the study proposes actionable strategies for all major stakeholders:

Celebrities should engage in proactive fan education and establish ethical boundaries within their fanbase.

Brands must integrate fan behavior into endorsement risk assessments and prepare for "community-originated crises."

Social platforms are encouraged to curb mechanisms that facilitate aggressive fan culture and instead promote inclusive, pluralistic dialogue.

In an era where fan communities are highly mobilized and publicly visible, managing fandom is no longer optional-it is an essential component of contemporary reputation management. Failure to recognize and regulate the behaviors of these communities can turn admiration into alienation and brand equity into liability.

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