

Stratified rituals and emotional currency: power dynamics and the production of simulated intimacy in fan meet-and-greets

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of China's entertainment market and the intensifying commercialization of fan-idol relationships have created a fertile ground for the commodification of intimacy. Employing an anthropological framework, this study investigated the micromechanisms of this process as observed in fan meet-and-greets. Through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of online communities, the analysis revealed a complex economy of affect. Event organizers employed "stratified rituals" (e.g., tiered ticketing, coded wristbands) to convert Bourdieusian symbolic capital into measurable economic value, thereby constructing a pricing system based on "emotional currency". Drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the study illustrated how staff members standardized emotional production through the micromanagement of interactions, while Goffman's dramaturgy elucidated the performative nature of these curated exchanges. Concurrently, the research documented how fans proactively carved out spaces of resistance through informal economic practices, such as the black-market trading of wristbands and the resale of exclusive benefits. Crucially, the study identified that these commodified interactions often culminated in emotional alienation, manifesting as "emotional inflation" and "post-meet-and-greet depression". This paper argued that such industry practices not only commodified emotions but also fundamentally challenged relational ethics. In response, it proposed an "exploitation-alienation-reconstruction" analytical framework, offering a critical lens for understanding the emotional politics of contemporary hybrid economies.

Keywords: stratified rituals, emotional currency, fan meet-and-greets, symbolic capital, bodily discipline, emotional alienation

1. Introduction

The accelerating commodification of social relations has transformed the fan economy from a subcultural practice into a globally influential paradigm of affective economy. Enabled by mobile internet technologies (e.g., Weibo Super Topics, WeChat fan groups), new interaction models have turned fan communities into core sites for observing the "affective operations" of the modern entertainment industry. In this context, fans assume a dual identity: they are both "emotional laborers" subject to commercial discipline and "cultural agents" capable of creatively negotiating and even subverting consumption norms [1, 2]. This duality underscores the complexity of contemporary emotional politics—particularly as "simulated intimacy" evolves into divisible, priceable, and tradable symbolic capital. This necessitates a critical reconstruction of existing theoretical frameworks within new consumer cultural contexts, specifically in the unique landscape of China's digitalized and rapidly modernizing fan economy.

Existing research, predominantly from communication studies, has extensively analyzed collective fan behaviors in online communities (e.g., fan fiction creation, data support for idols) [3]. However, a significant gap remains in exploring the ritual and embodied dimensions of offline interactions. Fan meet-and-greets serve as critical "liminal spaces" bridging virtual support and physical encounter—precisely where the entertainment industry's most sophisticated commercial experiments unfold. This study argues that these events are pivotal for understanding how emotional capital is generated, quantified, and exchanged.

2. Literature review

As a frontier of contemporary emotional commodification, the fan economy has attracted interdisciplinary attention from sociology, communication studies, and anthropology. This review systematically traces the evolution of relevant domestic (Chinese) and international scholarship, focusing on core themes, theoretical contributions, and limitations to provide theoretical grounding and research questions for this study.

International fan studies have undergone a paradigm shift—from framing fans as "pathological audiences" to recognizing them as "agentive actors"—and have formed three core theoretical strands.

2.1. Participatory culture theory

Jenkins' "participatory culture" theory is a milestone, portraying fans as active "textual poachers" and emphasizing their collective intelligence (e.g., collaborative creation of fan fiction), creativity (e.g., secondary creation of idol merchandise), and community bonds (e.g., online support organizations) in transmedia storytelling [4]. This theory shattered the stereotype of fans as passive consumers and established "fan agency" as a key research focus. However, its emphasis lies on collective actions, fan creations, and meaning negotiations in online communities—while neglecting analysis of offline embodied interactions.

2.2. Emotional labor and free labor theory

Hochschild's pioneering work on "emotional labor" (i.e., "managing one's emotions to evoke specific emotional states in others for monetary compensation") provides a critical lens for understanding the fan economy [5]. Terranova further extended this to the digital age with the concept of "free labor", noting that the substantial emotional (e.g., daily engagement with idol updates) and temporal labor (e.g., staying up late to boost idol-related data rankings) invested by fans in participatory culture is often invisibly absorbed and exploited by capital [6]. This strand addresses the identity contradiction of fans as "emotional laborers", highlighting how capital converts fans' passion, loyalty, and other emotional resources into economic value. Yet it fails to explain a core question: how capital precisely measures and monetizes emotional value through embodied, ritualized offline interactions.

2.3. Parasocial interaction theory

Horton and Wohl's "parasocial interaction" theory—which reveals the one-sided emotional bonds media users form with media figures—laid the foundation for understanding the asymmetric fan-idol relationship [7]. This theory has undergone three key breakthroughs in the digital age. Cohen developed the "Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale", transforming fans' parasocial attachment to idols into measurable psychological indicators through dimensions such as "level of emotional investment" and "frequency of interaction fantasies" [8]; Based on fieldwork in K-pop fan meet-and-greets, Lee and Watkins found that the entertainment industry packages mediated parasocial intimacy into tiered, marketable "intimacy experience packs" via materialized interaction designs (e.g., exclusive eye contact, customized greetings)—marking the first exploration of how parasocial affect is converted into economic capital [9]; Yung proposed the concept of "emotional futures," noting that algorithmic platforms (e.g., idol private messaging communities) entice fans to prepay large sums for imagined emotional returns by manufacturing "promises of future intimacy" (e.g., "We'll prepare a surprise for you at the next meet-and-greet")—signaling that parasocial intimacy has entered the stage of financial derivatives [10].

While this strand groundbreakingly maps the transformation chain of parasocial intimacy from "psychological connection" to "economic commodity" [7-10], it has a notable blind spot: it overemphasizes the logic of capital control while neglecting fans' agency in resisting commodification through practices like "black-market trading (e.g., resale of wristband benefits)" and "emotional mutual aid (e.g., message relay services)".

Domestic (Chinese) fan studies focus on the scale, business models, and impacts of China's fan economy. For example, Wang explored idol worship and consumer culture in post-reform China [11]; Zhang studied affective economies and digital fandom in China [12]. Yan and Qin drawing on the "theory of spatial production", argued that fans achieve relationship building, self-identity formation, and circle restructuring within the "representational space" shaped by support activities [13]; Zhao emphasized media's (especially social media's) role in accelerating the construction and dissolution of fans' collective memory, exacerbating the diversity and fragmentation of fan identities [14]; Chen further explored the emotional labor of fan groups in China's digital economy, highlighting the interplay between affective engagement and commercial exploitation [15].

In summary, despite rich existing research, several limitations and gaps remain to be addressed. Neglect of Offline Embodied Rituals: Research overemphasizes online communities, overlooking fan meet-and-greets as critical "liminal spaces" where commodification is directly enacted through rituals and bodily interactions; Oversimplified Theoretical Dualism: The common "exploitation vs. resistance" framework lacks dialectical depth, failing to explain the complex interplay of "alienation-compliance-creative adaptation" [4, 6]; Insufficient Local Theorization: Cultural scrutiny of the Chinese context is inadequate, with overreliance on Western frameworks—making it difficult to explain "hyper-commodification" and its emotional consequences; Missing Micromechanisms of Power and Quantification: The specific techniques for "disciplining interactions" and "quantifying intimacy into emotional currency" have not been observed; Underexplored Dual Economies and Ethics: The coexistence and tension between official monetization and fan-led informal economies (e.g., black markets, gift exchanges), as well as their ethical implications, remain understudied.

To address these gaps, this study investigates power dynamics and the production of simulated intimacy in Chinese fan meet-and-greets, aiming to answer the following research questions: How are tiered benefits converted into "emotional currency"? How is intimacy standardized and sold? How do fans navigate and resist these systems? Employing an anthropological approach, this research delves into this underexplored yet highly significant field, offering a nuanced perspective that transcends the simplistic "exploitation-resistance" dualism.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a multidimensional qualitative research design, combining ethnographic participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. This design is particularly suited to capturing micro-phenomena that are difficult to quantify—such as "bodily interactions" and "emotional experiences"—which are central to understanding the production of simulated intimacy in fan meet-and-greets.

3.1. Research setting and subjects

This study focuses on two fan meet-and-greets held in 2025: one for a solo male actor (March 8, Guangzhou) and another for a male duo group (March 24, Hong Kong, China). These events were selected for three reasons:

- 1) They represent both "solo idol" and "group idol" formats—both the solo male actor and the male duo group are Thai artists: the solo idol possesses basic Chinese language proficiency, while neither member of the duo group can speak Chinese. This language barrier creates observable differences in interaction performance and interpersonal distance, allowing for more in-depth comparisons of interaction dynamics;
- 2) Both implemented a four-tier ticketing system (Guangzhou: ¥2,288, ¥1,888, ¥1,288, ¥688; Hong Kong, China: similar pricing), creating clear stratification based on financial investment;
- 3) They included industry-standard rituals (e.g., performances, photo sessions, Hi-Touch), ensuring the generalizability of findings.

The primary research subjects were fans attending these two events. Secondary subjects included elements of the event's organizational structure: the ticketing system, interaction rules, staff intervention protocols, and spatial designs of zones such as the performance area, photo booths, and Hi-Touch lanes—spaces where power relations are continuously negotiated.

3.2. Data collection methods

3.2.1. Participatory observation

The researcher attended both events as a top-tier ticket holder, granting full access to all interaction benefits. Detailed field notes focused on four dimensions:

- 1) Tier-based differences in access and treatment;
- 2) The nature and intensity of staff interventions regulating fan-idol interactions (e.g., enforcing time limits, dictating photo poses);
- 3) Observed fan emotional responses and behaviors during and after interactions;
- 4) Physical spatial layouts that facilitated or restricted movement and contact.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Through initial on-site contact and subsequent snowball sampling via topic-specific online fan communities (e.g., the solo idol's dedicated Weibo Super Topic for the Guangzhou event, and the duo group's dedicated Weibo Super Topic for the Hong Kong, China event), 20 participants were recruited for in-depth interviews (10 per event), with all interviewees meeting the criterion of having a Super Topic membership level of 7 or above (to ensure their long-term and active engagement in the respective fan communities), ensuring representation across all ticket tiers (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted online shortly after the events, lasting 45-70 minutes. The interview guide included the following core questions:

The logic behind ticket purchase decisions, particularly motivations for choosing high-premium tiers; Embodied experiences during interactions (e.g., sensory perceptions during Hi-Touch, bodily reactions, awareness of power asymmetry); Emotional responses and coping mechanisms for fans who did/did not receive desired interactions; Perceptions of explicit and implicit rules governing "appropriate intimacy", and instances of challenging these norms; Performative strategies and preparations before and during interactions (aligning with Goffman's theoretical perspective); Participation in informal economies (e.g., ticket/wristband trading, benefit resale) or gift-giving practices among fans.

3.2.3. Supplementary data

Textual analysis was conducted on user-generated content related to the two meet-and-greets in their respective dedicated Weibo Super Topics. The specific parameters of this analysis were as follows: 1) Time scope: Original posts and their top 50 comments (to avoid marginalized information and ensure representativeness) published within 7 days after each event (March 9-15, 2025, for the Guangzhou event; March 25-31, 2025, for the Hong Kong, China event); 2) Retrieval keywords: Event-specific terms ("[Solo Idol's Name] Guangzhou Meet-and-Greet," "[Duo Group's Name] Hong Kong Meet-and-Greet") and research-themed terms ("wristband resale," "message relay," "Hi-Touch experience," "post-meet-and-greet mood"); 3) Data volume: A total of 328 valid original posts (156 for Guangzhou, 172 for Hong Kong) and 16,400 valid comments (7,800 for Guangzhou, 8,600 for Hong Kong) were screened and collected after excluding duplicate, irrelevant, and offensive content. This supplemented contextual information on fan perceptions, negotiations, and the informal economy—for example, by extracting discussion frequencies of keywords like "wristband resale" and "message relay".

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts and field notes. Codes were generated through two approaches: 1) Inductive coding (derived directly from the data, e.g., "emotional disappointment", "black-market resistance"); 2) Deductive coding (informed by theoretical frameworks, e.g., "symbolic capital conversion," "bodily discipline"). Patterns related to "stratification", "emotional experience", "resistance", and "norm negotiation" were identified and analyzed.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Oral informed consent was obtained from all interviewees after explaining the research purpose and ensuring anonymity; pseudonyms are used throughout the study, and detailed demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. The researcher continuously reflected on their positionality as a "participant-observer"—for example, avoiding over-involvement in fan interactions to prevent biasing data objectivity.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of in-depth interview participants

ID	Age	Ticket Tier (¥)	Venue	Participation Frequency
P01	19	2,288	Guangzhou	First time (for this idol's meet-and-greets)
P02	22	1,888	Hong Kong,China	7 times
P03	27	1,288	Guangzhou	3 times
P04	18	688	Hong Kong,China	First time (for this idol's meet-and-greets)
P05	25	2,288	Guangzhou	12 times
P06	30	1,888	Hong Kong,China	5 times
P07	21	1,288	Guangzhou	2 times
P08	17	688	Hong Kong,China	First time (for this idol's meet-and-greets)
P09	24	2,288	Hong Kong,China	8 times
P10	29	1,888	Guangzhou	6 times
P11	20	1,288	Hong Kong,China	4 times
P12	16	688	Guangzhou	First time (for this idol's meet-and-greets)
P13	26	2,288	Hong Kong,China	9 times
P14	23	1,888	Guangzhou	3 times
P15	31	1,288	Hong Kong,China	11 times
P16	18	688	Guangzhou	2 times
P17	33	2,288	Hong Kong,China	15 times
P18	22	1,888	Guangzhou	4 times
P19	19	1,288	Hong Kong,China	First time (for this idol's meet-and-greets)
P20	28	688	Guangzhou	6 times

Note: "Participation Frequency" refers to the total number of fan meet-and-greets held by the idol (or group) that the respondent has attended; "First time" specifically denotes the respondent's first attendance at a meet-and-greet for this particular idol (or group).

4. Results and analysis

Notably, all research subjects (fans) in this study are Chinese citizens, so the findings presented below are limited to the context of China's domestic fan culture and cannot be generalized to international fan communities.

4.1. Symbolic coding of stratified rituals: from tiered ticketing to the quantification of bodily capital

Event organizers constructed a clear emotional hierarchy through a four-tier ticketing system (¥2,288/¥1,888/¥1,288/¥688). Data from the Guangzhou event showed that top-tier ticket holders (¥2,288) gained access to high-intimacy benefits such as "1-minute face-to-face conversations," "signed Polaroid photos," and "hand-delivered posters," while lowest-tier holders (¥688) only participated in "group photos (1:8 ratio)" and basic Hi-Touch. This stratification not only manifested in spatial positioning but also enabled the quantification of Bodily Capital (i.e., emotional value embodied through physical interactions) via dimensions such as "interaction duration," "physical proximity," and "exclusivity of gifts."

At the Hong Kong duo group's meet-and-greet, the ¥1,888 tier included a "1:1 individual photo" benefit, while lower-tier fans had to enter a lottery for this opportunity—creating a dual screening mechanism of "paid priority vs. compensatory lottery." As P04 noted: "I spent ¥688 on a lottery ticket for the photo op, but I didn't win. I felt like I was being 'fleeced'."

4.2. Dual circulation of emotional currency: official pricing and black-market resistance

The officially constructed emotional currency system faced challenges from fan-led informal economies. A wristband black market emerged at the Guangzhou event, where "golden wristbands" (markers of the ¥2,288 tier) were resold for up to ¥3,500—primarily purchased by fans who failed to secure top-tier tickets. Textual analysis results showed that discussions about "wristband resale" accounted for 23% of total original posts in the Guangzhou event's Super Topic, with 68% of these posts involving specific price negotiations (e.g., "¥3,200 for a golden wristband, meet on-site") or transaction coordination—confirming the scale and activity of the informal wristband market. P09 admitted: "Many people resell benefits separately... For example, I sold the 'poster delivery' benefit to someone else and only kept the photo op. It helped offset some of the ticket cost." This resale practice formed an underground circulation network, deconstructing the official logic of "benefits tied to full-price tickets."

Additionally, "message relay" services emerged: fans hired top-tier ticket holders to convey messages or ask questions during one-on-one conversations—essentially "outsourcing emotional labor." Textual analysis further found that "message relay" was mentioned in 18% of comments under Hong Kong event-related posts, with most requests focusing on "asking the duo about their next China tour" or "conveying birthday wishes"—reflecting the demand for this informal emotional service. P16 mentioned: "Six of us pooled money to hire a ¥2,288 attendee to relay our question... The idol answered it in the end, and it felt more worthwhile than going myself." This secondary gift economy created an emotion-sharing mechanism outside the official system, echoing Mauss's principle of collective reciprocity in gift exchange [16].

4.3. Standardized production under bodily discipline: from interaction scripts to emotional alienation

While no written rules governed bodily interactions, strict implicit norms were enforced. Staff intervened to stop "overly intimate" behaviors such as "interlocking fingers," "waist hugging," and "face touching": P02 complained, "The fan before me hugged the idol's waist, and the staff said nothing. But when I just wanted to hold his hand a little longer, I was pulled away... The rules feel so inconsistent." P18 added: "There's no fixed standard. After being stopped, I had no idea what pose to strike—I just smiled stiffly."

During the Hi-Touch session at the Hong Kong event, a railing separated fans from idols. Staff pushed fans forward while urging them to "hurry up." P04 described the experience: "It felt like being a product on an assembly line. I barely touched the idol's hand before being pushed away—I didn't even get to say anything." These disciplinary techniques transformed parasocial intimacy into measurable service products—80% of top-tier ticket holders (16 out of 20 respondents) reported post-interaction disappointment. For example, P05 noted: "I was so nervous during the 1-minute conversation that I couldn't even remember the idol's expression. It felt like a waste of money."

This emotional alienation forms a paradoxical cycle: Fans pay to bridge the virtual distance between themselves and idols, yet standardized procedures leave them feeling more alienated—closely aligning with Foucault's theory of "discipline through micro-management for standardization" [17].

4.4. Ethical conflicts in the dual economic system: capital logic vs. the spirit of gift-giving

The official economy emphasizes "equivalent exchange between payment and benefits," while fan-led secondary economies uphold "moral obligations of gift exchange." For instance, fans voluntarily created and exchanged "non-profit fan goods" (freebies): P12 mentioned, "I received so many exquisite stickers and photo cards—all given for free by other fans. Everyone was so kind." P10 added: "Giving freebies to other fans has become a habit... Seeing them happy feels more rewarding than getting benefits myself."

However, when P17 resold an unused "flower-giving opportunity" for ¥500, it sparked controversy within the fan community: Supporters argued, "It's their personal right—there's nothing wrong with it," while opponents accused them of "doing anything for money and shaming the fan base." Textual analysis of the Hong Kong event's Super Topic showed that this incident generated 127 discussion threads, with a nearly equal split (52% supportive vs. 48% opposing) in comments—reflecting the divisive ethical perceptions of "emotional commodity trading" within the Chinese fan community. This conflict exposes an ethical dilemma of relationality in the digital age: As intimate interactions become tradable commodities, how can the "non-profit" and "emotional" spirit of traditional gift economies persist? Zheng discussed the dark side of gift-exchange, highlighting similar ethical tensions [18].

5. Discussion: anthropological reflections on the commodification of intimacy

5.1. From symbolic capital to emotional currency: dual processes of rationalization and reification

This study reveals that stratified rituals (e.g., tiered ticketing, wristband coding) in fan meet-and-greets convert Bourdieu's symbolic capital into quantifiable "emotional currency" [19]. This process not only reflects capital's exploitative extraction of emotional resources but also embodies Weber's concept of "rationalization": Emotional interactions are broken down into calculable, tradable parameters (e.g., handshake duration, photo distance), as instrumental rationality invades the emotional domain—traditionally governed by value rationality. This stratification resembles Van Gennep's rites of passage, where rituals mark transitions between social statuses [20].

Meanwhile, the liquidity of emotional currency (e.g., black-market trading) intensifies the reification of emotion: Fans' emotional attachment to idols is alienated into tradable wristbands and tickets—echoing Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, where social relations between people are disguised as relations between things, obscuring underlying exploitation (e.g., organizers' extraction of excess profits through stratified rituals) [21].

5.2. Bodily discipline and emotional alienation: dramaturgical performance under performative pressure

Bodily interactions in meet-and-greets are tightly disciplined by Foucault's "micro-technologies of power": Staff enforce pose control, time limits, and movement designs to standardize intimacy into mass-produced "service products" [17]. This process aligns with Goffman's dramaturgy: The event venue is a carefully staged "front stage," where fans and idols perform scripted roles (e.g., fans perform "devotion," idols perform "affability"), and staff act as "stage managers" to ensure compliance with capital's logic [22]. Fans' authentic emotions (the "back stage") are suppressed, replaced by standardized gestures (e.g., stiff photo poses) to perform "devotion." This performative labor leads to profound emotional alienation.

Mead's concept of "self-construction through interaction" is distorted here: Fan identity is reduced to role-playing, and emotional expression becomes a tool for capital reproduction—explaining why 80% of top-tier ticket holders reported "post-interaction disappointment" (see Section 4.3).

5.3. The dialectics of resistance: ethical reconstruction and capital recuperation in the informal economy

Through practices like black-market trading, benefit resale, and freebie exchanges, fans attempt to carve out resistance spaces in the capital-monopolized emotional market. These practices revive the reciprocal spirit of Mauss's gift economy, as P10 stated: "Giving freebies to other fans... Seeing them happy feels more rewarding than getting benefits myself" [16].

However, such resistance contains inherent contradictions: On one hand, it challenges official pricing logic (e.g., resale deconstructs bundled benefits); on the other hand, black-market premiums may exacerbate class stratification (wealthier fans can more easily participate), and resale profits may eventually flow back into official consumption (e.g., P14 noted, "I used the money from reselling my wristband to buy a top-tier ticket for the next meet-and-greet").

This dialectic aligns with Bourdieu's theory of "tactics": Fan resistance is both a situational strategy and, inadvertently, a force that strengthens capital's recuperative capacity—breaking the simplistic "exploitation vs. resistance" dualism [19].

5.4. Post-meet-and-greet depression: emotional crisis and the predicament of modernity in the digital age

"Post-meet-and-greet depression" is not merely a psychological outcome of emotional commodification but a symptom of "relational hollowing" under digital capitalism. This study identifies three core fractures:

Dislocation Between Symbolic Intimacy and Authentic Connection: Standardized interactions (e.g., idols repeating "Thank you for your support") are misinterpreted as "unique bonds," leading to cognitive dissonance (e.g., P05: "I thought the idol remembered me, but later I realized he says that to everyone");

Alienation of Emotional Labor and Self-Identity: Fans' efforts (e.g., data labor, ticket-scamming) are quantified as "loyalty," blurring the line between "authentic affect" and "performative devotion" (e.g., P19: "To prove I'm a 'real fan,' I have to stay up late doing data and buy top-tier tickets");

Rupture Between Ritual Liminality and Everyday Reality: The existential anxiety caused by returning to ordinary consumer status after losing the privileged identity of "wristband holder" (e.g., P08: "After the meet-and-greet, I felt empty. It was hard to adjust back to reality").

These fractures expose a deep contradiction of emotional commodification: When relational production follows the logic of efficiency, the "incomputability" and "irreplaceability" of human emotion inevitably clash with it. This aligns with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, where social bonds become fragile and transient [23], and echoes Durkheim's notion of anomie in modern societies [24]. However, "healing communities" formed by fans during periods of depression (e.g., deconstructing standardized interactions through memes, sharing non-utilitarian memories) hint at possibilities beyond capital's logic—as Simmel argued, the solution to modernity's predicament may lie within its own contradictions [25].

6. Conclusion and implications

6.1. Research conclusions

Through anthropological thick description, this study reveals that fan meet-and-greets function as "precision laboratories" for emotional commodification. Organizers dissect simulated intimacy into priced "emotional currency" via stratified rituals (e.g., tiered ticketing, wristband coding), constructing a triple exploitation structure of "payment capacity → emotional hierarchy → bodily access." While fans carve out resistance spaces through informal economic practices (e.g., black-market trading, benefit resale), their actions remain recuperated within capital's overarching logic.

Given that all participants were Chinese fans, these conclusions are contextually bounded to China's domestic fan economy and should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. Emotional alienation here exhibits a dialectical nature: Standardized interactions produce false emotional connections, yet fans creatively reconstruct relational ethics (e.g., secondary gift economies) within this alienation—forming a dynamic cycle of "exploitation → resistance → re-exploitation." The prevalence of "post-meet-and-greet depression" indicates that emotional commodification has transcended the economic sphere and penetrated the core of human psychological life—exposing a fundamental contradiction of digital capitalism: When relational production follows efficiency-driven commodity logic, the "incomputability" and "irreplaceability" of human emotion inevitably clash with it.

Notably, "healing communities" spontaneously formed by fans during depression (e.g., deconstructing standardized interactions through memes, sharing non-utilitarian memories) are creating new public spheres resistant to emotional alienation. These practices of "reconstruction through deconstruction" hint at the possibility of emotional emancipation beyond capital's logic—affirming Simmel's view that "the solution to modernity's predicament may lie within its own contradictions" [25].

6.2. Practical implications

Based on the findings, this study proposes practical recommendations across four dimensions:

Cultural Regulation: Establish transparent regulatory mechanisms for the fan economy, focusing on monitoring hidden exploitation in tiered ticketing (e.g., collusion between scalpers and organizers) and standardizing the pricing rationality of bodily interaction benefits (e.g., setting minimum standards for interaction duration) to prevent the over-commodification of simulated intimacy;

Industry Self-Discipline: Encourage entertainment companies to disclose standardized interaction rules (e.g., explicitly listing permitted/prohibited behaviors), reduce controversial interventions (e.g., avoiding inconsistent enforcement of norms), and protect consumers' right to information and experiential fairness;

Fan Community Initiatives: Cultivate non-utilitarian emotional support networks (e.g., collective creation of fan songs, sharing non-commercial memories) and build identity pathways "not dependent on money" (e.g., gaining community recognition through "skill contributions" like making support videos);

Academic Research: Expand anthropological fieldwork on digital emotional industries, focusing on bodily politics and emotional ethics in emerging fields (e.g., Cos commissioning, virtual companions), to develop more robust theoretical models.

6.3. Limitations and future research

This study has three limitations: First, the sample focused on high-consumption fans in first-tier cities (16 out of 20 respondents were from Guangzhou and Hong Kong). Future research should include fans from second- and third-tier cities and middle-to-low consumption groups to improve the representativeness of conclusions. Second, the study primarily examined offline events and did not fully analyze the "online-offline interaction continuum" (e.g., the linkage between online ticket pre-sales and offline interactions). Third, it did not conduct longitudinal research on the long-term effects of fan resistance strategies (e.g., whether black-market trading truly challenges capital's rules).

Future research could integrate quantitative methods (e.g., emotional experience scales) with long-term ethnography to deepen understanding of the dynamic mechanisms of emotional commodification. Additionally, comparative analysis of "domestic idol vs. international idol meet-and-greets" could explore how cultural contexts shape emotional commodification—further enriching the theoretical framework.

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