Chapter 6

Celebrity Fans in China: Motives, Characteristics, and Marketing Impacts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the motives, characteristics, and marketing impacts of celebrity fans in China, and illustrates these points using the fans of Wallace Chung. Based on a grounded theoretical approach, the analysis reveals five fan segments with different motives and marketing impacts: casual fans (playful, limited marketing impacts); fascinated fans (aspirational, fervent purchasers); devoted fans (sense of belonging, voluntary marketer-promoters and fervent purchasers); dysfunctional fans (identification with celebrity, rally pro); and reflective fans (solid self-identity, celebrity image-shapers). The analysis shows that in addition to buying celebrity-related products, fans undertake essential marketing activities (celebrity image-shapers, voluntary marketer-promoter) that in the past were the domains of agency management and marketers of endorsed products. These changes elevate fans to become marketing partners. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A celebrity is a human brand (Thomson, 2006) who, in the age of social media, has a robust network of fans that comprise the major group of purchasers, consumers, and ardent promoters of the celebrity. Celebrity fans are now connected by social media to form a virtual community across regions. On the one hand, they exert influence on popular culture (i.e. celebrity fan culture), the economy (i.e. fan economy),

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and marketing practices (Huang, 2015). On the other hand, they provide dedicated support to the celebrity. Through individual and organized activities, the community of loyal and enthusiastic fans supports a celebrity directly through its consumption activities, such as attending a concert, watching a movie, and buying mementos; and indirectly through its consumption of celebrity-endorsed products. Further, fans create and share user-generated content (UGC) in the form of text, images and videos on social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), thus providing free publicity to the celebrity. Given the importance of the fans’ roles in the promotion and consumption of the celebrity and related products, researchers and practitioners alike are interested in understanding who the fans are and their motives and impacts in a consumerist culture and society.

Although an individual may attain celebrity status by pursuing a successful career in a variety of areas, including sports, entertainment, business and politics, in China they are the entertainers such as actors, actresses, singers and musicians who are the most popular. Baidu and Weibo, which index the popularity of celebrities in the country, consistently rank entertainment celebrities among the top. Further, according to the 2017 Forbes China Celebrity List (Flannery, 2017) that ranks celebrities by income, all of the top 50 celebrities came from the entertainment industry. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the fans of entertainment celebrities, given their importance in the consumerist economy and in popular culture.

The chapter aims to enrich the literature on fandom and celebrity endorsement by examining the characteristics and motives of fans in China, as well as their marketing impacts on the celebrity and related works. The chapter begins with an examination of organized fandom and fan segments on different dimensions, followed by an illustrative study of the fans of Wallace Chung. Based on an in-depth analysis of UGC, the chapter identifies five segments of fans with different motives and marketing impacts. Of particular interests are fan activities such as (re-)shaping the celebrity’s image and being voluntary marketer-promoters for the celebrity, his/her works and endorsed products, activities that were formerly conducted solely by the celebrity’s agency and marketers of endorsed products. The chapter ends by discussing the marketing impacts of organized fandom. As shown in the many examples included in the chapter, celebrity fans are now a marketing partner involved in co-creating the celebrity and promoting his/her related products.

THE RISE OF ORGANIZED FANDOM

Celebrities have always had fans; yet, prior to the social-media era, the fans were scattered. Fan communities were small and unconnected, situated in different cities, townships and universities. During this time, a fan’s knowledge about a celebrity was based by-and-large on the celebrity’s works (e.g. TV series, movies, interviews and variety shows) and reports on mass media (e.g. newspapers and periodicals). This one-way, controllable path allowed the management agency and the media industry to plan and create the image of each celebrity. The fans at the receiving end were generally passive in this regard.

This situation changed with the emergence of Weibo, the largest social-networking site in China. Weibo has 261 million active monthly users and 120 million active daily users. It allows fans not only to follow celebrity news but also to take an active role in engaging the celebrity. Further, it provides a platform for fans to connect with and follow one another. It is also a convenient platform for fans to retrieve, like, and share one another’s public statements about their idol.

Currently, social media connect celebrity fans all across the country in China. Aside from the celebrity’s official Web pages, fans also create webpages (fan pages) that often come up as suggested Web