Dyssynchronas
&
The Conflictual Core of Fandom

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Abstract

Scholarship in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has largely emphasised the synchronising force of communitas in marketplace cultures, documenting the positively valenced, unifying outcomes of collective consumption. Rooted in Turnerian thinking, marketplace cultures tend to be most closely associated with a suspension of everyday structures, the levelling of hierarchies, and intensified feelings of solidarity around shared ideals. Yet consumption communities are also sites of exclusion, rivalry, and toxicity – nowhere more visible than in celebrity fandoms where members compete for proximity to and recognition by the idol. Based on a three-year 'aca-fan's' ethnography of K-Pop artist Jessica Jung's fandom community of 'Goldenstars' – including interviews, observations, and netnographic material – I introduce the concept 'dyssynchronas' as the obverse to communitas. Through dyssynchronas I explore the de-synchronising and de-stabilising activities and experiences of marketplace cultures.

The aca-fan journey is replete with instances of inter-fandom strife, pettiness, and one-upmanship that are contradictory to communitas, suggesting conflict is crucial to in-group social functioning and status. Drawing upon important instances in the data, I conceptualise dyssynchronas as the inter-competitive, fractious, and dysfunctional character of fandom, characterised by three main features: jealousy, vengeance, and justification. These features incur certain behaviours in the fan community that are antagonistic to and countervail communitas, ranging from the assignment of blame within the community to the rationalisation of aggressive behaviours.

The conceptualisation of dyssynchronas offers a more critical perspective on human interaction within marketplace cultures, acknowledging and dissecting the complexities and conflicts that coexist within communal consumption environments. This thesis clarifies how Dyssynchronas contrasts with and extends Turner's communitas along three dimensions: (1) Temporality. Rather than fleeting moments of unity, Dyssynchronas is ongoing and pervasive; (2) Structure. Instead of hierarchy removal, Dyssynchronas entails continuous hierarchy-making and surveillance; (3) Valence. Instead of always

being positive, Dyssynchronas found out negativity such as jealousy and vengeance play within the fandom.

This thesis explain how irreconcilable tensions between individuality and communality within shared consumption-related environments can manifest in truculent, agonistic, and onanistic types of ‘acting-out’ that fetishise fragmentation and disharmony rather than relationality and co-operation. These negative – or ‘toxic’ – effects reflect an entire category of consumer behavior that contradicts and complicates the assumed primacy of harmonious social experience in shared consumption interests.

Keywords: Dyssynchronas, Communitas, Celebrity Fandom, Netnography

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Declaration

This doctoral thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for any other degree at this institution (Lancaster University) or any other university. Except where specific acknowledgement is made, it is the result of my own work. Research in this thesis has been presented in the following academic conferences, magazine contributions and poster sessions.

Conference Paper

Ziyi, Y., Cronin, J. and Higgins, L. (2024) The Countervailing Effects of 'Dyssynchronas' within Communities of Consumption: A Study of Jessica Jung's Toxic Fandom Community in China. Paper presented at *Academy of Marketing* conference 2024, Cardiff, United Kingdom.

Conference Posters

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Contribution to Magazine with ISSN

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Adele, Haitao Lu.

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A doctoral thesis is never the work of one person alone. It is a tapestry woven from guidance, generosity, and love. I am deeply grateful to the many people who walked alongside me and helped shape this project in any ways.

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PROLOGUE

Recently, as I approached the final leg of my doctoral journey, I was revisiting notes from when I first began this PhD and discovered a handwritten memo I had scribbled to myself in the margins of a dog-eared copy of Kozinets' trusty text *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. The note read: "I need to produce a positive thesis which can help Jessica in some way and encourage other Goldenstars". This simple, hopeful, somewhat naïve statement instantly resonated with me. It seemed to at once capture the blind devotion that characterises being a fan but also (with the benefit of mature reflection) the kinds of conflicts and blurred lines that are introduced when attempting to study fandom as a committed insider.

My reflection on the motives of my earlier self also intersected with feelings I had about an incident from a few days previously when Jessica Jung, the celebrity idol who much of this thesis centres on, had posted to Weibo and Instagram, gushing about the generosity and commitment of her most devoted fans. Jessica's gratitude was directed to a specific cadre of Chinese fans who collaborated to mark the anniversary of her debut with a breathtaking aerial display of drones and fireworks over the Han River in Seoul, lighting up the skyline with a symphony of lights in her honour (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Jessica's gratitude post to her fans

Pausing over Jessica's words of appreciation, I had found myself filled with a sense of joy and relief that such an extravagant fan-initiated display of admiration had come off without a hitch, a celebration woven across skies and hearts alike. Although it was not public knowledge, *I* was personally responsible for coordinating and overseeing the drones-and-fireworks show. Most other fans—including those who contributed financially to the show—remained unaware of my involvement.

After seeing Jessica's post, I felt like an unsung hero, having worked dutifully behind the scenes without recognition. I had helped to organise many similar displays of fan-support and celebratory initiatives over the years, with Jessica doubtlessly sharing her appreciation on social media each and every time. But recounting her expressions of surprise and joy following the fireworks and drone show in Seoul had moved me deeply. Something about the added grandiosity of that particular event, the huge amount of logistical problem-solving that went into making it a success, and Jessica's genuine sense of humility seemed to mix with the bittersweet realisation that I, as an aca-fan of Jessica's, was rapidly entering the twilight stages of my doctoral research.

Although my academic journey with Jessica's fans was nearing its end – and that end would come with its own concrete exit ceremonies and celebrations in the form of a thesis, viva, a graduation, and so on – I knew my road ahead as a humble fan would continue to be paved with demanding, mostly invisible, anonymous work that I would rarely be thanked or even recognised for by my community. Being a dedicated fan, dates like Jessica's birthday and the anniversary of her debut are annual celebrations of her presence and legacy. I can picture the global community of fans ostensibly uniting - buying her birthday gifts, setting up crowdfunding pages to rent out premium advertising space to promote her music in cities worldwide, singing her songs, watching her videos, launching massive online campaigns, and more. This devotion especially resonates with me as I reflect on why fans conduct these things, often without explicit thanks from others, and why I myself have engaged so fully in them. The tenets of this devotion and its material commitments in terms of time, money, and emotion are the foundation of my interest in

undertaking this thesis, a reflection on the powerful connections and motivations that fuel fan culture. But, more than anything, I am interested in understanding how all of this devotion is oftentimes far from harmonious. When the next fan-sponsored cause for celebration takes place, I know there will be – *as there always are* – fierce intra-group rivalries, jealousies, campaigns of online bullying directed at perceived traitors or insufficiently loyal members, and a culture of one-upmanship. Individual fans will vie for Jessica's attention, resent their own perceived invisibility, feel unseen, and seek currency in an imaginary status game we have built amongst ourselves. While we fans want to be known for the love we have for our idols, we are notorious for our viciousness, and this is something which should not be disavowed but must be paused over and considered academically.

A decade has passed since I first became Jessica's loyal fan. Both before embarking on my PhD and even now, friends, family, and fellow fans often ask, *"Why do fans devote so much to support their idols? What meaning lies behind these fervent displays?"* These questions, echoing through the years, are ones I, too, wish to answer. My journey into researching K-pop fandom in China is, at its heart, a journey shaped by Jessica Jung herself, by the admiration and fascination she continues to inspire in me. But my journey too has been and continues to be shaped by a seasoned awareness of the hardships that we fans put ourselves through. These years of devoted fandom, woven from personal experiences and countless moments shared within this community, have given me the foundation and confidence to delve into this research area.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 Origins of the thesis: personal motivation and context

As I reflect on the journey that led me to this research, I am drawn back to the summer of 2014 – a formative moment in both my fandom and academic life. Having just completed my IGCSEs and with a rare stretch of free time before starting A-Levels, I stumbled upon the reality TV show *Jessica and Krystal* (2014), which chronicles the daily lives of K-pop star Jessica Jung and her sister Krystal. I was immediately captivated by Jessica's on-screen personality and the intimate glimpse into her world. What began as casual viewing quickly transformed into an immersive deep dive: I spent weeks marathoning every piece of content I could find from Jessica's 2007 debut onward – music videos, interviews, social media updates, and fan-made compilations. By the end of that summer, I realised I had crossed a threshold from a curious observer to a dedicated fan. I felt an intense desire for connection with others who shared this passion. I began reaching out to more seasoned Jessica fans online, eager to hear their stories and insights that went beyond what any public content could offer.

This personal fandom experience soon intersected with a pivotal event in Jessica's career. On the morning of September 30th, 2014 – a day that fans to this day refer to solemnly as '9/30' – I logged into Weibo, a Chinese social media platform where Jessica's fandom, the "Goldenstars" congregated, to shocking news: Jessica had been abruptly removed from the K-pop group Girls' Generation, a group in which she had been a founding member. The online fan communities erupted in confusion, sorrow, and anger. For me, this moment was profound – I witnessed firsthand how a normally jubilant fan community could rally together in support yet also fracture into debates and blame. I joined collective efforts to support Jessica's new solo endeavours, contributing to fan projects and discussions aimed at defending her image. These experiences – the *euphoria* of shared fan celebrations and the *tumult* of fan conflicts – kindled the questions at the heart of this thesis. I became fascinated not only by the devotion that fans like me show toward idols, but also by the internal dynamics among fans: the camaraderie and the

rivalries, the unity and the infighting. In essence, my personal journey as an "aca-fan" (an academic who is also a fan) provided both the motivation and the unique insider perspective to pursue this research. Jessica Jung's fandom, known as the Goldenstars, became the living laboratory for examining broader questions about fandom, consumer culture, and the social forces that bind and sometimes divide passionate consumer communities.

1.2 Situating the thesis in Consumer Culture Theory

This thesis is grounded in the research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and specifically within the "marketplace cultures" sub-stream of that tradition. Marketplace cultures theory offers a lens to study how consumers actively create and participate in cultures of consumption, forming communities and meanings around marketplace offerings (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Within this sub-stream, fandom communities serve as a vivid example of what Arnould and Thompson describe as consumers forging "feelings of social solidarity" and self-selected cultural worlds through shared consumption interests. Fandom is fundamentally a consumer cultural phenomenon: fans co-create value and meaning around a cultural product (in this case, a celebrity idol), engaging in rituals, social interactions, and collective projects that transform individual entertainment into communal experience (Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001; Stanfill, 2019). Contributions to CCT, such as Wohlfeil's (2018), Cocker and Cronin's (2017), and Hewer et al's (2017) highlight how fans are not mere spectators but active participants in immersive consumption communities, whose passionate emotional investments result in distinctive identities, rituals, and traditions. In other words, fandom exemplifies an experiential consumption community where the marketplace good (Jessica's music and persona) becomes a nucleus for both personal identity and social bonding.

By situating Jessica Jung's fan community within the CCT framework, this research positions fans as dual actors: consumers of cultural goods and producers of communal

culture. This perspective foregrounds fans' roles in both generating social solidarity and negotiating social order in a consumption context. Most CCT-aligned fandom studies, however, have emphasised the celebratory and solidaristic aspects of fan culture – what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) called communitas, a spirit of egalitarian camaraderie and togetherness. Fandom is often romanticised as an inclusive haven where hierarchies melt away in the shared joy of devotion. Yet, emerging scholarship suggests that marketplace communities can also harbour fragmentation and conflict. For example, even within ostensibly unified brand or fan communities, scholars have observed status contests, rivalries, and exclusions (de Valck, 2007; Cova and White, 2010; Sibai et al., 2024). Fan studies researchers Chin and Morimoto (2013) and Stanfill (2019) also note that fan cultures are not free from tension – power dynamics and gatekeeping frequently shape who is considered a "true" fan.

Although fandom studies within the marketplace cultures programme have tended to reflect the experiences of Euro-American consumer subjects (Chin and Morimoto, 2013; Morimoto, 2017; Stanfill, 2019), Asia is recognised as an important geographic territory ripe with its own fandoms (Chua, 2012; Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014; Lee and Zhang, 2021). Contemporary Chinese fandom communities display distinctive characteristics shaped by China's digital landscape and unique social norms. Chinese scholars note that digital platforms such as Weibo have accelerated fandom practices, creating more intensive and hierarchical fan structures due to their real-time interactivity, visibility, and competitive consumer dynamics (Yin and Fung, 2017; Zhai and Wang, 2023). Moreover, fandom in China is frequently characterised by explicit expectations of consumer activism, such as collective buying campaigns, idol sponsorship, and organised voting initiatives, reflecting a deeper integration of fandom practices into consumer culture and market-driven logics (Yin, 2020; Zhang and Fung, 2017).

This thesis examines how cohesion and fracture co-exist within Jessica Jung's (Goldenstars) fandom in China. Throughout, I signpost a recurring pattern of misalignment – a phenomenon I call "dyssynchronous" – throughout periods when status

competition, moralised boundary work, and punitive norms disrupt feelings of togetherness. I mention this phenomenon of dyssynchronous here briefly, return to it empirically in the Findings, and develop it conceptually in the Discussion. Importantly, my study did not set out to "find" a named construct; rather, it uses an inductive strategy to make sense of observed practices such as jealousy, legitimacy contests, and retaliatory action. In Jessica's Goldenstars fandom, instances of communal unity (e.g. collective projects, mutual support in defending Jessica) coexist with episodes of jealousy, competition, and punitive behaviour among and between fans. By interrogating these undercurrents of envy and antagonism, the thesis challenges the dominant narrative of fandoms as inherently egalitarian or purely "joyful" consumption subcultures (see also Wickstrom et al, 2021). Instead, it reveals fandom as a contested consumer arena where issues of status, hierarchy, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated alongside expressions of solidarity.

By attending to the 'darker' sides of communal consumption, this thesis dovetails with marketplace cultures studies centred on the antagonisms, rivalries, and brutalities between participants (de Valck, 2007; Sibai et al., 2024). The study of envy and jealousy within consumer culture and fandom remains relatively underexplored, despite its significant impact on fan interactions and social cohesion. Another important and interrelated area of concern that this thesis connects to and builds upon is the study of digitisation within fan cultures (Cocker and Cronin, 2017; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Hills, 2015; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013; Click and Scott, 2018; Bennett and Chin, 2014). Digitalisation – such as relying on social media, smartphones, and internet-mediated communication – has fundamentally transformed how legitimacy, status, and inclusion are negotiated. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Weibo have intensified fandom interactions, providing fans with greater visibility, networking opportunities, and engagement with idols (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns, 2013). However, these platforms have also created new opportunities for surveillance, social comparison, and performative competition among fans (Abidin, 2016). The shift from localised, subcultural fan gatherings to highly

interactive digital networks has amplified fandom's internal hierarchies, making power struggles over authenticity and status more visible and consequential.

This thesis examines how digital infrastructures mediate fandom power dynamics, particularly through the mechanisms of visibility and social policing. In Weibo-based fan communities, fans engage in conspicuous displays of devotion through public showcases of merchandise collections, exclusive event attendance, and personal interactions with idols. While these consumption practices function as status markers, they simultaneously become sites of tension as they provoke envy, scrutiny, and allegations of elitism from other fans. Thus, this research investigates how digital fandom platforms both democratise participation and reinforce exclusionary consumer hierarchies.

1.3 Research aim and objectives

The primary aim of this thesis is to critically explore internal conflicts and tensions in a fan community. Using Jessica Jung's Goldenstars fandom as an illustrative case, this research examines how fan identities and relationships are negotiated through phenomena of jealousy, status hierarchy, and peer policing. To address this, the research is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1. To investigate what makes a 'true' or worthy fan in the context of Jessica Jung's Goldenstars:

- To unearth what resources or capital encapsulate a 'true' or worthy fan status.
- To understand how proximity to, or lack of proximity to, an idol stimulates emotional responses of inequity in fans?

RO2: To understand the consequences of equity and/or inequity in stimulating fan conflicts and punitive behaviours:

- To unearth the specific behaviours, such as shaming, cyber-bullying, or ostracism enacted upon fellow fans.
- To unearth the justifications utilised by fans to rationalise their conflicts and punitive behaviours.

By seeking to fulfil these objectives, the thesis challenges any simplistic portrayal of fandoms as *inherently* inclusive or joyous spheres. The intent is not to detract from the genuine camaraderie and empowerment fans find in communities, but rather to shed light on the *other side* of these communities – the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) contests for status and authenticity that bubble beneath the surface of togetherness. In essence, answering the above questions provides insight into how a fan community can simultaneously function as a source of belonging and contention.

1.4 Methodological foundations of the thesis

Given the focus on understanding fans' subjective experiences and social interactions, an interpretivist approach was deemed most suitable, and a full accounting of my methodological, epistemological, and ontological decision-making is covered in Chapter 4. Briefly, for the purposes of introduction, the research employs a multiple method ethnographic strategy that combines three interpretivist-qualitative methods: subjective personal introspection (SPI), netnography and semi-structured interviews. Ethnography, in the traditional sense, involves prolonged participant-observation within a cultural group to understand their practices and worldview. Here, because a significant portion of Jessica's fandom activity occurs online, I embraced netnography (Kozinets, 2010) as an online extension of ethnography to observe fan interactions on social media and forums. This entailed immersing myself in fan digital spaces (like Weibo, WeChat groups, and Twitter) over an extended period, observing discussions, conflicts, and collaborations in real time. The netnographic approach to exploring fan behaviour is well established in CCT literature (e.g. Hewer et al., 2017).

To complement these observations, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the fandom. The interviews provided a more private forum for fans to articulate their personal stories, opinions, and emotions regarding phenomena like fan rivalries or communal projects. Finally, recognising my dual role as a researcher *and* an embedded member of this fandom, I incorporated SPI which involved keeping reflexive journals and notes about my own fan experiences and emotional reactions throughout the research process. SPI served as a form of first-person data that could be triangulated with the other sources – for example, my internal perspective on a fan event could be compared with interview narratives and online discourse about that event. SPI added a layer of reflexive depth, as I could interrogate my own emotional responses – for example, feeling a pang of envy when seeing another fan's expensive support gift for Jessica, or feeling discomfort when I myself participated in subtle gatekeeping. By reflecting on my experiences, I became more attuned to the underlying norms and values in the community that might otherwise remain implicit.

In designing this methodology, I took inspiration from prior consumer research scholars who successfully blended multiple qualitative methods. Jones (2021), in his micro-ethnographic thesis on consumer escapism through binge-watching, combined interviews with personal introspection to capture both external and internal viewpoints. Likewise, Hackley (2007) and others have emphasised the value of introspective techniques in marketing research to reveal phenomena that are hard to access through interviews alone. Following these leads, my approach was intentionally triangulated: the convergence of evidence from observations, interviews, and introspection strengthens the credibility of the findings. The interpretive analysis of these data (detailed in the Methodology chapter) was conducted through thematic analysis, iteratively coding and distilling themes that answer the research questions.

Overall, the methodological framework of this thesis is both exploratory and evaluative. It is exploratory in delving into under-researched facets of fandom (like internal jealousy and fan-on-fan policing), and evaluative in reflecting on the ethics and

validity of researching a community to which I belong. Reflexivity and ethical consideration were embedded at every stage, from obtaining informed consent for interviews and sensitive online observations, to carefully anonymising data and being transparent about my dual role. By combining an *insider's empathy* with a *researcher's rigor*, the methodology sets out to faithfully capture the complexity of Goldenstars fandom life and to produce insights that resonate with broader consumer culture phenomena.

1.5 Contributions of the thesis

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to consumer research by introducing and conceptualising the obverse of communitas that occurs within fan communities, a phenomenon I tentatively term *dyssynchronas*. Beyond the Turnerian idea of communitas which assumes a profound sense of fellowship, equality, and solidarity emerges during the ritualistic, multi-phasic gatherings of communities, this thesis points to the deep entrenchment of inequity, perceptions of supremacy, and a profound sense of embattlement between fans as they navigate (or simply try to survive) the communal aspects of their consumption lifestyle. Far from interactions and rituals with one another (whether online or in person) giving way to feelings of jubilation and synchronicity, fandom, I shall argue, is characterised by an obscene underside of antagonisms, dissensions, bullying, and anxieties which are not equally distributed, resulting in hierarchies, rivalries, agonistic politics, and the pervasive feeling amongst members of being 'out of sync' with one another. The lack of synchronicity between fans – or the feeling that they are not aligned in their goals but are in competition with some, targeted by others, resentful of some, and look down on others – does not necessarily threaten the integrity of fandoms but seems to provide them with an illicit enjoyment and even introduce an impetus for more committed, fundamentalist participation as *fanatics*.

By developing the concept of dyssynchronas, this thesis provides a more novel and critical means of understanding the functioning of internal conflicts within consumption communities. Whereas fan and brand communities have often been analysed through the lens of communitas (emphasising harmony and egalitarianism) (Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et. al, 1993; Thomas et. al, 2013; Turner, 1969), dyssynchronas highlights the persistent misalignments such as envy-driven rivalries, status hierarchies, and moral vigilante behaviours that not only coexist with communal efforts but provide them with a huge boost. At the core of my thesis is that the antagonisms, dissensions, bullying, petty jealousies, and so on are not aberrations or threats to communal integrity but constitute the fanatical thrust that sustain (rather than undermine) committed and fundamentalist participation over time.

Potentially, the concept of dyssynchronas may have relevance beyond fandom too, as it provides a framework to examine any consumer group where strong identification with a collective ideal is coupled with internal stratification and conflict (e.g. brand user communities, hobbyist groups, etc.), offering a transferable lens for future research. By identifying and naming this phenomenon, the thesis demonstrates that consumer tribes and fan cultures are not utopian enclaves but are frequently arenas of negotiation where participants jostle for legitimacy and influence. The thesis expands a small and still nascent footprint within CCT by systematically examining the "dark side" of consumer communities (see de Valck, 2007; Sibai et al., 2024), thereby complementing existing theories of communitas, marketplace cultures, and collective consumption with a more critical perspective.

Relatedly, this thesis contributes to broader CCT discourses on consumer envy and rivalry (Crusius and Lange, 2017; Tumbat and Belk, 2011), demonstrating these emotions in a novel context. By doing so, it advances conversations within CCT about the role of negative emotions and antagonistic interactions in shaping consumer collectives, an area that has been underrepresented in contrast to studies of positive community feelings.

Additionally, the thesis provides one of the first in-depth critical and consumer-cultural accounts of a K-pop fandom in the People's Republic of China (PRC), offering a reprieve to the ethnocentric myopia (Tadajewski and Saren, 2008) that seems to ossify and limit our understanding of global consumer culture. CCT has long faced criticism about perpetuating a hegemonic, Western perspective on consumption, markets, and consumerism (see Cronin and Fitchett, 2022; Jafari et al., 2012; Sandikci, 2022; Varman and Costa, 2013; Varman and Saha, 2009) that is only sometimes euphemised under mostly sub-regional flavours of diversity such as Nordic (Østergaard et al., 2014), Celtic (Brown, 2007) and Mediterranean (Cova, 2005) CCT groups with contributions from Turkish consumer researchers (Ger et al., 2018; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandıkci and Ger, 2002).

By focusing on Chinese consumers' experiences of an effectively foreign (South Korean) cultural product within a unitary communist state, my research adds geopolitical and cultural diversity to fan studies and marketplace culture theory in CCT, challenging monolithic assumptions derived largely from Euro-American or European-leaning contexts and highlighting how culture-specific factors (like collectivist norms or censorship policies) influence consumer community dynamics. My thesis enriches the literature by documenting how fan cultures within the PRC – with their complex levels of organisation, reliance on state-approved social media platforms, and geopolitical and socio-cultural idiosyncrasies – produce important conditions for marketplace cultures forging self-selected consumption interests. The findings show, for example, how Chinese fans engage in intense collective labour (translating content, bulk-buying albums, etc.) which fosters solidarity, yet simultaneously this environment breeds competition (fans compare contributions and seniority, leading to elitism and jealousy). The study also captures the impact of external forces like the Chinese government's regulatory campaigns (e.g. the *Qing-lang* 'fandom disorder rectification' operation) on fandom behaviour, illustrating a context where state and market forces intersect with fan practices.

Methodologically, the thesis showcases an approach to studying one's *own* consumer community with academic rigor. It addresses the challenges of the aca-fan positionality, demonstrating strategies for maintaining reflexivity and credibility when the researcher is an insider. For example, the use of Subjective Personal Introspection in tandem with conventional ethnographic methods is a contribution in itself – it illustrates how a researcher's embodied experiences and emotions can be systematically incorporated as data, adding depth to interpretations that outsiders might overlook. The careful documentation of the translation process (from Chinese to English) and the use of a "thick translation" approach (Appiah, 1993; see also Pym, 2010) also serve as a reference for scholars working in multilingual research settings, underlining the importance of handling language not just as a conduit but as an integral part of qualitative analysis.

To sum up, the thesis contributes a fresh theoretical concept (dyssynchronas) to describe a nuanced social phenomenon in consumer communities, expands the empirical horizon of CCT to a Chinese fan culture context, and offers methodological insights into conducting interpretive research within one's own community.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised to move from framing and scholarship through context and method into the presentation of findings and a final integrative chapter that delivers theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Thesis sets the problem and purpose. It explains why a close, practice-based account of a contemporary Chinese celebrity fandom is needed, states the aim and macro-level research questions, clarifies scope and definitions, and briefly signposts the recurrent misalignment pattern that will be theorised later. The chapter closes with this section outlining the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: Celebrity and Fandom: Theoretical Underpinnings surveys the scholarly terrain that informs my understanding of the field. It first situates celebrity and fandom scholarship, distinguishing major schools of thought and recent evaluations relevant to CCT; it then reviews how fans are categorised and governed in prior work, including self-management and externally imposed management; finally, it revisits parasocial relationships as a long-running explanatory motif while foreshadowing limitations of celebratory readings of participation. The literature review provides the conceptual vocabulary and tensions that the empirical chapters later put to work.

Chapter 3: Communitas develops the core theoretical lens used across the thesis. It introduces Turner's communitas and its associated dynamics, then focuses on reciprocity and tangibility as everyday routes through which togetherness is produced and felt in fan practice. The chapter ends by acknowledging that participation also has a "darker" side documented in prior scholarship, setting up the empirical investigation of how cohesion and fracture co-exist without pre-empting the later conceptualisation.

Chapter 4: Contextual Background anchors the study in its cultural and empirical setting. It outlines K-pop's development and reception in mainland China, profiles Jessica Jung and her trajectory from Girls' Generation, and describes the Goldenstars community's formation and organising repertoires. As part of the contextual grounding, the chapter briefly situates the researcher's aca-fandom trajectory and field entrée within this milieu.

Chapter 5: Methodology explains and justifies the philosophical and practical aspects of my research design. It sets out the interpretivist stance and the rationale for an ethnographic approach adapted to the study of fandom; details the three complementary methods used, introduces sampling strategies, outlines ethics and protections, and describes the translation-first analysis pipeline that moves from surface-faithful transcription to concept-preserving coding. The chapter closes by addressing criteria used to ensure the trustworthiness of my data collection and analysis and clarifies the researcher's positionality as well as safeguards used to manage aca-fan alignment.

Chapter 6: Findings I — Jealousy presents the first empirical strand. It traces how publicly legible contribution metrics, role visibility and perceived access differentials generate comparison and jealousy, and how those affects are narrated and negotiated in everyday practice. Subsections examine inequity in proximity (e.g., access to events and perceived closeness) and inequity in financial resources (e.g., conspicuous collection and gifting), using interview vignettes and netnographic episodes to show how status talk and moral judgements emerge from routine coordination.

Chapter 7: Findings II — Vengeance, as the second empirical strand of my findings, follows the escalation from grievance to sanction amongst fans. It analyses how calling-out and back-channel consolidation produce scapegoating, justification and reputational gatekeeping, and how "for the idol/for the community" rhetoric legitimates punitive repertoires. The chapter demonstrates how exclusion, demotion and coordinated non-cooperation become normalised as community maintenance, while documenting the movement of conflicts between public and semi-private arenas.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion crystallises my new concept of dyssynchronas while integrating the findings with relevant literatures to explain how cohesion and fracture are co-produced in this fandom. This closing chapter develops implications for governance in China's current policy environment and for platform and community design more generally; reflects on methodological choices and constraints; delineates limitations; and proposes a focused agenda for future research. The chapter ends with concluding remarks that recapitulate the argument and its value.

A comprehensive reference list follows, providing full bibliographic details for all works cited. A prologue at the beginning and an epilogue at the end of the thesis are including to weave the whole journey together.

CHAPTER 2 CELEBRITY AND FANDOM THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the key theoretical perspectives surrounding celebrity culture, fandom, and their intersections within CCT. As fandom continues to grow as a central force in consumer research, it is essential to explore the academic frameworks that explain its emergence, categorisation, and management. By examining these themes, the chapter aims to shed light on how fans engage with media and public figures and how these relationships influence both the individual and collective consumer experience.

The chapter begins with a brief background on the development of celebrity culture, followed by an examination of the various schools of thought that have shaped our understanding of fandom within consumer culture. The chapter will then explore how fans are categorised and managed, both through self-regulation within fan communities and through external control by media producers and other stakeholders. The chapter will also discuss the importance of para-social relationships that reinforce the cohesion of fan communities.

2.1 Celebrity: a brief background

Celebrity, from the Latin *celebritās* meaning to be "made known", "distinguished", or "honoured", is defined as a state of being *famous* to a mass audience and is most typically characterised by individuals perceived to be worthy of adoration on the basis of their contributions to or prominence within some field of mass culture (cf. Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019; Lee, Scott and Kim, 2008; Wohlfeil, Patterson and Gould, 2019). Of course, what emerges immediately upon reading this definition is the necessity to also account for being famous— "fame" —which Giles defines as "[a] process by which individuals become recognised by a significant number of people outside of their predictable social and professional networks" (2010, p. 191). The modern understanding

of celebrity often encompasses individuals known beyond the immediate field of their mass-cultural activity and perpetuated primarily by their visibility in the media, a phenomenon fuelled by society's complex relationship with authority and legitimacy (Furedi, 2010). The unassailable relationship between visibility and celebrity and the purpose of celebrity being fame (which, by itself, is a form of heightened visibility) led Daniel Boorstin to write what has become one of the most oft-cited quips on celebrity: "The celebrity is a person who is well known for his well-knowness" (1962, p. 57)

As agents of 'well-knowness', celebrities occupy an unusual binary role within media as both products of and contributors to consumer culture. Various models have been drawn up to speculate and account for the processes or intersections between the person, the market, and the audience that produce the celebrity. In her 2005 review of Graeme Turner's *Understanding Celebrity*, Lori Baker-Sperry discusses the process of creating and sustaining celebrity as a market commodity, highlighting the roles of agents, publicists, and media industries in constructing and maintaining celebrity status (Baker-Sperry, 2005). The market-mediated transition from being an ordinary person to the extraordinary celebrity is marked by the processes of 'celebrification' or 'celebritisation', where individuals achieve fame not merely through notable achievements but also through distinct media presence (Ahmed and Faiq, 2022).

Consumers' interest in celebrity is based upon attention, commitment, and adoration may be expressed in behavioural, emotional, and attitudinal responses (Lee, Scott and Kim, 2008). The appeal of celebrity to consumers is understood to be multi-constitutional or *polysemi*c, in that it is not homogenous and is characterised by multiple semiotic layers (Wohlfeil, Patterson and Gould, 2019). For Wohlfeil and his colleagues, the degree to which a celebrity's persona appeals to an individual consumer is contingent upon the alignment between the celebrity's characteristics and any one given consumer's personal interests, values, and aspirations. Wohlfeil et al. delve into the idiosyncratic dynamics governing individual consumers' engagement with and receptivity to certain celebrities,

proposing that consumer preferences for celebrities are heterogeneous. Using the apt example of fishing, they provide the following illustration:

> A good metaphor to explain why a celebrity has a different personal appeal to each individual consumer is that of fishing in a lake. The reason why a fish eventually bites a specific hook while ignoring all the other hooks in the lake is simply that this hook has offered something special as bait that this fish desired, which the others did not. Another fish, however, may be attracted to the bait of a very different hook, or may not care for any at all (Wohlfeil et al., 2019, p. 2048)

Continuing in the spirit of Wohlfeil and his colleagues' metaphor, some consumers become "hooked" by a particular celebrity based on that individual's performance within a given field—here, we might extend this explanation to the cult of interest that follows decorated sporting heroes, prolific authors, and award-winning musicians—while other consumers might be hooked by another celebrity based on their beauty or sex appeal, an explanation that might lend itself well to the celebrification of glamour models, socialites, and pornstars.

The issue is further complicated when an accomplished musician becomes revered as a sex symbol by those consumers less concerned with his technical command over an instrument while other consumers become enamoured with the busty glamour model not for her physical beauty but for her outspoken political beliefs or ostensibly down-to-earth attitude. The polysemic nature of celebrities' appeal implies that celebrities are simultaneously appreciated as performers, 'private' persons, brand manifestations, and sources of social linkage to other consumers, suggesting that the stronger these components resonate with the consumer's desires, the stronger the emotional attachment to the celebrity.

While some commentators tend to regard celebrities as compounds of mediatised semiotic meanings which have been deliberately constructed for both on- and off-screen consumption (see Ali and Ullah, 2015; Dyer, 1998; Parkwell, 2019; Quinn, 1990; Roy, 2014), Wohlfeil, et al. (2019) contend that this approach dehumanises celebrity and argue instead for celebrity persons to be viewed as real human beings. Thus, while Dyer (1998)

emphasises the manufactured one-dimensional nature of celebrity, Wohlfeil and his colleagues argue in favour of celebrity's multi-dimensional authenticity, humanity, and relatability in the eyes of fans. Similarly, Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) conceptualise the celebrity figure as at once both *a person* and *a brand* and these two components are indissoluble and interdependent. Human qualities are not extraneous to a celebrity's appeal but are inherent to it. In this context, fans' interest in their favoured celebrity brands would be seen as arising out of interest in the celebrities' credibility as authentic, real-world personalities. Hence celebrity appeal to fans is conceptualised as consisting of four major elements – more specifically, their appeal as the performer, the private person, the tangible possession (i.e., as reflected in owning paraphernalia associated with the celebrity), and as the social link (i.e., as a source for social interactions with one's like-minded fans in a fandom community; Holbrook, 1995; Kanai, 2015; Krämer and Lovewell, 1999; Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012; Wohlfeil, Patterson and Gould, 2019).

Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) discuss how four aspects of the person have the potential to destabilise and compromise the celebrity-brand: mortality (an inherently limited existence of a celebrity's person-brand in time), hubris (an exaggerated sense of self-confidence often attributed to celebrities and deemed to lead to their downfall), unpredictability (likelihood of reputation risks to a brand as caused by a given celebrity's controversial public image), and social embeddedness (dependence of a celebrity's person-brand on its social environment, such as a web of social relationships surrounding it). Overall, the literature on celebrities' appeal to their audiences is sufficiently expansive to warrant some general inferences on the subject of the components of celebrity identity construction.

Cocker, Banister and Piacentini (2015) refer to the importance of specific 'identity myths' and 'identity goals' and consumers' intended identity development outcomes, respectively) in the course of constructing and/or responding to celebrities' marketised identities. Drawing upon British socialites Katie Price and Cheryl Cole as exemplars, Cocker et al. (2015) explore how celebrities who develop the negative identity attachment

of a ‘chav’ (that is, vulgar, uncouth) become complex vessels for consumers in the negotiation of their own identities. Cocker and colleagues note that consumers’ reactions to negative identity attachments of their adored celebrities are likely to be guided by a mixture of cultural considerations, such as their perceptions of taste, worthiness, morality, connection, as well as specific goals, such as affirmation, distinction, or belonging (Cocker, Bannister and Piacentini, 2015). Likewise, contributions by Preece (2015) and Mills, Patterson and Quinn (2015) offer insights into the complex processes which engender narratives of authenticity and scandal which celebrities can become embroiled in resulting in propitious personal branding. To bridge this exploration with the subsequent focus on fandom, it is essential to recognise the transition from general audience engagement to the formation of deep, emotional fan attachments. This transition underscores the evolution from mere appreciation to an active, committed relationship with the celebrity, marking a critical juncture in consumer-celebrity dynamics.

The journey from casual consumer to dedicated fan of a celebrity involves a nuanced engagement with celebrity personas, particularly when scandals or reputational challenges emerge. For some consumers, reputational damage or scandal amongst celebrities can irrupt in complex forms of negotiation and moral reasoning strategies so that support for celebrity wrongdoers can be maintained, while insulating themselves from dissonance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013, Lee and Kwak, 2016, Wang and Kim, 2019). However, when consumers graduate to becoming ‘fans’ of celebrities, they can form intense emotional attachments, meaning scandal or reputational trouble can be received much more severely (Jones, Cronin and Piacentini, 2022). Jones and colleagues (2022) discuss how becoming a ‘fan’ – beyond simply remaining a mere consumer – means greater levels of *commitment to*, *self-identification with*, and *emotional investment within* a particular celebrity. For fans, Jones et al. suggest, is the felt duty to express their feelings about their adored celebrity with like-minded others, whether these feelings are positive or negative, and to be especially sensitive to the ‘trauma’ when their relationship with the celebrity is compromised:

> To claim the identity of a "fan" requires not just a willingness to rationalise any dissonance that can emerge during uncomfortable parts of the fan-celebrity relationship, but also the impetus to socially perform, communicate and legitimise one's feelings amongst like-minded others when there is risk of that relationship ending. (Jones et al., 2022, p.721).

Consumption of a celebrity for a fan is not strictly a rational individuated activity but is characterised by what Jones et al (2022, p. 721) identify as "a community ethos, shared fantasies, and 'fantagonisms' – which denote fans' activist struggles to claim, 'personal significance' and intensely felt 'possession' of a celebrity's work". To delve deeper into the specific attachments that make up fan-celebrity relationships, we must first explore the concept of fandom in more detail.

2.2 Fandom: the good, the bad, and the ugly

Defining fans as well as situating them in their socio-cultural contexts requires first providing a parsimonious account of etymology. The word 'fan' has historically been read as an abbreviation: either as an abridged version of the Latin noun *fanaticus* ('fanatic'; see Chung et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2013), or of the English verb *to fancy* (that is, to have a liking or enthusiasm for something; see Wohlfeil, 2011). While a shortened version of "to fancy" suggests a fairly pedestrian interest or infatuation with a desirable object or person, understanding fans as an abbreviation of "fanatic" carries with it less innocuous connotations of "religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 12). The etymological grounding of fans in fanaticism has thus been one of the principal grounds for fans being perceived with suspicion and derision from academic commentators, the media, and the public discourse (e.g., Duffett, 2013; Bensecry, 2011; Wohlfeil, 2011).

Many historic accounts and discussions that emphasise fanaticism have emphasised the dysfunctional, incoherent, and problematic nature of fans' commitments and enactments (Fathallah, 2023; Haynal et al., 1983; Redden and Steiner, 2000; Gollwitser

et al., 2022; Steiner, 2014; Katsafanas, 2018). Fans have often been depicted as a "hysterical crowd" and their impassioned commitments classified as "unconventional and unusual" as they appear in contrast to the sober and reserved comportment of polite society (Jensen, 1992, p. 14; Thorne and Bruner, 2006, p. 53). Media coverage of events ranging from high-profile trials to criminal acts by or for celebrities fuelled these narratives, cementing an image of fandom as a potential threat to social order and moral decency (Cohen, 2011; Katsafanas, 2018).

The hysteria and abnormal acting out of passions are encapsulated cleanly by Milgram (1977) who categorises the fan as "someone who goes to extremes in beliefs, feelings and actions". The period during which Milgram was writing was perhaps a particular low point for the popular opinion of fans. Various serial killers throughout the 1970s—the Zodiac Killer, Ted Bundy, the 'Son of Sam' David Berkowitz, and John Wayne Gacy—and murderous cult leaders, such as Charles Manson and Jim Jones, attracted a high level of media attention and celebrification giving rise to so-called "dark fandoms" (Fathallah, 2023, p. 2). Female fans turned out in their droves to voice support, sympathise with, and express their sexual attraction (and love) to Ted Bundy during his trial and, as was documented heavily in the media at the time, he even married a fan during his incarceration. Another serial killer, Richard Ramirez, the 'Night Stalker', who was convicted of thirteen brutal counts of murder in the 1980s, also married one of his many fans who sent him letters and gifts while in prison. As Wiest (2016, pp. 331-332) highlights, both Bundy and Ramirez had "fans who flock[ed] to courtrooms during trials and prison visitation rooms after convictions" and "their autographs, photographs, and even hair clippings draw large sums at auction".

Besides fans' seeming attraction to the egregious, dangerous, and grossly immoral behaviours of others, they too were seemingly capable of such things themselves as was widely mediatised when an ex-fan of the Beatles, Mark David Chapman, gunned down his idol John Lennon in New York City on December 8th 1980 and when, on March 30th 1981, John W. Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate then US President Ronald Reagan as

a means of courting the affections of Hollywood actress Jodie Foster. The reputation of fans was not helped by a litany of other fan-perpetrated murders of their idols including actress Rebecca Schaeffer, fashion designer Gianni Versace, and rock musician Dimebag Darrell.

While the 1970s up to the turn of the 21st century were seemingly dark times for the characterisation of fans, over the past two decades a steady stream of work has emerged within marketing and consumer research that crystallises the instrumental facets of consumer fanaticism, and has done much to absolve the practice of suspected harmful content (Chung et al., 2018; Fuschillo, 2020; Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Redden and Steiner, 2000; Liang, 2023). As reflected by these texts is a growing recognition that, beyond the freakish dark fandoms of serial killers and the various murderous acts by dysfunctional fans, "fandom seems to have become a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialised world" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 3). Rather than viewing all intense attachments as dangerous, researchers have moved to more nuanced analyses of the motivations, practices, and effects of fandom.

A landmark text in these respects is Thorne and Bruner's (2006) exploratory investigation into the characteristics of fanatical behaviour in the marketplace. In taking a self-declared "neutral" stance on the topic, Thorne and Bruner (2006, p. 53) jettison potentially loaded terminology and biases to define fanaticism simply as "the level of investment" one has in directing one's passion and commitment towards an object of interest. Though the authors recognise that the term has most often been applied to fundamentalists, obsessives, extremists and hooligans, they depart from "past studies that emphasised fanaticism as demonstrated through extreme activities and behaviour ... [to] [show] that there are common characteristics across several different genres of fans and that these characteristics are neither extreme nor aberrant" (Thorne and Bruner, 2006, p. 65). They crystallise four characteristics that motivate fanaticism (as a fairly benign lifestyle commitment) within contemporary consumer culture: the desire for internal involvement (i.e. seeing oneself as a fan), a desire for external involvement (i.e. to be

involved in fan-related activities), a wish to acquire material objects related to their area of interest (i.e. collecting and displaying), and a desire for social interaction (i.e. communing and communicating with other fans).

Comparatively, Chung et al. (2008) further distinguishes between affective commitment—volitional, ongoing attachment—and extraordinary pursuit—going "beyond the ordinary" in seeking connection to the object of fandom. They suggest that while fanaticism is typically characterised by high levels of loyalty and devotion beyond what might be considered normal, it is not always detrimental to consumers with many able to "exercise self-control [to] avoid fanaticism turning into the darker and potentially problematic forms often portrayed in the existing literature" (p.335). Chung et al (2018) suggest two important features of fanaticism within consumer culture: 1.) *affective commitment*, which they define as "the voluntary and volitional conscious decision to keep the interest in the object of fanaticism alive" (p.15), and 2.) *extraordinary pursuit* which they define as "going beyond the ordinary, usual, or average levels in one's pursuit of the object of fanaticism" (p. 15). Besides these two features, it would be remiss not to consider also the fan's relationships with non-fans or their managing the potential for antagonism between themselves and perceived outsiders. The sets of values that motivate a fanatic have historically been considered radically incompatible with the values and perceptions of a currently dominant – or 'mainstream' – culture of a given society. Crucially, scholars now recognise that the boundaries between "fanatic" and "ordinary" engagement are porous, and that the values and behaviours of fan communities can both clash with and become absorbed by the mainstream (Fuschillo, 2020; Seregina and Schouten, 2017).

Fuschillo (2020) views fandom as being a specific manifestation of a larger phenomenon of fanaticism as supposedly 'rooted' in contemporary society. Fanaticism, for Fuschillo does not always take the form of communal phenomenon but can also be individually experienced by fans who exploit fandoms for personal cultural capital accrual and status in society, rather than solely for social belonging. Moreover, while

fandoms foster a sense of community and connection among members, these social bonds within fandoms may be temporary and ephemeral. “However, fandoms hold ephemeral and potentially dissipating social bonds … Nevertheless, they are organised with an internal social structure in which social positions and hierarchies are clearly defined in accordance with the experience, knowledge, and know-how of fans in relation to their cult object” (Fuschillo, 2020, p. 350). The notion of fanaticism in fandoms as a process that leads to the emergence of new values that challenge mainstream culture can be seen as analogous to how other social resistance movements develop alternative narratives and ideologies that counter dominant societal beliefs (Fuschillo, 2020). By creating their own cultural practices, rituals, and traditions, fans challenge the existing norms and contribute to reshaping societal values and structures.

This perspective illuminates how fandom acts as a bridge connecting personal identities to collective experiences, fostering a shared sense of belonging through passionate engagements with brands and cultural phenomena. Fuschillo’s exploration extends beyond individual fanatic behaviours to encapsulate a broader, societal phenomenon, where emotional investments in consumer cultures serve as pivotal elements in the construction of communal and personal identities alike. As highlighted elsewhere by Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007): the emergence of fandom as a “bridge” between personal identity and collective experience, with its own rituals, traditions, and ethical codes, challenges the notion that fandom is only a site of dysfunction. Instead, it is increasingly understood as a key space for the negotiation of new cultural values, often in opposition to—or in complex interplay with—dominant societal norms.

Before further unpacking the relationships between fans, markets, and consumer culture, it is worth pausing first to review the diversity of epistemic opinion on fans in academic research. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of different or competing scholarly views on fans.

2.2.1 Different schools of thoughts

20th-century approaches to fans have centred on critical analyses of supposedly 'low-brow' forms of cultural consumption associated with a 'mindless' devotion to celebrities and the resulting cult of consumerism (Duffett, 2013, pp. 85-123; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). An early indictment of fandom within consumer culture can be found in Münsterberg's (1916) psychological accounts of the vulnerable audience in which he warned, apropos of early enthusiasm towards motion pictures ("photo plays" or "movies"), of "the trivialising influence of a steady contact with things which are not worth knowing" (p.14). While not completely dismissive of the motion picture medium per se, Münsterberg was concerned about the corrupting influence over "the mind[s] [that are] so completely given to the moving pictures". To him, audiences are prone to suggestion and imitative behaviour and so fans ("misguided boys or girls") who commit so much of their time and interest to media forms (especially those he considers to be insipid) place themselves at grave risk of harming their personal vitality and originality. Building on Munsterberg's early contributions, a broader tradition of critical theory–oriented fan and media studies emerged in later decades. This body of work explored how entertainment contributes to the erosion of genuine social community and the diminishing of human subjectivity, often critiquing the dominance of media-driven commercial interests and the ideologically loaded illusions offered by "popular" fantasy.

Much of the critical school of thought on fandom is based largely on the legacy of Theodore Adorno, in particular, his observations of early fan cultures in *Essays on music* (Adorno, 2002) and his work with Max Horkheimer in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (Adorno and Horkheimer 2006). Adorno and Horkheimer locate the phenomenon of fandom and the associated star system which births it within a broader division of political economy, what they call the culture industry. At the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments is the concern that the human subject's critical cognitive capacities are sated and ultimately undermined by popular forms of consumption-based fandom. Through directing subjects' libidinal energies to

preorganised and market-mediated lifestyle pursuits bound up in pseudo-individuality, personal desire, and pacification rather than to collective political projects, radical creativity, and antagonistic struggles for difference "culture today has infected everything with sameness" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2006, p. 120). For these theorists, the star system and its attendant fan cultures erode authentic sociality and reinforce social hierarchies. Sameness coupled with the profit motive and the ideological (liberal) fantasy of personal sovereignty—or compulsory individuality—guarantees a predictable, manageable and imminently commodifiable framework through which all forms of expression—even those with the pretence of rebellion or subversive potentials—are defanged, depoliticised, and rerouted back into marketing and market-making rather than to something better.

The culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer contains and absorbs all possible energies, especially contrarian ones, remoulding them into that which can be found *within* rather than outside of the market, thus making consumption a new opium for the masses. Where once human subjects may have channelled their creativity, excitement and passions into unifying political, spiritual, athletic, aesthetic or intellectual pursuits, they are now placated through fanatical interests in the surrogate socio-symbolic life of consumer culture. In these respects, the star system with its careful generation of celebrity and associated fandoms—while fun and rewarding for the liberal, identity-seeking individual—is, to Adorno and Horkheimer, gravely cancerous for our greater human community as it stunts what humanity might have become, placating and dumbing down groups such as the marginalised and working classes, ensuring "the alienation of man has become complete" (Adorno, 2002, p. 391). While these groups may have once found greatness through expressions of uniqueness appreciated amongst their peers and might even have improved their circumstances through political solidarity and participating in alternative political spaces beyond formal parliamentary democracy itself, they are—in the Adornoian view—now easily sedated and atomised by a steady stream of carefully curated celebrity images around whom they can apolitically focus their energies.

The ‘enthusiasm’ and/or ‘fanatical love’ fans hold toward modern cultural forms such as popular music are, according to Adorno, equivalent to their conformist integration to the prevailing ‘petit-bourgeois’ consumer culture, ultimately leading to a loss of one’s self (and political potential) in a conformist, commodity-based model of social organisation thus helping to stabilise extant relations of power based on generic liberal-capitalist identarianism and commerce (Adorno, 2002). The Adornoian perspective has given rise to a vast breadth of conceptions of fans and fandoms, many of them following his suit though some others providing divergent perspectives on this critical approach. Hence the following sub-section considers the differences in terms of the respective academic schools’ approaches to the subject matter.

Epigones of Adorno have developed a critical line of argumentation centred on the vulnerability of audiences to the influence of massifying media images and the limits they impose on authentic and self-determined ways of living and being (Boorstin, 1961). Adherents of the Adornoian perspective would then seek to relate fan cultures – or fandoms – to a kind of Marxian alienation in the process of capitalist social production and reproduction, which they tend to view with suspicion and disdain (e.g., Boorstin, 2006; Schickel, 1985; Hyde, 2009). In this legacy, the Adornoian perspective entails a disparaging view of fandoms as mere imitations of ‘proper’ social movements and exemplars of masses who have substituted interest in material matters with pseudo-activities grounded in a surrender to bourgeois forms of cultural commodification.

The Adornoian fan is analogous in many ways to Nietzsche’s “last man”, the consumer-oriented, depoliticised subject who is *last* to contribute anything worthwhile to social life and clings instead to personal comforts and conceits, favouring pleasure, entertainment and vicarious thrills over firsthand, risky attempts at achieving greatness (see Cronin and Fitchett, 2022; Cronin, Fitchett, and Coffin, 2024). Approaching fandom exclusively through a critical Adornoian lens, while incisive and polemic, risks reducing the phenomenon to a simple variant of commodity fetishism by which consumer culture encroaches on subjects’ freedoms and inhibits their capacity for self-realisation. The

Adornoian view, Wohlfeil (2018, p.23) laments, results in "stereotyped conceptualisations" of fans as the *culturally alienated dupes of capitalism*.

A less denunciatory but similarly critical perspective may be found in the research by Cornel Sandvoss (1995), which has been further followed by Duffett (2013). Sandvoss's perspective, in effect, draws upon Guy Debord's (1965) notion of the society of spectacle to arrive at a spectacle-based approach to fandom. Sandvoss argues that fandom is not simply a reflection of capitalist manipulation but can also be a site for self-reflection and potential resistance (2005). Like Adorno before him, Sandvoss sees political economy – specifically, capitalism – as working structurally and insidiously to ensure fandoms work in the service of a defanged, deskinned kind of consumerist subjectivity rather than any kind of politically aware subjectivity. For him, fandom is an archetypal manifestation of the "performance principle of capitalism" through "fascination with the external object" effectively reflecting an "unrecognised image of self" (Sandvoss, 1995, p. 119). In that sense, focus may be placed upon fans' tendency to indulge in narcissistic pleasures through their association with external objects of their adoration. At the same time, Sandvoss acknowledges the potential for challenging existing forms of consumer capitalism through fannish activities that may emphasise use-value and fans' self-reflection over exchange and "identificatory fantasies of resemblance or imitations" (Sandvoss, 1995, p. 122).

Contrary to Adornoian or Sandvoss inspired work, some streams within cultural consumption research have tended toward less critical and more supportive views of fans and their cultures (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins, in his seminal work *Textual Poachers* (1992), rails against critical scholars' efforts to downplay fans' creative energies and participatory powers by demonstrating the active and complex ways that fan cultures express their creativity and associations with the objects of their worship both cognitively and affectively. For Jenkins, fandom is not some massified, atomised consumerist space of passive comforts, acriticality and cultural dupedom but is instead "often motivated by a complex balance between fascination and frustration, affirmation and transformation"

(Jenkins, 2018, pp. 11-16). By this, he means fans are defined by their fascination toward celebrity and media spectacle, but their sustained interest is subject to critical introspection and exhaustion unless fans actively work with the media and one another to affirm their own identities and that of their object of worship within the matrices of consumer culture.

This approach has given rise to the influential concepts of participatory culture and active audience (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2018), shifting the analytic focus from pathology to productivity, and from passivity to community formation. Thus, academic approaches to fandom now span a spectrum from suspicion (critical theory), through spectacle (Sandvoss), to celebration (Jenkins and the participatory culture tradition), with each offering important, if partial, insights. Where critical theorists caution against the depoliticising and commodifying potential of fandom, more optimistic scholars highlight its capacity for creativity, solidarity, and even resistance. Yet neither extreme fully accounts for the ambivalent, often contradictory dynamics observed in real fan communities. Consequently, a more consumer culture-oriented perspective will need to be implemented in order to provide for a link between fandom's cultural activities and their relevance for fans' identities as consumers of specific market values.

2.2.2 Contemporary Evaluations of Fandom in CCT

The analysis of fandom as a subject for Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research necessitates an overview of the pertinent literature. In an attempt to provide a summary of the major strands of fandom research in consumer cultural studies, Fuschillo (2020) provides a characterisation of fandoms as "social and cultural universes of meanings and practices" (2020, p. 349). In CCT research, fans are most often conceptualised as cultural producers who independently or communally manifest and perform their devotion to specific fannish objects, which encompass a variety of cultural texts and products around which fans may associate and to which they feel attachment (Chung et al., 2018; Cocker

and Cronin, 2017; Fuschillo, 2020; Hewer and Hamilton, 2012; Joubert and Coffin, 2020; Seregina and Schouten, 2017). Following the less critical, more celebratory, and counter-Adornoian views popularised by Jenkins, CCT has tended to approach fandom as involving both an appropriation and a reinterpretation (or, in the words by Jenkins (1992, p.18), a 'rogue reading') of cultural texts with which fans are involved, implying a degree of fan agency, empowerment, and even resistance against dominant forms of media culture. This ostensible Jenkinsian foundation for approaching fans within CCT may lead one to deduce that fandoms / fan cultures are a highly dynamic phenomenon of cultural consumption, encompassing a variety of forms of independent collective cultural production, resistance, sociality, and even religiosity.

Therein, CCT researchers have observed that "fandom aids identity building and self-reflection… [and] fandom can teach fans to function better as members of society" (Seregina and Schouten, 2017, p. 108). A crucial thread within this literature is the identification of fandom as a resource for identity work and social connection, but also as a domain of boundary-drawing, distinction, and moral regulation (Seregina and Schouten, 2017; Kozinets, 2001). Embedded in Jenkinsian optimism, CCT research has highlighted how fan cultures may develop their own moralistic teachings or ethical perspectives, such as those espoused by certain members of the *Star Trek* fan culture (Kozinets, 2001). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork within the 'Trekkie' fan community, Kozinets conceptualises fandom as a kind of "utopian consumption" — a desirable social sphere (or sanctuary) wherein admirers of media text are not mindless, manipulated dupes, but are instead active co-creators of collective meaning imbued with values, community awareness, and a tacit vision of a better world. Resisting the Adornoian stance that would discount Star Trek fandom as a commodified offshoot of the culture industry's efforts to pacify and depoliticise audiences, Kozinets sees Trekkies as a self-aware, impassioned community committed to imaginative debate and critique, bound by its own solidarity, collective consciousness, and sense of social progress. Kozinets emphasises how fans appropriate, rework, reimagine and even extend their admired text's themes—such as inclusivity, diversity, adventurousness, and courage—in complex ways that exemplify

and help to institute ideals of interdependency, egalitarianism, and techno-scientific optimism. For Kozinets:

> The utopian sense of the communalism inside fandom contrast[s] with the alienation of the mundane world […] fandom is… a place where many of those who do not easily fit into mainstream social roles (i.e., those who are already stigmatised in some sense or another) can find a form of sanctuary and acceptance. (Kozinets, 2001, p. 71).

Previous to Kozinets' presentation of fandom as a hopeful, regenerative and communal pocket of consumer culture, O'Guinn (1991) had traced the parallels between religious rituals and the ones taking place within fan communities. For O'Guinn, fan clubs centring on individual celebrities may be host to consumption activities and attitudes usually expected of a religious congregation (e.g., regular show attendance, creation and purchase of paraphernalia associated with the celebrity the fan club members feel attached to, or invoking the celebrity's 'name and spirit' in the course of important private rituals, such as wedding anniversaries; O'Guinn, 1991). The case study of the Tom Petty fan community (Schau and Muñiz, 2007) demonstrates the extent to which a fan-based brand community may manifest certain 'magico-religious' (i.e., similar in their scope and orientation to that of a religious cultic community) features of its identity (such as adherence to the figure of Tom Petty himself) with the ones associated with a successful integration into mainstream music culture. Hence the degree to which fandoms may take upon a more or less religious character and to what extent the latter may be (self)-regulated remains an important subject for further research and analysis in the context of contemporary fandom studies.

Furthermore, CCT research recognises the transformative potential of fandom not just for individuals but for markets and industries themselves. Giesler (2008) by drawing upon the context of music downloads demonstrates how the development of fans' market presence may influence the development of the respective markets in specific cultural industries. Here, Giesler accounts for how the growing prominence of fan-created music downloading platforms ultimately forced the recording labels to countenance a transition

from a “hyper authoritarian music marketplace” (marked by the labels’ attempts to safeguard their proprietary rights by persecuting pirates) to a “postmodern music marketplace” where music downloading has become one of the staples of the music industry’s offering to their consumers (Giesler, 2008, p. 743). Elsewhere, Hewer et al. (2017) through an analysis of Celtic Football Club’s ‘Green Brigade’ cadre of ‘ultras-style’ fans, reveal how fans worshipping according to their own counter-philosophies – and adapting (and subverting) a brand’s strategy and merchandising for their own ends – can assume the roles of “brand agitator” and “brand heretic” which can serve useful devil’s advocate functions in the marketplace. Quoting Illouz (2009), Hewer and colleagues suggest, “consumer culture fosters feelings of rebelliousness that in turn become vehicles for consumption” (2017, p. 613). This emphasises the participatory and transformative aspect of fandom as a collective and impactful endeavour with shades of rebellion and subversiveness – an approach that would go beyond both the negative representations of fandom by the Adornoian school of fan studies outlined earlier in this chapter (e.g., Boorstin, 2006; Hyde, 2009).

At the same time, CCT perspectives acknowledge that fan communities are not free from conflict, hierarchy, or exclusion. The communal bonds that define fandom are frequently accompanied by internal rivalries, contests for status, and struggles over authenticity and legitimacy (De Valck, 2007; Richardson and Turley, 2007; Sibai et al., 2024). While CCT scholarship is often more optimistic than critical theory, it recognises that the same processes that foster belonging and meaning can also generate competition, stratification, and even antagonism. Fandom is thus understood as an ambivalent space, marked by overlapping dynamics of unity and division, inclusion and exclusion, creative agency and social regulation.

2.3 Categorising fans

The diversity of fans and their communities entails the importance of differentiating between various types of fans as well as forms of sociality. It goes without saying that fans of sportspersons and fans of heavy metal percussionists would most likely differ from one another in terms of their values, priorities, and sociocultural attributes. The issue of categorising fans appears to pose difficulties to researchers as fan communities themselves are marked by varied organisational structures and forms of management and self-management (Fillis and Mackay, 2014). Fillis and Mackay have suggested that multiple typologies and other classification systems have been deployed to understand and categorise fans, but they lament the difficulty in reaching a universally reliable approach. The authors suggest there are what are known as "tiered models" of typology where "fans are grouped and ranked according to their emotional or financial commitment" (Fillis and Mackay, 2014, p.340).

A clear example of a tiered fan typology can be found with Thorne and Bruner's (2006) measure of the intensity of fanaticism displayed by individual fans. Thorne and Bruner suggest fandom will proceed from the level of *dilettante fans* (characterised by casual involvement, such as intermittent viewing of the respective TV programmes or taking part in fan gatherings by being 'infected' by the enthusiasm of others), through that of *dedicated fans* (characterised by their attempting to change their lifestyle in accordance with the sociocultural guidance provided by their primary texts), being followed by *devoted fans* (making major changes to their lifestyle on the same basis, e.g., devoting the bulk of their free time to fandom-related activities), and finally *dysfunctional fans* (consumed by the intensity of their fanaticism to the extent that they would neglect their 'normal' social activities or even engage in anti-social activities to perpetuate their fandom-related goals). However, Fillis and Mackay (2014) criticise such tiered efforts for their lack of transparency around differences within each tier or to why fans would be able to migrate between tiers.

An alternative to the tiered model is the "multidimensional approach" to fan typology which takes into account various socio-psychological dimensions which impact

upon fan behaviour and influence the willingness for social integration. The multidimensional approach, Fillis and Mackay (2014, p. 341) suggest, "is more rounded, since it includes geodemographic and psychographic dimensions, as well as a consideration of the benefits sought in the relationship". A recent case of such a multidimensional approach towards reaching a taxonomy of fans was provided by Collins and Murphy (2018), who identify a spectrum running from *Geeks* (fannish producers focussed on developing and popularising their creative products within a fan-oriented brand community), *Mavens* (fans focussed on more or less theoretical knowledge about their brand / product), *Alphas* (opinion leaders), *Evangelists* (fans focussed on converting the others beyond the original scope of their brand community), *Fanboys* (enthusiastic consumers of the fandom's brand value), *Haters* (vigorous opponents of the rival fandoms), *Sasaengs* (stalkers) etc. In so doing, this classification represents the case of the psychographic dimension being implemented. Similarly, the geodemographic dimension of categorising fans would focus on their demographic characteristics (e.g., younger versus older, male versus female fans, etc.), as well as on their geographic place of origins (e.g., Asian fans versus North American ones).

2.4 Managing fans

Defining the issues of fans' governance – or how fans are managed and coordinated – is important for understanding the processes of rule- and identity-making, status-seeking, and trendsetting within fan cultures. Without some clearly understood and unifying order shared between fans, their expressions of loyalty and devotion would be incommunicable and chaotic. On the one hand, the participatory nature of fan cultures / fandoms, especially online ones (Massanari, 2015), implies a principal openness of most fandoms to new creative impulses, implying that new fans may expect to acquire greater prestige and influence with the passage of time since their integration within the community (Jenkins et al., 2009). Mutual learning and informal mentorship exerted by more experienced members over novices is then tantamount to recognising the importance of fan

camaraderie as a complex of knowledge and experience sharing, which inevitably entails the development of specific fan languages, jargons, and quirks. With this in mind, two major aspects of governance of fandom emerge: (1) fans' (internal) self-governance of their own subculture; (2) the (external) governance of fans by others including governmental actors, market actors and celebrities.

2.4.1 Fans' self-management

The concept of self-management in general refers to a specific community's ability to govern its affairs on the basis of mutually agreed-upon internal mechanisms, rather than relying on external aid. Self-management of fan communities has often been discussed as bound up in normative identity and acts of acquiring subcultural capital which serve to determine fans' internal competition and hierarchy (Bennett, 2011). This has been discussed in the contexts of sports (Richardson and Turley, 2007), movies / cinema (Jancovich, 2002), and popular music (Farrugia and Gobatto, 2010) fandoms. With respect to movie fandom, Jancovich (2002) demonstrates how writing about cult movies emerges as a reflection of a fan's desire to claim authenticity for themselves, which in turn leads to the development of specific standards of authenticity which can be used for the purposes of producing distinctions / hierarchies within fandom communities. Furthermore, authenticity can be considered to be a reflection of a fandom community member's sincerity of intent and commitment to identity-driven community goals, which is subsequently highly valorised within the context of fandom communities (Leigh et al., 2006). Accordingly, the extent to which a given fan or a group of fans may or may not accept the dominant standards of "subcultural capital" for their community impacts upon the degree to which such fans may be accepted by like-minded others.

Thornton (1995), drawing on Bourdieu, defines subcultural capital as the cultural knowledge and commodities gained from members of a shared subculture, in order to improve their status and specialise themselves amongst like-minded others. In the context

of fandom studies, the concept of sub-cultural capital has been used extensively to refer to the symbolic economy of the 'alternate hierarchy' of fandom communities (Thornton, 1995; Jenkins, 2006; Threadgold, 2015). The importance of subcultural capital as a standard for governing fans' behaviour is emphasised by Richardson and Turley (2007) in their account of football fandom. The authors illustrate how the notion of authenticity is used among English football fans to draw distinctions between 'real supporters (i.e., those perceived by their community to genuinely dedicate their efforts to pursue their fandom's interests) and 'glory hunters' (those seeking to switch from one club to another, more popular one in the moment of opportunity). This is relevant to generally differentiating legitimate fans from those deemed to be unworthy of such a status due to their undignified behaviour as defined by the community.

At the same time, the question of internal tension and even 'war' within virtual consumer communities has been raised, most notably, in the work by De Valck (2007). De Valck (2007) emphasises three key sources of tension among community members: *1.* challenging each other's expertise; *2.* disputing the extent to which non-core members may 'appropriately' follow the community's norms and practices as laid down by core members, and *3.* differences over lifestyles and consumption practices within a community. The respective angles revolve on different levels: thus, the tensions over expertise affect core members only, while the two other dimensions are applicable to studying the situation within the community as a whole. This nevertheless demonstrates the potential of conflict as part of fans' self-management.

Närvänen et al. (2013) underscore the importance of discursive practices for the community's functioning and development, including those of challenging practices, so that challenges issued to the community's previously agreed-on standards by non-conforming members may be considered to be conducive to the community's creativity. To complement the discussion, Husemann et al. (2015) suggest that there are two major types of conflicts occurring in online consumer communities, namely routinised and transgressive ones, with different approaches to conflict management being practised by

community members. Thus, routinised conflicts would be solved on the basis of pre-established intra-community conflict management and communication platforms and procedures, whereas transgressive conflicts would be associated with breaking the community's inner cultural norms (Husemann et al., 2015). Accordingly, the management of transgressive conflicts is associated with disruption of habitualised forms of conflict management and the recourse to the core and undisputed values as the only tangible source of conflict settlement. In both respects, the importance of an effective conflict culture for online consumer communities, including fandom-based ones, will have to be emphasised.

Finally, Sibai et al. (2015) underscore the role played by social control in the course of online communities' self-management. The authors refer to moderation practices as a major means of enforcing social control within online communities of consumption (OCCs). According to their approach, the focus is placed on an interplay of the principles of social organisation provided by the operative concepts of market, hierarchy, and clan (Sibai et al., 2015, p. 252). The authors find the presence of each of these three types of governance within contemporary OCCs' moderation structures, hence offering a more complex perspective on such communities' governance than a pure self-management perspective may have offered. Altogether, the relevance of the aforementioned studies to the subject of fans' self-management in online and supposedly decentralised structures is substantive, since this would concern identifying the key features of social control and conflict management systems in the absence of which fandom communities would likely cease to exist.

2.4.2 Others' management of fans

While the aspects considered above reveal fans' self-management, the role of external actors in facilitating or impeding the development of fandom communities toward their goals cannot be ignored either. External actors who seek to influence and direct the

development of fandom communities for their own purposes can include celebrities (Farrugia and Gobatto, 2010; Bennett and Chin, 2014), market actors (Stanfill, 2019; Stanfill and Condis, 2014) and political actors, such as government agencies and political movements / parties (Navarro, 2016; Xu, 2019; Zhai and Wang, 2023). Navarro (2016) discusses how governments, by engaging in "the marketisation of popular culture", play a crucial role in stirring fan interests around particular cultural issues and movements, "thus intentionally contributing to culture-making and shaping collective behaviour" (p. 229). Navarro points to the politicisation of Britpop fandom in the 1990s such as how fan interest towards bands like Oasis was channelled into advocacy for Tony Blair's New Labour government in the UK:

> …the Blair project made use of these creative industries in favour of his party – renewing its image and winning voters – and once in government, favouring a dynamic economy stimulated by culture industry and its consumption (Navarro, 2016, p.235).

The focus placed on the political governance of fandom culture has likewise been perpetuated in the studies by a range of authors focussing on sports fandom in particular (e.g., Brown, 1998; Dean, 2017; Jones, 2020; Porter, 2019). In addition, the role of national and regional / local identities in conjunction with fandoms has been explored with regard to Chinese fandoms of Japanese and Korean pop culture (Chen, 2017), where the considerations of cultural hierarchy ('strong' versus 'weak', 'original' versus 'derived' cultures) have been used to explain the crises of cultural popularity of fandoms of Japanese and Korean origins in the context of the contemporary China. The role of official patriotic education and its impact on the youth, who are more likely to be members of such fandoms, cannot be overlooked here as well, so that the degree to which deliberate state policy may undermine the popularity of some supposedly apolitical fandoms can be clearly seen here (Chen, 2017).

Similarly, celebrities can likewise be argued to treat their fandom communities as resources for their own gain, irrespective of their fans' devotion to them. In such case, the celebrities in question would pose as inspirational figures for their fannish adherents

whilst inevitably drawing the latter in the networks of commercialisation, as the case study by Farrugia and Gobatto (2010) would demonstrate. Farrugia and Gobatto show how the celebrity singer-songwriter Tori Amos attempted to make use of subcultural capital of her fans in order to boost her own sales of so-called 'official' bootleg recordings, hence making her fans' devotion a potential source of the commercial success of her own. In so doing, the authors deduce that celebrities may willingly capitalise on their fans' devotion to further commercialise their personal brand, which will then be taken as a case of their personal interest in manipulating their fandoms to that end.

In general, as observed by Wohlfeil (2018), there may be an indirect relationship between celebrity fans' devotion to their favoured celebrities on the one hand and their tendency to buy items (such as film and concert tickets and various paraphernalia) associated with their 'heroes' or 'heroines'. Thus celebrities (and their agents and handlers) may indeed influence fans for purely commercial purposes, which would further bring one toward the question of how much larger market actors – i.e. Adorno's famous culture industry – actually do govern fandom communities. Celebrities' role in manipulating / conditioning their fans to engage in specific consumption activities has been acknowledged and addressed by several authors, including Duffett (2015; with a reference to the practices of celebrity worship as a manufactured 'totemic' phenomenon), Bowrey (2011; with a focus on fans becoming consumers of commercial franchises constructed around preplanned objects of attraction), and Liu, Zhang and Zhang (2020; concerning celebrity influences on fans with brand equity and purchase intentions firmly in mind).

The regulation of fan conduct—what recent scholarship terms "fan policing"—has become a central, if often underexamined, mechanism through which communities maintain order and boundaries (Stanfill, 2019; Chin and Hills, 2008). Within digital fan environments, everyday policing is enacted through public callouts, mass-reporting, ritualised shaming, and the explicit marking of "inauthentic" or "unworthy" fans (Sibai et al., 2024; Williams, 2016). These practices, while ostensibly in service of community

ideals, often create or reinforce internal hierarchies, intensifying competition over status and legitimacy (Jenkins, 2006; Click et al., 2019). In the Chinese context, the fusion of platform affordances (e.g., algorithmic visibility, instant mass-messaging) and local social norms amplifies the visibility and severity of such exclusionary practices (Yang, 2021; Yin and Fung, 2017). By situating fan policing within a wider tradition of consumer community governance (Cova and White, 2010; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), this thesis argues that ritualised punishment and surveillance are not aberrations but systemic responses to the instability of community ideals under digital conditions.

Digital platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Twitter have not only enabled new forms of collective action and visibility for fan communities (Abidin, 2016; Highfield et al., 2013) but have also dramatically transformed the logics of recognition, status, and discipline within fandoms (Yang, 2021; Zhang and Fung, 2017). Algorithmic amplification of "hot" posts, metrics of likes and retweets, and the public ranking of contributors intensify competition for attention and fuel social comparison (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). In the Chinese context, these affordances combine with deep-rooted norms of collective activism and peer scrutiny, generating an environment where internal policing is both highly visible and rapidly mobilised (Yin, 2020). As a result, conflicts over legitimacy and status are no longer private but are played out in front of a mass audience, with consequences ranging from reputational damage to outright ostracism.

2.5 Postemotional fans: some additional considerations

There have been recent accounts of the "postemotional" nature of fans in contemporary consumer culture (Cronin and Cocker, 2019). Fans that make themselves visible, thoroughly integrating themselves and communicating regularly with like-minded others (especially via public internet-mediated communications) are sometimes considered postemotional in the sense that they are assumed to control or *edit* their emotions in other-directed ways thus "performing" displays of feeling when appropriate in order to fit with

the expectations of their peers (Cronin and Cocker, 2019). Postemotionalism is a concept introduced by critical sociologist Stjepan_Meštrovic (1997), who retracing Adorno and Horkhimer's steps before him, suggests that within consumer culture we have become so conscious of and sensitised to the power of emotions that they have, in many social settings, become warped into something else – "post-emotions" or "emotionally charged fictions" – which are controllable, performative, commodifiable, and sometimes weaponisable entities. Postemotionalism, as Meštrovic (1997, p. 26) describes:

> refers to the use of dead, abstracted emotions by the culture industry in a neo-Orwellian, mechanical, and petrified manner. The use of 'post' in the concept of postemotionalism is deliberately ambiguous… emotions did not really disappear, so that the 'emotional' in postemotional is still relevant. A new hybrid of intellectualised, mechanical, mass-produced emotions has appeared on the world scene.

Whether the celebrity who turns on the waterworks (i.e. cries on demand, feigns one's sadness) to garner sympathy and support from fans during news of a transgression, or fans who dial up their indignation to place pressure on media producers so as to better support a particular celebrity or to release and market content for that celebrity, emotion becomes both a tool and a simulacrum; an important lubricant for generating spectacle, encouraging action, and is both "suitable for manipulation by self and others" (Meštrovic, 1997, p. 38; also Sandlin and Callahan, 2009).

Recognising how postemotionalism might challenge individualistic accounts of emotional life, fan scholars should be sensitive to the features of: 1.) *other-directedness* (an embeddedness of the self in a social environment marked by consideration of other actors' reactions to one's emotional manifestations), 2.) *mechanisation* (implying a resource-based perspective on one's emotions as far as one's cultural consumption patterns are concerned), and 3.) *voyeurism* (a constant seeking after 'raw' and 'authentic' emotions by others as a driver for cultural consumption), as major aspects of consumers' contemporary cultural identities (Illouz, 2007; 2009; Sandlin and Callahan, 2009; Hackley et al., 2012).

In discussing the impact of postemotionalism on fans, Cronin and Cocker (2019) identify that even though contemporary internet-mediated fandom communities, like their predecessors, remain drawn to the expressive and escapist pleasures of shared action and worship (i.e. "collective effervescence"), the weight of intergroup social norms and pronounced social visibility foster a stifling atmosphere of self-awareness and artifice that can mechanise and rationalise away the organic functioning of these groups. The rise of social media, with its economy of visibility, performativity, and appearances has meant that the sharing of emotion between group members often becomes fabricated and aestheticised, hence undermining its authenticity.

Cronin and Cocker (2019) emphasise the concept of 'zomsumption' within postemotional fandom. Mirroring the neither-dead-nor-alive subjectivity of the 'zombie', fans are fully aware of how fake, insincere and therefore lifeless their online interactions between one another have become yet they disavow this awareness of their symbolic death, choosing instead to go along with the fantasy that all is 'alive' and well in the hopes of preserving meaning for their selves and their celebrity totem. In this sense, the 'living-dead' emotional life of the fan-as- 'zomsumer' can be explained away as the knowing manipulation of self and others in the pursuit of fantasy. The critical kernel of this perspective is that fans may fully appreciate the inauthenticity of their interactions but nonetheless not opt for change because of how invested they are in particular habits, comforts, and illusions. As Meštrovic suggests, "one gets habituated to having one's emotions manipulated and will object to being forced to engage in collective effervescence to experience real emotions in the same way that the modernist is irritated by a bird's song but enjoys listening to the radio as background noise" (1997, p. 152). Keeping on the topic of simulacra and the inauthentic yet vaguely self-aware character of social relations, I now turn to the concept of parasocial relations.

2.6 Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are a foundational concept in the study of fandom, where fans develop intense emotional bonds with celebrities despite the inherently one-sided nature of these relationships. Originating from the work of Horton and Wohl (1956), PSRs reflect the illusion of a close, personal relationship between a fan and a celebrity despite the lack of reciprocal interaction. Over time, fans invest emotionally and materially in these relationships, treating the celebrity as a significant figure in their lives. This involves fans following their chosen celebrities across multiple media platforms, engaging with various forms of content, such as interviews, social media posts, and performances. This multidimensional engagement reinforces the perceived closeness between the fan and the celebrity, making the relationship feel more personal and complex than it truly is (Russell and Schau, 2014; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Jones, Cronin and Piacentini (2022) summarise five key features of fans' PSRs with celebrities: *unrequitedness, intertextuality, homophily identification, surrogacy,* and *love* (or *intimacy*).

First, the commitment that fans have for their idols is better characterised as *unrequited* rather than mutual: "the relationship is inherently one-sided and reciprocity between the two can only ever be suggested or imagined" (Jones et al., 2022, p. 722). Second, in terms of *intertextuality*, fans with parasocial attachments rarely limit their consumption of their idol to one medium or outlet. Rather, as Jones and colleagues (2022) suggest, "fans follow a celebrity – and make linkages – across multiple and intersecting sites, texts, and cultural narratives including interviews, media reports, autobiographies, behind-the-scenes exposés, and the celebrity's own oeuvre of work or content. This enables fans to feel as though they truly know a celebrity, not just as a performer but as a "real" and complete person behind their public image" (2022, p. 722).

As evidenced by the behaviours of 'EXO-Ls' (name for fans of the K-Pop boy-band EXO), fans do not merely consume music but also actively engage in practices such as attending concerts, organising fan-led events, and creating and sharing digital content like fan art and videos (Murwani et al., 2023, p. 7). These fans closely follow their idols'

activities across multiple platforms and media sources, reinforcing their attachment through continuous interaction with celebrity-related content. Additionally, fans contribute to their idols' brand by purchasing star-endorsed merchandise and collaborating on global fan projects, including mass charity drives and voting campaigns (Murwani et al., 2023, p. 10).

Third, *homophily identification*, the sense of similarity between fans and their idols, is a critical element in forming and sustaining PSRs. Homophily identification can be either objective, rooted in actual shared traits, or subjective, stemming from fans' perceptions of shared attitudes, values, or experiences (Eyal and Rubin, 2003, p. 80). Research suggests that this perceived similarity fosters stronger emotional connections, as individuals are more likely to relate to and be influenced by figures they perceive as being like themselves (Rogers and Bhowmik, 1970, as cited in Eyal and Rubin, 2003, p. 80). Laffan (2020) highlights the sense of identification with celebrity amongst K-pop fans, highlighting how fans often perceive their idols as role models whose personal struggles and achievements resonate with their own experiences, fostering a sense of motivation and admiration.

Fourth, early theories of parasocial relationships (PSRs) proposed that mass-mediated figures could serve as *surrogate* social partners for individuals who struggle with real-world connections. Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 223) theorised that celebrities are "readily available as an object of love," allowing the socially isolated or rejected to experience a semblance of companionship. Such surrogate bonds perform a compensatory function: they provide stability, emotional intimacy, and identity reinforcement for those facing social rejection—or "loveshock"—when their parasocial object disappoints. As a result, fandom can operate as a mechanism through which unmet emotional needs are substituted and regulated via mediated connections.

Fifth, *love* is an important basis for PSRs, given that fans have been known to refer to their favourite celebrities in terms approaching an intimate relationship with one's loved one – as evidenced by the case of some Barry Manilow female fans likening him

to a “lover, husband or friend” (O’Guinn, 1991, p. 105).With particular attention given to the love that fans bestow upon their idols, Jones et al. (2022) introduce the concept of "para-loveshock," which encapsulates the emotional turmoil fans experience when they "fall out of love" with a celebrity following a scandal. This concept develops and extends the idea of loveshock (Giddens, 1992), a play on “shellshock”, describing the post-traumatic disorientation and distress that occur when a loving relationship ends.

In the case of PSRs, the fan's sense of identity and emotional investment in a celebrity brand can lead to profound grief when scandals or perceived betrayal occur, and a need to legitimise this grief through social and discursive practices emerges. To illustrate, Jones and his co-authors explore how fans of Kevin Spacey managed their grief and betrayal following allegations of sexual misconduct made against the actor. Spacey fans engaged in various performative acts, such as seeking out like-minded individuals online to share their grief – a practice the authors term "grief enfranchisement" (p. 725) – allowing fans to externalise their sorrow amongst kindred spirits, making complex feelings socially visible and thus more "real". Additionally, Spacey fans indulged in "performative flagellation," where blaming themselves publicly for somehow enabling the actor's transgression or for not picking up on signs of his perversions earlier allowed them to fabricate relevance and culpability for themselves in Spacey’s life, thus legitimising their felt closeness. These coping strategies amongst others highlight the deep emotional and social entanglements that fans find themselves in with their celebrity idols, even in the absence of any genuine or substantive interactions.

Importantly, the dissolution of parasocial relationships can also catalyse the formation of anti-fan communities, which media scholar Carrie Lynn Reinhard (2018) describes as "fractured fandoms." Reinhard explores the complex dynamics by which fans, who previously engaged in communal support and collective activities, may turn to expressing their dissatisfaction and grievances communally, following disappointment by their celebrity idol. The formation of these fractured fandoms, characterised by a transition from adoration to antagonism, underscores the dual-edged nature of parasocial

relations: while they can bring individuals together in a shared experience, they also have the potential to foster division and conflict when the object of fandom no longer meets the community's expectations.

Reinhard explores how fans, despite their shared interests, experience significant discord and even harassment due to differing interpretations, opinions, and behaviours regarding their fandom's focal point (Reinhard, 2018, pp. 89-90, 106). This is seen in the way fans sometimes police each other's behaviour, creating hierarchies and divisions within the community (Reinhard, 2018, pp. 33-34). With that said, fans' emotional and psychological responses to these tensions may sometimes lead to both positive and negative dissolution of their fandom's normative frameworks, which will be further explored in the section on the notion of communitas down below.

2.7 Conclusion

In sum, the contemporary literature has moved beyond simple binaries—fan versus fanatic, community versus pathology, agency versus manipulation—to frame fandom as a multifaceted, evolving social form. It is both a refuge and a battleground, a site of identity-making and contestation, and a vital context for the negotiation of values, boundaries, and collective life in consumer culture. This complexity prepares the ground for deeper analysis of the forms and contradictions of community, belonging, and discord that structure fan worlds—topics to which the following sections now turn. Yet, as this section has shown, the literature remains divided between those who view fandom primarily through the lens of dysfunction, passivity, or alienation (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2006; Sandvoss, 2005) and those who celebrate its capacity for creativity, empowerment, and sociality (Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001; Schau and Muñiz, 2007). Within the CCT tradition, this tension is especially apparent: while some scholars emphasise the potential of fan cultures to subvert, reinterpret, or resist dominant market logics (Kozinets, 2001; Seregina and Schouten, 2017), others argue that even the most

apparently subversive fan activities may ultimately be reabsorbed by the very consumer capitalist systems they appear to challenge (Fuschillo, 2020; Sandvoss, 2005).

As a possible means of reconciling these divergent perspectives is consideration of the concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) which is sometimes invoked to capture the unique emotional and social intensity of fan gatherings, collective projects, or online communities: fans find in each other a sense of belonging, recognition, and shared identity often missing from their everyday lives (Kozinets, 2001; Schau and Muñiz, 2007; Seregina and Schouten, 2017). Through rituals of consumption, participatory creation, fans enact and reaffirm communal bonds that both mirror and depart from the more transactional logic of mainstream consumer markets (O'Guinn, 1991; Hills, 2002). However, the literature has also demonstrated that the experience of communitas within fandom is never wholly unambiguous or harmonious. The same forces that foster deep social bonds and a sense of collective purpose can also generate internal competition, exclusion, and conflict. Theories of fandom as participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018) or "utopian consumption" (Kozinets, 2001) are thus counterbalanced by emerging research on the 'dark sides' of fandom: hierarchies, gatekeeping, status competitions, and punitive mechanisms of social control (Bury, 2005; Stanfill, 2013; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Sibai et al., 2024). It is to all these aspects of the fandom experience as a whole that the next sections will turn their attention.

CHAPTER 3 COMMUNITAS

3.1 Introduction to communitas

The concept of *communitas*—first developed by Victor Turner (1969)—has become foundational for understanding moments of egalitarian bonding within consumer communities. Turner defines communitas as a "for an exhibition of values that relate to the community as a whole, as a homogeneous, unstructured unity that transcends its differentiations and contradictions" (Turner, 1969, p. 92), usually arising in liminal situations when ordinary hierarchies are suspended.

In consumer research, communitas has been invoked to explain the intense, almost sacred togetherness that can occur in subcultures of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Cova et al., 2007), fan conventions (Sandvoss, 2005), or shared "brandfest" rituals (McAlexander et al., 2002). Fandom, from this perspective, represents a "liminal zone" where devotees set aside outside distinctions to immerse themselves in collective celebration—whether at an idol's concert, a fan meet-up, or during online trending campaigns. These shared rituals create affective bonds and a sense of solidarity that sustains fan identity, often reinforced by digital platforms that enable continuous communal interaction (Kozinets, 2001, 2010; Hills, 2002, 2017). However, as both CCT and fan studies scholars increasingly recognise, this experience of communitas is rarely permanent or uncontested: hierarchies, rivalries, and mechanisms of exclusion soon emerge within the very space that once felt egalitarian (Sibai et al., 2024; Stanfill, 2019). In this light, communitas in fandom should be seen not as a static condition but as a fragile, always-contested achievement—one that is in constant tension with processes of differentiation and conflict.

Turner contrasts communitas with "structure", the normative fabric of everyday social life where individuals occupy specific roles and statuses that dictate their interactions and relationships. During certain ritualistic periods, normal social structures are temporarily suspended allowing for individuals to enter a state of communitas,

characterised by a sense of equality and comradeship as the usual social distinctions are absent or diminished (Turner, 1969, pp. 94-96). Communitas is deeply intertwined with the concept of liminality, which Turner (1969) identifies as a transitional phase that individuals experience during rites of passage. Turner (1969, p. 95) explains that in this liminal phase, individuals "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial", which contrasts sharply with the structured, hierarchical nature of everyday life.

Turner identifies three forms of communitas: spontaneous, normative, and ideological. Spontaneous communitas is the immediate, unplanned experience of unity that can arise during intense collective experiences. This form is transient and naturally occurs in situations of shared hardship or euphoria (Turner, 1969, pp. 132-133). Normative communitas, on the other hand, occurs when spontaneous communitas is organised and maintained through norms and structures to preserve the sense of togetherness. Examples include monastic communities or intentional communities that institutionalise certain practices to sustain communitas (Turner, 1969, p. 132). Lastly, ideological communitas refers to the vision or ideal of communitas that guides actions and inspires movements, often seen in utopian ideologies or religious movements that aim to create a perfect, egalitarian society (Turner, 1969, p. 132).

While Turner's concept of communitas has been influential in understanding the dynamics of communal activities, it has also faced significant criticism. Eade and Sallnow (1991) assert that the notion of pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon, where secular social structures are abrogated and egalitarian communitas is achieved, is overly deterministic and does not account for the complexity of pilgrimage experiences (Eade and Sallnow, 1991, pp. 4-5). For example, the presence of numerous shops selling religious souvenirs and the development of a bustling town around famed pilgrimage locales such as Lourdes blur the lines between sacred experience and secular tourism. Thus, Eade (1992, p. 27) points out that "the most frequent reaction of those new to Lourdes is one of horror at the commercial 'exploitation' of religious fervor." Pilgrims often view tourists as intruders

who do not share the same depth of religious commitment, a dichotomy reinforced by both physical and ideological separations between sacred spaces and the secular surroundings. However, Higgins and Hamilton (2020) counterargue this perspective by illustrating how seemingly commercialised or kitsch objects purchased by visitors can become deeply meaningful. Rather than diluting communitas, these physical artifacts often serve as crucial conduits, transporting feelings of collective belonging and emotional connection back into personal, domestic settings. Applying this insight to fandom contexts, Jessica Jung-related memorabilia—despite its commercial dimension—similarly serves not merely as symbolic markers of fan hierarchy, but also as vital objects enabling sustained emotional engagement and everyday experiences of communitas at home.

Apart from application to pilgrimages and rituals, the concept of communitas has also been extensively explored and critiqued within the realm of contemporary consumption enclaves. Arnould and Price's (1993) seminal study on commercial river rafting experiences provides an important foundation, demonstrating how communitas manifests in a sense of togetherness and mutual support among those linked by consumption interests. As the authors note, "feelings of linkage, of belonging, of group devotion to a transcendent goal are facilitated by proximity forced by the narrow canyons, small camping areas, boats, and teamwork associated with rafting itself" (Arnould and Price, 1993, p. 34). Similarly, in their exploration of high-risk leisure activities, Celsi et al. (1993) emphasise how the sense of bonding and mutual support emerges prominently in the context of skydiving. This communal bond is further reinforced through shared rituals and narratives that celebrate collective thrill and achievement (Celsi et al., 1993, p. 13). Moreover, the authors discuss the concept of "phatic communion," which is defined as a blend of shared experiences and technical language unique to the high-risk and ephemeral nature of extreme sports consumption. The concept of phatic communion originates from Malinowski (1923), who described it as a form of communication within cultural groups that provides insiders with special verbal and nonverbal cues to create and communicate their worldview. As Celsi et al. (1993) note, "There is a magic indeed in a

language whose differential codifiability makes it peculiarly suitable for the expression of an individual's most central personal and cultural experiences" (Celsi et al., 1993, p. 13).

Following the foundational work on communitas laid down by Arnould and Price (1993) and Celsi et al. (1993), subsequent CCT researchers have contributed to and expanded our understanding of how the intrusion of market dynamics, status competition, and hierarchical structures can complicate the realisation of authentic communal experiences (e.g. Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Muniz and Schau, 2011; Schau and Muniz, 2002; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Tumbat and Belk's (2011) examination of adventure tourism, for example, reveals how the emphasis on individual achievements disrupts the supposed egalitarianism of communal endeavours, leading to boundary creation and reinforcing social hierarchies. High-altitude climbers, rather than experiencing unmediated solidarity, often engage in competitive distinction, "damaging any feelings of communitas, sharing, and cooperation" (Tumbat and Belk, 2011, p. 52). Here, competition undermines the communal ethos, as individuals vie for superiority based on the style and difficulty of their climbs, as well as their associations with prestigious companies.

Similarly, Canniford and Shankar's (2013) ethnographic study of surfing communities exposes the fragility of communitas in the face of commercial influences. Surfers, in constructing romanticised experiences of nature, engage with an assemblage of cultural narratives and material geographies that require cooperation, interdependency, and community between one another. Nevertheless, the commercialisation of iconic surf sites—where the presence of amenities dilutes the authenticity of natural engagement—compromises these communal ideals (Canniford and Shankar, 2013). The ritualistic aspects of surfing become contested, highlighting how consumerism can overshadow collective experience.

Schau and Muniz (2002) further complicate the idea of communitas by exploring online fan communities, where the visibility and legitimacy of one's contributions often

lead to competitive hierarchies. In these digital spaces, individuals strive for recognition as experts, asserting their dominance within the community. The desire for status within these environments mirrors the contestation seen in physical spaces, such as with the climbers in Tumbat and Belk's (2011) study, suggesting a recurring dynamic where communal self-dissolution is undermined by individual competitiveness. Hence, the notion of negative communitas is especially pronounced in online environments, as further explored by Sibai et al. (2024).

Sibai et al.'s (2024) analysis of toxic online communities reveals a breakdown of communal ideals, where direct, structural, and cultural violence pervade. The concept of brutalisation is central to this phenomenon, where social interactions become a "theatre of cruelty" (Sibai et al., 2024, p. 22), and conflict is encouraged for entertainment. This toxic dynamic is further reinforced by structures that reward aggressive behaviour, exemplified in awards like "Meltdown of the Year" (Sibai et al., 2024), which incentivise harmful interactions and perpetuate a culture of abuse. Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt (2023) contribute in parallel to this analysis via the realm of social media influencers, where negative communitas emerges from followers' disillusionment. As influencers grow in popularity and commercialise their relationships with followers, the intimacy that initially fostered community gives way to feelings of betrayal. This erosion of trust leads to the formation of anti-fan communities, where former supporters engage in "forensic anti-fandom" (Mardon et al., 2023, p. 1143), scrutinising the actions of influencers and coordinating collective actions like boycotts. These anti-fan communities illustrate how communitas can invert into its negative form, characterised by shared grievances and a desire for retribution.

3.2 Reciprocity, tangibility and communitas

Communitas is closely related to the concept of reciprocity. Describing the exchange of tangible items as a communal practice, Mauss (1954) emphasises its three key features: the obligation to give, the obligation to take, and the obligation to return. This means that reciprocity presupposes a horizontal system of exchange in which the participants are

subject to mutual social obligations, which, in turn, are a condition for social integration. An important property of the exchange is that it is far from always associated with economic benefits and / or the benefit of the tangible stuff given (cf., Belk and Coon, 1993). Thus, for Mauss, it is important to demonstrate the social aspect of the exchange practice, which can be interpreted as an exclusively economic practice.

In the context of communitas, Higgins and Hamilton (2020) emphasise the role of material objects in pilgrimage settings, particularly focusing on how spontaneous communitas manifests through objects that act as tangible markers of the liminal space where pilgrims temporarily step outside their usual societal structures and enter a state of communitas. The material offerings left behind at Lourdes, such as religious tokens, personal mementos, or devotional objects, act as physical representations of the pilgrim's interaction with the sacred. The act of leaving an object at the site extends the moment of communitas beyond the individual pilgrim's immediate experience, symbolically binding the pilgrim to the community of others who have similarly participated in this material exchange (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020, p. 3).

This reciprocal relationship between the pilgrim and the sacred space—mediated through the exchange of material objects. In the case of pilgrimage, the objects left behind at sites like Lourdes function as both offerings to the sacred and symbolic exchanges within the community of pilgrims. The pilgrim gives a material token, often with the expectation (implicit or explicit) of receiving a form of spiritual blessing or healing in return. Pilgrims who take objects home, such as vials of holy water or religious souvenirs, maintain their connection to the pilgrimage and its associated spiritual community even after returning to their everyday lives. This portability of communitas challenges the traditional view that communitas is confined to the liminal space of the pilgrimage site. Instead, Higgins and Hamilton suggest that material objects serve as conduits for extending the transformative experience of communitas into the structured, normative spaces of everyday life (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020, p. 4).

Higgins and Hamilton's analysis of pilgrimage demonstrates how materiality enables portable communitas, wherein seemingly commercial or trivial souvenirs act as tokens of shared experience, spiritual transformation, and community belonging. Fandom—particularly in highly ritualised and commodified spaces like K-pop—exemplifies this phenomenon. Fans often purchase not only merchandise but also symbolic artefacts (e.g., photo cards, lightsticks, concert banners) that allow them to relive shared experiences, assert their group membership, and maintain a sense of emotional continuity with both the celebrity and fellow fans.

Similarly, Cox (2018) expands on the concept of "tangible communitas" through an analysis of the Wisdom Tree in Los Angeles. Here, the material offerings left behind—notes, letters, and small tokens—construct a form of secular pilgrimage where spontaneous communitas emerges among hikers and visitors (Cox, 2018, p. 33). The notes left behind in the "wish box" reflect a form of anonymous social reciprocity, where individuals contribute personal reflections, experiences, or hopes for others to read and respond to. Like in pilgrimage settings, this practice aligns with Turner's (1969) notion of spontaneous communitas, where social roles and structures are momentarily suspended, allowing for a deep sense of connection between participants, albeit through material exchanges rather than direct communication (Cox, 2018, p. 39). The reciprocal nature of these exchanges in both pilgrimage and secular settings, as observed in the studies, underscores how materiality can be central to the experience of communitas. In both studies, the authors also draw attention to the ways in which these material exchanges are embedded in broader social structures.

While spontaneous communitas, as Turner posits, can offer a temporary escape from these structures, both studies highlight how the return to normative communitas or structured social relations often follows. For instance, Higgins and Hamilton (2020) note that while pilgrims may experience moments of egalitarianism during their journey, the commodification of pilgrimage sites often reintroduces hierarchical distinctions (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020, p. 5). Similarly, Cox (2018) discusses how the transient sense of

community formed at the Wisdom Tree can be disrupted by external factors such as land privatisation, which affects access to the space and thus limits the ability of individuals to participate in this form of communal tangible item exchange (Cox, 2018, p. 50). In summary, reciprocity in communitas—whether in religious or secular contexts—extend beyond economic exchanges to encompass deeper social and spiritual bonds. Material objects serve as both symbols of this connection and vehicles through which individuals can engage in acts of reciprocity that foster a sense of belonging, even if only temporarily. This analysis draws attention to the ongoing tension between spontaneous and normative communitas, as well as the role of materiality in bridging these experiences.

3.3 Considering communitas in fandom: speculative thoughts

Fandom offers a contemporary site in which limits, gaps, irregularities, paradoxes, or unidentified aspects of communitas can be interrogated. While the aforementioned pilgrimage studies emphasise the sacred and often spiritual character of communitas, fandom – as it exists today relative to commercialised celebrity idols and the obscene levels of consumption, markets, and market-making that surrounds them – foregrounds the potentially novel conditions of its production. This raises important questions about whether communitas can exist in spaces fundamentally shaped by consumer capitalism, and if so, in what altered forms. Fandom's entwinement with digital networks, parasocial relationships, and performative identity projects also could push the boundaries of communitas theory by embedding collective feeling within asynchronous, combative, and often anonymous interactions. The fan who shares an emotional response in online forums participates in a diffuse, distributed form of communitas that is neither temporally bounded nor spatially co-present inviting a rethinking of Turner's spatial and temporal assumptions.

Of particular concern for me is that, within fandom, tangible dimensions of communitas manifest vividly through the acquisition of products and memorabilia whether collectibles, souvenirs, or branded merchandise (Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Hewer et al., 2017). The materialities of fandom not only commemorate a shared passion

but also operate as a marker of authenticity, dedication, and status within communities. The ability or inability to buy into those market-mediated materialities can decisively shape individual fan identity, thereby establishing tangible goods as critical arbiters of fandom legitimacy. Looking ahead to my own empirical context, Jessica's Goldenstars, this includes limited-edition albums, photobooks, signed merchandise, beauty products from Jessica's Blanc and Eclare brand, and multiple versions of her autobiography, etc. – oftentimes expensive tangible possessions which function not only as commemorative tokens but also as social capital within the fandom, signifying one's emotional investment and communal legitimacy.

Jessica's fans who can access and display these goods — often referred to informally as "Tu Hao fans" (土豪饭), or wealthy fans — occupy a higher status in the fan hierarchy. Their ability to purchase rare items, sponsor fan events, or engage in high-cost group orders often earns them recognition, authority, and influence within the community. By contrast, economically disadvantaged fans, sometimes self-identified or labelled as "poor fans" (穷饭), may find themselves marginalised due to their limited capacity to participate in these consumption-based rituals. Thinking speculatively about this, their lack of access to participating materially within the fandom might disqualify them from full inclusion in its communal structure. Such a dynamic would illustrate a paradox within fandom communitas: while it promises a space of affective unity and shared passion, it is also deeply entangled with consumer capitalism, where participation is frequently stratified along economic lines. In this sense, the acquisition of Jessica-related goods could function as both a medium of belonging and a mechanism of exclusion.

This interface between communitas and fandom could reveal critical tensions. Whereas Turner's communitas is theoretically grounded in temporary suspension of hierarchy, fandom cultures reintroduce, even intensify, forms of stratification. For example, access to physical goods—limited-edition merchandise, proximity to concerts, or exclusive fan zones—can become a means through which internal hierarchies are reproduced, undermining the supposed egalitarianism of fan communitas. Material

reciprocity becomes conditional on financial and geographical proximity, with fans who are unable to participate in consumption-based rituals often rendered less legitimate or "inauthentic" by community standards. Here, fandom not only draws on communitas but complicates and extends it, making visible how affective egalitarianism is continually negotiated within capitalist structures of access, visibility, and status.

In sum, theorising communitas within fandom not only could enrich our understanding of contemporary fan practices but also offers communitas theory itself new grounds for conceptual evolution. Fandom reanimates communitas as a hybrid form—part spontaneous, part commodified; part egalitarian, part hierarchical; part affective, part performative.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has revisited communitas through Turner's (1969) liminality framework and traced its uptake in consumer research to explain intense, egalitarian peaks of togetherness in extraordinary consumption settings (Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et. al, 1993; Sandvoss, 2005). It has also foregrounded sustained critiques: communitas is prone to romanticisation, and sacred sites and practices are frequently entangled with market logics (Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Eade, 1992). Rather than dismissing material culture as mere commercial "noise", recent work shows that seemingly kitsch or commercial objects can carry and extend shared meanings and affiliations (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020).

Building on Mauss' (1954) account of reciprocity as a social obligation, distinct from narrow economic exchange, this chapter highlighted how tangible reciprocity and material tokens make togetherness portable beyond the site of encounter (Belk and Coon, 1993; Higgins and Hamilton, 2020; Cox, 2018). Yet the very nature that materialise communitas also reintroduce structure. As prior studies of high-risk leisure, surfing, and online brand communities demonstrated, commercialisation, status competition, and visibility regimes quickly complicate egalitarian ideals and channel contribution into reputational currencies (Tumbat and Belk, 2011; Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Schau and

Muniz, 2002). In digital cultures specifically, platform metrics and ranking systems can reward antagonism and institutionalise toxic atmosphere, challenging any collective unity (Sibai et al., 2024).

To sum up, this chapter recasts communitas as short-lived rather than lasting, made and carried by material artefacts and visible acts of reciprocity rather than appearing from nowhere, and as uncertain in its relation to hierarchy rather than purely egalitarian. This view keeps communitas useful for naming shared emotional highs while clarifying its limits within contemporary fan cultures. It also sets up the empirical analysis that follows by asking how visible reciprocity and material artefacts, operating under platform rules, simultaneously produce belonging and solidarity even as they enable comparison, ranking, exclusion in fandoms over time.

CHAPTER 4 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

4.1 Introduction to K-pop and K-pop in China

To situate Jessica's fandom within a broader cultural and industrial framework, it is essential to understand the context of K-pop—an abbreviation for South Korean popular music—which blends influences from electropop, electronica, commercial rock, and R&B. The emergence of so-called pop idols in Asia can be traced back to Japan during the 1960s and 1970s, when television producers began cultivating the image of youthful, talented female performers in response to growing audience interest (Simone, 2019).

Produced from within South Korea and sung primarily in *hangugeo*, the regional South Korean language, K-pop has become a global cultural phenomenon, graduating from a niche regional trend in the early 1990s to becoming an international sensation. Scholars widely acknowledge the pivotal role of Seo Taiji and Boys, whose 1992 debut reshaped the South Korean music landscape by incorporating MIDI sounds and Western rap and its aesthetics with local Korean ballad style vocals (Lie, 2015; Shin, 2009). Over the next two decades, this evolved into a structured system for manufacturing idols, with televised star-search competitions becoming a preferred method for discovering talent and disseminating their image to a mass audience (Iwabuchi, 2002). The international appeal of K-Pop was later accelerated by internet-mediated communications via YouTube, TikTok and other social media that provided global access to and viral mumification of a string of Korean stars' music videos such as Wonder Girls' (2008) "Nobody", Psy's "Gangnam Style" (2012), BLACKPINK's "Kill This Love" (2019), and BTS's "Mic Drop" (2017).

A defining characteristic of the K-pop industry is its structured "rookies" training system. Prospective idols undergo extensive preparation across disciplines such as vocal technique, dance, and general performance skills. Trainees are required to pass regular evaluations—weekly, monthly, and annual performance panels—before a select few are chosen for debut based on merit and market potential.

The importance of fans' online proselytising and evangelising to others via social media communities has been so crucial to the expansion of K-Pop fandom that one Japanese-Irish commentator, Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain (2021, p. 2822), suggests that "K-pop has been popularised in the West almost solely through the emergence of a transnational digital social world of emotionally invested fans". Swift market capitalisation on K-Pop's international appeal is evidenced by - a highly industrialised production model whereby entertainment giants like SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment scout, cultivate, and mediatise future K-Pop idols through a rigorous training regime with hair-trigger sensitivity given to the latest internet-mediated tastes and trends (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2017; Oh, 2013).

It can be framed that K-pop fandom within the broader concept of "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006), where fans are not passive consumers but active creators of content, engaging in activities like fan-made videos, social media campaigns, and crowdfunding. This aligns with Lee's (2019) analysis of K-pop fans as highly organised and mobilised, especially through online platforms, where they can influence music charts, social trends, and even political discourse. Cho (2022) adds that this collective fan activism has been central to K-pop's success, particularly in amplifying its visibility across different regions of the world.

Scholars have pointed to the cultural hybridity or creolisation of the K-Pop model exemplified by adaptation of new music to Western tastes while preserving distinctively Asian roots (King-O'Riain, 2021; Mandel and Hwang, 2023; Oh, 2017; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006; Yoon, 2019). Mandel and Hwang (2023), Yoon (2019), and Shim (2006) all emphasise that K-pop's success lies in its skilful blending of local and global elements, which allows it to thrive in international markets, while King-O'Riain (2021) adds that fans are provided with relatively direct access to different masculinities and femininities than those of Western stars who hegemonise global media. Oh (2017) suggests K-Pop's runaway popularity functions as a means of decolonising Asian consumer culture by de-

centring White racial visibility and thus exorcising predominantly Western-focused celebrities from media spectacles. He writes, that through K-Pop:

> Koreanness is valorised, constructions of Asia as a racial monolith are complicated, Asian/Korean masculinity is desired, nationalism is ambivalently displaced, the West is decentred, Korean stars are admired, and Western/White subjectivities are humbled. (Oh, 2017, p. 2282)

K-pop has played a critical role in South Korea's cultural diplomacy, serving as a form of soft power (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014; Jin, 2018; Kim, 2022). Interestingly, K-Pop with all of its valorisation of Asian metropolitanism and beauty has become popular in mainland China despite the PRC’s long tradition of patriotic education campaigns which encourage celebrification of internal rather than foreign media personalities. K-Pop's success in China represents a complex interplay of cultural proximity, aspirational aesthetics, and negotiated nationalism. Wang (2022) identifies how Chinese K-pop fandom has developed within a contested space between transnational cultural flows and national identity formation. The popularity stems partly from what scholars call "cultural proximity" – the shared Confucian cultural heritage, similar beauty standards, and overlapping entertainment formats that make K-pop accessible to Chinese audiences (Fung, 2013; Chen, 2018).

Moreover, Chinese youth have embraced K-pop as an alternative modernity – one that presents a sophisticated, cosmopolitan East Asian identity distinct from Western influences while simultaneously incorporating global production values. This allows fans to participate in transnational cultural consumption while maintaining a sense of regional cultural pride (Wang, 2022). The high production quality and innovative aesthetics of K-pop also offer Chinese consumers access to aspirational lifestyle representations that resonate with their desires for upward mobility and cosmopolitan identity. However, this embrace of Korean cultural products operates within complex political boundaries. As Gong (2022) demonstrates, Chinese fans often reinterpret K-pop idols through local cultural lenses, aligning their preferences with transcultural tastes while performing what she terms "neoliberal patriotic subjectivity." This process involves fans strategically

navigating between their transnational fan identities and their obligations as Chinese citizens, particularly during periods of heightened political tension between China and South Korea. Fan practices like translating Korean content into Chinese, creating China-specific promotional materials, and celebrating idols' demonstrations of respect for Chinese culture all represent efforts to domesticate and legitimise their K-pop consumption within nationalist discourses (Wang, 2022).

The rise of Chinese members in K-pop groups has further facilitated this cultural negotiation, creating direct bridges between Korean entertainment and Chinese audiences. These Chinese K-pop idols often serve as cultural mediators, helping to localise Korean content for Chinese consumption while demonstrating to Chinese audiences that they too can succeed in the glamorous world of K-pop (Jin, 2016; Wang, 2022).

In recent years, Chinese governance of online fandom has been reshaped by the "Qing-Lang" (清朗, "Clean and Bright") 'fandom disorder rectification' campaigns led by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) from mid-2021. In June 2021, CAC launched a two-month rectification targeting fandom disorders – celebrity ranking lists, trending-chart manipulation, inducements to paid data-boosting, and abusive behaviours. Then CAC followed with a formal notice instructing platforms like Weibo to cancel any rankings about celebrity and fan-group, restrict fan club accounts, justify fundraising/bulk-purchase reduction, and strengthen management of celebrity agencies and minors (CAC, 2021). Broadcast regulation moved in parallel: the National Radio and Television Administration barred "idol-selection" shows (i.e. non-debuted rookies of idols would be on these shows to compete for the chance of debuting as a boy/girl group), restricted voting mechanisms for these shows, and prohibited monetised voting (NRTA, 2021). In practice, it narrows the range of plans Chinese fandoms can deploy at scale, trying to rechannel participation toward a more positive way.

4.2 Jessica Jung and Girls Generation

Jessica Jung, known professionally just as Jessica, is a multi-faceted artist who enjoys a vibrant career as a singer, actress, stage performer, model, and designer. She was born in San Francisco in the US and raised there until 11 years old, training for seven years with SM Entertainment (Lie, 2012) and debuting as a member of Girls Generation (or "Sonyeo Sidae" in Korean, SNSD in short) in 2007. With multiple albums, singles and duets in her discography, Jessica has expanded her reach in the entertainment industry to include stage performances and acting roles. She launched her luxury fashion/beauty brand BLANC and ECLARE in 2014, officially cementing her role as fashionista of the entertainment world.

Jessica with her fluency in Mandarin and English and strategic targeting of the Chinese market exemplifies how K-pop stars have cultivated Chinese fanbases by acknowledging the distinctiveness and importance of this audience. Jessica is one of the founding members of Girls Generation. Girls' Generation was one of the most globally successful K-pop girl groups of the pre-2010s, playing a key role in the rise of the "Korean Wave" or Hallyu, a milestone helping to establish K-pop as a global phenomenon (Jin, 2016; Lie, 2015). The group's polished image, synchronised performances, and catchy songs set a standard for K-pop groups, making them a model for subsequent acts (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014). Their 2009 hit "Gee" was a breakthrough, staying at the top of the Korean music charts for nine consecutive weeks and gaining widespread acclaim as one of the most iconic K-pop songs (Oh, 2013). Girls' Generation's official fan club, SONE, had millions of members, with estimates suggesting over 4 million registered members worldwide by 2013 (Oh, 2013). However, their actual reach extended further, as digital platforms like YouTube and social media allowed them to engage with fans globally. By 2015, they had more than 3.2 million Twitter followers and 1.5 million Instagram followers (Yoon, 2019). As Yoon (2019) notes, *"Girls' Generation's fandom was vast, organised, and deeply engaged"*.

However, Jessica posted on her Weibo at dawn on September 30th, 2014, that she "suddenly got kicked out" from the group by "the eight others and the company" and she

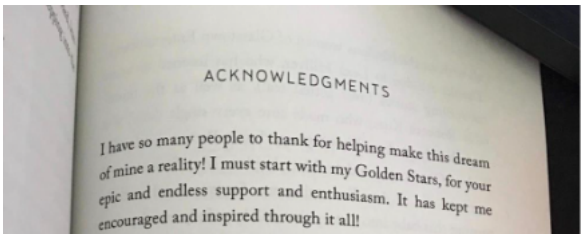
"felt devastated" (Jessica's Weibo, 2014). This incident was dubbed the "9/30" incident by fans. Although SM Entertainment officially cited scheduling conflicts due to her fashion brand, Blanc and Eclare, as the reason for termination of her role with Girls' Generation (Jin, 2018), Jessica's exit from the group triggered speculation and conspiracy theories from fans. Some fans continued to support Girls' Generation while others abruptly ended their fandom to the group and shifted their loyalty to Jessica, reflecting the complexity of idol-fan relationships in K-pop (Yoon, 2019). The latter became known as "only-Jessica" fans in reference to their new monogamous dedication to Jessica while others chose to identify as 'SONE (8)' (i.e. fans of an 8-member SNSD) or '8+1' (i.e. fans who still celebrate SNSD but wish for Jessica to be reinstated as a member). Also, there were fans who regard them as parallel idols and support both parties.

4.3 Jessica fans: "Goldenstars"

On 14 June 2016, Coridel Entertainment announced "Goldenstars" as the official name for Jessica's global fan community. The metaphor—fans as bright points of light accompanying Jessica through a dark sky—was immediately taken up across platforms as both a narrative of care and a practical badge of belonging. Within days many accounts on Weibo incorporated the "GS" tag into their handles and bios, signalling affiliation and making coordination more legible in crowded timelines. The naming consolidated an already active transnational audience into a recognisable public, while giving fans a lexicon for articulating loyalty during and after a period of reputational turbulence.

That turbulence is commonly anchored to the "9/30" incident of 30 September 2014, when Jessica's departure from Girls' Generation precipitated intense controversy and polarisation within K-pop publics. In subsequent years Jessica herself has framed that moment as the darkest period in her professional life and has attributed her recovery, in part, to the constancy of Goldenstars. In a 2022 appearance on the variety show *The Seaside Band*, she introduced a new song, "Golden Sky," as a gift to fans who "brightened

[her] sky" and "showed [her] the way" when she felt lost, explicitly linking the Goldenstars imagery to a biography of endurance and re-orientation. The published paratexts around her creative work reinforce this acknowledgement: the Acknowledgements in her debut novel *Shine* thank Goldenstars directly for their patience and support [see Fig. 2].


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have so many people to thank for helping make this dream of mine a reality! I must start with my Golden Stars, for your epic and endless support and enthusiasm. It has kept me encouraged and inspired through it all!

Fig. 2. Acknowledgement in Jessica's first book, *Shine*

This combination of symbolic anchoring, infrastructural readiness and moral vocabulary shapes the social world in which the present study is situated. The name "Goldenstars" is more than a label; it is a condensed narrative about how fans understand their role—guiding, brightening, safeguarding—and about how community worth is measured and displayed in public. It also sets the stage for the ambivalences analysed elsewhere in the thesis: the same visibility that enables rapid mobilisation also furnishes comparison cues; the same rhetoric of protection can legitimise boundary work and sanction. Because these dynamics are partly tacit and partly codified in platform practices, the researcher's insider status as an aca-fan requires careful handling. The next section situates my positionality within Goldenstars and explains the reflexive and ethical controls used to translate participation into analysis while preserving the community's privacy and integrity.

4.4 Aca-fandom and its origins

I consider myself to be an 'aca-fan' which has, in recent years, become a fairly apt classification for academics who are also fans of particular consumption objects or persons. The subject positioning of an aca-fan has been described as "a node between academic and fan communities, familiar with both languages and therefore facilitating the process of integration of knowledge and take into account the relations that the aca-fans can have with the field, models and materials they collect" (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017, p. 713). For Jenkins (1992, 2006), aca-fandom positions the researcher as both an ethnographer (with duties to one's academy) and a participant within a community of media fans (with responsibilities for one's idol and fellow fans) under investigation*, i.e.* the "insider approach to media ethnography" (2006, p. 4). The aca-fan subjectivity thus operates from a dual vantage point, embodying both the role of an interested observer and an active, participatory member of the fan community.

While others have distinguished the aca–fan from the perhaps less-scaffolded concept of 'fan scholar', the former assumed to be more academic and the latter more fannish (Brennan, 2014; Hills, 2020), Jenkins does not assume any such distinction in his use of the term, considering any opposing positions to be hybridised at best ("a hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic" Jenkins 2006, p. 7). I follow Jenkin's pragmatism here and use the term aca-fandom in reference simply to a lived subjective approach in which the researcher who is both ethnographer and fan alike draws upon one's unique insider perspective to allow access to the emotional and cultural aspects of fandom that might remain inaccessible to an outsider. However, being an aca-fan necessitates careful reflexivity to ensure that personal investments do not compromise academic rigor while academic instrumentalism does not subordinate all naturalistic fan behaviours to dispassionate theoretical explanation (Jones, 2021).

Cristofari and Guitton (2017) provide a framework that emphasises how aca-fans serve as mediators between academic discourse and the fan communities they study. They argue that aca-fans' insider status allows them to access cultural insights and emotional nuances that might be invisible to outsiders. This insider perspective enables aca-fans to

legitimise fan practices within academic contexts. For example, my role as an aca-fan in Jessica Jung's fandom provides me with the ability to critically engage with the ways in which fans co-construct Jessica's public persona, participate in fan-driven projects, and contribute to her brand's commercial success (Cristofari and Guitton, 2017, p. 716). At the same time, Cinque and Redmond (2019) highlight the ethical dilemmas that aca-fans must navigate. Their work on aca-fan conferences surrounding David Bowie explores the emotional entanglements that aca-fans experience as they both study and celebrate their object of fandom. As a member of Jessica Jung's Goldenstars for over twelve years, I am intimately familiar with this tension. My personal attachment to Jessica's career and the fandom's internal dynamics provides me with a rich perspective, but it also complicates the task of maintaining scholarly objectivity (Cinque and Redmond, 2019, p. 50). Navigating these dual roles—academic and fan—requires constant self-reflection, particularly when addressing sensitive issues like fandom hierarchies, emotional investments, and communal identity.

As Booth (2013, p. 125) mused, "The paradox of aca-fandom is that one must keep a foot in each world but not become wholly subsumed by one identity over another." In this study, aca-fandom provides the framework through which Jessica Jung's fandom is explored by me, a self-identified Goldenstar, considering how the researcher's dual role influences data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Booth (2013) further examines the ethical challenges of aca-fandom, noting that aca-fans often wield influence within the communities they study, which can shape the community's internal dynamics and alter how fan practices are perceived both by fans and by the broader public. In my case, my role as an aca-fan has positioned me not only as a participant in the Goldenstars fandom but also as someone who shapes conversations about Jessica's persona through my involvement in fan projects and social media campaigns. As Booth (2013, p. 124) points out, this dual role comes with the responsibility to critically engage with the impact of my academic work on the fandom, particularly in terms of how my analysis might influence the community's self-perception or the broader media narrative surrounding Jessica.

4.5 My fandom experience

Fig. 3: *Jessica Jung waving to the researcher's camera as reflected on the latter's X (Twitter) timeline, in 2019.*

Though I can trace my first experiences of Jessica (and feeling as though I like her and want to find out more about her) back to a faithful afternoon when I first watched her reality TV show, *Jessica and Krystal*, in 2014, I cannot recall the precise moment I identified as a "true" fan. Deconstructing my first instance of exposure to her in 2014, I vaguely remember sensing that Jessica, at that time, was enduring personal difficulties that I could empathise with and relate to. As I committed to watching further episodes of her reality show, searching for information about her online, and becoming drawn into the various products, projects, and aesthetics Jessica was attached to over the ensuing weeks and months, I now believe this marked my transition into becoming one of Jessica's most dedicated Goldenstars.

My transition went far beyond the mere consumption and enjoyment of her work as a solo artist. I committed myself to following her every public appearance around the world—including at airports, fashion shows, brand events, fan signings, and fan meetings. I racked up considerable travel over my life as a fan. See Fig. 3, which is a screenshot of a post I made on Twitter reporting on Jessica attending the 2019 Cannes International Film Festival. I had travelled to the festival specifically to see Jessica and when she saw my camera flashing from the crowd, she posed specifically for me. Much to my delight,

Jessica later used two of these photos of mine, posting them on her own Instagram and Weibo.

Besides huge amounts of air travel undertaken to follow Jessica's itineraries around the world, I watched every available video clip I could find featuring Jessica and invested substantial financial resources in supporting both her solo musical releases and the commercial success of her fashion brand. In addition, I voluntarily assumed the role of administrator for one of her largest fan websites in China, where I contributed to enhancing her digital presence through data visualisation—such as rankings, charts, and award tracking—and worked to strengthen her fan community within the region.

Recognising that Jessica lacked substantial fan support outside of China and South Korea, I personally established a UK-based fan-page for her in 2015. For fandoms, it is always better when a celebrity has as many active fan-sites /fan pages as possible, which shows their reach and popularity. The reason why I chose to create a UK fan-page is because while Jessica has fairly pronounced (and vocal) Korean, Chinese, and Thai fan communities, I felt that she did not have much of a dedicated online European following. At least not of the same magnitude of the communities coming out of Asia. Accordingly, under a pseudonym[1], I created a framework for those throughout the UK to come and post, and I uploaded as many photographs from her public schedules as possible, carefully avoiding the disclosure of my personal identity to other fans. The reason for not revealing my real identity through the fan-site is conventional in the sense that site administrators rarely (if ever) "out" themselves to their peers in K-Pop fandom. But also, more importantly, the tradition of anonymity is built on recognition that one's peers can be protective and sometimes vindicative. Fan wars, either internal or external, often escalate into personal attacks.

[1] I agonised over whether to include my 'real' pseudonym here and the real name of the website(s) I established but, out of respect to the fans who value anonymity both of themselves and their administrators, I have redacted these details from the thesis.

My accumulation of merchandise and products associated with Jessica —including fashion items, albums, branded merchandise, and other memorabilia—provides visual documentation of my personal journey as a Goldenstar, represents a key dimension of my engagement as a fan, and offers a tangible reflection of the affective and economic investments that characterise contemporary celebrity fandom (see Fig 4 – 10). Within the broader context of fan studies and material culture, collecting practices are not merely acts of consumption; rather, they serve as performative and symbolic gestures that reaffirm identity, loyalty, and emotional connection to the celebrity figure (Sandvoss, 2005; Hills, 2002). Belk (1995) notes that collectors often imbue their objects with emotional meanings, treating them as extensions of themselves. Within fandoms, signed editions are particularly coveted, as they represent a direct link to the idol, amplifying their significance. These collections represent more than material accumulation; they embody acts of devotion, identity construction, and community signalling that resonate with broader themes in consumer culture and fandom studies. As Belk (1995) asserts in his seminal work on collecting, the act of accumulating and displaying items is deeply tied to notions of self-extension and the creation of personal meaning.

Fig. 4. 'With love, J' - the first solo album of Jessica's.

A large part of my fandom, as it is with many K-Pop fans, is buying up multiple copies of the same album. In Figure 4, the 418 copies of Jessica's debut solo album, *With Love, J*, were purchased by me as part of a gift tradition in K-pop fandoms, where fans align symbolic numbers with the idol's milestones (in this case, Jessica's birthday, April 18). Sending receipts (proof of purchase) as gifts further reinforces the relational dynamic between the fan and idol, transforming private acts of consumption into public declarations of devotion. This act reflects what might be considered to be sacred consumption (Belk et al., 1989), where the items collected transcend their material form to acquire sacred significance through their association with the idol. The bulk-buying is done too as a kind of brute financial support for the celebrity idol (i.e. they get more sales, this puts them higher in the charts) but, more cynically, the more a fan buys, the better the chance they have at meeting their idol. With most K-pop stars' commercial releases – including Jessica's – each album copy purchase grants an entry into a raffle to win a chance to meet the star in person at a signing. The more copies that a fan buys, the more raffle entries they receive, significantly increasing their chances which, naturally, is an incentive to bulk-buy copies of albums.

Fig.5: One of my cats, Dora, sitting with my collection.

In Fig. 5, we see an image of my cat sitting amongst multiple copies of Jessica's books, *Shine* and *Bright*, which I own – some of which are signed versions. I include this image because I think it neatly captures the interplay between the things that matter most to me: my beloved pet and fandom collectibles which have pride of place in my home.

Fig.6: Me, sitting in front of the TV in Seoul, in 2016.

In Fig. 6, I can be seen watching Jessica's reality beauty show while peeling off the cellophane from the many copies of *With Love, J* I had purchased in Seoul so these could easily be brought back to China. Without their cellophane covering, the items would appear "used" – not brand-new – and thus be declared for personal use rather than flagged by customs for the intention to sell. Eventually I did carry these all back to China but still got penalised by the Boarder Control for 1,000 RMB for carrying excessive amount of music copies.

Fig.7: Each album contains one photocard.

In Fig. 7, we can see the photocards that come inside the album copies. Here, the specific cards taken from the copies of *With Love, J* I bulk-bought in Seoul are stacked neatly. This photo was taken by myself while checking to see if I got the whole package of 10 versions. Figures 6 and 7 together highlight the tactile and ritualistic aspects of collecting, such as peeling off album covers and checking for complete photocard sets. These acts align with McCracken's (1988) theory of rituals of possession, where the process of interacting with items imbues them with personal meaning. The photocard tradition, a hallmark of K-pop, adds a gamified element to collecting, turning each acquisition into an opportunity for surprise and completion, reflecting the role of scarcity and exclusivity in enhancing the desirability of collectibles (Belk, 1995).

Fig.8: Some of the copies I bought for Jessica's third solo album, called *My Decade.*

Figure 8 depicts two full boxes of my bulk-purchases of Jessica's third solo album, *My Decade*. Such extensive collections underscore the link between conspicuous consumption and status within fan communities. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital is applicable here, as the size and exclusivity of one's collection often function as markers of prestige and devotion. Within Jessica's fandom, collections are not only personal artifacts but also tools for social signalling, contributing to the implicit hierarchies that define the community.

Fig. 9 and 10: Some of the items I bought from her fashion brand BLANC and ECLARE

The products I have collected in relation to Jessica—ranging from fashion items and albums to rare, branded merchandise—represent more than material commodities; they serve as affective anchors through which I articulate my identity, dedication, and emotional connection to her as a celebrity figure. These items embody not only personal memories and milestones within my fan journey but also reflect the structured interplay between commercial media industries and individual fan agency (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). In the context of K-pop's hybridised and globally networked cultural economy, such collecting practices further illuminate the role of fans as active participants in shaping celebrity value and sustaining brand presence across borders (Chin and Morimoto, 2013; Jung, 2011). The collection, then, functions both as an intimate archive of affective labour and a public statement of fandom affiliation—reinforcing the notion that material culture is central to the lived experience of contemporary fanhood (Sandvoss, 2005; Gray et al., 2007).

CHAPTER 5 METHODOLOGY

5.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the research design used to explore the Goldenstars fan community. The following sections describe each component of the methodology in turn, beginning with the underlying research philosophy and the researcher's positionality, then moving to the rationale for adopting an ethnographic approach, and finally explaining the data collection and analysis procedures.

5.1 Research philosophy – an interpretivist paradigm

The research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which holds that social reality is subjective and constructed through meaning-making processes, best understood by interpreting the perspectives of those immersed in the context. The interpretivist paradigm aligns well with the objectives of the thesis. The phenomena of interest – jealousy, rivalry, and community conflict – are deeply embedded in social context and subjective experience. They cannot be quantified or experimentally isolated without stripping away their meaning. Instead, they must be understood from the inside, through the words, emotions, and actions of fans themselves. The interpretivist approach allowed me to use methods like participant-observation and open-ended interviewing, which are flexible and responsive to emergent insights. It also meant that as patterns surfaced inductively from the data, I could refine my understanding iteratively rather than being locked into a rigid hypothesis-testing mode. In framing the research philosophy, it is important to clarify why interpretivism was chosen over other paradigms.

Rejecting a purely positivist design was also a conscious decision grounded in ethical and practical considerations. A positivist study might treat fans as research subjects from whom data is extracted, whereas an interpretivist ethnography treats fans as *participants* and partners in meaning-making. In the context of this study, a positivist

approach (perhaps a survey of fan attitudes or a quantitative content analysis of posts) would likely fail to capture the nuanced emotions and culturally specific behaviours that define the Goldenstars fandom – for example, the tone of sarcastic humour fans uses, or the unspoken rules that govern their interactions. Interpretivism, on the other hand, is *inherently sensitive* to these subtleties. It embraces understanding, aiming for an empathetic and context-rich grasp of human behaviour rather than broad generalisations (Geertz, 1973, p.5). By adopting interpretivism, I acknowledge that my role as a researcher is to interpret and derive meaning from the data (interactions, narratives, etc.), recognising that there can be multiple valid interpretations of the same phenomenon. Given my own position as a member of this community, it was crucial to adopt a philosophy that respects the insider perspective and the co-construction of knowledge. Interpretivism provided a framework for engaging with participants in a dialogical manner, where their interpretations of events are not just data points but central to the analysis. It also allowed me to integrate my reflexivity (acknowledging how my identity and feelings influence the research) into the knowledge production, rather than trying to suppress or "objectify" it.

A *post-positivist* or realist approach (seeking a single underlying "truth" but allowing for qualitative data) was considered too limiting given the fluid and constructed nature of fan discourse. Meanwhile, a *social constructionist* perspective is actually quite close to interpretivism in acknowledging that reality is constructed through social processes – indeed, this study does assume that the realities of "being a true fan" or "being jealous" are socially constructed within the fandom. The distinction is largely one of emphasis: interpretivism in this thesis emphasises understanding the individual and collective meanings that fans attribute to their experiences, while social constructionism might focus more on how broader social forces and discourses produce those meanings. In practice, both views inform the research, but I lean on interpretivism to foreground the agency of fans in creating and navigating their world of meanings.

In summary, the interpretivist paradigm set the stage for a qualitative inquiry attuned to context, meaning, and complexity. It acknowledges that my findings are themselves an *interpretation* of a cultural reality, constructed through continuous interaction with participants and data. This stance does not seek immutable laws of fan behaviour, but rather a deep understanding of *how and why* this fan community experiences both unity and discord. Embracing this paradigm ensured that the methodology remained flexible, human-centred, and sensitive to the rich tapestry of fan culture under study.

5.2 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Situated within an interpretivist approach, my positionality as an "aca-fan" (see Chapter 4) became both an asset and a challenge that required careful reflexive management. This positioning challenges traditional notions of scholarly detachment, instead centring on the assumption that insider knowledge and emotional investment can enhance rather than compromise research quality. Early debates centred on whether fan-scholars could maintain sufficient analytical distance, with critics suggesting emotional investment inevitably compromised objectivity (Brooker, 2002). However, as interpretive and autoethnographic approaches gained acceptance, the question shifted from whether aca-fans could produce valid research to how they could best leverage their positioning for scholarly insight (Hills, 2002; Cristofari and Guitton, 2017; Wohlfeil, 2011; 2012; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). The methodological implications of insider-outsider positioning have been extensively theorised in qualitative research. The insider researchers possess cultural intuition and access advantages yet face challenges of over-familiarity and potential bias (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; Fleming, 2018; Mercer, 2007). The insider-outsider boundary is often more fluid than binary, with researchers occupying multiple, shifting positions throughout the research process (Bruskin, 2019; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Merton, 1972). In this study, I navigated this tension by embracing what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) term the "space between", leveraging insider access and empathy

while maintaining analytical distance through systematic reflexivity and external peer debriefing.

Handling my closeness to the subject matter as a committed fan demanded rigorous reflexivity to ensure it did not compromise the research. The risk of bias is the most obvious concern – my personal admiration for Jessica or my friendships within the fandom could have subconsciously influenced which issues I noticed or how I interpreted certain behaviours. I confronted this risk by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study, where I recorded not only observations but also my own reactions, assumptions, and worries about potential blind spots. For instance, when I felt defensive reading a harsh criticism of Jessica by a participant, I noted that emotional response in my journal and later discussed it with my academic supervisors to check whether it was affecting my analysis.

Engaging in such reflexive practices helped me distinguish between when I was wearing the "fan hat" and when I was wearing the "researcher hat," and to be transparent about the inevitable interplay between the two. Rather than trying to erase my fan perspective (an impossible and arguably undesirable task), I used it as another source of data – something to be analysed and questioned. This approach aligns with the idea that an aca-fan's insider position, if handled openly, can serve as a "vital contextual position" that adds affective insight without claiming any ultimate authority over the subject (Phillips, 2018). In other words, my interpretations were always provisional, and I continually sought to validate them against what other fans said or what the data showed, rather than assuming my insider view was automatically correct.

Another dimension of positionality is how my presence and identity affected the field environment. In fandom settings (both online and offline), it is natural for each fan to have their own alias or nickname for other fans' recognitions, instead of revealing our real names. I was known to some by my fan alias "E", a bold and early-age English name I chose for myself from the middle school, (and even by a somewhat derisive nickname "Dr. E" once I started the PhD) meaning participants were aware I was researching them.

Such awareness could have influenced their behaviour; for example, fans might have moderated their expressions of dissatisfaction or avoided venting negative feelings in front of me – not necessarily out of fear of academic judgement, but rather because of my established reputation and status within the community itself. I mitigated this by building rapport and emphasising my fan identity first in most interactions, allowing the academic role to take a back seat. During interviews, I used language and a tone that felt peer-to-peer rather than formal interviewer, and I often shared a bit of my own fan experiences to create a reciprocal trusting atmosphere. Still, I remained alert to performative responses. In one interview, for instance, a participant gave very diplomatic answers about conflicts in the fandom, perhaps because she knew I was recording for research. Only after we officially ended the interview and chatted informally did she express more candid (and negative) opinions. I treated such moments as insight into how my positionality might be shaping the data – recognising that power dynamics (researcher vs. participant, even as fellow fans) can never be entirely erased. To address this, I sometimes followed up in writing (via chat) with participants in a more casual setting, giving them a chance to add or clarify anything once the "research spotlight" was off. This approach often yielded richer information and also underscored to me the importance of reading between the lines of formal data for what might have been left unsaid.

Being an insider also meant I had pre-existing relationships in the community that influenced recruitment and data collection. Gaining access to certain private WeChat groups, for example, was only possible because of contacts I had made over years as a fan. Those gatekeepers vouched for me, which was tremendously helpful for the research, confirming observations in the literature that an aca-fan's embeddedness can be "useful (and sometimes necessary) for gaining access" to hidden fan spaces (Hansal and Gunderson, 2020). On the flip side, there were a few fans who harboured personal grievances against me (stemming from past fan project disagreements) and refused to participate in interviews or forums where I was present. This introduced a subtle bias: the voices of certain dissenting individuals or subgroups in the fandom might be underrepresented in my data simply because my presence was a deterrent to them.

Acknowledging this limitation, I made note of those individuals' known positions from secondary sources (e.g. posts they made in forums where I wasn't present) to ensure their perspective was at least factored into my understanding. I also reflect on this in the thesis discussion as part of the community's social dynamics (after all, the fact that some fans "boycotted" the researcher is itself telling of internal splits).

In all, I treated my own experience as another layer of data, subject to the same critical analysis as any interview transcript or observation. Throughout the research, I maintained an ethical commitment to honestly represent the community while also subjecting my interpretations (including those informed by my insider feelings) to scholarly scrutiny. This reflective balancing act is documented in the methodology to demonstrate rigor. By openly articulating how my fan identity intersected with my research activities, I aim to contribute to the evolving conversation on aca-fan methodologies – showcasing that it is possible to leverage one's insider status to enrich research, so long as one remains vigilant about reflexivity, ethics, and the plurality of truths within the field of study.

5.3 Adoption of an ethnographic methodology

Given the interpretive and exploratory nature of the inquiry, ethnography was adopted as the overarching methodological approach. Ethnography is well-suited for studying consumer cultures and communities because it involves deep immersion in the participants' natural environment to understand their practices, values, and interactions in context. A fan community can be seen as a subculture with its own micro-level culture, and ethnography is the classic method for understanding subcultures from the inside. It allowed me to see not just *what* fans do or say, but *how* and *why* they do so, as embedded in a web of meanings. For example, rather than merely noting that fans sometimes scold each other, ethnography let me observe the surrounding circumstances, the unspoken rules invoked ("true fans should…"), and the emotional tones, thus revealing what such

scolding *means* in the context of Goldenstars' values. Moreover, ethnography aligns with CCT's methodological preference for naturalistic inquiry (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), where understanding is generated through prolonged engagement and empathy with consumer informants in their everyday lives. Ethnography's emphasis on *naturalistic observation* and *participant engagement* aligns with the need to observe organic fan behaviour (such as spontaneous online arguments or collaborative fan projects) rather than relying solely on after-the-fact reports. It also allows for iterative learning – as I observed new phenomena or heard new stories, I could adapt my focus and questions in real time, a flexibility crucial for uncovering an emergent concept.

In practice, the ethnography in this research was a multi-sited ethnography spanning both online and offline locales of fan activity. I engaged with the fandom over a period of approximately 12 months (from April 2022 to March 2023 as the concentrated data collection period). Offline, this included attending fan gatherings or events when possible (though many interactions among Chinese fans occur online, especially due to geographic dispersion and fans privacy protection). Online, it meant "living" in the fan's digital world – regularly visiting and interacting in Weibo, following WeChat group conversations, monitoring relevant Twitter hashtags, and so forth. I adopted the role of a participant-observer, meaning I was not a silent lurker; I occasionally took part in discussions, "liked" posts, or even mediated minor disputes, as any regular fan might. These actions helped me build rapport and also provided firsthand insight into the practices under study.

That said, ethnography as a method comes with well-known challenges, and it was important to acknowledge and address its limitations in this study. One major limitation is the issue of researcher subjectivity and bias – particularly acute here due to my insider role though I took steps to mitigate this by maintaining rigorous reflexive practices (detailed in Section 3.3) and by seeking external "checks" on my interpretations. Another limitation, as Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) point out, is that ethnographic insights are often deep but narrow, tied to the specific contexts the researcher could physically (or virtually) be in. While ethnography offers unparalleled contextual richness, it is important

to acknowledge its scope and boundaries. Ethnographic insights are necessarily situated in specific times and spaces, and no single researcher can capture every community interaction. In this study, it was impractical to witness every important fan interaction: key conversations might happen in private chats where I had no access, or during hours I was offline. In this digital age, fan communities operate continuously across multiple platforms, making comprehensive observation challenging. When direct observation wasn't possible—such as in private conversations or during offline hours—I supplemented ethnographic data with interview accounts and retrospective discussions with participants. The multi-method design was partly designed to extend ethnographic reach: what one method could not capture, another often could.

Importantly, some fan interactions are intentionally kept private or are sensitive (for instance, venting about the idol or about other fans in closed groups). As an ethnographer, I had to negotiate entry into these spaces without violating ethical boundaries. In some cases, my insider status eased this – I was naturally part of certain group chats and circles of fans who trusted me, so I could observe interactions there. In other cases, I had to request permission or rely on introductions (e.g. asking a fan friend to invite me into a chat group of senior Goldenstars). Not all attempts were successful; a few elite fan groups were wary of an academic presence, and I respected their wish for privacy. Where access was not granted, I did not "snoop" covertly. I strictly avoided any deceptive practices (like fake identities) to infiltrate groups, as that would breach ethical standards and community trust. I instead gathered what I could from publicly available data or second-hand reports. For example, I learned about one internal fan club dispute through a series of Weibo posts that obliquely referenced it, even though the discussions themselves happened in a private forum I couldn't join. In my notes, I carefully marked such instances as partial information. By acknowledging these gaps, I remain transparent about the limits of my observational data – not every corner of the fandom could be illuminated.

Finally, ethnography is time and labour intensive, often yielding an overwhelming amount of qualitative data that can be challenging to organise and analyse. Indeed, over

the course of fieldwork I accumulated hundreds of pages of field notes, chat logs, and social media screenshots, alongside interview transcripts and personal journal entries. Managing this volume required disciplined record-keeping and systematic analysis methods (described in Section 3.6 on Data Analysis). One strategic decision was to focus my observations on the most relevant thematic occurrences, and the ethnography became increasingly *purposive* as it progressed. This helped prevent data overload and ensured that the time-intensive nature of ethnography was directed efficiently toward the phenomena of interest: insights from one method often informed and sharpened my approach in another (for example, an intriguing netnography observation would prompt a specific question in subsequent interviews).

5.4 Data collection methods

5.4.1 Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI)

As both a researcher and a long-standing insider in Jessica Jung's fan community, I made systematic use of my own experiences through Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI). SPI is a method wherein the researcher's personal reflections, emotions, and memories about the phenomenon of interest are recorded and analysed as data (Gould, 1991; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). It is rooted in the tradition of autoethnography and phenomenological inquiry in consumer research, acknowledging that the researcher's lived experience can provide unique insights into consumer behaviour that might be inaccessible through external observation alone. In the context of this study, SPI served as a bridge between academic analysis and emotive fan perspective – it allowed me to capture the immediate, visceral reactions of a fan in the wild, which could then be examined with a critical research lens. A note is warranted that some aspects of SPI – particularly anecdotal personal stories or observations about my own fandom consumption, like my Jessica merchandise collection or event participation – were initially drafted in an earlier chapter on researcher context. To avoid redundancy, I refer

readers to Chapter 1's personal reflection for background and focus here on the methodological role of those personal experiences. Thus, only new or methodologically relevant introspective insights are detailed in this section, ensuring a clear separation between narrative background and analytic introspection.

Introspection permits researchers to delve into the subjective realm of consumption experiences, revealing feelings and thoughts that respondents themselves might not articulate in interviews or surveys (e.g. Gould 1991). Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) describe how carefully documented introspection can be a valid qualitative technique, especially when triangulated with other methods. Key strengths of SPI include its ability to surface tacit knowledge – those taken-for-granted understandings and emotional undercurrents that participants might assume "everyone knows" and thus leave unsaid. However, the method also requires a high degree of self-discipline and reflexivity, since the introspecting researcher must strive to be as honest and clear-eyed as possible about their own experience and remain aware of potential self-confirmation biases. The value of SPI has been demonstrated in prior consumer culture research on high-involvement consumption (Holbrook, 1986; 1995) and in studies where the researcher has *insider* status (such as Belk and Kozinets' explorations of collector communities or Wohlfeil's accounts of his fandom of a movie actress, where researchers' personal passions informed the study). These works underscore that insider accounts, when methodically collected, can enrich understanding by providing an emic (insider's) viewpoint to complement etic (outsider's) observations.

In terms of my adoption of SPI, at the outset, I recognised that I had already unwittingly been doing a form of introspection throughout my years as a fan – mentally noting my feelings during fan events, comparing my reactions to others', and so forth. To harness this systematically, I began keeping an introspective journal from the start of the formal research period (September 2021). In this journal, I wrote regular entries related to the research themes. These entries included: descriptions of my emotional reactions to notable fandom incidents, recollections of past experiences in the community that

suddenly seemed relevant to emerging findings, and meta-cognitive notes questioning *why* I might feel a certain way. I maintained this journal concurrently with field notes, often writing an introspective entry immediately after an observational session. For instance, after observing a heated Weibo argument among fans, I would document the facts in my field notes, then separately write an introspective account of how it felt as a fan to witness that – Was I angry? Embarrassed for the fandom's image? Did it echo something I had felt before? This separation of "observation log" and "introspection log" was important to prevent my personal feelings from bleeding into the objective recording of events, while still capturing them for later analysis.

Because much of the fandom interaction was online and in Chinese (my native language), some introspective entries were essentially "think-aloud" translations of my emotional state. For example, during Jessica's 2022 birthday celebration, I participated in a fan crowdfunding project, writing in my journal not only about what I did, but *how I felt* working alongside peers, facing setbacks together, seeing our project succeed, and getting to appreciate Jessica's acknowledgement of our efforts. Of note here too, I recorded the *tinge of competitiveness* I felt knowing that other fan clubs were doing projects too. Such nuanced feelings (pride *and* rivalry intertwined) might not emerge readily in interviews, yet they are crucial for understanding phenomena like intra-fan competitiveness. Capturing these in the moment was a key benefit of SPI. On another occasion, when a prominent fan ("Katherine") showed off an extravagant purchase (hundreds of albums to boost Jessica's sales), I recorded my immediate reaction: I was impressed but also somewhat put off – a mix of admiration for her dedication and irritation at what struck me as an attention-seeking performance. This personal reaction alerted me to a broader sentiment that I later found many other fans shared (which became a theme of resentment towards displays of wealth in the fandom). In this way, my introspections often served as an early barometer for issues to investigate more deeply with others.

To ensure rigor in the SPI process, I followed a few self-imposed guidelines. I wrote entries promptly to avoid memory decay or post-hoc rationalisation. I included as much concrete detail as possible – e.g. instead of writing "I felt jealous," I would elaborate: "When I saw the photo of Katherine's wall of purchased albums, my stomach clenched and I had an involuntary thought: 'I'll never be able to do that, does that make me less of a fan?'." Such detail provides richer material for later analysis and helps differentiate layers of emotion (in this case, a mix of envy and self-doubt). I also frequently cross-referenced my introspective notes with other data. If I introspected about a WeChat group conversation that upset me, I would later compare it to how interviewees described that same conversation, to check whether my personal take aligned with or diverged from others'. This practice is akin to *analyst triangulation*, treating my perspective as one "analyst" and my participants as another. If they diverged significantly, it prompted deeper inquiry – perhaps my position in the community (say, being slightly more senior) gave me a different outlook than a newer fan, highlighting the importance of positional perspectives within the fandom.

Ethically, SPI did not pose direct risks to others since it was about my own experiences. However, I was cautious when my introspections involved other people in the community. If I wrote about conversations or incidents involving specific individuals, I anonymised those in my notes just as I would in formal field notes (using pseudonyms or initials), in case those notes were ever seen by others or included in analysis. Moreover, I treated my introspective insights as *highly personal* data that required the same confidentiality as interview data – I did not share my private journal with anyone. Portions of it were used in analysis and appear (anonymously) in the thesis as illustrative examples of fan sentiment, but always in a way that focuses on the phenomenon, not on me as an individual. One unique step I took was to sometimes bring my introspections back to participants for feedback through member-checking. In two interview sessions with fans I knew well, I experimented with this: I described a feeling I had (for example, "Sometimes I feel anxious or 'less than' when I see other fans donating large sums") and asked if they ever felt similarly. This approach carries a risk of introducing bias (it could

lead the interviewee to simply agree), so I did it sparingly and only when the rapport was strong enough that I trusted the participant to be frank (one friend laughed and said, “Yes! Finally, someone admits it. I thought I was the only petty one,” whereas another said, “Actually no, I don’t feel that way – I just feel proud of them,” which was enlightening as a contrasting viewpoint). This reflective member-checking helped validate that some of my introspective discoveries were not purely idiosyncratic, while also reminding me that fan experiences are diverse.

Overall, SPI proved to be a valuable tool that complemented the netnographic and interview data. It gave me a window into the *implicit fan etiquette and emotions* that might otherwise remain hidden. For instance, through introspection I became acutely aware of an “implicit community etiquette” around not bragging about one’s expenditures – I noticed my own discomfort when I almost posted about buying 10 albums (worried it might seem boastful). This tacit norm only fully surfaced because I felt it internally; later, I saw it play out in the data (fans quietly policing those who show off). Thus, my personal introspections often foreshadowed analytical themes, allowing me to trace how my individual feelings were reflective of broader social dynamics in the fandom. Moreover, SPI enhanced reflexivity: by documenting how my positionality might shape my interpretations, I could better separate which insights were widely applicable, and which might be “just me.” Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) argue that such reflexive introspection can increase the trustworthiness of autoethnographic work by exposing the researcher’s perspective to scrutiny. In this study, making my biases and feelings visible (at least to myself and in analysis) helped me guard against projecting my views onto participants’ statements. To illustrate the impact of SPI on the findings: In Chapter 6 (Jealousy), one sub-theme revolves around “financial displays and implicit hierarchy.” My introspective notes about feeling uneasy with overt displays of wealth directly informed this line of inquiry. I realised that what I felt was not isolated – indeed, interviews and observations confirmed that many fans share a resentment of those who seem to “buy” status. Similarly, in Chapter 7 (Vengeance), I discuss the emotional complexity of witnessing fan shaming. My introspection captured not only my ethical

disapproval of such shaming, but also the peer pressure I felt to join in or stay silent so as not to seem disloyal. These layered emotions were crucial for interpreting why otherwise kind fans engage in vicious online pile-ons – an insight that might have been lost without the introspective angle revealing that mix of conviction and angst within a fan (in this case, myself).

5.4.2 Netnography

Netnography was one of the main pillars of my data collection, as a significant portion of Goldenstars fandom activity takes place online. Netnography is a qualitative research method, pioneered by Kozinets (1998; 2010), that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities and computer-mediated interactions to understand their cultural practices and meanings. Like ethnography, netnography is naturalistic and contextual, observing people in their own "digital habitat" without manipulating conditions. It typically entails collecting data from online forums, social media platforms, chat groups, or any virtual space where community discourse occurs. The researcher may take on an overt role (openly interacting as a member) or a more passive role (lurking and recording) depending on the context and ethical considerations. Netnography has become increasingly important in consumer research as more consumer communities (brand fan clubs, hobby groups, fandoms, etc.) have significant online presences. It offers several advantages: access to larger and more diverse sample of interactions than might be feasible face-to-face, the ability to capture spontaneous, naturally occurring conversations, and often, a rich archive of historical posts and media that can be analysed retrospectively. However, it also introduces challenges, such as determining the authenticity of online identities, navigating ethical issues of consent in public vs. private online spaces, and interpreting text without the benefit of offline social cues.

In consumer research literature, netnography is praised for its immersive yet efficient nature – it is less time- and cost-intensive than full offline ethnography yet can yield comparably deep insights if done rigorously. Kozinets (2015) and others have updated netnographic practice to account for the explosion of social media, noting that contemporary netnography often deals with multimedia content and rapid, transient conversations (Kozinets, 2020). Researchers have applied netnography to topics like brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), online health support groups, and of course, fandoms and virtual communities of entertainment consumers. One key methodological emphasis in netnographic literature is cultural fluency – the researcher should strive to become "fluent" in the symbolic language and norms of the online community. In my case, being already a member of the Goldenstars online fandom gave me a head start in cultural fluency. Another emphasis is ethical research conduct: Kozinets (2002; 2010) suggests that researchers should adhere to norms of the community and seek permission/consent where appropriate, even if the data is in the public domain, because participants' *perception* of privacy matters. I kept this in mind throughout my netnographic work.

The primary platforms I focused on were Weibo, particularly Jessica's Super Topic (a dedicated forum-like section on Weibo for her fans); WeChat, through several private group chats of fans; and Twitter (X), which some Chinese fans use in a more international fandom context. Each of these platforms offers a different texture of interaction: Weibo Super Topic is semi-public and highly structured around posts and comments; WeChat groups are private, invite-only chatrooms with more intimate, rapid-fire discussion; Twitter is public but less central for Chinese fans except for interacting with global fandom trends. By covering all three, I aimed to capture both the public-facing and backchannel communications of the fandom. My netnography began with identifying key online sites of fan convergence. Leveraging my insider knowledge, I already knew the major Weibo fan pages and had been a member of Jessica's Super Topic for years. I formally mapped out these sites in a field diary: for example, I listed the top 5 fan-run Weibo accounts (like big fan pages that organise projects), relevant hashtags, and the

known WeChat groups segmented by topic (one group for album sales coordination, one for general chat, etc.). I obtained entry into two additional WeChat groups during the research that I wasn't previously in, by asking contacts to introduce me; one was a group of "old guard" fans who were mostly in their 30s and had followed Jessica from her early days – I suspected their perspective on newer fan behaviours would be illuminating (indeed it was). These introductions were made transparently: I was introduced as a fellow fan and researcher writing about the fandom, and I made sure group members were comfortable with me observing. In any quotes or analysis, I anonymised usernames to protect privacy.

During netnographic data collection, I used a mix of non-participatory observation and active participation. On Weibo, I mainly observed and collected data without instigating discussions. I regularly scrolled through the Super Topic feed, noting trends: for instance, recurrent complaint posts, popular fan art, or emerging community slang. I screenshot or saved posts and comment threads that were relevant to jealousy or conflict (e.g., a thread where fans debated whether a certain wealthy fan was "showing off" or just supporting Jessica). On WeChat groups, given their private nature, I participated more naturally as a member. I chatted, shared my opinions on benign topics, and occasionally asked questions like "Did anyone see that Weibo drama earlier today? What was that about?" to get context (only when I truly missed context). I drew a line at not influencing conversations about the core topics of my research: for example, if a group was discussing another fan's behaviour critically, I did not lead the conversation or volunteer my analysis; I mostly listened, occasionally asking a neutral question ("I wonder why she did that?") to encourage elaboration. My role here was a participant-observer – fully present as a fan, but with a researcher's eye on collecting insights.

A crucial part of my netnography was the systematic recording of data. I logged into these platforms daily (multiple times a day for Weibo) during peak periods of fan activity (such as Jessica's birthday, a new song release, or any notable incident in the fandom). I saved transcripts of WeChat group chats during particularly salient discussions – I would

copy-paste the chat text into a document (excluding any unrelated chatter) and then later annotate it with my observations or initial interpretations. For example, in a chat where fans were venting about "ungrateful new fans" who allegedly only joined for hype and not true love of Jessica, I copied the conversation and noted how certain keywords kept appearing. These terms and the tone indicated an in-group vs out-group mentality within the fandom. I highlighted this as early evidence of a legitimacy discourse. On Weibo, I used its search and hashtag following functions to not miss discussions of interest. This helped me catch posts that I might otherwise scroll past. I also paid attention to counter-narratives – for instance, if someone posted defending a fan who was being dogpiled, that perspective was important to capture to avoid a one-sided analysis of events.

Rather than randomly sampling posts, I concentrated on "information-rich" cases – intense debates, illustrative conflicts, typical daily interactions – that could shed light on the research questions. This way, my netnographic corpus included the voices that were shaping community norms (like the fan site admins' posts which often implicitly set standards) as well as voices of those who challenged or fell afoul of those norms (like newbies who asked "naive" questions and got scolded). Snowball sampling also naturally occurred: following a contentious thread, I would find references to another platform ("…they're even talking about this on Douban") or another user's post ("User X wrote a long essay about this"), which I would then locate and include. In this manner, significant events or controversies led me to the various digital touchpoints where they were being discussed, ensuring a comprehensive capture of the discourse around that event.

Throughout the netnography, I adhered to a do no harm principle and respected the community's privacy expectations. Weibo, being a public platform, is open, but I was still careful when quoting any posts in my notes or thesis to pseudonymise usernames and not reveal any personal data. If a post was publicly accessible but from a regular user (not a known official fan page), I treated it as *semi-private* – I would paraphrase rather than directly quote large chunks, to prevent easy tracing. In WeChat groups, I obtained at least tacit consent by being introduced as a researcher, and often explicit permission when I

wanted to use a specific quote from a member in my analysis (I would DM them and ask, without pressure, explaining I would anonymise it – none declined, many said "sure, and you can paraphrase if it's easier"). I followed Kozinets' stance that even if online content is technically public, ethical netnography respects the community's subjective sense of what's private. One challenge was handling screenshots that contained usernames and profile images. For analysis, I blurred these out in any working documents and certainly did not include them in the thesis to avoid any accidental disclosure of identities.

Netnography helped to highlight the role of digital platform features in exacerbating or mitigating conflicts. For instance, Weibo's visibility (likes, share counts) sometimes inflamed competition – I noticed fans checking how many likes a rival fan's project post got versus their own, something they mentioned bitterly in chats. Meanwhile, WeChat's closed wall nature meant gossip and complaints could ferment unchecked, then jump to Weibo only when reaching a boiling point. Netnography provided a voluminous and vivid dataset of actual fan communications, which, when combined with interviews and introspection, allowed for a triangulated understanding of the phenomena at hand. The netnographic findings serve as the connective tissue between the broader cultural patterns (communicated through interviews and literature) and the individual experiences (captured through introspection), anchoring them in concrete communal events and dialogues. By being both *immersed* and *analytical* in the online environment, I was able to fulfil Kozinets' ideal of achieving "cultural fluency" and thus present in this thesis a richly contextualised portrayal of fandom dynamics, true to the voices of the fans themselves.

Given the enormous amount of online content, my netnography was selective. It is possible that some aspects of fan life (perhaps more mundane or entirely positive interactions) are underrepresented in analysis because they were not focal to my research questions. My approach deliberately prioritised conflict-related content. To balance this, I also took note of plenty of positive communal activities (fans helping each other,

expressing unity) to ensure I wasn't viewing the fandom solely through a conflict lens. They appear in the thesis as needed to paint a fair picture.

5.4.3 Semi-structured interviews

*S*emi-structured interviewing is a qualitative research method characterised by a flexible interview protocol – it involves a set of guiding questions or themes but allows the conversation to flow naturally and adapt to the interviewee's responses. This format is well-suited for exploratory research where the aim is to deeply understand participants' perspectives while giving them room to introduce new insights. In the context of consumer and fan research, semi-structured interviews enable participants to share personal narratives, reflections, and emotions that might not be observable externally. They are particularly useful for delving into why participants perceive things in certain ways or behave as they do, complementing observational data with introspective explanations (McCracken, 1988). Key strengths of this method include its depth and adaptability: interviewers can probe interesting points, clarify meaning, and explore unforeseen topics that emerge during the dialogue (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018; Belk et al., 2013). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) note, a good qualitative interview feels like a focused conversation, yielding rich descriptions and nuanced understandings of the subject matter. However, interviews also come with challenges, such as the potential for social desirability bias (participants might present themselves in a favourable light or say what they think the researcher wants to hear) and the reliance on retrospective accounts, which can be influenced by memory and self-interpretation.

In designing interviews for this study, I drew on best practices from the literature. McCracken's (1988) "long interview" technique in consumer research emphasises starting with very broad, non-directive questions to allow participants to frame the domain in their own terms before narrowing in on specifics. I adopted this approach by opening interviews with questions like "Can you tell me about how you became a fan of

Jessica and what being her fan means to you?" This allowed interviewees to establish their personal context (often yielding insights into their motivations and values) before I asked about particular experiences like conflict situations. I also heeded Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets (2013) who advise that interviewers in consumer research should be attentive to metaphors and language that participants use spontaneously, as these often reveal deeper cultural meanings. For example, if a fan described the fandom as "a family," that metaphor would be worth probing (it did come up, interestingly, with some adding "a somewhat dysfunctional family" – a telling addition). The semi-structured format enabled me to follow such leads.

I conducted 34 in-depth interviews with members of Jessica's Goldenstars fandom (see Table 6.1); all interviews were with Chinese fans, reflecting the study's focus on the Chinese fan community.

Table 6.1: Interview participant profile

	Participant ID	Gender	Age Range	Fan hierarchy[2]	Years active as fan
1	Jo	female	25-30	Transparent	13
2	Cindy	female	20-25	Transparent	10
3	Rachel	female	30-35	Big Big	14
4	Jori	female	25-30	Transparent	9
5	Tracy	female	20-25	Transparent	10
6	Lily	female	25-30	Transparent	8
7	Dora	female	25-30	Transparent	9
8	Katherine	female	20-25	Big Big	10
9	Guy	female	25-30	Transparent	11
10	Kitty	female	25-30	Big Big	12
11	Sakura	female	30-35	Big Big	13
12	Zoey	female	30-35	Transparent	10

[2] Fan hierarchy is a phenomenon I will unpack in greater detail in the findings chapters but, for the purposes of categorisation, there are two elementary statuses which K-Pop/Jessica fans in China tend to be ascribed: *1.* "Big Fans" (大大/粉头, Dàdà / Fěn Tóu) who have greater financial access to pursue their fandom and hold greater visibility and status amongst peers; and *2.* "Transparent Fans" (小透明, Xiao Touming) who lack visibility and status often owing to lack of financial access.

13	May	female	30-35	Big Big	13
14	Miles	female	25-30	Transparent	10
15	Tina	female	20-25	Transparent	7
16	Billie	female	20-25	Transparent	8
17	John	male	25-30	Transparent	10
18	White	male	30-35	Transparent	16
19	Mountain	male	40-45	Transparent	17
20	Sabrina	female	20-25	Transparent	10
21	Echo	female	25-30	Transparent	11
22	Aki	female	30-35	Big Big	14
23	Rain	female	30-35	Big Big	13
24	Sicsic	female	35-40	Transparent	10
25	Keni	female	25-30	Big Big	11
26	Alicia	female	30-35	Transparent	14
27	Ivy	female	20-25	Transparent	8
28	Jack	male	25-30	Transparent	9
29	Liam	male	30-35	Transparent	11
30	Megan	female	25-30	Transparent	7
31	Chloe	female	30-35	Transparent	10
32	Dion	female	25-30	Transparent	7
33	Olivia	female	20-25	Transparent	3
34	Molli	female	20-25	Transparent	5

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives within the fandom. I wanted to hear from highly active, core fans (those running fan pages or leading projects) as well as more peripheral or "ordinary" fans, and also to include both those who had largely positive experiences and those who might have been involved in conflicts. Initial recruitment was done through posts in the Weibo Super Topic and personal outreach: I made an open call saying I was looking to chat with fellow Goldenstars about their fan experiences for my research. This yielded a number of volunteers, mainly fans who were confident and eager to talk about the fandom. To reach less visible fans, I used snowball sampling – at the end of each interview, I asked if they could refer me to someone they know in the fandom who might have a different viewpoint. This helped me recruit two fans who had quietly drifted from the community and one who had been on the receiving end of fan backlash (valuable for a contrasting perspective).

As can be seen from Table 6.1 above, the sample included fans of varying "fan age" (tenure in the fandom ranged from 2 years to 12+ years), different levels of involvement (from fan club organisers to mostly solo online fans) and spanning roughly late teens to early 30s in age. I ensured a mix of genders as well (though the majority of Jessica's dedicated Chinese fans are female, I did interview two male fans). All interviews were one-on-one, conducted in Mandarin Chinese (with a bit of fandom slang thrown in, which I was conversant in). They were done via video call or voice call (using WeChat or QQ), except two that were in person because the fans happened to live in my city. Before each interview, participants received a Participant Information Sheet and signed a Consent Form (for online interviews, I sent the documents electronically). I assured them of confidentiality, explained they could skip any question or stop at any time, and sought permission to audio-record. All consented to recording, which facilitated detailed transcription later.

The interviews typically lasted between 40 to 150 minutes. I followed a semi-structured interview guide that covered broad themes yet left room for divergence. Key topics included: *Personal fan journey* (how they became a Goldenstar, memorable moments as a fan), *Community involvement* (how they participate in fan groups, any roles they hold), *Perceptions of the fandom culture* (what they value about it, what issues they see), *Experiences of conflict or negativity* (have they witnessed or experienced jealousy, competition, fan wars, shaming, etc.), *Reactions to such incidents* (how they felt and responded, their interpretations), and *Reflections on being a fan* (what being a "true fan" means to them, how they see the fandom evolving). The ordering was flexible. With some interviewees, sensitive topics like conflict emerged organically even before I asked (for instance, one fan immediately launched into a story of how upset she was over a recent internal fight), whereas others were more reserved until prompted. I used plenty of open-ended questions ("Can you describe…", "How did you feel when…") and encouraged storytelling: if a fan mentioned "there was this incident last year…", I gently invited them to narrate it fully.

If an interviewee gave a general statement like “There’s a lot of jealousy in our fandom,” I probed: “Could you share an example of when you noticed that jealousy? What happened and what made you interpret it as jealousy?” This often led to rich examples and sometimes surprising introspection by the participants (some would pause and realise things like “Actually, I guess I was jealous too in that situation…”). I also paid attention to emotional cues – if a topic seemed to touch a nerve (voice changes, sighs), I empathetically acknowledged it and let them elaborate if they wished. One fan, when discussing being ostracised after she criticised Jessica’s decision on something, became audibly emotional; I offered to skip that topic, but she insisted on continuing, saying it was cathartic to talk about it. Such moments underscored that our interviews were not just data collection but also spaces for fans to voice feelings they might have suppressed. I am grateful for their openness and treated those disclosures with great care in analysis.

In addition to audio-recorded transcripts, I maintained a set of “meta information notes” for each interview, which served as contextual supplements to the spoken data (Hills and Garde-Hansen, 2016). These notes included observations on the interview atmosphere, the interviewee’s mood, communication style, physical setting (from the background in the screen), and any prior personal interactions I had with the participant. Such reflexive documentation allowed me to capture nuances not always evident in verbal responses, such as hesitations, shifts in tone, or body language. These observations were not treated as primary data but were crucial in interpreting the interviews with greater sensitivity and contextual awareness. As Hills and Garde-Hansen (2016) suggests, the “metadata” of interviews—including their affective atmospheres and the relational dynamics between researcher and participant—can play a critical role in understanding how fan knowledge and narratives are emotionally and socially constructed.

The interviews provided depth of understanding that complemented the observational data. They allowed me to probe the *motivations* and *interpretations* behind behaviours observed in netnography. For example, netnography showed me the *what* of fans scolding each other; interviews helped explain the *why*. Many fans, in interviews,

articulated that they hold the fandom to high standards because they feel protective of Jessica's reputation – thus, when they shame a member for "bad" behaviour, they often frame it as for the greater good of the fandom or Jessica. Such insights were crucial for my analysis in Chapter 6, where I discuss how acts of vengeance or shaming are rationalised as moral crusades within the fan community. Without interviews, I might have simply described the behaviour; with interviews, I could delve into the ethical reasoning fans use (e.g., invoking loyalty, fairness, justice concepts).

Interviews also surfaced the emotional and psychological dimension of being in the fandom, which observations alone only hinted at. Several fans admitted feelings of inadequacy or anxiety – for instance, one said, "Sometimes I wonder, am I a bad fan because I haven't spent as much, or I don't attend as many events? You feel this pressure." Such candid reflections in at least half the interviews pointed to a pervasive undercurrent of social comparison and pressure within the group, feeding into jealousy dynamics. This reinforced the idea (which I integrate in Chapter 6) that jealousy in fandom can be as much about *self-evaluation* as about *resentment of others*.

I treated the interview data with strict confidentiality. Real names were replaced with pseudonyms in transcripts, and any potentially identifying details (specific fan club names, etc.) were generalised. Given the sometimes-sensitive content (people speaking about conflicts with others who might read this thesis), I was careful in how I present quotes – ensuring they illustrate the point without enabling someone to be identified as, say, the critic of a particular fan. All participants were informed that aggregated results and anonymised quotes would be used in publications, and all were comfortable with that. A few even said "I stand by what I said, so even if someone guesses it's me, it's okay" – but I still anonymised them, as promised. Triangulating the interviews with the netnography and my introspection created a robust, 360-degree view of the phenomenon: what happens (netnography), how it feels and is experienced (introspection and interviews), and how participants make sense of it (interviews). Each method reinforced and enriched the others. For instance, if multiple interviewees independently described feeling "envy

but also admiration" toward a certain fan practice, and I had felt the same personally, and I had netnographic evidence of mixed reactions to that practice – that convergence strongly indicates a real underlying theme. I found many such triangulations, which bolster the credibility of the findings.

Doing these interviews was sometimes emotionally taxing, as I empathised strongly with fellow fans' struggles. It required balancing my role as a compassionate listener with that of an objective researcher. In a couple of cases, after the formal interview ended, I spent additional time just chatting informally or offering words of support if someone had shared a painful story – I felt a human obligation to do so. These moments also reminded me why this research matters: it's not only an academic inquiry but a topic that affects real people's community life and well-being. This reflection reinforced my commitment to analyse the data respectfully and meaningfully.

5.5 Data analysis and interpretation

5.5.1 Translation of data

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and many collected texts (Weibo posts, chat transcripts) were also in Mandarin. Because this thesis is written in English with a focus on academic prose, a careful translation process was necessary to accurately convey meaning across languages. Translation in this research was not a mere mechanical task but an integral part of analysis, given that language carries cultural nuances that relate to fandom practices.

I approached translation in multiple phases. First, I transcribed each interview verbatim in Mandarin and prepared detailed summaries of key points in English, to start identifying themes. During this summarising, I made note of any terms or expressions that were culturally specific or hard to translate directly/ next, as I incorporated interview quotations and field note excerpts into the thesis, I engaged in what some scholars call

"thick translation". This means I did not always strive for a single-word or literal translation; instead, I aimed to convey the original *connotations* and *context*. Where necessary, I added bracketed explanations for culturally loaded terms. The translation process required particular attention to fan-specific terminology and culturally embedded expressions. Terms like "Tu Hao fans" (土豪饭) or "transparent fans（小透明）" carry implicit hierarchical meanings within Chinese fan culture that necessitated extensive contextual explanation rather than direct translation. Following Dion, Sabri, and Guillard's (2014) approach to "untranslatable," I adopted a foreignising translation strategy for certain key terms, preserving their Mandarin forms while providing detailed explanatory footnotes. This approach maintains cultural authenticity while ensuring accessibility for English-speaking readers.

Mandarin expressions rich in cultural specificity and connotation required careful negotiation. For instance, the term "Chicken-soup Auntie" (鸡汤阿姨) emerged frequently in participants' narratives. When I was trying to transcribe the term into English and explain to my supervisors, it was exceedingly difficult to find an equivalent term. What I have offered up here by retaining "Chicken-soup Auntie" is what I consider to be a reasonably unfiltered translation from Mandarin, because it became evident that trying to substitute the term for something equivalent (if it even existed) in English or adjusting the words to an approximate expression such as "comforting elder" or "older motherly fan" would strip the term of its layered socio-cultural meanings bound to middle-aged fan demographics and gendered fan hierarchies. Following the practice described by Dion et al. (2014), I adopted a foreignising translation strategy (Venuti, 1995), choosing to retain the term in its original Chinese form, supplemented with explanatory footnotes to guide non-Mandarin readers without erasing cultural specificity. Briefly, in Chinese online vernacular, "chicken soup" (鸡汤) is used pejoratively to label sentimental, comforting, albeit banal platitudes (akin to parental advice, inspirational quotes, or self-help clichés) while "auntie" (阿姨) is suggestive of the personality and honorific – albeit patently uncool – character of an older woman. The fusion of the words online functions as a kind of meme or caricature of a seemingly older female figure who,

in internet-based communities, is adrift from what is cool and youthful, instead behaving in a way that is more maternal, fawning over a celebrity idol and behaving almost like a guardian of other fans than their peer.

Throughout translation, I maintained a translation log, noting difficult passages, my rationale for particular word choices, and any consultation I did. I occasionally consulted with a peer who is native bilingual to see if my translation of a sensitive quote was preserving its intent. One challenge was translating tone and politeness levels, which are conveyed in Chinese through particles or formal pronouns. For example, when fans scold each other, the tone can be discerned by whether they use casual "you" (*ni*, 你) or a more confrontational or plural "you guys" (*nimen*, 你们). In English, I sometimes added "...you all..." to capture that plural if it mattered to the dynamic.

Moreover, my aca-fan positionality further complicated the translation. While my insider knowledge provided crucial cultural intuition, it also introduced the risk of over-familiarity, potentially blurring the boundary between translation and interpretation. Acknowledging this, I periodically consulted with my supervisors and peers to triangulate interpretations and guard against individual biases (Inhetveen, 2012).

5.5.2 Thematic analysis

Once data were translated or summarised sufficiently for coding, I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns relevant to the research questions. I combined manual coding with a bit aid of qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to organise the large volume of data. The process was iterative and grounded in the interpretivist tradition – meaning I moved back and forth between data and emerging concepts (similar to a constructivist grounded theory approach; Charmaz, 2006). Initially, I open-coded the data with descriptive labels closely tied to the content. For example, some first-round codes were "expressing envy over money", "calling out 'fake fans'",

"hiding true feelings", "older vs newer fans tension", "unity display", "loyalty justification". I deliberately coded very inclusively – any interesting or repeated idea got a code. I ended up with a long list of codes (over 60). I then began axial coding (grouping and relating codes) to see the bigger picture. I noticed many codes were variations of jealousy or competition, so I clustered them under a broader theme "Jealousy and Social Comparison". Within that, I further differentiated sub-themes: jealousy about proximity to Jessica (e.g., resentment when some fans got to attend a meet-and-greet), jealousy about financial contributions (the whole gifts and donations competition), and jealousy about social capital (like being in the inner circle of fan organisers). Similarly, many codes dealt with punitive actions, so a theme "Punishment" was formed, with sub-themes like scapegoating individuals, collective shaming, and narrative of protecting the idol. I was mindful also of finding contrasts and counterpoints. Not every fan viewed these phenomena the same way; some rationalised jealousy as motivation (one said, "a little jealousy is good, it pushes us to work harder for Jessica"), so I kept a sub-theme for positive or ambivalent views of internal competition.

At this stage, I wrote analytic memos for each major theme capturing what that theme encompassed and how it related to others. I constantly compared the emerging thematic structure against the raw data to ensure it fit – a technique akin to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For instance, under the jealousy theme, I revisited each interview to see if jealousy manifested in all, and if anyone contradicted it. This is where I noted, for example, one interviewee who insisted she never felt jealousy, only pride, which became an interesting deviant case to discuss (she was an exceptionally confident fan, which I mention as a footnote in analysis to show not everyone is impacted equally). As themes solidified, I realised that the common thread in jealousy and revenge themes was the idea of a lack of synchronisation or harmony among fans despite a shared goal. I validated this conceptual naming by reflecting on whether it captured the essence of what participants described. Many had used words like "分裂" (splintering), "矛盾" (conflict), and "不齐心" (not of one heart) – all pointing to disunity amidst unity. "Dyssynchrony" (lack of synchronicity) seemed fitting and adding an "-as" gave it a noun

form echoing communitas. I then retroactively checked how each theme illustrated Dyssynchronas. Jealousy showed it in that while fans ostensibly unite to support Jessica, internally they are out-of-sync in emotional equity; policing showed it in that efforts to enforce unity paradoxically create fear and division. Finally, I composed narrative summaries for each theme (which became sections in Chapters 6 and 7) interweaving quotes and observations to evidence them. Throughout the analysis writing, I continued to iterate – if something felt missing, I went back to data. For example, while writing about jealousy, I realised I needed more concrete examples of how it started and ended (its trajectory), so I dove back into field notes of a particular event (the album sales race incident) to give a more chronological account.

5.5.4 Limitations in analysis

Interpretively analysing social data has subjective elements; my positionality inevitably influenced how I categorised and prioritised themes. I mitigated this by being transparent about biases (documented in reflexive memos) and by seeking external audit: one of my academic supervisors reviewed portions of coded data and our theme structure, providing an outsider check. Through this rigorous, reflexive analytical process, the raw data were distilled into the key findings' chapters of this thesis. The analysis demonstrates that these two aspects are intertwined and mutually constitutive: for example, the stronger the communal identity, the more policing occurs to protect it, which then creates deeper rifts – a dynamic insight that emerged from piecing together multiple themes and data points. The methodology and analysis combined have, I hope, produced a rich and credible account of the Goldenstars fandom that advances our understanding of consumer communities in general.

5.6 Criteria of trustworthiness

In alignment with interpretivist paradigms, this study evaluates the quality and rigour of its methodological design not through positivist measures such as reliability or generalisability, but through criteria appropriate to qualitative inquiry: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and integrity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba, 2007; Tracy, 2010). Each criterion is addressed below, with explicit reference to the methodological choices made throughout this research.

5.6.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the plausibility and trustworthiness of the research findings from the standpoint of participants and readers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This was achieved through methodological triangulation across three data sources—netnography, semi-structured interviews, and SPI. Triangulation ensured that key thematic findings (e.g., jealousy-driven competition, legitimacy disputes, vengeance mechanisms) were consistently supported by multiple data types, enhancing the interpretive depth and evidentiary robustness of the study (Flick, 2018).

Prolonged engagement in the field, particularly via longitudinal netnographic observation across Weibo, WeChat, and X, further bolstered credibility. My sustained presence over 15 months allowed for an in-depth understanding of community dynamics and evolving interactions. This immersion aligns with Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory emphasis on iterative engagement and thick, context-rich data interpretation. By selecting individuals who embodied varying levels of engagement, different fan roles, demographic backgrounds, and reputational positions within the fandom, the study minimised the risk of overrepresenting a single dominant narrative. This strategic inclusion of multiple voices and experiences strengthens the credibility of the findings, providing a robust and multifaceted understanding of intra-fandom dynamics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, snowball sampling supported credibility by expanding access to participants who might otherwise have been difficult

to reach. Through word-of-mouth referrals, the study was able to recruit individuals who occupied more hidden or marginal positions in the community, thereby further diversifying the sample and enhancing the authenticity and depth of the data.

5.6.2 Dependability

Dependability pertains to the consistency and traceability of the research process over time (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In this study, dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of all research activities (see Halpern, 1983; Koch, 2006). This included detailed documentation of analytical memos, coding processes, SPI reflections, and iterative adjustments to emergent themes. NVivo software was used to manage and code qualitative data systematically, facilitating transparent and replicable analytical procedures (Baseley and Jackson, 2013). Further, peer debriefing with academic colleagues during the analysis phase offered critical interrogation of coding categories and thematic interpretations, ensuring internal coherence and interpretive clarity.

5.6.3 Confirmability

Confirmability addresses the neutrality of the research—i.e., that the findings are grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's biases or preferences (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In this study, confirmability was supported through systematic reflexivity, most explicitly embedded in the SPI process (Gould, 1991; Hackley, 2020). As both a researcher and an insider within the fandom, I employed introspective journaling to interrogate how my emotional investments and prior knowledge may have shaped data collection and analysis. These reflexive accounts were cross-examined against empirical data to identify potential bias and to consciously bracket subjective interpretations. Confirmability was further enhanced by presenting disconfirming cases

(e.g., interview participants who challenged or resisted dominant community norms), thereby avoiding over-determined or monolithic readings of the fandom.

5.6.4 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings may be meaningfully applied to similar contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisability, this study enhances transferability by providing detailed contextual information ("thick description") of the Goldenstars fandom, its digital platforms, and socio-political context (Geertz, 1973; Tracy, 2010). The inclusion of diverse participant voices—ranging from core community figures to peripheral and marginalised fans—and the systematic documentation of distinct interactional genres (e.g., competitive displays, public shaming, emotional confession) allow future researchers to assess the applicability of findings to other fan cultures, especially those operating within similarly politicised or digitalised contexts.

Including participants across a range of demographics, roles, consumption patterns, and community statuses ensures that the study captures the complexity and heterogeneity of fan experiences. This breadth of representation supports the development of insights that are not only contextually rich but also potentially applicable to other fandoms and digital community settings beyond the specific case of Jessica Jung's fandom (Tracy, 2010). By incorporating voices from different geographical locations (mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macao) and including both high-profile fansite administrators and less visible solo/individual fans, the study creates a nuanced picture that enhances the transferability of its findings to similar online and offline fandom contexts.

5.6.5 Integrity

Integrity, or ethical rigour, was upheld through continuous reflexive engagement and strict adherence to ethical guidelines. All interview participants provided informed consent, and all digital data were anonymised and stored securely in accordance with institutional ethics protocols. Sensitive insights—such as participants' reflections on scapegoating, exclusion, or moral policing—were treated with particular care, ensuring that descriptions neither sensationalised nor stigmatised the individuals involved (Tracy, 2010; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). The dual-role complexity of conducting aca-fan research necessitated heightened ethical vigilance. SPI was instrumental in ethically processing my own involvement and complicity in community norms, which in turn informed my ethical stance toward representing participants' experiences responsibly and respectfully.

5.7 Conclusion

Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study adopted an ethnographic approach, operationalised through three interlinked methods: SPI, netnography, and semi-structured interviews. Particular emphasis was placed on the methodological affordances of netnography in accessing naturalistic digital interactions, interviews in eliciting affective narratives and moral justifications, and SPI in maintaining ethical and analytical reflexivity. Thematic analysis was employed as the core analytical strategy, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns such as jealousy, legitimacy disputes, and vengeance mechanisms. The triangulated use of multiple data sources enabled a robust integration of insights and strengthened the study's interpretive validity.

CHAPTER 6 JEALOUSY

6.0 Introduction

Sociologically and anthropologically, jealousy can be conceptualised as a response to perceived inequities within a given social structure, particularly when status or recognition is at stake (Foster, 1972; Parrot and Smith, 1993; Protasi, 2021). In the context of fandoms, these inequities often manifest through the dynamics of social comparison, access, and visibility. The terminology, which stems from Chinese fan culture, emphasises divergent roles and dynamics within the fan community. These hierarchies are critical to understanding the negotiation of status, authenticity, and power in fan communities.

The chapter is organised into two primary sub-themes. First, inequity in proximity is explored through fans' longing for intimate or direct access to Jessica, exemplified by vignettes from Jo, Cindy, and Rachel, who variously internalise or externalise the affective costs of exclusion from these sacred fan-idol encounters. Second, inequity in financial resources, where wealth becomes a proxy for devotion, but also a source of social suspicion and latent resentment. Through a detailed exploration of fan discourses surrounding the conspicuous consumption practices of Katherine and others, this thesis unearths how financial capacity is transformed into symbolic capital, sometimes provoking admiration, but more often inciting veiled forms of passive aggression or indirect envy.

Before proceeding with the detailed analysis, it is essential to establish two key fan categorisations that emerged from the data and will be referenced throughout the findings chapters. "Big Fans" or “Big Big Fans” (大大/粉头, Dàdà / Fěn Tóu) occupy the upper echelons of fan hierarchies, wielding considerable influence through their visibility, charisma, and resources. These fans gain influence within fan communities by balancing two key dimensions of fandom: active leadership online (e.g., voicing opinions,

coordinating campaigns) and demonstrative dedication offline (e.g., attending events, participating in star-chasing activities). In contrast, "Transparent Fans" (小透明, Xiao Touming) experience relative anonymity and lack of visibility, with their contributions often undervalued despite their critical role in sustaining fandom activities. In Chinese fan vernacular, “粉头” (fěntóu) literally means ‘fan head’ and refers to a fan leader, often a fansite admin or organiser. “小透明” (xiǎo tóumíng) literally means ‘little transparent’ and describes low-profile, often invisible, rank-and-file fans. The tension between these fan types—and the struggle for legitimacy and recognition that ensues—forms a critical backdrop for understanding tensions within Jessica Jung's fandom.

This finding aligns with classic theories of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and contemporary work on status jealousy in consumer settings (Belk, 2011; Crusius and Lange, 2017), showing that fans continually evaluate their own access and devotion against that of others, often leading to feelings of resentment and rivalry. The interesting point about the stratification within Jessica’s fandom is the low level of market expandability amongst its layers of fans: there are limited places for those “at the top” and so competition is fierce and encroachment on one another’s activities is common. Their active participation in offline events, combined with their ability to capture and distribute high-quality visual content, cements their status as fandom leaders, who gain influence within fan communities by balancing two key dimensions of fandom: active leadership online (e.g., voicing opinions, coordinating campaigns) and demonstrative dedication offline (e.g., attending events, participating in star-chasing activities).

6.2 Inequity in proximity

One of the most salient factors instilling jealousy within Jessica Jung’s fandom is the perceived inequity in opportunities to meet and converse with their idol. Jo (29), a self-identified “hardcore Goldenstars” since 2012, exemplifies this dynamic. Despite her significant financial investment—spending in excess of £9,000 on Jessica’s merchandise

and gifts—Jo admits that her greatest source of regret is the limited number of times she has met Jessica in person. In contrast, some of her fellow fans have had the privilege of meeting Jessica multiple times, creating a stark disparity in perceived proximity. Jo recounts her feelings:

> I know you (the researcher) and many other Goldenstars went to the Ride On Waves show recording several times over the past few months. I wanted to be there so badly, just like you all, because you know it was the first time Jessica ever appeared on a popular Chinese reality show, and that means a lot to her future career in China. We must show up as much as we can to support her, right? But instead of pride or solidarity, all I could feel was bitterness. I felt like I let her down by not being there, but more than that, I hated that you all were there when I couldn't be. You got to stand so close you could smell her perfume, have casual conversations with her like friends, and see her at the hotel—experiences I could only dream of. The thought of her seeing you, and not me, when she looked out into the crowd during her performance made my stomach churn. It was like you are her power station, her 'true' supporters, while I remained invisible, unimportant. It's not just disappointment—I feel consumed by this sense of jealousy. Knowing that you were the ones she saw that she smiled at, that she might even remember, left me seething with envy. While I was stuck at work, chained to responsibilities that robbed me of the chance to see her, you all were living the life I so desperately wanted. Even worse, I can't voice these feelings on Weibo because fans would dismiss me, saying, 'Then you should just go and see her.' Completely pointless and hopeless - as if it were that simple! If I could go, don't you think I would have? But no, I was left watching from the sidelines while everyone else took my place, standing where I felt I deserved to be.

This example highlights the emotional toll of 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) (Przybylski et al., 2013) and resonates with recent work on depressive hedonia in digital fandom (see Fisher, 2009), where the inability to participate fully generates chronic feelings of inadequacy. While "transparent fans" such as Jo may engage in labour-intensive tasks such as voting campaigns, promoting idols through social media algorithms, and performing logistical support for offline events, are often unseen within their communities and have fewer opportunities for engaging closely with their idol. This creates disappointments and anxieties which are emblematic of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) or what has been referred to more critically as 'depressive hedonia' (Fisher, 2009). In Jo's case, her inability to participate in in-person interactions with Jessica results in recurring feelings of inadequacy and 'bitterness'. This aligns with psychological and

sociological theories of jealousy, particularly those that distinguish between benign and malicious envy (Crusius and Lange, 2017).

The introspection and netnographic data unearthed an essential question within the fandom to be ‘who is deemed a 'true' or 'big' fan’? Marketplace legitimacy is achieved and maintained through marketing practices that expertly leverage cultural narratives and societal values (Granovetter, 1985). This strategic engagement fosters a form of fetishistic disavowal among fans who deeply invested in the cultural and emotional narratives tied to their fandoms, may overlook or rationalise the potential harms of their engagement. Such disavowal, cultivated through the passionate participation in fandom activities and the consumption of celebrity-related products, in turn, reinforces the perceived legitimacy of the market. It allows participants—fans, to justify their negative involvement within the market. Within fan communities, “big fans” often automatically claim the authority to revoke this status of legitimacy, creating a hierarchy that privileges certain expressions of fandom while marginalising others. This gatekeeping is not merely an assertion of preferences but becomes a fetishised aspect of fan identity-where the right to define and perpetuate legitimacy is zealously guarded (Kozinets, 2001).

While benign envy may motivate individuals to emulate those they admire, malicious envy is characterised by resentment and frustration. Rather than framing her experience as an absolute lack of interaction, Jo’s jealousy is fuelled by her comparison to those who she perceives as privileged within the fandom. While Jessica’s concerts and meet-and-greets foster a sense of togetherness and collective adoration, the exclusivity of these interactions exacerbates feelings of exclusion and jealousy among fans who cannot participate. The benevolent side of Jessica’s fandom—exemplified by communal support and shared enthusiasm—is counterbalanced by its malevolent aspects, such as envy and competition. Jo’s description of her peers as a “power station” for Jessica encapsulates this duality, highlighting the positive role fans play in energising and supporting their idol

while simultaneously underscoring the competitive dynamics that arise from unequal access to this symbolic proximity.

On the other hand, Jo's description of her emotional turmoil—feeling "invisible" and "seething with envy"—suggests a deeper psychological toll, resonating with Collins' (2004) interaction ritual theory. Collins argues that emotions are shaped by the dynamics of social encounters, and in the context of fandoms, rituals of participation (e.g., attending events, showcasing devotion) become key sites for generating both solidarity and division. Jo's exclusion from these rituals reinforces her sense of inadequacy, creating a feedback loop of envy and withdrawal. Unlike her well-networked and travel-ready peers, Jo views herself as an outsider, habitually denied the opportunities needed to deepen her personal relationship with Jessica. By situating Jo's experience within the framework of dyssynchronas, we can see how the same rituals that unify and energise the fandom simultaneously serve as fault lines that create division. Jessica's concerts and public appearances evoke communitas for those who can attend, yet for fans like Jo, who remain outside these moments of heightened emotional energy, the result is an acute sense of alienation.

While Jo internalises her jealousy, another fan – Cindy – channels hers outward, transforming exclusion into anger. Cindy (24), a devoted seven-year Goldenstar and final-year university student juggling a busy study schedule and internship, echoes Jo's feelings of jealousy but channels her emotions differently. Whereas Jo's narrative reveals a sense of despondency and withdrawal, Cindy describes experiencing anger when encountering posts from other fans who have had one-on-one interactions with Jessica. Her frustration highlights the emotional volatility that can arise within fan communities, especially when disparities in access to the idol become visible through social media:

> I don't know if I'm being too dark, but I cannot help feeling irate whenever I stumble upon posts of Jessica's offline fans meeting her inside or outside the hotel, or of her having cordial conversations with them in person. You know, fans typically share a detailed report on Weibo of their encounters with Jessica which, I hope, are just fictitious tales created by fans puffed up by their own egos rather than having any kind of truth to them. [After reading them] I will usually go to BLANC and ECLARE

(Jessica's signature fashion label) to buy a bunch of clothes worn by Jessica, to cheer myself up.

Cindy's reaction offers an alternative dimension of dyssynchrony within fandoms, where jealousy transforms into frustration and consumerist coping mechanisms. Unlike Jo, who internalises her envy as a sense of inadequacy, Cindy externalises her emotions, questioning the authenticity of other fans' accounts and finding solace in material purchases that allow her to symbolically align herself with Jessica. Her 'hope' that other fans' detailed accounts of meeting Jessica are "fictitious tales" highlights a reluctance to confront the reality of her own exclusion. Cindy's experience, much like Jo's, underscores the structural nature of dyssynchrony within fandoms. While both fans share a deep admiration for Jessica, the inequalities in their access and experiences highlight the fragility of communal bonds. Cindy's anger toward other fans and her reliance on consumerism reflect the interplay between relational and status jealousy within Jessica's fandom.

Cindy's resentment stems from the idea that some fans are privileged with exclusive moments of closeness—meeting Jessica at hotels, conversing casually with her, and witnessing her performances in person—while she is left to experience fandom through secondary accounts and social media updates. However, Cindy does not merely dwell in resentment; she actively seeks to compensate for her lack of proximity by asserting her devotion in another way—through consumption. Her decision to purchase BLANC and ECLARE clothing to "cheer herself up" reflects a compensatory response to relational exclusion, transforming her status jealousy into material participation (Belk, 1988). Within fandoms, status objects like exclusive merchandise or high-value fashion items become proxy markers of devotion, filling the void left by physical distance from the idol.

Cindy's tendency to purchase Jessica's branded merchandise as a form of emotional consolation aligns with 'benign envy' (Crusius and Lange, 2017), where admiration drives compensatory behavior rather than resentment. Yet her case complicates this classical framing. In benign envy, emulation is typically self-driven, arising from the

desire to improve oneself (Van de Ven et al., 2011). By contrast, Cindy's consumption is compelled by the structural demands of the fandom, where belonging is increasingly tied to commodified displays of loyalty (Booth, 2010). This creates a more ambivalent form of envy: admiration motivates her, but so too does the anxiety of exclusion if she fails to keep pace with visible consumption. In this sense, Cindy embodies a tension between benign and malevolent envy—the former inspiring her devotion, the latter threatening to turn inward as frustration when she perceives inequalities in financial capacity or recognition.

This ambivalence resonates with longstanding debates around the distinction between 'fan' and 'fanatic'. Jenson (1992) argued that popular discourse often pathologises the 'fanatic' as irrationally excessive, contrasted with the supposedly appropriate 'ordinary' fan. Jenkins (1992), by contrast, repositions fans as creative participants rather than pathological obsessives, but even in this more positive framing, devotion risks being measured against thresholds of acceptability. Hills (2002) critiques this very binary, showing how fandom is always at risk of being re-stigmatised once intensity tips over into excess, while Duffett (2013) highlights how the boundary between enthusiasm and obsession is inherently unstable. Seen through this lens, Cindy's case illustrates how envy in fandom does not neatly fall into benign or malevolent categories; rather, it oscillates between them, producing ambivalence that is both personally consoling and socially coercive.

Cindy's conflicting feelings—resentment toward other fans and simultaneous compulsion to purchase items from Jessica's fashion label—exemplify the dual emotional responses engendered by this environment. Her reaction can be situated within the framework of benign and malicious envy as theorised by Crusius and Lange (2017): benign envy motivates self-improvement or aspirational behavior, while malicious envy leads to resentment and a desire to diminish others' success. However, what emerges from Cindy's narrative is the co-existence of these modes—what might be described as ambivalent envy—where admiration and resentment are not sequential but concurrent,

triggered by structural constraints such as time, money, and geographic proximity that limit fans' ability to participate equally. While previous work has drawn clear distinctions between these two types of envy (van de Ven, Seelenberg, and Pieters, 2009; Parrott and Smith, 1993), the data here suggest that they may not be mutually exclusive in practice. Cindy does not simply oscillate between admiration and resentment; rather, her envy is a complex affective state shaped by the very architecture of platformed fandom and the visibility of inequities it renders unavoidable. Jo and Cindy's cases show that fandoms do not merely produce envy along a hierarchical axis (between fans and idols); they also create lateral envy among fans themselves, driven by disparities in social, economic, and symbolic capital. Moreover, the phenomenon of fans exhibiting obsessive behaviours and seeking personal validation through parasocial relationships is discussed by Kim and Kim (2020), highlighting how online communication styles can foster such dynamics.

In a different expression of jealousy brought about by inequity in terms of proximity, Rachel (31) utilises poetic language to suggest her connection with Jessica in the following passage (See Fig. 11).

Fig. 11: Jessica's Instagram story of Rachel's chocolate gift (Photo Source: Jessica Instagram. Access Date: 15th October 2022)

Rachel's post accompanying a screenshot of Jessica's Instagram story exemplifies the ritualised performance of intimacy in fandom culture. In a short poetic verse shared on Weibo, Rachel writes:

"In my memories, I don't usually give you chocolate.

In my memories, this is the first time that I bought you chocolate.

I bought many flavours you like.

Hope you can be surrounded by sweetness, always."

By repeating the phrase "in my memories," Rachel frames her offering as part of an ongoing, almost narrative-like relationship with Jessica. Her use of "usually" and "the first time" subtly imply a history of gift-giving and personal knowledge, elevating her proximity to Jessica from occasional gesture to familiar intimacy. The specificity of "many flavours you like" not only demonstrates an attentive devotion, but also constructs an implicit claim to insider knowledge—positioning herself as someone uniquely attuned to Jessica's preferences. This expression of affective closeness is further reinforced through the final wish for Jessica to be "surrounded by sweetness, always," blurring the lines between sincere goodwill and romanticised idealisation. Gift-giving in this context operates as a form of symbolic intimacy and social distinction (Belk, 2010). While it creates a sense of closeness for the giver, it also signals privileged access and can exacerbate hierarchies among fans, echoing Mauss's (1954) theory of reciprocity.

Several interviewees were critical of Rachel's actions, questioning the authenticity of her proximity to Jessica and the fairness of her privileged access. A participant named Lily (26) commented, "She benefited from the identity of being in the management team;

otherwise, she could not get to contact Jessica's staff by herself alone. How dare she." Another interviewee, Dora (27), expressed outright scepticism, stating, "Whom she thinks she is? I can say I am Jessica's sister, too. Jessica knows about me, and we even had dinner together! But who on earth will believe that without proof? Only Jessica herself can expose Rachel, but we all know Jessica will not and cannot. Rachel is taking the advantage of this." These critiques illustrate the tensions that arise within fan communities when individuals in privileged positions are perceived to exploit their roles for personal gain.

Jessica's role in this context is primarily a symbol of collective adoration, with fans projecting their desires and insecurities onto their interactions with her and her fandom. This absence is not unusual; research on celebrity-fan relationships highlights how celebrities rarely intervene in fandom disputes, as doing so could alienate segments of their audience or disrupt the carefully curated image of inclusivity and warmth they project (Chung and Cho, 2017). Jessica's "inaction" is likely strategic, preserving her brand while allowing fans to self-regulate their community dynamics. Moreover, the question of whether Jessica has a responsibility or etiquette toward her fans raises important considerations about the role of celebrities in managing their fan communities. These issues will then take upon a new prominence in the following section, where the focus is duly shifted to inequity in terms of financial resources.

6.3 Inequity in financial resources

Like in the case of proximity, financial jealousy among Goldenstars is sometimes described using the emic term "眼红" (yǎn hóng, "red eyes"), which is similar in meaning to the English phrase "green with envy" and most easily Anglicised as "green eyes". This term is often used to express feelings of envy toward those with greater advantages including financial resources, particularly as these advantages allow them to engage more actively in fandom activities or gain favour with their idol. One of the regular targets of

green eyes is Katherine (24) who serves in the coveted position for one of Jessica's largest fansites in China and is publicly perceived to be one of Jessica's wealthiest fans, epitomising the archetype of a Big Fan whose financial capital intersects with online presence and translates into symbolic power.

Katherine frequently posts photographs to Weibo of her collection of multiple status items including an expansive, impeccably furnished luxury apartment, rare, limited-edition bottles of Dom Pérignon champagne, fashion items from Louis Vuitton and Chanel, and a high-end Porsche sportscar. She also flaunts her wealth through posting casual dilemmas such as "Should I spend this New Year's Eve in New York or Paris?", reinforcing the sense of boundless privilege and access to global luxury. Katherine's ostentatious displays extend to her appearances at Jessica's live events where she consistently dons Chanel's iconic designs, pairing coordinated ensembles with the brand's signature handbags. Each appearance serves as a deliberate visual statement of her financial status and cultivated exclusivity, leaving little doubt about her ability to seamlessly intertwine fandom with the symbols of extraordinary wealth. This aligns with Marwick and Boyd's (2011) exploration of digital performativity, where social media interactions are curated to maintain appearances, often at the cost of authenticity.

One of the most noticeable posts Katherine made to her Weibo was of a collection of multiple autographed copies of Jessica's book. Although it is quite common for fans in China to purchase multiple copies of their idol's albums/books in order to boost sales (see my collection back in Chapter 4), it is decidedly rarer to be able to afford purchase of large numbers of genuinely autographed copies which Katherine has. To provide some context, a standard unsigned copy of Jessica's book retails for around £20 and a copy of her album for about £15 whereas autographed editions are sold at an opening bid of at least £200 in open auction. The rarity of genuine autographed editions stems from the fact that they can only be obtained through official fan-sign events or limited public releases by the distributor. According to Katherine's own opinion she shared with me, the estimated value of her personal assortment of signed multiples could easily surpass

£10,000. Furthermore, it is unlikely for anyone to amass this number of signed multiples without having access to insiders who can pull some strings, a fact which other fans are well aware of. Netnographic data revealed that many fans commented on Katherine's photo of her autographed books, expressing their envy in a friendly manner. Some said, "OMG you're so rich!!", "Rich and loyal", and "How did you manage to get so many signed versions?" In private group chatrooms, fans often circulated screenshots of Katherine's posts alongside a barrage of critical commentary. Yet strikingly, while the reactions clearly conveyed disdain, they rarely named their affective root as envy or jealousy. This reluctance reflects what Ho, Fu, and Ng (2004) describe as a cultural aversion within collectivist societies—particularly in East Asia—toward expressing socially divisive emotions. Instead of articulating jealousy outright, fans engage in passive-aggressive critique, veiled skepticism, and sarcastic reframing. For instance, after Katherine posted images of her collection of signed merchandise, one comment read, "How come she could get all those signed copies? We all know that there are no signed copies for sale in the market." Another remarked, "She cannot be that rich at her age. Besides, true millionaires do not enjoy showing off like she does." These comments serve a dual purpose: they allow fans to express their discontent with Katherine's perceived privilege and ostentation, while also avoiding the vulnerability of acknowledging envy.

This mode of communication aligns with what Parrott and Smith (1993) describe as the indirect expression of envy through socially permissible channels, such as sarcasm or moral critique. Rather than saying, "I am jealous of Katherine's access," fans imply that her access must be illegitimate—perhaps the result of favouritism, manipulation, or even theft. As one user speculated: "There must be something weird with her source of money," while another asked, "Can someone check if she steals funds from the fansite?" These accusations are not based on evidence but are deployed to cast doubt on Katherine's legitimacy within the community, effectively challenging her symbolic capital without openly acknowledging the underlying status jealousy. Fans who spend huge amounts of money on their interests, like Katherine, are called "土豪" ("Tu Hao"), which roughly translates to something analogous to uncouth or over-consumed "nouveau riche" and has

become somewhat of an internet meme[1]. The term "Tu Hao" (土豪) carries connotations of nouveau riche vulgarity, and its deployment in fandom settings not only expresses class resentment but also polices the boundaries of acceptable fan behaviour (Xu, 2017; Dan, Wang and Chen, 2023). As an active member of Jessica's online fandom, I myself have had this name levelled against me by other fans on occasion, particularly between 2014 to 2016 when I was in the habit of regularly sharing images of high-ticket items that I gifted to Jessica. Initially, I was bemused if not a little humbled by having the term applied to me because I perceived it as recognition from my peers that I could afford and was willing to spend generously on my idol. As time went by, however, I realised that flaunting my gifts to other fans does not necessarily garner respect but can invite envy and even animosity. While I ratcheted up many likes and shares on every post of a high-ticket purchase I made, those posts were also lightning rods for accusatory and cynical comments speculating on my family's wealth with some individuals accusing me of recklessly spending my parent's money.

Consequently, I decided to adopt a low-key approach and avoid drawing too much attention, which was from 2017. At the time, this decision felt like a pragmatic response to the rising tensions I observed—but in retrospect, it was a moment of recognition that profoundly inspired the direction of this research. The discomfort I experienced in navigating my own visibility and legitimacy within the community prompted deeper questions about the affective and structural dynamics at play in fandom hierarchies. This realisation did not just shape how I engaged with the fandom personally; it became a catalyst for this study's focus on the emotional undercurrents of jealousy, vengeance, and legitimacy. This shift highlights the social risks of conspicuous consumption, where visible displays of status can provoke jealousy, criticism, and social isolation (Truong and McColl, 2011). Comments from two other Goldenstars, Guy and Kitty, provide a vivid illustration of how Katherine's conspicuous consumption and elevated social position trigger both admiration and resentment. Guy (28) highlights the mixed reactions to Katherine's posts, describing how her displays of wealth, spark heated debates:

> It's hard to miss. Whenever Katherine posts about her collection—like those Chanel outfits or the limited-edition Dom Pérignon bottles—there's always a heated debate in the comments. Some fans openly admire her, saying she's a great example of how fans can support Jessica in style. But others… well, they're less kind. I've seen people accuse her of flaunting her wealth unnecessarily or trying to 'buy' her way into being noticed by Jessica. Someone even called her 'the Chanel billboard of the fandom.' (…) Let's be honest—most of us can't afford even one of the bags she casually shows off, let alone the kind of lifestyle she leads. I think for some fans it stirs up feelings of inadequacy. They feel like they'll never be able to match her level of devotion—or at least what looks like devotion—because they can't afford to. But instead of admitting that, they lash out at her. It's not a good look for the fandom, honestly.

Guy's observation underscores the duality of conspicuous consumption within fan communities. While Katherine's financial contributions and visible support for Jessica position her as a figure of admiration, they simultaneously provoke feelings of inadequacy and resentment among less affluent fans. Kitty (29) echoes these sentiments, providing insights into how Katherine's actions are perceived in private conversations:

> In our private chats on WeChat, fans don't hold back. I've heard fans say things like, 'Katherine's just showing off because she wants everyone to think she's the biggest fan in the fandom,' or 'Does she even care about Jessica, or is this just about the number of her Weibo comments and likes?' Some even question if she's really a fan or just using Jessica's fandom to boost her own image. It can get pretty harsh.

Kitty's account highlights the competitive and performative aspects of fandom, where financial privilege is often viewed through a lens of suspicion. The critiques of Katherine reflect the broader dynamics of status jealousy, as fans evaluate each other's motives and authenticity based on visible markers of devotion. My own experience also sheds light on the unspoken etiquette that governs these interactions: publicly showcasing wealth through merchandise or gifts risks disrupting the communal ethos of fandom, which values shared passion over individual displays of privilege. In this context, Big Fans like Katherine must engage in a form of self-management, carefully regulating how their consumption and contributions are displayed. As discussed in the literature review, fandoms often develop tacit systems of self-discipline to preserve an image of equality and solidarity (Hills, 2002; Stanfill, 2019). Katherine's case illustrates how this self-

management operates in practice: she simultaneously celebrates her contributions while strategically downplaying their financial dimension, seeking to avoid accusations of arrogance or exclusivity that could destabilise her position within the group.

Ostensibly, Jessica's fandom, like many others, strives for inclusivity and a sense of communal solidarity. However, the commodification of fan devotion complicates these ideals. Earlier scholarship often emphasised the participatory and collective ethos of fandom (Jenkins, 1992), but as Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue, fandoms are not insulated from broader societal structures - class and access inevitably shape participation. In Jessica's fandom, financial disparities dictate not only the ability to purchase Jessica's branded goods but also the terms of social interaction within the community. This creates a paradox: conspicuous consumption reinforces individual status while simultaneously undermining the collective goal of supporting the idol.

From the perspective of communitas, tangible goods such as merchandise or gifts might be expected to act as ritual objects fostering unity and solidarity (Turner, 1969). Marketing scholarship has similarly shown how shared consumption can generate intense feelings of communitas - Arnould and Price (1993), for instance, describe how river rafting participants achieve a sense of egalitarian bonding through ritualised and material practices. Yet in this case, Jessica's fandom demonstrates the inverse: rather than binding fans together, tangible goods fracture the group along lines of privilege and exclusion. The "hidden rules" of sharing - prioritising items that directly benefit Jessica - represent attempts to discipline consumption back into a collective frame, but they also highlight the fragility of solidarity under commodification.

CHAPTER 7 VENGEANCE

7.0 Introduction

Following jealousy, "vengeance" refers not only to interpersonal retribution but also to collective moral policing and punitive actions against those who are seen as violating community norms (O'Leary and Murphy, 2019). Vengeance is a form of retribution carried out in response to some real or imagined wrongdoing and, amongst Jessica's fan community, can be understood as the punitive acts that fans undertake against one another, often accommodated by reliance on social media. Whilst digital platforms are commonly hailed as arenas for self-expression and social communing, they can also function as theatres where individuals, propelled by an 'insatiable' desire for validation, partake in self-destructive exhibitions where perceived transgressors can be publicly shamed (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). O'Leary and Murphy (2019) highlight the role of digital disinhibition in intensifying online conflicts, where anonymity and lack of face-to-face accountability contribute to heightened aggression and performative policing of social norms. This duality fuels a process of "ritualised humiliation" (O'Leary and Murphy, 2019), wherein fans attempt to diminish the status of high-ranking members as a means of reclaiming their own perceived worth within the community.

Throughout this section, I identify two aspects of fans' vengeful behaviours: *scapegoating* and *justification*. First, the data reveals how some fans are made into scapegoats – or sources of blame – by their peers when seeking to purge undesirable or unwanted practices, affects, or norms from their tribe. Those who are made scapegoats by their peers are subjected to public humiliation ('pillorying') and privacy invasion ('doxxing'). Second, through various forms of justification, fans rationalise the reprehensibility of mistreating their peers. Here, I explore how justification works as a means for fans to cynically disavow the problems that their vengeful behaviour can cause, presenting them as necessary for the collective interest of the fandom.

7.1 Scapegoating

The targeting of “problematic” members for collective blame echoes classical accounts of scapegoating as social control (Girard, 1986), now amplified by digital visibility and networked publics (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Throughout the ethnographic data, scapegoating functions as a form of cyber-mobbing, where fans collectively identify individuals whose behaviours or expressions are seen as disrupting the dominant fandom norms. A particularly vivid example of this scapegoating mechanism can be found in the case of Sakura (33), who was targeted for her sentimental and emotionally expressive engagement with the fandom. Unlike fans who present a cool and detached image of devotion, Sakura’s fandom expression was marked by intimate, verbose, and deeply personal narratives of her experiences with Jessica. The below extract from one of Sakura’s Weibo posts provides an example of her gushing approach to fan communications:

> Attending the fan signing event today was both surreal and familiar. Upon seeing the note I wrote presented to Jess, she gave this adorably exaggerated sigh, her nose crinkling as she exclaimed, 'Oh, Chinese!' Watching her fumble and carefully rehearse her response was endearing. And when I tried assuring her in Korean about the simplicity of the text, her playful retort of 'No, it’s very difficult!' was just so characteristically Jessica. But it was when our eyes met, and I conveyed my admiration for her song, that her ensuing radiant smile left me momentarily captivated by her sheer charm” (Source: translated to English from Sakura’s Weibo account).

Such detailed and emotive recounting, which underscores the perceived, almost homoerotic depth of Sakura’s interaction with her idol, potentially provides us with a window into the cause of some fans' resentment towards Sakura. Those more aloof fans, who perhaps do not or cannot forge a similar bond with Jessica, perhaps because of their self-awareness amongst peers, might feel overshadowed by and resentful of the intimacy Sakura alludes to. Affective theory suggests that emotions are not simply internal states but relational forces that shape and structure social interactions (Ahmed, 2004). Sakura further described how, after attending Jessica’s events, she would take to Weibo to post

long, diary-like reflections, filled with rich, sentimental language that emphasised Jessica's warmth and kindness.

> I found myself becoming a source of irritation for those fans when I shared sweet moments with Jessica. They would post sour words on their own accounts first, such as 'Oh you must be so happy to live in your own fantasy' and 'Does Jessica know you were faking those emotions in your repos?'

Here, the language of Sakura's detractors is instructive. By accusing her of fabrication and self-indulgence, they were effectively undermining her legitimacy within the fandom, positioning her as someone whose engagement was less 'real' than others'. This mirrors Noelle-Neumann's (1993) spiral of silence theory, which argues that deviations from dominant discourse are quickly policed and suppressed within tightly controlled communities. Within Jessica's fandom, there is an implicit expectation that fan devotion should not be framed in such overtly personal or emotional terms—especially in public-facing spaces. Sakura's style of deeply subjective emotional expression clashed with the dominant fandom aesthetic, which values a certain ironic detachment or a more strategic, status-oriented display of devotion. One of the most potent ways fans mark someone for scapegoating is through labelling and rebranding. Sakura became known within fandom circles as "Chicken-Soup Auntie", a name that was used to position her as an outsider and undermine her credibility.

The moniker draws from the Chinese term for overly sentimental or moralistic writing (鸡汤, jī tāng, 'chicken soup'), which is often used pejoratively to describe content perceived as cliché, overly earnest, or lacking intellectual rigor. The addition of "auntie" (阿姨, ā yí) further reinforces a generational gap, marking Sakura as older, out-of-touch, and emotionally indulgent compared to the younger, more socially dominant members of the fandom. However, in the context of K-pop fandoms, this term has been reappropriated pejoratively to target older female fans whose sentimental and nurturing expressions are seen by younger fans as melodramatic or outdated. In branding Sakura this way, younger fans weaponised a term of emotional nourishment to underscore generational divides and position her as an out-of-touch outsider whose expressions of

fandom were seen as embarrassing rather than endearing. This linguistic shift reflects a broader trend in fandom spaces, where emic terminology is used not only to categorise but also to regulate emotional norms and enforce status hierarchies.

> Once I acquired this nickname, it spread throughout our fandom. They used it to manipulate new and existing fans, painting me in a negative light as someone who was too soft and not as aggressive as them.

Here, Sakura's description highlights how fandom exclusion is often enacted through subtle, coded forms of public ridicule rather than outright aggression. The nickname functioned as a discursive weapon, signalling that her form of participation was fundamentally incompatible with the image that the fandom wanted to project. This reflects how policing of expressed emotions (compare with Gach, Fiesler, and Brubaker, 2017) operates as a form of gatekeeping within fan communities, shaping who belongs and who does not. Moreover, returning to the previously discussed distinction between 'Big Fans' and 'Transparent Fans', this may be seen as an example of the former deliberately striving to force Sakura into the latter category. Sakura's case also illustrates how scapegoating within fandoms is rarely confined to private disputes; rather, it is a highly performative and public spectacle. Fans who opposed her did not merely criticise her in private group chats; they took deliberate steps to mock and delegitimise her in public forums, ensuring that her exclusion was widely visible.

> They would post sarcastic comments under my Weibo posts, but they also took my words and reposted them on their own accounts, mocking me in front of their followers.

This behaviour aligns with Lenhart et al.'s (2016) findings that cyber-mobbing is rarely an isolated conflict between two individuals but rather a group ritual, where exclusion is enacted in a performative manner before an audience. By circulating Sakura's words among their own followers, her detractors did more than express personal disdain—they engaged in a symbolic act of public ridicule, framing her style of fandom engagement as not just undesirable but laughable. The act of reposting with sarcasm served as a ritualised boundary-drawing mechanism, reinforcing who and what is deemed

acceptable within the fandom (cf. Lenhart et al., 2016). Rather than passively accepting this treatment, Sakura attempted to reclaim agency, using Weibo as a space to counteract the narrative that had been imposed upon her. She describes her efforts to expose those who targeted her, stating, “I took to Weibo to expose their toxic behavior and warn other fans about the harm they were causing to the fandom and to Jessica.

This contradiction—where jealousy must be disavowed yet bullying is performatively excused—echoes the patterns explored in the previous jealousy section. There, we saw how envy was refracted through sarcasm or moralistic judgment to remain unspoken, while here, acts of cyber-aggression serve as masked outlets for those very same repressed affective tensions. This paradox raises critical questions about the socio-cultural logics underpinning fandom governance: why is it more acceptable to publicly shame than to vulnerably confess envy? As Jenson (1992) observes, fandom is haunted by the figure of the ‘fanatic’—stigmatised as excessive, irrational, and socially disruptive. Hills (2002) similarly notes that fannish devotion is always vulnerable to being recast as pathological once it crosses perceived thresholds of intensity. Within this framework, open admissions of envy risk aligning a fan with the stereotype of the unstable fanatic, threatening their credibility and belonging.

By contrast, practices of shaming, sarcasm, and mobbing can be framed as protective of the collective, casting the aggressors not as dysfunctional but as guardians of communal norms. Thus, what appears as a paradox—the acceptability of bullying versus the silencing of envy—actually reveals the disciplining logics of fandom itself: devotion must be performed as rational, moral, and collective, while the raw affective undercurrents of jealousy and insecurity are displaced into socially sanctioned rituals of ridicule. Here, she positioned herself not merely as a victim but as a protector of both the fandom’s integrity and Jessica’s public image. However, her attempt at resistance only served to escalate the conflict. By publicly confronting her aggressors, she inadvertently fuelled their hostility, leading to a heightened phase of retaliation: “Sadly, when I fought

back, they took more severe actions against me again – their attacks even spread out to some of my fan friends."

This reflects O'Leary and Murphy's (2019) discussion of digital shaming as a cyclical phenomenon, where each act of public condemnation begets further rounds of retaliation. Here, Sakura speculates on her status as a "scapegoat" singled out and ridiculed as an easy target to resolve wider jealousies within Jessica fandom. She further contemplates the "Chicken-soup auntie" nickname given to her by her detractors and speculates that the jealousy may emanate from the extensive engagement her posts attract, especially those reflecting "the sweet moments I shared with Jessica". Within fandom spaces, emotions like jealousy, admiration, and resentment are not experienced in isolation—they are generated through interactions, comparisons, and the visibility of certain affective performances over others. Sakura's fandom performance, characterised by an openly emotive, deeply personal, and highly subjective engagement, disrupts the dominant affective economy of Jessica's fandom.

Unlike fans who express their devotion through cool, distant admiration or strategic status signalling, Sakura foregrounds intimacy and emotional vulnerability, making her a highly visible and, consequently, controversial figure. In previous studies of inter-fan relations within consumer communities, de Valck (2007) argues that fandoms can breed a potent sense of emotional proprietorship that has the potential to spark conflict. Fans often engage in territorial disputes, driven by the belief that their connection – or 'claim' – over their source of worship grants them the autonomy to set the narrative, or even the unwritten rules, of engagement (de Valck, 2007, p. 270). This territoriality, paired with the desire for proximity to the idol, can sometimes push certain fans to the periphery, even when their admiration for the idol is equally profound thus laying the groundwork for vengeful relations.

The case of Sakura's interaction with Jessica offers an insightful lens. When Zoey, another fan, commented on Sakura's post during our interview, her words were telling: "It's not just that she met Jessica. It's how she talks about it - as if she's the only one who truly understands her." Sakura then becomes scapegoated out of almost super-egoic desperation of sorts; Sakura presents an unconscious reminder of all fans' inherent selfishness and thus a barrier to achieving communal territory that must be suppressed. Fans' deferral to revenge isn't merely a reaction to jealousy; it is a way to reclaim their perceived rights, rights they believe are foundational to the very relationship between an idol and their fandom. Fans, as de Valck (2007) notes, are not just passive observers. They are emotionally invested stakeholders, eager to assert their connection and, at times, territorial about their perceived closeness to the idol. Such territorial claims are not always overt; they manifest in subtle dynamics, as seen in reactions to Sakura's posts and the labels ascribed to her. Scapegoats become necessary to purge the community of the risks of over-identification and personal desire for one-on-one closeness with the idol that always lay just below the surface.

7.1.1 Doxxing

In some extreme cases, aggressors target the fans through 'doxxing' which involves leaking private or personal information through online mass media channels without the consent of the targets, whose safety and privacy are intentionally compromised. May (30) often labelled a "warrior fan" by others in the community, has built a reputation for her outspoken and combative approach to fandom disputes. She recalls how a seemingly mundane disagreement about Jessica's latest album spiralled into a full-fledged fandom war:

> I recall a fight was provoked by some disagreement over Jessica's new album. Some fans thought it was not as good as they expected and even implied that they blamed Jessica. So, I publicly announced that I loved this album and 100% appreciated Jessica's hard work. They thought I was picking on them to have a fight [and so] we began to fight as they wanted.

This initial conflict demonstrates a familiar pattern in fan discourse—differing opinions about an idol's work can quickly escalate into contests over legitimacy, where performances of devotion are scrutinised by fellow fans. May's unwavering praise for the album was interpreted by others as an indirect attack on dissenters, reinforcing the idea that disagreements within fandoms are rarely just about the idol; they are also about power, status, and belonging.

However, May's experience escalated beyond the usual digital altercations when her adversaries resorted to doxxing, targeting her family, and ultimately sabotaging her professional life:

> Then they started to bring my whole family into it. [They would say things like]: 'Not only is your mother dead, but her going to hell seems too light a punishment for having given birth to you. They probably opened another level of hell specially for your mother.' That kind of thing. And so, I fought back, then they retaliated, continuing until I was numb.

May's symbolic power as a fan who was well-versed in online debates - as she puts it, "Every Goldenstar knows I'm a pro, okay?"- made her an intimidating presence in fandom conflicts. However, her detractors recognised that they could not defeat her through verbal exchanges alone, so they sought alternative methods of disempowerment. Their deliberate focus on her family magnified the attack's emotional and social stakes. In Chinese culture, where family honour and respect hold profound significance, targeting May's deceased mother was an exceptionally transgressive act, amplifying the cruelty of the harassment (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2009). The insults weaponised familial shame, making the attack feel both personal and culturally violating.

This attack also illustrates how fan hierarchies are governed through the interplay of devotion and dysfunction. Jenson (1992) has shown how the figure of the "fanatic" haunts fandom discourse, marking the line between legitimate and excessive attachment, while Hills (2002) argues that fannish devotion is always vulnerable to reclassification as pathological once it breaches communal thresholds. Within this framework, attempts to demote May from the status of a 'Big Fan' to that of a mere 'Transparent Fan' can be read

as disciplinary practices: strategies that frame her devotion as dysfunctional and excessive, thereby stripping her of authority. Such boundary-policing is innately anti-communitas, for rather than reinforcing solidarity, it fractures the group through exclusion and humiliation.

However, the attacks did not stop at personal insults. May's career became the next battleground:

> Then they started to stretch out the claws onto my real life. They started to illegally poach my private information like home address, work address, all of that. One day, I received a call from the Bureau of Education as I'm a teacher – it filled me with dread. It turns out they had put in numerous anonymous calls to the Bureau and reported me for 'not living up to the standards one would expect of a teacher' based on what I said online.

This would be exemplifying the most extreme form of "targeting" (Douglas, 2016), where fandom aggression transcends the digital sphere and manifests as material harm. May's doxxing became institutionalised, moving beyond fandom conflicts and into professional consequences. Her aggressors weaponised her digital footprint, reframing her fandom-related altercations as evidence of professional misconduct. This illustrates the permeability between online and offline identities, where digital actions are not only visible but interpretable through mainstream social and professional frameworks (Thompson, 2011). Her adversaries were strategic in how they leveraged their attacks—by making anonymous reports to her employer, they ensured that May's online reputation would be judged not through the norms of fandom but through the lens of professional ethics. This reframing of transgression, from fandom quarrel to workplace liability, highlights how digital fan disputes can spill over into wider cultural and societal standards, with non-fan audiences acting as unwitting enforcers of fandom retribution (Jenkins, 2012). The final blow was devastating:

> They also emailed some of my Weibo posts to the Bureau which were posted during fan wars with other fandoms – admittedly, most of my words contained offensive language! Then the Bureau suspended me from work and asked me to wait for the final decision while they investigated. A few days later, I was told I was fired.

Here, fandom aggression escalates beyond digital boundaries, exposing the invisible mechanisms by which fan conflicts become institutionalised. This reflects Jenkins' (2012) argument that digital conflicts do not remain contained within subcultural communities but can quickly gain traction among non-fan audiences who assess these disputes against wider societal norms. In May's case, her aggressors understood this and weaponised it deliberately. By taking fandom disputes outside of their original context and reinterpreting them through a professional lens, they transformed May from a high-status, combative fan into a professional liability. Her public and private personas collapsed into one, leading to material consequences that extended far beyond the realm of fandom. Here, fandom aggression escalates beyond digital boundaries, revealing the often invisible yet insidious mechanisms by which online fan conflicts become institutionalised and weaponised. This aligns with Douglas's (2016) tripartite model of doxxing, which includes deanonymisation (the revelation of a target's identity), targeting (directing others to take action against the victim), and delegitimisation (damaging the victim's credibility or moral standing). In May's case, all three dimensions converge with striking force. Her name and professional affiliation were uncovered and circulated without consent, illustrating a deliberate attempt at deanonymisation. Her aggressors then launched a coordinated campaign to report her to her employer, transforming an internal fandom dispute into a public spectacle of reputational targeting. Finally, her legitimacy as both a fan and an educator were called into question, with selected Weibo posts reframed and presented as evidence of professional misconduct, enacting delegitimisation through the strategic extraction and recontextualisation of digital content.

May's experience also demonstrates how cultural values shape the severity of fandom retaliation. In Chinese culture, family holds an exceptionally sacred status, and attacks directed at one's relatives—as seen in the earlier threats against May's mother—serve as a profound form of social punishment (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2009). However, beyond family, career stability and social reputation are also deeply valued, making doxxing and targeted reports to employers an especially damaging tactic. Unlike in some Western contexts where online aggression may remain confined to reputation-

based damage, May's adversaries leveraged the specific cultural and institutional structures of Chinese society—where professional conduct and morality are closely intertwined—to escalate their retaliation beyond the digital sphere. This tactical weaponisation of social structures illustrates the complex, high-stakes nature of fandom warfare in hyper-connected societies. To advance fandom theory, May's case should be positioned within a broader critique of digital fandom governance, discipline, and punishment, extending beyond existing discussions of cyber-mobbing (Lenhart et al., 2016) and toxic self-performance (O'Leary and Murphy, 2019). While previous scholarship has examined in-group policing within fandoms, much of this work focuses on symbolic forms of exclusion and intra-fandom conflicts over legitimacy and authenticity (Hills, 2002; Stanfill, 2019). May's case pushes the conversation further, illustrating how digital fandoms have evolved beyond discursive policing and into institutionalised punitive mechanisms that extend into real-world consequences. In May's case, anonymity provides her aggressors with a sense of security, allowing them to push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour without direct accountability. As she explains:

> At that moment, I felt speechless and empty. I never imagined that my career would come to an end because of such a ludicrous reason. After I was told I was fired, I locked myself in my room for almost a week, avoiding any contact with others.

This reaction demonstrates the psychological toll of fandom cyber-mobbing, particularly when it extends into real-world consequences. O'Leary and Murphy (2019) argue that platforms like Weibo enable a kind of toxic disinhibition, where users—protected by anonymity—engage in behaviours they would not otherwise consider acceptable. For May's aggressors, doxxing and reporting her to her employer was not merely about punishment; it was about asserting power and control. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of online aggression is evident in May's final decision to exit the fandom entirely:

> The incident made me realise that you can never predict what harm online lunatics may inflict upon you.

Here, May's symbolic death as a fan coincides with her professional and personal loss. Having lost her career, her security, and her status within the fandom, she finds herself without the resources to continue fighting. This echoes Polder-Verkiel's (2012) argument that deindividuation in online spaces—where individuals feel less personally accountable for their actions—amplifies the severity of digital aggression. May's public expulsion from the fandom coincides with her loss of professional identity, illustrating how fandom-based punishments now extend beyond digital spaces. This reflects a new, more severe form of fan discipline—erasure—which differs from traditional forms of fan policing in critical ways, wherein erasure replaces mere exclusion as a form of ultimate punishment. This means that fandoms are no longer just interpretive communities (Jenkins, 2006); they now wield the power to fundamentally alter individuals' lives outside the digital sphere. In May's case, the "public and private dichotomy" dissolves, making it impossible for her to separate her identity as a Jessica fan from her identity as an educator. Her forced exit from the fandom, coupled with her loss of professional standing, suggests that in cases of intense fandom retaliation, the goal is not simply to correct behaviour, but to erase individuals entirely. This aligns with Marwick and Boyd's (2011) concept of "context collapse," where social media merges different aspects of a person's identity, making it impossible to separate one's fandom persona from their professional or personal life. In May's case, her fandom identity (as a "warrior fan") was deliberately weaponised against her in her professional sphere, resulting in material consequences like job loss. This suggests a critical evolution in fandom power dynamics: fandom surveillance no longer just enforces norms within communities—it actively redefines individuals' social and professional existence. May's case presents one of the most extreme manifestations of dyssynchrony, where fandom does not function as a site of collective belonging, but as an arena for enforcing exclusion through aggressive tactics.

In the next section, this discussion will continue by examining how fan aggressors justify their actions, crafting narratives that rationalise their attacks while preserving their sense of moral righteousness. This will further explore the psychological and cultural

mechanisms that sustain toxic fandom behaviours, revealing the complex interplay of vengeance, power, and exclusion within digital fan communities.

7.2 Justification

Beyond the scapegoating that enables fans to first seek retribution on their peers, it became apparent throughout the ethnography that fans often narrativise and justify retributions, allowing for their perpetuation and intensification. Many of the incidents of extreme treatment of scapegoats such as doxxing were often "justified" by aggressors to insulate themselves from any potential shame or regret arising from their actions. This insulation tactic which appears so central to fans' acts of vengeance against one another can be understood as a form of fetishistic disavowal, a simultaneous admission and denial: fans are fully aware what they are doing is problematic, but by fetishising a particular thing (e.g. a reason, a story, a justification), they can look past/disavow the problems that stem from their behaviour (Žižek, 2009). As Žižek (2009) explains:

> the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth . . . a fetish can play the very constructive role of allowing us to cope with a harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their own private worlds, they are thoroughgoing 'realists,' able to accept the way things are because by clinging to their fetish they are able to mitigate the full impact of reality. (Žižek, 2009, p. 65)

Throughout the ethnography, the fetishes that fans most often cling to, allowing them to justify and cope with their undertaking of unkind, petty, and destructive vengefulness include: (i.) defence of the celebrity, (ii.) marketplace legitimacy.

7.2.1 Defence of the celebrity

One of the premier means for fans to fetishistically disavow their petty vengeance is the fantasy that, in behaving vengefully, they are coming to the defence of their idol, Jessica. Fans are fully aware that they are behaving vengefully but perceive it as behaving

heroically. Heroism is defined as extreme prosocial behaviour that is performed voluntarily, involves significant risk, requires sacrifice, and is done without anticipation of person gain (Franco et al., 2011; Allison et al., 2017). To explain heroism as a means of being able to consciously admit the pettiness of one's behavior while still undertaking it, we can turn to Miles (29) who confesses to taking revenge on fellow fans in belief that they threatened Jessica in some ways. Back in 2016, there was a set of Korean news articles reporting about Jessica's private life and her relationship status. It suddenly witnessed Jessica face public criticism and negative media coverage, triggering Goldenstars to display their heroism. Fans may justify punitive action as "defence of the celebrity's reputation," constructing their actions as necessary for the collective good, even as they reinforce exclusion and hierarchy (Stanfill, 2019).

Miles (29) voluntarily started organising fans on social media, launching campaigns with the hashtags like #StayWithJessica. They not only posted about Jessica's previous positive actions and contributions to counteract the negative coverage but also sought critics of Jessica to retaliate against, accusing these critics of misunderstanding the situation or deliberately slandering. This behaviour then caused divisions within the fandom, with some fans who advocated for a more rational approach to the controversy being accused of being "disloyal" or "fake fans". Miles shared during the interview about how and what they did to "punish" these fans:

> We couldn't bear that kind of fans. Staying quiet and being a coward cannot save Jessica from this mess. I believe all loyal Goldenstars should follow the plan and defend her against those people. Instead of fighting as one, if Goldenstars cannot dedicate themselves in hard times, we can never protect Jessica. (…) To educate those disloyal fans, there were several approaches. First, we picked these fans out one by one on Weibo, messaged them and forced to agree with our fight-plan. A part of fans agreed because they did not want any more trouble from us. The other part still insisted with a more rational plan and disguised ours as useless to Jessica. At that point, we immediately publicly announced their Weibo IDs within the fandom, and labelled them as 'Jessica haters', asking fans to report their accounts so that they could not use their Weibo accounts anymore. (…) These fans would sign up new accounts after being treated like this, accusing us of not having the rights to deprive their fan identities. I personally believe I am carrying the duty to protect Jessica when needed. If any fans are useless, then they do not need to be Goldenstars.

Miles aggressively shared her thoughts and criticised fans who were classified as “disloyal” and “fake”. She expressed a strong sense of defensiveness and protectiveness through “couldn’t bear”, “being a coward”, and “defend her against”. Her vindication that “believe I carry the duty to protect Jessica” aligns with the lens of Allison and Goethals’ heroism theory (2011, pp. 8-12). It can be seen how fans justify their negative actions as heroic deeds to protect Jessica from unjust treatment, e.g. “all loyal fans should follow the plan and defend”. By depriving the fans from Goldenstars, which Miles and her group believed were the right thing to do, they are essentially imitating the actions they associate with heroes - boldly standing up for someone who is misunderstood or treated unfairly. By publicly supporting Jessica and even taking severe actions on fans themselves, Miles and her group are not just spreading their support for Jessica, crafting their public image as loyal supporters, but also justifying their negative actions towards one another as being in the defence of Jessica.

Miles’ account of vindication provided by heroism, steeped in the fetishisation of celebrity defence, echoes Žižek’s notion of the fetish as a symbolic stand-in that veils the reality of the situation (Žižek, 2008), serving to justify or mask violent acts by framing them as necessary for a greater good. In her rationalisation, the collective experience is revered, becoming a fetishised ideal that Miles and her group self-appoint themselves to protect. This shared narrative of supporting Jessica is held as sacrosanct, and any perceived threat to this collective unity is met with a strategy that, while divisive, is framed as a protective measure - a defence mechanism resonating with Žižek’s interpretation of ideological fantasy that masks a certain antagonism (Žižek, 1989). Additionally, Miles’ behaviour reflects a deep fetishisation of her professed love for Jessica. This idealisation allows her to position her vengeful actions as profound expressions of devotion, thereby masking the underlying aggression. Her behavior is justified under the guise of preserving the intensity and purity of the fandom's collective passion (Cova, Pace, and Skålén, 2015).

Miles' "purge" of disloyal fans exemplifies a reverse communitas, where instead of a collective bond forming through shared experience, exclusion and purity policing become the central organising principles. Unlike Turner's (1969) classical communitas, which emphasises togetherness and liminality, Miles' version of fandom ritualises exclusion, elevating it into a core tenet of group identity. This aligns with Eade's (1991) assertion that communitas can become a means of defining 'us' versus 'them'—not simply by welcoming members but by rigorously expelling those deemed unfit. The fandom, rather than functioning as an inclusive space, transforms into a zone of ideological purification, where Miles and her group determine who is worthy of participating in fan culture.

By publicly labelling dissenting fans as "Jessica haters", Miles mobilises the fandom's collective energy toward policing and punishing perceived wrongdoers. This demonstrates how digital fandoms can function as disciplinary regimes, rather than as participatory spaces of mutual appreciation. As Stanfill (2019) notes, fandoms are not simply communities of affection but also sites of governance, where social norms are actively policed by their members. Ultimately, Miles' retrospective absolution is underpinned by these fetishised justifications, enabling her to navigate the cognitive dissonance that arises from her actions. By convincing herself of her duty to protect Jessica, she exonerates herself, in her mind, from the fallout within the community. This internal narrative, influenced by Žižek's concept of disavowal, allows Miles to maintain the illusion of commitment and integrity within the fan community, while simultaneously engaging in actions that contradict those values (Kozinets, 2001).

7.2.2 Marketplace/fans legitimacy

The hierarchical tension between Big Fans and Transparent Fans manifests most profoundly in ongoing legitimacy disputes—what I term "legitimacy wars"—where fans contest who qualifies as a "true" Goldenstar. These conflicts emerged consistently across

interviews, netnographic data, and my own experiences, revealing how fan legitimacy becomes both a sought-after status and a weapon wielded against perceived transgressors in the fandom. Unlike marketplace legitimacy, which concerns commercial validation, fan legitimacy specifically addresses the intra-community recognition of one's devotion, status, and belonging within the fandom. This contestation over fan legitimacy frequently centres on three primary dimensions: seniority (time spent as a fan), visibility (online presence and recognition), and exclusivity (unique access to Jessica). The interplay of these dimensions creates complex power dynamics where some fans—predominantly those with Big Fan status—assume the authority to validate or invalidate others' fandom participation. This gatekeeping function transforms fan legitimacy from a personal affective relationship with Jessica into a collectively policed identity marker regulated through various disciplinary mechanisms. The case of May, discussed earlier, exemplifies how even established fans can have their legitimacy violently revoked when they transgress unwritten community norms. Despite her long-standing position in the fandom, May's aggressive online presence made her vulnerable to delegitimisation tactics that ultimately extended beyond digital spaces into her professional life. Her experience reveals how the boundaries between "true" and "false" fans are not fixed but constantly negotiated through complex power relations, with devastating consequences for those who find themselves on the wrong side of these boundaries.

A Goldenstars named Jori (26) shared with me a legitimacy war that happened to her, where she was labelled as non-real fans and her fan loyalty got questioned by senior fans. Jori's account of being labelled a "non-real fan" underscore how seniority within fandoms is fetishised as a marker of authenticity, where older members self-appoint themselves as regulatory authorities.

> I was chased after like a dog by those fans after merely expressing my love to another idol when reposting a Weibo. They commented under that post and questioned my loyalty, accusing me in front of all the fans that I'm not a real Goldenstars. 'A true Goldenstars is one and only Jessica - no others. We need to maintain fandom order for Jessica.'

This reflects a rigid, exclusionary structure wherein identity as a fan is conditional—not just on love for the idol, but on adherence to prescribed rules. As Tracy (23) further notes:

> I sense that clear hierarchy in this fandom and I know it's the same in others. However, here, it felt much stronger. Big fans profess themselves to be true fans because they became Goldenstars earlier.

Here, seniority in the fandom is transformed into a form of capital—a fetishised marker that justifies power over other fans. These "big fans" do not merely assert their experience as a source of knowledge; they use it to police and exclude newer members. This aligns with Stanfill's (2019) work on fan governance, where fandoms act as self-regulating communities that dictate legitimacy through hierarchical structures rather than open participation. The phrase "maintain fandom order" is particularly revealing, implying that marketplace legitimacy is not just about personal devotion but about the enforcement of an ideological purity within the community. Those who deviate—whether by expressing admiration for another idol (as Jori did) or by challenging the legitimacy of fan-led commercial ventures—become targets for retribution, framed as threats to the integrity of the fandom.

Netnographic data revealed that a similar case occurred in the winter of 2023, Jessica was planning to host multiple fan-sign events in China, offering fans the chance to meet her. The plan was to sell 1000 tickets per city, with 100 lucky winners getting the opportunity to have a poster signed, and 10 of those also getting to take photos with her. Surprisingly, these events were announced and organised by Jessica's largest fanbase/fansite in China, making it the sole platform for fans to be able to participate. The ticket package included 2 albums, a poster, a photo card, and an invitation to the event, granting entry to the venue upon purchase. Prior to this, fans were required to provide proof of their fan identity, including their Weibo account ID, evidence of purchasing Jessica's merchandise, and proof of following both the fanbase and Jessica. Additionally, fans were asked to share their real name and identity number with the fanbase when purchasing. The ticket price was set at 1,600 RMB (equivalent to 180 GBP), which was

higher than the average fan-sign event price. Furthermore, despite purchasing a ticket, fans only had around a 10% chance of being selected as lucky winners. Following the announcement, the Goldenstars fandom became abuzz with discussion. Some fans praised the fanbase for organising such events, while others expressed concerns, stating that it was unprecedented in any K-pop fandom for a fanbase to host such events. They questioned whether the fanbase might profit from it, the security of their private information, and the fairness of the lucky draw selection process. Here is a furious post by one of the fanbase admins on Weibo:

> "While examining the practices of various fandoms, it becomes apparent that attending fan-signing events can be a costly endeavour, often requiring the purchase of at least 30 albums to qualify for a single ticket. Scalpers capitalise on this by reselling these tickets at exorbitant prices, with sums typically reaching into the thousands. Contrastingly, Jessica offers a more accessible option for fans, charging only 1600 for entry, which also includes special gifts. This direct approach circumvents third-party platforms, indicating a deliberate effort to prevent scalpers from exploiting fans. Given the costs associated with the venue, staff, and makeup, the financial margin seems minimal, leading to the question: if profit maximisation was the objective of our fanbase, surely more lucrative strategies would be employed! If you are still questioning about this, then you shouldn't say you're a true Goldenstars."
>
> (Source: Weibo post, accessed date 4th of December 2023)

A later introspection that anyone close to the fanbase admins was likely to be selected, while those who criticised or were opposite to them would not be selected. This direct rejection of any scepticism as a marker of illegitimacy reinforces marketplace legitimacy as both a financial and ideological construct. Fans were expected not only to spend money but to do so unquestioningly. The demand for financial sacrifice aligns with Cova, Pace, and Skålén's (2015) concept of 'consumptive devotion,' where consumer behaviour is ritualised as an act of collective faith and loyalty. However, those who questioned the financial aspects of the event faced immediate pushback, revealing how economic participation is weaponised to police fan status. The selective nature of the lottery system, where proximity to the fanbase admins seemingly increased one's likelihood of winning, further indicates a consolidation of power within elite fandom

circles. By controlling access to Jessica, senior fans reinforced their dominance while effectively punishing dissenters.

This financial gatekeeping reflects a hidden rule within the fandom—marketplace legitimacy is not just about being a fan; it is about proving one's devotion through economic participation. Those who fail to meet these expectations are branded as outsiders, excluded not just from events but from the very identity of being a "true" fan. The continual policing of "true fan" boundaries reflects the struggle for legitimacy within consumer communities (Kozinets, 2001), where claims to authenticity and devotion are weaponised to reinforce internal hierarchies. Fetishistic disavowal in this case is the act of acknowledging the subjective nature of such legitimacy while simultaneously enforcing one's own criteria as the standard. This disavowal allows fans to rationalise exclusionary or even vengeful behaviours towards those deemed 'illegitimate'. It is a form of vengeance against those who threaten the established order or the perceived purity of the fandom. Fans who do not meet the exacting standards set by the self-appointed gatekeepers / senior fans may find themselves the targets of retributive actions, designed to uphold the fetishised ideal of a 'true fan' and to maintain the status quo within the community (Žižek, 2008).

The dynamics of fetishistic disavowal within Jessica's fandom illustrate how fans can simultaneously acknowledge the problematic nature of their vengeful behaviours while continuing to engage in them. By fetishising concepts like "Jessica's defence" or "fan legitimacy," vengeful actors construct narratives that transform aggression into virtue and exclusion into necessity. This process creates what Žižek (2008) describes as an "ethical suspension," where normal moral considerations are temporarily set aside in service of a supposedly higher purpose. This analysis extends beyond existing scholarship on fan conflicts, which often focuses on inter-fandom rivalries (Havard, 2018; Iwicka, 2014), by highlighting how intra-fandom policing constitutes a fundamental aspect of fan communities. Rather than viewing vengeance as disruptive to fandom cohesion, this research positions it as productive establishing who belongs, who doesn't, and under what

conditions. This reconceptualisation challenges idealised notions of fandoms as inherently inclusive spaces, revealing instead how exclusion and punishment function as constitutive elements of fan communities in the digital age.

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

8.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the thesis's core contributions. At its centre is the conceptual development of dyssynchronas, articulated as the obverse to communitas. I first set out dyssynchronas in depth, defining the concept, presenting the model, and contrasting it with communitas across hierarchical structure, temporality, and valence. I then outline additional contributions to methodology, fandom, and consumer experience, followed by practical and managerial implications. The chapter closes with limitations and avenues for future research.

8.1 Overall Theoretical contribution: Dyssynchronas

Based on extensive ethnographic observations, interviews, and netnographic data from the Chinese fandom of Jessica Jung, I am now in a position to more fully develop the concept of dyssynchronas to capture the obverse of communitas. While communitas evokes a sense of egalitarian togetherness and shared purpose, dyssynchronas underscores the fragmentation and hierarchisation of community dynamics. Dyssynchronas emerges not only through internal dynamics but also through external pressures, such as regulatory constraints or market forces. These destabilising forces are explored across key subthemes, with particular attention to how inequities in access, resources, and social capital disrupt the cohesion of fan communities.

Dyssynchronas refers to an ongoing condition in which fans' devotion, practices, and interactions do not produce harmony but instead generate tension and division. It is not a temporary breakdown of harmony but a structural rhythm of oscillation between togetherness and fracture. This differs from Turner's (1969) foundational conception of communitas in several ways.

Firstly, structurally, Turner casts communitas as egalitarian levelling – "the basic equality of all" (1979, p. 470) and an "undifferentiated, not segmented" sociality that appears in liminality when ordinary distinctions recede (1969, pp. 94-96; 132; 177-178). Even across spontaneous, normative and ideological communitas, the shared aspiration is equality: an immediate surge, custodial rules that try to conserve it, and an ideal that projects it (1969, p. 132). Dyssynchronas reverses this expectation. As the findings in the previous chapters reveal, participation is hierarchical, not equal; jealousy and vengeance sort fans and guide their actions. Jealousy is catalysed by social comparison around proximity to the idol and financial resources. Those able to attend concerts and fan-sign events, gain intimate or direct access, or maintain prominent fan-sites are perceived as the ones being envied. Competition is intense while the online leadership roles some fight tooth and nail to achieve permits them to have stronger-voices, and the power to coordinate the fandom, which coupled with demonstrative dedication offline (i.e., frequent attendance to events) stabilises a small stratum of recognisable "Big Fans," while the remainder are positioned below them. Importantly here, rather than contravening the fandom community – something that would be suggested by Turner's framework – the ossification of hierarchy, the fierceness of competition, and the acuteness of rivalries work to encourage and embolden commitment. Instead of all the joyful undifferentiation, unity, and release that Turner emphasises, dyssynchronas suggests the very possibility of belonging depends upon exclusion, denunciation, and constant awareness of boundaries.

Vengeance then enforces and polices fans' hierarchical ordering of themselves. When perceived overreach occurs, punitive actions such as scapegoating, pillorying, doxxing are mobilised to degrade rivals' standing; these actions are frequently rationalised through public justifications that portray the target as deserving correction. They become the obscene glue that actually binds the community together. In effect, jealousy supplies the hierarchy impulse and vengeance supplies the disciplinary acts, so internal differentiation is not an afterthought, but a routine feature of how the community runs. Through Turner's three forms of communitas, the contrast holds: in spontaneous communitas the surge of "all together" is shadowed by jealous comparisons that

immediately sort who is closer, richer, or more central; in normative communitas the unity campaigns that aim to protect equality become channels for vengeful actions; in ideological communitas the voiced ideal of sameness is too ideal and coexists with a set of hierarchies sustained by recurring jealousy and periodic punitive acts. Counter to Turner's utopic egalitarian levelling, petty rivalries, hierarchical gatekeeping, and indefatigable vengeance work to intensify communal functioning.

Secondly, temporally, Turner treats communitas as fleeting and liminal, ordinary distinctions recede only briefly, most vividly in spontaneous communitas (1969, pp. 94-96; 132-133), while the normative and ideological forms aim to preserve or project that moment rather than describe an enduring condition (1969, p. 132). Dyssynchronas, by contrast, is persistent and ongoing because jealousy and vengeance do not fade but reappear over time. After concerts, fan-meetings, and annual birthday/anniversary fundraising, comparisons over access and spending are remembered and circulated; resentments do not disperse with the end of an event but travel into the next cycle as topics for action. Vengeance converts this memory into continuity: retaliatory behaviours, counters and public shaming reignite when the next occasion arises, so this toxicity remains even if the specific target changes. Framed through Turner's three communitas types, endurance over temporality pervades: where the spontaneous form privileges a burst of unity, dyssynchronas connects such surges over time as jealousies and envies persist and resurface. Normative communitas tries to hold equality in place with shared rules while dyssynchronas shows that the routine organising of activities is where remembered grievances from earlier events are acted on; Ideological communitas speaks of lasting sameness, but dyssynchronas shows that in practice rivalry and revenge last as normal parts of everyday fandom participation.

Thirdly, in terms of valence, Turner frames communitas as a positively valenced experience, while dyssynchronas is characterised by negativity, rooted in jealousy and expressed through vengeance. To Turner, communitas bears a pronounced positive affective colouring: participants experience "a manifestation of values pertaining to the

whole community," forming "a homogeneous, unstructured totality" that transcends existing differences and contradictions; this sense of being-together and mutual trust is grounded in a feeling of egalitarianism (Turner, 1969: pp. 92, 94-96; Turner, 1979: p. 470). Correspondingly, the spontaneous form appears as a brief yet intense crest of warmth; the normative form seeks to maintain harmony through shared rules and everyday order; the ideological form projects this idealised solidarity toward a more long-term horizon (Turner, 1969: p. 132). Dyssynchronas reverses this pattern: its essence is driven by negative emotions and actions, and by them it steadily organises internal relations: the more toxic the fandom atmosphere, the more precious the demand seems to be for fundamentalist loyalty. Because fan positions at the top are scarce and tightly guarded, competition is constantly refreshed. Set alongside Turner's three forms of communitas, the contrast becomes clearer still: in the spontaneous form, the brief positive peak of communitas is quickly shadowed by immediate comparison and suspicion; in the normative form, where communitas maintains harmony by rules, dyssynchronas shows that these very "maintenance" processes are repeatedly occupied and repurposed by resentment and grievance, thereby providing the discursive justifications and arenas of execution for sanction and retaliation. In the ideological form, while communitas appeals to an ideal of enduring solidarity, dyssynchronas displays that negative affect does not subside, cycles of retribution are continually extended, online and offline echo one another, and the everyday atmosphere thus tilts in the long term toward negative valence.

Beyond advancing Turner's original concept, dyssynchronas extends consumer research by advancing further the critical notions surrounding communitas (i.e. Canniford and Shankar, 2013; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Across consumer culture, tourism, pilgrimage, sports, and fans studies, scholars have repeatedly challenged over-romantic readings of communitas, arguing that its positivity is overstated (Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al, 1993; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Eade, 1992; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Hills, 2002; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Even while acknowledging communitas' positive moments, prior work also traces its darker edges. In river-rafting, the "magic" is followed by role separation and evaluation once trips are organised (Arnould and Price, 1993). In

skydiving, camaraderie coexists with ranked training trajectories and governance (Celsi, et al, 1993). Surfing reinstates insider and outsider lines through purifying practices and access claims (Canniford and Shankar, 2013). And brand communities reproduce internal ordering by distinguishing cores, regulars, and newcomers and by enforcing participation norms (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). These studies offer a critical account of communitas, showing that unity is fragile and quickly entangled with differentiation. The shades of dark permeating communitas were highly debated by Eade (1992), who showed at Lourdes how commerce, tourist logics and competing claims over sacred space unsettle idealised egalitarian togetherness, replacing it with contestation, boundary work and rectified access. Dyssynchronas develops this by showing how envy, competition, and suspicion between one another is built into the fabric of fandom. What sustains fan communities' sense of "us" is not only a shared devotion to idols but is having just enough of a feeling that one is out of sync with one's peers that rivalries and opportunities to prove oneself emerge that heighten the stakes of belonging.

In some respects, the elementary argument of my thesis – that the toxic aspects of fandom do not count as a fall from grace but are a necessity that guarantees survival – is a view that is emerging and gaining traction by others. Sibai et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that communities can brutalise their members, complicating celebratory portrayals of solidarity. Elsewhere, Cruz, Seo, and Scaraboto's K-pop study (2023) which traces how fans reconcile appreciation and appropriation debates so they can keep consuming cultural difference, show the element of fracas, contradiction, and the need for reconciliation too. Yet even these accounts still assume that collective belonging is broadly shared, with negative experiences treated as disruptions or excesses.

Dyssynchronas goes beyond simply suggesting that negativity is something that might be encountered and would then need to be handled within consumption communities, rather it makes the much more radical intervention that antagonism, toxicity, and fundamentalism are structurally constitutive of these groups. By suggesting that these features are baked into the DNA of consumption community as necessary and

unavoidable means researchers must shed their utopian lenses when it comes to approaching marketplace cultures and contend seriously with the depths of their darker and conflictual dynamics. Here my thesis has shown what I consider to be more toxic occurrences than what has previously been reported in marketplace culture theory, including family-directed attacks, offline harassment, and coordinated campaigns intended to assassinate a fan's character, jeopardise their employment, and produce states of endangerment through violence and serious mental health harm. Contrasting with idyllic Turnerian fantasies of egalitarianism and unity and contending instead with a more brutal-realist recognition of dyssynchronas contributes to consumer research on fandom by showing something obscener at the heart of community.

Furthermore, focussing on this obscene underside of fans helps to sidestep simplistic binaries that have long dogged the study of fandom. Early on in this thesis, in Chapter 2, I had explored how, on one hand, Jenkins (1992) cast fans as active, participatory, and creative while on the other, Adorno and Horkeimer-inspired critical theorists more pessimistically framed fans as passive dupes whose revolutionary potential had been misdirected into benefitting the culture industries. Focusing attention away from this long played out and overdetermined debate about whether fans are passive or active, producerly or consumerly, provides the opportunity to consider a more perverse phenomenon at the heart of their subjectivity. The dyssynchronas I have explored in this thesis is basically an obscenity where agency and complicity coexist: fans are at once both dupes and creatives. In their brutish fundamentalist struggle for domination, policing one another, weaning out perceived weak links, and punishing real or imagined threats, the actors of a fandom community are neither simply resisting nor conforming — their social experience is a contradictory formation where their own subjugation is wilfully and enthusiastically pursued. They are not duped by some comforting appeal of their celebrity idol or consumer culture more broadly that would keep them in a happy stupor. Rather they actively, creatively, and viciously fight to remain subservient through exercising very demanding conflictual energies.

Dyssynchronas develops this critical turn by naming a model that explains how the coexistence persists: jealousy lingers, and vengeance follows, so moments of unity and internal hierarchy happen at the same time. Dyssynchronas integrates these strands, showing that devotion and dysfunction are not opposing categories but mutually reinforcing practices.

8.3 Methodological Contribution: The Aca-fan Stance

A further contribution of this thesis lies in the development and formalisation of the aca-fan stance as a research positionality within CCT and wider interpretivist discourses on digitally mediated communities. While the term "aca-fan" is well established in media and cultural studies, it has yet to be systematically theorised as a positionality approach in consumer research. Following Jenkins' (1992) and Hills (2002) prescriptions on the aca-fan positionality to work as a member rather than a visitor, I stayed continuously embedded in my community, behaving as I would as a fan and contributing to everyday fandom campaigns regardless of whatever research objectives of interest to my academic self. In consumer research, the nearest methodological neighbour is subjective personal introspection (Wohlfeil, 2012, 2018; Wohlfeil, Patterson & Gould, 2019) or Consumer Introspection Theory (CIT) (Gould, 1995; Gould, 2012), something which has spawned sub-species like Brown's (2021) "me-search". All of these methodologies suggest that the researcher can tap into aspects of their personal consumer interests and engage in a degree of autobiographical writing that is held up to its own scrutiny and evaluation for submission as empirical data. But the aca-fandom I have lived and captured in some small part in this thesis is different for several reasons. The first reason is that I made the community the primary object of analysis and weight co-created materials with the participants over my own fieldnotes, which serve only as secondary checks (Jenkins, 1992, p, 7, 23). Meanwhile, I replaced traditional introspection with a continuous multi-source design. Thirdly, I moved aca-fan from single identity to a replicable set of procedures. Moreover, I put sincere care into the participants and the community I researched.

First of all, in terms of orientation, Jenkins' core move is epistemic, where he legitimises fans as producers of things "out there" (material reality) rather than simply "up here" (i.e. in the mind) (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 7, 12, 23). I followed this by placing community actions, campaigns, collections, and objective occurrences at the foreground of my study. This differs from SPI / CIT which tend to centre the researcher's interiority – bound up in inner reflections, thoughts, feelings, and memories. No doubt that the kinds of introspective work that Brown, Wohlfeil, Gould and other CCT researchers champion are valuable in opening up space for the depths of subjectivity, enthusiasm, and vulnerability amongst consumers, but they tend to remain highly textualised, internal, and less concretely bound to actions "out there". For an aca-fan, the fandom and the "things" the fandom does for its idol materially is a kind of wordless "data" that is epistemically quite different to what the SPI-oriented consumer researcher feels and narrates. The data of an aca-fan does not stop at reflexivity, it is mired in enactment and praxis – much of which is so lived, rote, and practical that it does not even get introspected upon: like streaming idols' music to boost chart placement, bulk-buying boxes of album releases, administrating websites, organising logistics for following the idol across continents, checking in to crowdsourcing platforms to see how much money is generated for an event, ripping the cellophane off of album covers to avoid customs charges when travelling abroad with them, and so on. Beyond reflecting on the semiotic, the aca-fan's body, time, and labour are implicated before, during, and after any short-term data collecting exercises. For a SPI or CIT consumer researcher, the consumer's internal life is the site of data whereas for an aca-fan, it is the endless material actions which must occur often without much explicit meaning-making or discursive expression. My thesis helps to show the role of myself but also my peers as "active producers and manipulators" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23) rather than receivers and interpreters of meaning.

Second, with respect to sources and timeframe, my aca-fan stance has provided a multi-source, longitudinal participation rather than independent, extractable data – echoing Jenkins' insistence that fans are active collaborators in the research process (Jenkins, 1992, p. 7). SPI/CIT often involves episodic, reflective moments like taking out

a journal to jot down recollections of a childhood memory of a toy, narrating one's affective entanglements with some brand in the past or present, or for the purposes of fieldwork actually going out to some retail store, concert, or event to journal one's experiences or about the whole excursion. Aca-fandom entails durational commitment – years of activity, much of it rote and non-discursive – that centres on activities that occur independently and are going to happen regardless of any research taking place. CIT/SPI, while rich in affect and self-reflexivity, is to the phenomenology of consumption what a journalist chasing a scoop is to the daily rhythm of world events whereas aca-fandom is the perpetrator of those events. Knowledge emerges from what fans actually enact, not from what they report feeling. Accordingly, this thesis combines three streams gathered over time: sustained participation and observation in daily fandom activity as well as thrilling moments; interviews with self-identifying Goldenstars; and personal fieldnotes about my own reactions that are supplemented to other materials (Kozinets, 2020; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Framed through Jenkins' own articulation of the aca-fan as a bridge between fan and academic worlds (Jenkins, 2010), this long-term, multi-source approach formalises that bridge as a more solid one.

Moreover, for reflexivity, I took Jenkins' aca-fan position seriously and moved it from simple self-identity to clear steps others can follow. I kept two records at the same time: one written as a fan about how I felt and what I saw through a fan perspective; the other one as a researcher about objective views of who was involved, what actions fans took and why. I also carefully noted times when I found myself siding too strongly with Jessica or particular fans and explain how that could bias my reading, seek counter examples, as well as maintain an auditable trail linking claims to notes, interview transcripts, and more. This advances Jenkins' idea of the aca-fan as "part fan and part academic" by turning that identity into a reflexive method that others can inspect and replicate them for future research (Jenkins, 2006).

Regarding ethics and access, Jenkins repositions fans as legitimate collaborators and urges disclosure of one's aca-fan status, which reminds us why care is central in the

research - the label “fan” has long carried connotation of “religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 7, 12; see also Jenkins, 2011). What he did not spell out is how insider access should be granted, limited, documented, and de-risked in modern, highly-searchable fan spaces. My consistent contribution opened these closed chats and backstage spaces because I pair it with layered anonymisation such as role-based pseudonyms, masking timestamps, and consent for any non-public content while has a right to withdraw.

8.4 Societal and managerial implications

The findings of this research carry broader societal and managerial implications. They show that while digital platforms and community structures can amplify jealousy, vengeance, and exclusion, these cannot be eliminated by removing superficial features or self-imposing bans. For those concerned with the public policy and social marketing implications of the toxicity and antagonisms on show in this thesis, potential interventions should focus on how to protect consumers’ ability to participate safely and sustainably. For policymakers, the task is not to define and police “good” fandom but to lower the chances of predictable harm. Policy efforts should aim to provide clearer protections for young and vulnerable fans online, for example, by requiring transparency in collective fundraising, ensuring accountability in fan-led projects, and offering accessible channels for reporting severe harassment. Such measures would not eliminate conflict, but they could reduce the likelihood that disputes escalate into targeted punishment or financial exploitation.

My thesis’ recognition that toxicity is not an aberrant pathology or playful occurrence gone wrong but is actually a structural feature of fandom puts significant onus on the fan community and particularly fan-sites’ admins. While rivalry, antagonism, gatekeeping and the committed lengths that some will go to in pursuit of “vengeance” cannot be completely eliminated without dissolving, or at least seriously impacting, the very

energies that sustain fandom, administrators can mitigate harm by implementing transparent moderation policies that distinguish between playful rivalry and harmful harassment. Creating online and offline channels for conflict resolution – particularly ones that value and uphold anonymity – could allow for grievances and grandstanding to be expressed but without descending into depths of obscene bullying. Rotating leadership roles from time to time, being transparent about decision-making processes, and providing low-stake ways for members to express negative emotions might also help prevent minor disagreements from hardening into battles. Actions such as removing the highly-competitive idols' popularity rankings could also go some way to eliminating inter-community fan wars triggered from these rankings.

Celebrity teams of publicists and handlers, however self-serving and limited they might believe their interests (and duties) are to the celebrity at hand, need to recognise that the brand image of a celebrity is intricately linked to the behaviours of fans. Provisions should be in place for celebrity's publicity teams to assume responsibility for the conduct of fans online, reducing the tacit acceptance of fundamentalist displays of loyalty, and here think of ways to proactively work with voices within the communities to manage or adjudicate fan-sites (when there are significant conflicts). Groups like SM Entertainment are already known for their brutish treatment of the celebrities they handle, pushing for excellence and discipline in beauty, talent, and performance. Channelling some of that totalitarian power into mandating that their celebrities promote digital literacy programmes amongst young fans to recognise and resist coercive forms of online participation would be more sustainable.

For policy-makers with interest in building protective legislation around social media platforms, the idiosyncratic ways that fandoms organise themselves online need to be taken into account with novel means of safeguarding. The Chinese government's regulatory Qing-Lang campaign, while appearing somewhat heavy-handed and invasive by Western consumer culture standards, provides an important exemplar of the fan-specific political action that is needed within broader policy agendas on mental health,

online safety, and consumer protection. Qing-Lang's measures include curbing fan fundraising for certain activities, cracking down on the spending of fans, penalising platforms that routinely enable excessive purchasing, cyberbullying, forbidding trolling, slandering, and cyber-hunting, and mandates that platforms suspend malicious user accounts, marketing, and billboards. Having collected my data amongst Chinese fans but writing it up for a PhD thesis to be read amongst a predominantly Euro-American audience raises the unique problem of whether to endorse absolutist state-apparatuses like Qing-Lang in the West. In full recognition that this may go against the grain of Western liberal-capitalist democracies, a Euro-American adaptation of Qing Lang would provide the regulatory teeth needed against harms like fans' financial self-exploitation, harassment, doxxing, and bullying that are not going to be addressed through 'softer', more generic internet safety protocols and will not be curbed by consumers' own self-governance. As some of my data shows, behaviours like doxxing are reprehensible and require novel forms of intervention in the form of automatic detection and blocking, fast takedown, and education – some of which might be facilitated by nascent AI technologies – but of course come at the risk of being pre-emptively disciplinarian and censorious. Policymakers, website administrators, and safeguarding groups have much to think about in terms of solutions when a user conceives of the means to viciously scapegoat a peer.

8.5 Limitations and Future Research

A core limitation I have reflected on recently is my own positionality as an aca-fan. I remain neutral and at times critical toward fans, but neutrality does not fully extend to the celebrity of Jessica. I have attempted to manage this through my reflexive SPI, marking when I felt overly admired or defensive; nevertheless, residual bias cannot be ruled out. With hindsight, the prologue's aim "to produce a positive thesis which can help Jessica in some way and encourage other Goldenstars" revealed an ideological commitment to the celebrity idol which much of this thesis centres on. As such, if I were to begin this thesis again, I would strive for delivering more critical attention around the celebrity role

and the power of the idol in the fandom activities, considering the role they play in perhaps stoking communitas and indeed the inverse dyssynchronas in the fandom. This provides an important opportunity for future researchers within CCT to explore the culpability of the brand and this figure's cult of personality in naturalising a particular outlook amongst communities of consumption.

There is also much more mileage for further unpacking, extending, developing, and dimensionalising the concept of dyssynchronas. My thesis has been completed at a critical point in fandom research where attention is slowly turning away from the hopefulness of Jenkinsian participatory culture towards the darker and less romantic aspects of these and other cohorts (see Fitchett and Cronin, 2022). Sibai et al.'s (2024) recent *Journal of Consumer Research* on "Why online consumption communities brutalise" provides an obvious and high-profile empirical example here. However, rather than calling simply for more critical work, the next step should be synthesis – to theorise how the positive sides of fandom interact with the negative elements, how communitas sits alongside dyssynchronas, what their entanglement means for a new generation of marketplace culture theory. Celebrity and management can be put into frame here. Beyond more recourse to consumer voices, future work should incorporate the rhetoric of those who sit outside and serve consumer communities. Nuance will also be important and here future researchers are advised to trace how behaviours in consumption communities can, for both good and bad reasons, both enable collective solidarity and unintentionally intensify competitiveness and retaliation inside the fandom. Furthermore, future studies should examine these harms directly and adopt a consumer-vulnerability lens to understand who is most at risk and how to protect them.

Future research might also examine when gift-giving, collective projects, and community care will trigger conflicts, then when they amplify it. For instance, future studies can track how concerts temporarily convert cities into fan spaces while testing what persists after the high: whether ticketing, queuing, close-access allocation, and more, intensify internal hierarchy and keep jealousy and vengeance alive across different

concert stops. Within these city events, the offline exchange of materials such as postcards, photo cards, badges, and etc. can be analysed as everyday reciprocity to see if gifting eases inequalities or becomes a trigger of "green eyes". That same future work might also pursue comparative and longitudinal – cross fandoms, cross country, and to track how dyssynchronas persist or change. For example, large-scale tours by Taylor Swift and Mayday (i.e. a famous Chinese band) offer a natural context to examine and further develop dyssynchronas.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter draws the thesis together. It advances dyssynchronas as the obverse to communitas, showing how hierarchy, persistence, and negativity are organised by jealousy, enacted as vengeance and justified by the fans it is out of "kindness", and setting out the main theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions. It also acknowledges limitations, proposes future research, and clarifies what better governance might do. The epilogue below returns to the hope stated at the outset and to the people whose care and labour made the research possible, closing the thesis on the lived textures behind the concepts.

EPILOGUE

As I write these final words, I think back to the fireworks and drones that once lit up the night sky for Jessica – a fleeting spectacle that seemed to hold the weight of a thousand unspoken promises. That image, shimmering across the Han River and across our screens, feels like a fitting metaphor for this thesis: dazzling in its scale, yet deeply personal in the emotions it carried.

This research began with a single question that lingered in my heart as a fan: why do we devote so much of ourselves to someone we may never truly know? Over years of fieldwork, I learned that giving is not a single act but an economy of commitments: money pooled for albums and events; hours spent coordinating, translating, and traveling; design and organising skills offered to strangers; and the quiet labour of care that keeps conversations civil and projects moving. I also learned what giving costs: savings stretched thin, sleep traded for urgency, trust frayed by rivalry, and reputations bruised when conflicts spill into public view. To give is to hope - and also to accept risk.

What this thesis adds, beyond the obvious, is a name and a structure for what I witnessed. The same energies that bind can divide. Gestures of belonging can sharpen hierarchies. Love can harden into jealousy; coordination can slip into control.

Dyssynchronas captures this pattern: the persistence of fracture within togetherness, the way unity is repeatedly unsettled yet never entirely undone. It explains why moments of solidarity endure alongside long memories of injury, and why victories quickly become new occasions for comparison, proof, and defence.

Years inside this community also changed me as a researcher. I started wanting to "produce a positive thesis" (see prologue) for Jessica and her fans; that hope made me more critical of fans than of Jessica. If I began again, I would ask harder questions about the idol's role in cultivating both communion and fracture. I also learned to write plainly,

to name the tensions without decoration, and to accept that my position—an aca-fan who cannot switch the stance off—both grants access and limits detachment. These are not liabilities to be hidden but conditions to be accounted for.

Finishing this thesis feels less like closing a book than placing a marker in a story that continues. The fandom will go on: new projects will rise, new debates will flare, new forms of care will appear in places I cannot yet imagine. My own role may shift again. But the lessons travel: that community is made in equal parts of warmth and abrasion; that governance and platforms matter for how power concentrates or rotates; and that giving, however ordinary or extravagant, remains the grammar through which fans recognise one another—and themselves.

And so, I end where I began, with gratitude and an open question. To the Goldenstars whose labour and love taught me what I could not have seen alone; to Jessica, whose presence set these lights in motion; to everyone who kept asking the hardest thing simply: why do fans give so much? The lights do fade from the skyline. But a glow remains—in memory, in community, and in the stubborn belief that such devotion, extravagant or ordinary, still matters.

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Appendix 1: Ethics Approval

Appendix 2 : Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Study: Ludo-capitalism & Post-emotionalism on K-pop fans: An Aca-fan Perspective

Dear Participant

My name is Ziyi Yang, a PhD student in the Marketing Department at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about fans' behaviours in K-Pop world and the role of emotions there.

Please take time to carefully read the following information before deciding whether you wish to take part in this study.

What is the study about?
This study is part of my research into the fandom world of K-Pop which aims to analyse key habits and behaviours of its fans in the social context of the rise of digital fandom and its impact on the fans' emotional expressions. By focusing on the Jessica Jung's fan communities, I expect to arrive at important findings about the relationship between the fans' emotional experiences and the fandom's standards of authenticity and expressivity.

Why have I been approached?
You have been approached because the study requires information from people who are Jessica Jung's fans, and you are an eligible participant.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decide you would like to take part, you will be asked to respond to my questions from the list prepared for the interview, as related to your emotional experiences as a member of the Jessica Jung fandom community. The interview will take place in an online form, through any of the messenger app you are comfortable with and will be recorded for the purposes of research. The approximate duration of the interview is expected to amount to about 1 hour, and we will be able to arrange the exact date according to your own schedule.

The type of the interview to be used is known as a semi-structured interview. This implies that I will ask you a set of pre-determined questions which have nonetheless been structured in such a way as to allow you a relatively large freedom to think about your responses and present them in a form and wording you find suitable. Hence this approach to interviewing is expected to give you a wider opportunity to express your opinion about the issues concerned.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's entirely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary. However, if you decide to go along with the interview process, you must bear in mind that you can withdraw from the interview when it has already been started and up to 1 month afterwards. In that case, any data recorded during the interview will have been destroyed and will not feature in the research findings. After this time has elapsed, it will regrettably be impossible to remove your data from the thesis, so please be sure about your decision in due time. In any case, though, your personal data will be fully anonymised, and you will not be identifiable as far as either the thesis or the future publications are concerned.

Will my data be Identifiable?

Research data will be anonymised, and personal data will be kept confidentially. The data collected for this study will be stored securely in OneDrive and only the researcher conducting the study and her supervisors Dr. James Cronin and Dr. Leighanne Higgins will have access to this data.

- Audio recordings will be destroyed and/or deleted once the project has been submitted for publication/examined. Hard copies of interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- The files on the computer will be encrypted (that is no-one other than the researcher will be able to access them) and the computer itself password protected.
- At the end of the study, hard copies of interviews will be kept securely in a locked cabinet for ten years. At the end of this period, they will be destroyed.
- The typed version of your interview will be made anonymous by removing any identifying information including your name. Anonymised direct quotations from your interview may be used in the reports or publications from the study, so your name will not be attached to them. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. All your personal data will be confidential and will be kept separately from your interview responses.

There are some limits to confidentiality: if what is said in the interview makes me think that you, or someone else, is at significant risk of harm, I will have to break confidentiality and speak to a member of staff about this. If possible, I will tell you if I have to do this.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be summarised and reported in a PhD thesis and may be submitted for publication in an academic or professional journals.

Are there any risks?

There are no risks to your physical or mental health anticipated in the course of you participating in this study. However, if you experience any distress following participation you are encouraged to inform the researcher and contact the resources provided at the end of this sheet. The following online resources are expected to be of

use if you feel that you have become distressed in the course of this research:
http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/disabilities.html
http://www.theaccessibleplanet.com/lifestyle/counselling-for-disabled.html
http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Counselling/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Are there any benefits to taking part?
Although you may find participating interesting, there are no direct benefits in taking part.

Who has reviewed the project?
This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

Where can I obtain further information about the study if I need it?
If you have any questions about the study, please contact the main researcher:

Ziyi Yang: z.yang36@lancaster.ac.uk

In the event of any further questions, you may contact either one of this research's supervisors:
Dr. James Cronin : j.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk
Dr. Leighanne Higgins: l.higgins@lancaster.ac.uk

Complaints
If you wish to make a complaint or raise concerns about any aspect of this study and do not want to speak to the researcher, you can contact:

Dr Sena Ozdemir
PhD Director, Email: s.ozdemir@lancaster.ac.uk
Department of Marketing
Lancaster University Management School
Charles Carter Building
D6, Lancaster, LA1 4YX

If you wish to speak to someone outside of the Marketing Doctorate Programme, you may also contact:

Professor Gillian Hopkinson
Head of Marketing Department
Email : g.hopkinson@lancaster.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1524 510752
Faculty of Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster University

Lancaster
LA1 4YG

Thank you for considering taking part in this project. If you understand the above information, and wish to participate, please click the button in the consent statement.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights, please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

Appendix 3: Participant consent form

Lancaster University

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: *Ludo-Capitalism and Post-Emotionalism on K-Pop Fans.*
Name of Researcher: Ziyi Yang
Email: z.yang36@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name and any identifiable information about me will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to the University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Name of Participant Date Signature

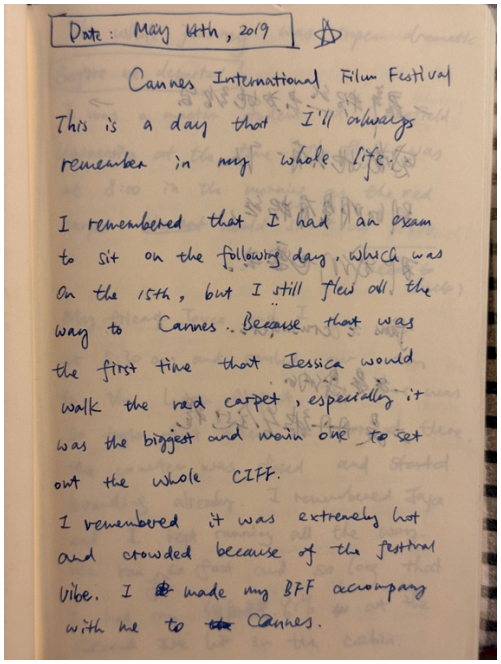
I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.
Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Appendix 4: Sample of Researcher Diary Notes

Notes of the experience of Cannes Film Festival, 2019



Date: May 14th, 2019

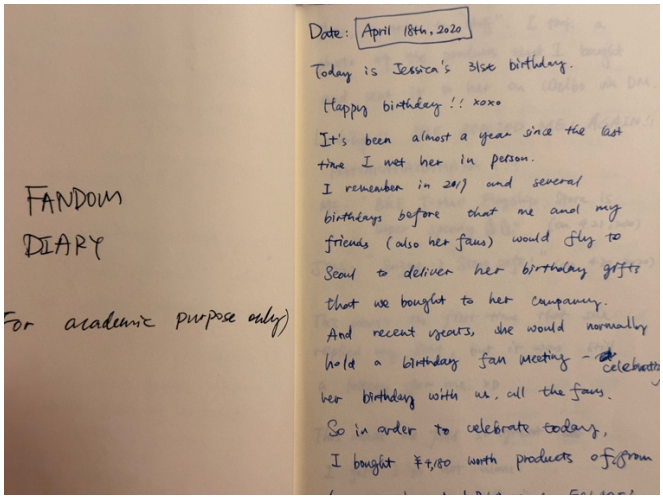
Cannes International Film Festival

This is a day that I'll always remember in my whole life.

I remembered that I had an exam to sit on the following day, which was on the 15th, but I still flew all the way to Cannes. Because that was the first time that Jessica would walk the red carpet, especially it was the biggest and main one to set out the whole CIFF.

I remembered it was extremely hot and crowded because of the festival vibe. I made my BFF accompany with me to Cannes.

Notes of Jessica's 31st birthday



FANDOM DIARY

For academic purpose only

Date: April 18th, 2020

Today is Jessica's 31st birthday.

Happy birthday !! xoxo

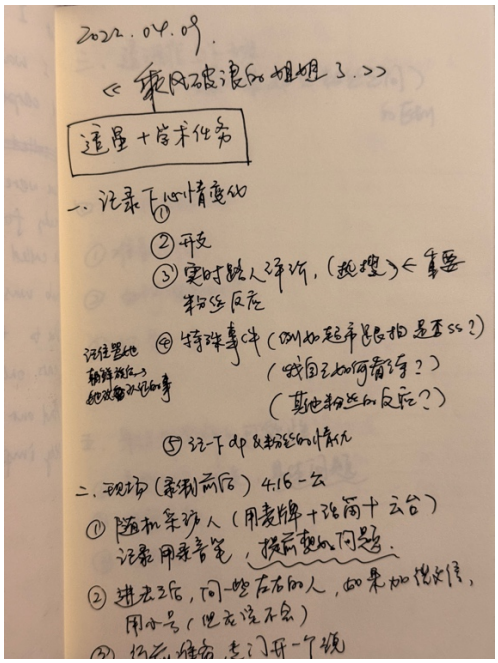
It's been almost a year since the last time I met her in person.

I remember in 2019 and several birthdays before that me and my friends (also her fans) would fly to Seoul to deliver her birthday gifts that we bought to her company.

And recent years, she would normally hold a birthday fan meeting - celebrating her birthday with us, all the fans.

So in order to celebrate today, I bought ¥7,180 worth products of from

Notes of attending offline recordings of the reality show “Ride on Waves” season 3, 2022. This includes what I needed to do for the research, before, during, and after the recording.



Appendix 5: Best PhD Poster Award at GENMAC 2024

Received the "Best PhD Poster" award: Dyssynchronas: a study of Jessica Jung fandom in China. At GENMAC Conference 2024, Edinburgh, United Kingdom


MARKETS · CONSUMERS
Ziyi Yang
Best PhD Poster Award
Dyssynchronas: a study of Jessica Jung fandom in China
GENMAC 2024, Edinburgh - Scotland
THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
Business School