

Sense or sensibility? Exploring the motivations behind fandom nationalism expression in China

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ABSTRACT

Organized fandom has become a defining feature of contemporary subculture, sociocultural dynamics, and even political discourse. In China, however, direct interaction between fan communities and the political sphere remains relatively limited, except in cases involving nationalist movements. The underlying motivations driving such fandom-based political participation remain insufficiently explored. In this study, 607 active fans with experience in fan communities were recruited to investigate the psychological and community-based mechanisms influencing fandom nationalism. Using partial least squares structural equation modeling, the results indicate that cognitive needs are significantly associated with fandom nationalism, whereas idol worship shows no direct effect. Contrary to prior assumptions that fan community engagement strongly mediates fans' political expression, this study found no significant mediating role of engagement. These findings contribute to deeper understanding of the motivational and structural dynamics underlying fans' political behavior in the context of digital China.

1. Introduction

Research in recent years has shown that digital fandom in China is no longer confined to the entertainment arena but has become an active participant in public discourse. During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, for example, public expressions of support for the “One China” principle by prominent entertainers triggered intense cross-regional debates. In this context, young female fans mobilized under the slogan “protecting our common A-Zhong (China),” and what became known as the “FanGirl Expedition” demonstrated how affective fandom attachment can be rearticulated into political boundary-making. Their coordinated campaigns on overseas social media were praised by state media as acts of digital patriotism (Cui, 2020). A comparable pattern resurfaced during the table tennis final at the 2024 Paris Olympics, when fans rallied around national athletes and constructed narratives of nationalism, pride, and symbolic protection. The online conflicts surrounding player affiliations and rival fan communities prompted public concerns about the “fandomization” of sports. In contrast to earlier celebrations of online fan mobilization, state media criticized such spillover beyond entertainment contexts, warning against excessive emotional investment and confrontational behaviors. These episodes reveal that fan

communities have moved from subcultural margins to a central, and sometimes contentious position in China's public sphere (Patrick Williams & Wang, 2025; Wang & Ge, 2023).

Over the last decade, a distinctive convergence between fan activism and nationalism has emerged in the social media era in China, transforming fandom into a conduit for nationalist expression (Hailong, 2020). This transformation is closely tied to the affordances of digital technology and social media platforms. Chinese fans have adapted the organizational tactics learned within online fan communities, extending the logics of celebrity worship to the realm of nationalist activism (Liao et al., 2022). This phenomenon, often referred to by scholars as *fandom nationalism* (Hailong, 2020), reflects the convergence of popular culture and political mobilization. Although an expanding body of literature portrays fans as a progressive force challenging the political status quo in Western societies (Hinck & Hardin, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2009; Sandvoss, 2004), it was not until the emergence of fandom nationalism event such as the “FanGirl Expedition” that China's government and mainstream media began to pay closer attention to the rising influence and mobilizing power of fan communities (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wong et al., 2021).

At the same time, due to the online censorship and regulatory

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mechanisms, Chinese fan communities remain largely self-organized and loosely structured (Cui, 2020). As a result, the mobilization capacity of fan groups is often overstated; in practice, the amplification and wide diffusion of nationalist discourse are primarily driven by the official accounts of traditional and state-affiliated media (Cui, 2020). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that the widespread dissemination and mobilization of fandom nationalism events are closely linked to, and often facilitated by, official endorsement and state support.

Citizens in China are encouraged to disseminate so-called “positive energy” in their online expressions (Liao & Fu, 2022), with an implicit expectation that individuals should be responsible citizens, particularly on politically sensitive issues such as national sovereignty (Shiyu, 2021). Within such a context, fan community engagement is no longer seen as purely spontaneous cultural behavior. Fans in China are often educated to be “rational” (Qing & Baoer, 2023) to avoid blind idol worship, to be patriotic, and to place national interests above personal preferences. In this discursive environment, a critical question arises: is the nationalism expressed by fans primarily driven by affective attachments and emotional devotion to idols, or has it become a cognitive motivation with an awareness of civic sense. Unpacking the underlying social-psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon constitutes the core inquiry of this study.

2. Understand fandom nationalism: the participatory culture in China

The new form of nationalism is called fandom nationalism by scholars (Hailong, 2020) which refers to a new type of nationalist movement with a behavior pattern similar to that of fans to their idol. This phenomenon integrates the expressive styles, behavioral patterns, and organizational strategies of idol fandom and online gaming into nationalist movement (Dong et al., 2022). By incorporating the practices of meme culture, which involves the participatory creation and circulation of user-generated digital symbols, images, jokes that foster shared emotions, and idol chasing, fandom nationalism events represent a unique model of online nationalism deeply rooted in fan culture. In the last ten years, similar examples of China's online fan-initiated nationalist or pro-government movements became more and more numerous (X. Liao et al., 2022). Scholars have begun to reconsider fandom as a potential political force embedded in China's digital nationalism (Lu & Ju, 2021; Shiyu, 2021).

Broadly speaking, *fandom nationalism* can be conceptualized as a form of fan participation that transcends entertainment boundaries and manifests as political engagement and collective action in the digital space (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; He & Li, 2023). Fan participation, defined as the active involvement of fans in cultural, social, or political processes related to their fandom (He & Li, 2023) has become a global phenomenon. While the core elements of fan participation such as emotional investment (Jia et al., 2019; Siuda, 2014), content creation, and community identity (Gray et al., 2020; Groene & Hettinger, 2016; Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022) are consistent across different regions, the forms, meanings, and motivations of fan participation differ significantly across the globe. Chinese fan culture initially emerged through a hybridization of multiple influences, incorporating elements of Japanese subcultures, South Korean popular culture, and Western media fandom practices (Yin, 2020). However, the boom of idol talent shows since 2011 has triggered a wave of fan group rivalries, exposing both the internal consolidation and external conflicts within fan communities to the public eye (Gao, 2018).

Scholars have long observed that the boundaries between popular and political culture are porous, with the pleasures derived from both often intertwined. Popular culture can thus serve as a site where civic virtues, traditionally associated with formal political participation are rehearsed and cultivated (Van Zoonen, 2005). In Western context, fan studies have been heavily influenced by Henry Jenkins' theory of

participatory culture, which posits that fans actively engage in media culture by producing derivative works, forming communities, and challenging traditional power dynamics in cultural production (Jenkins et al., 2009). Drawing on de Certeau's notion of “textual poaching”, Jenkins characterizes fans as interpretive agents who creatively rework media texts, giving rise to new meanings and forms of engagement (Jenkins, 2013). In parallel, theorists such as Sarah Thornton (Thornton, 1996) and Matt Hills (Hills, 2003) framed fans as members of subcultural groups and positioned at the margins of dominant media systems and often engaging in practices of resistance, irony, or subversion. Fan participation, in this framework, is seen as nomadic, affectively charged, and often resisting hegemonic narratives through symbolic creativity (Jenkins, 2014).

Building on Jenkins' argument that participatory fan cultures may function as a training ground for civic engagement, subsequent research has emphasized *fan activism* as a domain in which fandom becomes intertwined with contemporary political concerns (Andini & Akhni, 2021; Bennett, 2014; Numerato, 2016). These studies also highlighted fans' potential for civic and political activism, especially in online spaces where participatory cultures flourish. Terms like “fan activism” have emerged to describe how fans mobilize around causes linked to politics (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2009).

Based on this, in fan culture studies, there exist two contrasting representations of fans. On one hand, fans are often stigmatized in mainstream discourse as irrational, impulsive, and pathological figures, so-called “obsessed individuals” (Wang, 2016). Shaped by the subtle influence of media narratives, these fans are imagined fantasizing about having intense personal relationships with celebrities and are portrayed as mimicking or pursuing them to extreme and unhealthy degrees (Yan & Yang, 2021). This negative image of fans is widespread and rooted in public stereotyping. On the other hand, a more idealized and positive perspective emerges from academic discourse, particularly through Jenkins' theory of participatory culture which conceptualizes fans as an empowering social force capable of fostering civic engagement and contributing to the development of democratic participation (Driessen et al., 2024).

From these two contrasting perspectives, *fandom nationalism* emerges as a hybrid phenomenon that embodies both the affective dimensions of idol adoration and the civic-oriented practices of patriotic participation (Liao et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2022; Wang, 2022b). It simultaneously reflects the emotional intensity characteristic of fandom and the alignment associated with nationalist citizenship, illustrating how sense and sensibility intersect within China's fan culture.

3. The dual motivations of Chinese fans: being both a fan and a citizen

Building on Jenkins' assertion that participatory fan cultures can serve as a training ground for civic engagement, scholars have highlighted fan activism as a domain where fandom intersects with politics (Andini & Akhni, 2021). Beyond fandom itself, political activists increasingly appropriate popular culture symbols and utilize spreadable media logics in campaign strategies (Campus et al., 2024). In the Chinese context, celebrity expressions of pro-government are often encouraged and framed as socially desirable forms of public communication. During the COVID-19, the livestreaming of the rapid construction of temporary hospitals became a site of participatory creativity. Online users personified construction vehicles by naming them after popular video game and anime characters, and these playful narratives were subsequently amplified by state media to engage younger audiences and integrate popular cultural aesthetics into patriotic discourse. At the same time, audiences engage in consumer-citizenship, where fan practices are shaped by decisions about ethical, political, and environmental values (Wang, 2022b).

Traditionally linked to specific idols or entertainment communities, fans have now evolved into influential agents in nationalist campaigns.

In this new role, fans reframed the nation itself as a collective “idol”, an entity deserving of protection and support (Zhuang et al., 2023). By leveraging their emotional attachment and organizational power, fans are able to rally behind national causes, viewing their activism as an extension of their loyalty and devotion, similar to their allegiance to their idols (Hailong, 2020). This transformation illustrates how fan culture can shift from entertainment-based activities to more politically engaged actions, where the nation becomes the focal point of collective identity and pride. What drives this shift, and what factors are key in bringing it about? Scholars have analyzed the nationalist practices from various perspectives, including emotional games in online subcultures (Wang, 2016), identity production and mobilization mechanisms in commercial cultural contexts (Wang et al., 2016), identity political performances under consumer culture (Li, 2016), and fragmented spectacular experiences (Lu & Ju, 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, idol worship and cognitive needs represent two distinct but complementary psychological drivers of fan community engagement. Idol worship, characterized by emotional attachment, admiration, and the pursuit of belongingness, is an affective mechanism that fuels fan participation in communities (Li et al., 2023; Stever, 2011; Yan & Yang, 2021). It has traditionally been situated within the sphere of popular culture, representing intense emotional attachment to celebrities, often manifesting through various fan rituals and affective labor (Duffett, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2015). Prior research demonstrates that Chinese fan communities are hierarchically organized, with core fans exhibiting intense emotional investment and dedicating substantial time and resources to supporting their idols through practices (Wang, 2016). This deep affective alignment suggests that fans may extend their identification with idols beyond consumption behaviors to value orientations.

Psychological theories of cognitive balance posit that individuals seek consistency between their attitudes toward closely associated entities (Festinger, 2001). To avoid dissonance, individuals tend to align their views with those of significant others. Analogous findings from consumer behavior research indicate that positive affect toward a celebrity can transfer to the products they endorse when there is perceived congruence (Mowen, 1980). In this context, it is reasonable to expect that fans' strong emotional bonds with idols could similarly facilitate the internalization or amplification of nationalist sentiments when idols engage in the performance or promotion of nationalism. Accordingly, it is plausible to hypothesize that affective attachment to idols fosters fans' alignment with idols' nationalist performances.

Previous research has shown that China's fan communities are predominantly composed of young females, most of whom hold at least a bachelor's degree (Data & Weibo, 2018; Weibo, 2024). This demographic profile suggests a relatively high level of media literacy and cognitive engagement, which may contribute to fans' ability to coordinate complex online action. Educated young people tend to possess advanced digital skills and a strong familiarity with online communication platforms, allowing them to efficiently organize campaigns, manage information flows within fandom networks (Hailong, 2020). Individuals with higher levels of cultural capital also tend to share similar patterns in interests, tastes, and educational backgrounds, which further reinforces a shared sense of identity and value orientation within fan communities (Peng, 2019). Such characteristics have been linked to the emergence of highly structured and strategic collective behaviors in fan communities, ranging from charity projects and public relations efforts to nationalist mobilizations.

Scholars of fan culture have noted that fan communities function as structured social spaces where individuals engage in social learning, peer interaction, and even “data-making labor” (He & Li, 2023; Yang et al., 2024). Within these communities, fans gain social identity, develop skills, and cultivate a sense of belonging. Driven by the pursuit of knowledge, social recognition, and ideological alignment, when fans perceive their participation as contributing to broader social justice, their cognitive needs are activated (Yang et al., 2024). These needs

encompassing the desire for self-definition, identity construction, and critical engagement with sociocultural discourse, serve as a crucial driver of fan participation (Liao & Fu, 2022). Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. : Idol worship is positively associated with fan community engagement.

H2. : Cognitive needs are positively associated with fan community engagement.

3.1. The potential power of fan community

In Chinese media discourse, the highly organized and emotionally charged fan community is often portrayed as a potential threat to social order (Hammonds, 2020), frequently characterized by irrational behavior and mass mobilization. Such narratives implicitly assume that fans are uniformly and voluntarily engaged in collective action (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Fan participation mobilized by fan communities was found to be increasingly similar to collective actions in goals, forms, and mobilization logic (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). The fan communities can organize collective actions because fans are easily motivated by shared goals. Patriotic fans have engaged in large-scale online collective actions as a means of expressing their political stance, supporting national sovereignty and opposing territorial fragmentation (Hailong, 2020). In addition, the active engagement of Asian celebrities, such as BTS, whose posts and public statements against anti-Asian violence were widely reposted and dominated digital discourse significantly amplified the movement's anti-racist agenda (Shahin & Hou, 2025). This form of online participation mirrors the offline fan practice of “chanting”, functioning as a performative act of collective identity within both fan cultures and social justice movements. At the same time, fan communities increase the cohesion among fans and facilitate the mobilization of collective actions, especially when social media reduce the barriers to communication and connection between fans (Hinck & Hardin, 2023).

Fans' everyday practices often revolve around enhancing their idols' reputations, countering negative commentary, and investing considerable financial and emotional resources in idol-related products and events (Chen et al., 2022). Through such practices, fans participate in an “imagined community” of shared affect and belonging (Fung et al., 2019). Yet this sense of solidarity is fragile. Fan communities are frequently divided by competing idol affiliations, and their interactions are often marked by rivalry or even hostility (Qin & Chen, 2021).

However, when fans encounter unfair treatment in transnational cultural exchanges, these divisions can be temporarily bridged through patriotic sentiment. As Hailong (2018) observes, Chinese fans who face discrimination in global fan spaces often express nationalism as a defensive response (Huang et al., 2023). In such contexts, patriotism and nationalism become rhetorical resources used to defend both idols and national identity (Lams & Zhou, 2023). This dynamic is exemplified by the rise of the “Little Pink” group, a loosely organized online community of young, predominantly female internet users known for their passionate defense of China's image and interests on social media platforms. Within this cultural formation, fans symbolically merge the identities of nation, idol, and self through affective and commercial practices. Popular slogans such as “No idol before the nation” and “My country is the greatest idol” encapsulate this ideological transformation, elevating the motherland as the “greatest idol” above all others (Hailong, 2020).

Thus, in conflicts among different fan groups, patriotism often becomes a weapon leveraged by these groups (Wang, 2022a). This dynamic leads to what Liu describes as the integration of “state, nation, and self-identity” within the everyday consumer practices (Liu, 2023). The transnational nature of idol worship, involving idols and fan groups from different countries and regions, intensifies these dynamics.

Consequently, fans adopt expressions such as “there are no idols before the nation”, positioning the nation as the “supreme idol” above all individual idol (Wang, 2022a). This enables fan communities with initially divergent allegiances to unite under the banners of patriotism and nationalism. Hence, the hypothesis proposed:

H3. : Fan community engagement is positively associated with fandom nationalism.

3.2. From fan community engagement to nationalism

In the digital age, fan communities have gained unprecedented mobilizing power through the infrastructure of social media platforms (Hills, 2003; Siuda, 2014). These platforms afford coordination, visibility, and real-time responsiveness, turning fans into networked publics capable of mass mobilization (De Kosnik, 2016). Online fan groups are often hierarchically organized, with core members orchestrating tasks such as online voting, data-making, and even nationalist campaigns (He & Li, 2023). As a result, fan culture has evolved from a marginalized subculture to a mainstream social force.

Scholars have interpreted this transformation from two complementary perspectives. A technologically deterministic view argues that although subcultural “breakthroughs” are not entirely dependent on digital platforms, the technological logic of these systems dominates the circulation of information and network connectivity (Hyun & Kim, 2015). By contrast, a more optimistic view of “participatory empowerment” suggests that Web 2.0 highlights individual creativity while fostering collaboration and intelligence (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Jenkins et al. (2013) conceptualized this shift as “fan activism”, in which fan practices move beyond cultural consumption to enter the domain of civic and political participation. Together, these perspectives underscore that digital affordances are not merely technical conditions but social catalysts that reshape participation and collective identity (Hailong, 2018; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Schneider, 2018).

This not only emphasizes the significant impact of platforms and technology but also acknowledges the role of fan community engagement which holds a dual significance. On one hand, online fan communities function as connective platforms that facilitate interaction and coordination among members (Fiedler & Sarstedt, 2014). On the other hand, engagement reflects fans' active participation in meaning-making, content creation, and collective organization (He & Li, 2023). These collective actions are not confined to the entertainment industry. Instead, it has increasingly extended its influence on social and political events, where fans use their collective power to express their views, support causes, or engage in broader societal movements (Hammonds, 2020). This broader engagement demonstrates how fan communities can mobilize to impact the public sphere.

A distinct dual logic underlies these behaviors. Commercially, fan activism enhances idols' public credibility and visibility, which may translate into market value and media exposure. Politically, fans align idols with state-endorsed narratives, thereby embedding entertainment within frameworks of national identity (Lams & Zhou, 2023). Participating in official campaigns or amplifying state media content on national occasions simultaneously boosts idols' social reputation and situates them within patriotic discourse (Wang, 2022a). This dual mechanism reveals how digital fan practices integrate the symbolic economies of commerce and politics (Papacharissi, 2016).

The convergence of affective fandom and digital affordances facilitates a gradual transformation from idol-centered emotional engagement to collective expressions of nationalism. Fans' emotional attachment provides an initial basis for value alignment with their idols, while online platforms amplify these sentiments through algorithms, hashtags, and fan archives that synchronize behavior and cultivate a sense of collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Wong et al., 2021). As fans gain organizational experience and digital literacy, they acquire the skills and efficacy necessary for coordinated mobilization (Jenkins et al.,

2015). Some studies interpret this process as an extension of idol support, where political participation emerges organically from fandom activities (Lee & Moon, 2021).

Consequently, digital fan communities can function as intermediaries through which personal idol worship is translated into shared nationalist discourse. When fans participate in state-endorsed campaigns, defend China's image abroad, or adopt patriotic slogans, their affective labor simultaneously promotes idols and reinforces state narratives (Wang & Ge, 2023; Xia, 2024). This dynamic demonstrates how participatory culture in China has expanded beyond cultural consumption to encompass socio-political engagement. Through collective action, fans shape not only their idols' careers but also broader discourses of national identity (Peng et al., 2022), cultivating civic awareness among fans invisibly. Based on this discussion, it can be proposed that fan community engagement serves as a key mechanism linking individual motivations to collective action (Fig. 1).

H4. : Fan community engagement plays a mediating role in the relationship between idol worship and fandom nationalism.

H5. : Fan community engagement plays a mediating role in the relationship between cognitive needs and fandom nationalism.

4. Method

This study employed a survey as the main data collection method. The questionnaires were distributed on social media platforms where fan communities are active and invited fans to join in the survey. The platforms focused on Weibo and Douban which are two most popular fan communities' platforms in China. The selection of Weibo and Douban as dual platforms for this quantitative study on fan communities is strategically justified by their complementary capacities to provide breadth (large-scale, diverse samples) and depth (targeted, structures data), ensuring robust statistical generalizability. This study deliberately focused on fans of entertainment idols, as fandom nationalism in China is primarily rooted in the idol-fan subculture (Li, 2016). The questionnaires were distributed within these fan communities, and fans were invited to complete them. The survey was conducted from 8th October to 15th November 2024. A total of 640 questionnaires were collected, after excluding those not meeting the research criteria, 607 questionnaires were retained finally.

A majority of the survey respondents identified as female (74%), with the predominant age group being 18–24 years old (69.2%), followed by those aged 25–35 (28.2%). In terms of educational background, 70.7% of participants had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, 91.3% of respondents reported being single (unmarried). Geographically, participants were drawn from 30 of the 34 provincial-level regions in China, with the largest shares coming from Guangdong ($n = 101$), Jiangsu ($n = 52$), and Zhejiang ($n = 22$). Overall, the demographic distribution closely aligns with data from the official Weibo report (2018), suggesting that the sample is reasonably representative for analyzing the practices of Chinese fans on social media (Table 1).

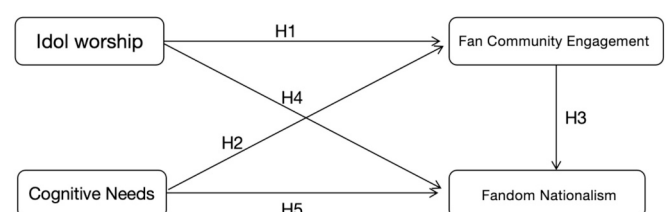


Fig. 1. The research model.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of respondents ($N = 607$).

Profile	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender		
Male	158	26
Female	449	74
Age		
Under18	8	1.3
18–24	420	69.2
25–35	171	28.2
36–45	6	1.0
Above 45	2	0.3
Education level		
Senior high school or below	16	2.6
Diploma	27	4.4
Bachelor's degree	429	70.7
Master's degree	125	20.6
Doctor's degree	10	1.6
Marital status		
Single	554	91.3
Married	53	8.7
Employment status		
Full-time student	374	61.6
Full-time employment	172	28.3
Temporary/Part-time employment	16	2.6
Self-employed	24	4
Non-employed	21	3.5
Average monthly income		
No monthly income	330	54.4
Below CNY3,000	57	9.4
CNY3,000–6000	104	17.1
CNY6,001–9000	56	9.2
CNY9,001–12,000	33	5.4
Above CNY12,000	27	4.4
Residential area		
Urban	447	73.6
Rural	69	11.4
Suburban	91	15

4.1. Measures

4.1.1. Idol worship

The study draws primarily on the Idol Worship Questionnaire's five-component structure, integrating its conceptual breadth with items from the Fanship Scale developed by [Reysen and Branscombe \(2010\)](#), adapting it to the unique characteristics of fan communities. We selected five key questions that specifically address the emotional attachment and admiration fans have toward their idols, including 1) I am emotional connected to my idol/interest in online fan community; 2) I want everyone to know I am connected to my idol/interest in online fan community; 3) I would devote all my time to my idol/interest if I could (by listening to his/her song, watching his/her movie, or browsing his/her information); 4) I would spend a considerable money on my idol/interest; 5) I would be devastated if I were told I could not pursue my idol/interest. The respondents reported their agreement on each item using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4.1.2. Cognitive needs

The measurement scale employed in this study is adapted from the Need for Cognition Scale (NCS), developed by [De Holanda et al. \(2020\)](#), [De Holanda et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Cacioppo and Petty \(1982\)](#), building on the foundational work of [Cohen et al. \(1955\)](#). It also integrates insights from previous studies ([Dhir et al., 2015](#); [Pang, 2018](#)) to ensure contextual relevance. The scale including the needs for: 1) I can broaden my knowledge in online fan community; 2) I get useful information in online fan community; 3) I get useful resource in online fan community; 4) I learn how to do things in online fan community; 5) I refine my thinking in online fan community.

4.1.3. Fan community engagement

This study focuses specifically on fans active within Chinese online fan communities. To ensure cultural and contextual relevance, the measurement scale for fan community engagement was adopted from [Pan \(2021\)](#), which comprehensively encapsulates the behavioral patterns and modes of participation unique to Chinese fans within fan communities: 1) Keep up the latest news of idol; 2) Post, comment or share idol-related content; 3) Increase the positive information about idols and weakening the impact of negative information about idols; 4) Participate in the production of idol-related cultural content; 5) Reproduce the content provided by the official website from multiple perspectives; 6) Communicate and interact with the fan groups; 7) Provide advice to the team; 8) Provide support or material assistance to help your idol with their career.

4.1.4. Fandom nationalism

The scale was adapted from [Kosterman and Feshbach \(1989\)](#) to assess nationalism sentiment among fans in China: 1) In view of China's moral and material superiority, it is only right that we should have a bigger say in deciding United Nations policy; 2) Fans should support their country even if the country is in the wrong; 3) Generally, the more influence china has on other nations, the better off they are. additionally, one new item- "the country should be our greatest idol, and to love it is to accept it in its entirety" was added to capture the distinctive form of nationalist sentiment expressed in fan communities, reflecting fandom specific discourse and behavioral patterns.

4.2. data analysis

We utilized a two-stage approach to data and analysis as follows. First, we evaluated the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Subsequently, we applied structural equation modeling (SEM) using PLS-SEM version 4.1.0.8 to develop the research model, test the hypotheses, and explore mediation effects. PLS-SEM focuses on predicting key target constructs or extending an existing theory in exploratory research ([Ross, 2017](#)). Given that this study seeks to develop a new research model, PLS-SEM was selected as the appropriate method.

5. Results

5.1. Measurement model

All constructs in this study were modeled as reflective, as their indicators represent manifestations of the latent variables, are expected to covary, and can be replaced without altering the conceptual meaning of the construct ([Hair et al., 2017](#)). Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples (bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals, two-tailed) indicated that all loadings were statistically significant, with lower bounds above 0.60 (see [Table 2](#)).

In PLS-SEM, the measurement model was assessed through reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Internal consistency was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with all constructs exceeding the 0.7 threshold, as shown in [Table 2](#). The standardized outer loadings ranged from 0.628 to 0.838, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (see [Table 2](#)) except three items (FCE1 = 0.698, FCE5 = 0.663, FN = 0.628) fell slightly below the cutoff but were retained because (1) its loading exceeded 0.60; (2) removal did not improve AVE or CR, and (3) the item contributed to the construct's conceptual coverage ([Hair, 2014](#)). Convergent validity was supported by AVE values ranging from 0.537 to 0.623. Discriminant validity was established, as all HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) ratios were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, as presented in [Table 3](#).

The recommended guideline for detecting collinearity issues in PLS-SEM is a VIF value of 5.00 or higher, indicating potential multicollinearity ([Hair, 2014](#)). The result showed that all VIF values in this study ranged between 1.221 and 2.268, which are below the threshold

Table 2

Internal consistency and convergent validity of variables.

Construct	Item	Mean	SD	Loading	CR	Cronbach's α	AVE
Idol worship	IW1	3.47	1.065	0.763	0.862	0.800	0.556
	IW2			0.742			
	IW3			0.741			
	IW4			0.724			
	IW5			0.757			
Cognitive needs	CN1	3.59	1.01	0.804	0.891	0.846	0.620
	CN2			0.742			
	CN3			0.786			
	CN4			0.763			
	CN5			0.838			
Fan community engagement	FCE1	2.96	1.16	0.698	0.912	0.889	0.565
	FCE2			0.774			
	FCE3			0.803			
	FCE4			0.741			
	FCE5			0.663			
	FCE6			0.809			
	FCE7			0.726			
	FCE8			0.784			
Fandom nationalism	FN1	3.77	0.97	0.717	0.821	0.712	0.536
	FN2			0.628			
	FN3			0.821			
	FN4			0.749			

Note: AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; SD = standard deviation.

Table 3

Correlation of the constructs (HTMT for discriminant validity).

	CN	FCE	FN	IW
CN				
FCE	0.707			
FN	0.340	0.321		
IW	0.669	0.770	0.303	

Note: IW = idol worship; CN = cognitive needs; FCE = fan community engagement; FN = fandom nationalism.

of 5.00, indicating the common method bias is unlikely to bias the results. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value was 0.071, which falls below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating a satisfactory model fit.

5.2. Hypothesis testing

As is showed in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3, the explained variance (R^2) was assessed to evaluate the model's predictive accuracy. The R^2 values were 0.525 for fan community engagement and 0.092 for fandom nationalism. While these values indicate differing levels of explanatory power, the statistical significance of the model was confirmed through bootstrapping (5000 samples, bias-corrected 95% CI). The results show that idol worship has a positive association with fan community engagement ($\beta = 0.456, p < .001$), and cognitive needs are also positively related to fan community engagement ($\beta = 0.366, p < .001$). Therefore, H1 and H2

were supported.

However, the path from fan community engagement to fandom nationalism is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.119, p = .059$). Likewise, the direct relationship between idol worship and fandom nationalism is non-significant ($\beta = 0.060, p = .319$). H3 was rejected. What's more, cognitive needs demonstrate a significant positive association with fandom nationalism ($\beta = 0.170, p < .01$). The findings suggest that cognitive motivations play a more direct role in predicting fandom nationalism (Table 4).

5.3. Test of mediation effect

Table 5 presents the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of idol worship and cognitive needs on fandom nationalism through fan community engagement. The bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples, two-tailed, BCa confidence intervals) was employed to assess both direct and indirect relationships among the constructs.

The findings indicate that for the path $IW \rightarrow FCE \rightarrow FN$, the total effect of idol worship on fandom nationalism was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.115, p < .05$), while the direct effect ($\beta = 0.060, p > .05$) and the indirect effect via FCE ($\beta = 0.054, p > .05$) were not significant. This suggests that fan community engagement does not mediate the association between idol worship and fandom nationalism.

For the path $CN \rightarrow FCE \rightarrow FN$, the total effect of cognitive needs on fandom nationalism was significant ($\beta = 0.214, p < .001$), as was the direct effect ($\beta = 0.170, p < .01$). However, the indirect effect through

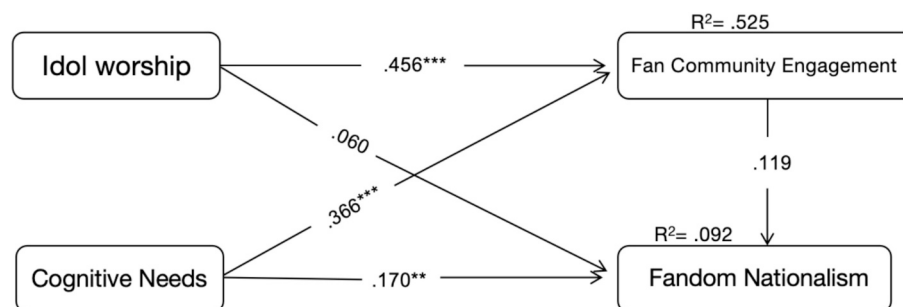


Fig. 2. Structural equation model with hypothesis testing results.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

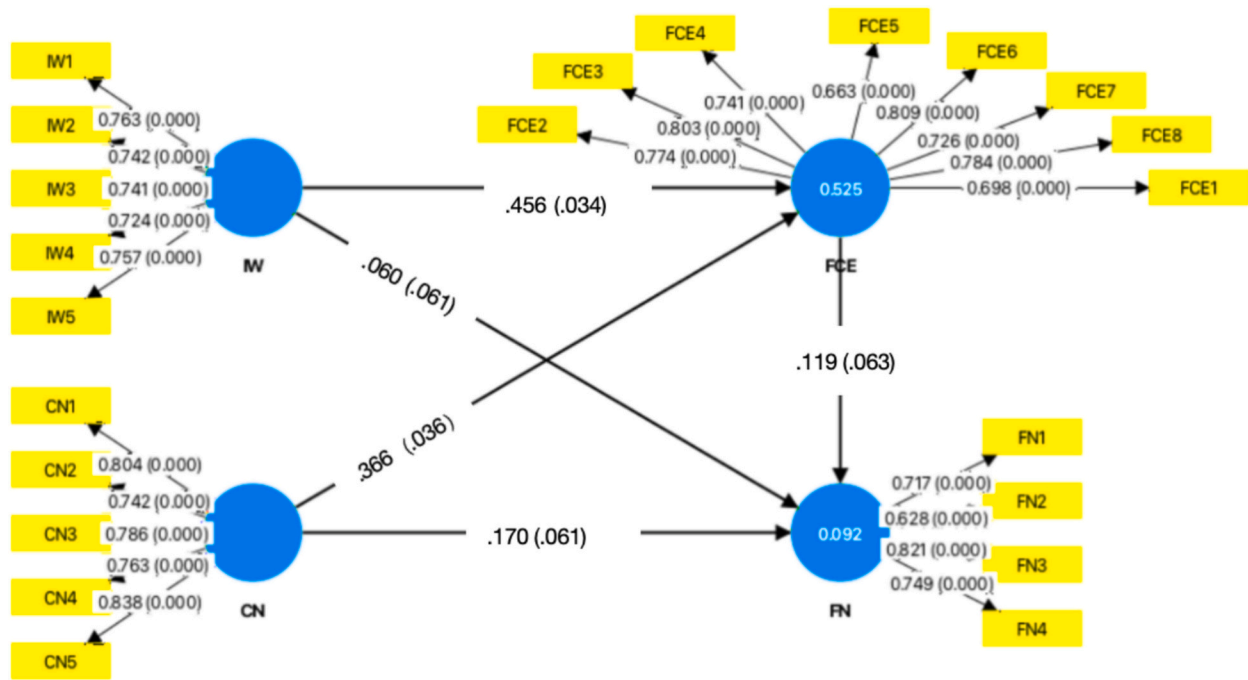


Fig. 3. PLS-SEM structural and measurement model.

Table 4

Bootstrapping results for the structure model paths.

Path	β	t	p	95%CI
IW $\rightarrow$ FCE	0.456	13.444	0.000***	[0.390, 0.522]
CN $\rightarrow$ FCE	0.366	10.162	0.000***	[0.296, 0.437]
FCE $\rightarrow$ FN	0.119	1.886	0.059	[-0.005, 0.242]
IW $\rightarrow$ FN	0.060	0.997	0.319	[-0.058, 0.182]
CN $\rightarrow$ FN	0.170	2.802	0.005**	[0.049, 0.293]

Note: Bootstrapping based on 5000 resamples; two-tailed test.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 5

Indirect effects (Mediation).

Path	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect
IW $\rightarrow$ FCE $\rightarrow$ FN	0.115 ($p < .05^*$)	0.060 ($p > .05$)	0.054 ($p > .05$)
CN $\rightarrow$ FCE $\rightarrow$ FN	0.214 ($p < .001^{***}$)	0.170 ($p < .01^{**}$)	0.044 ($p > .05$)

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

FCE was non-significant ($\beta = 0.044$, $p > .05$). These results indicate that cognitive needs are directly associated with fandom nationalism, but this relationship is not transmitted through fan community engagement.

The results reveal that fan community engagement does not function as a significant mediator between fandom motivation (idol worship and cognitive needs) and fandom nationalism. Instead, the effects appear to operate primarily through direct associations, rather than through the mediating mechanism of fan participation.

6. Discussion

Employing quantitative methods, this study examined the socio-psychological mechanisms underlying fandom nationalism sentiment in

China, reflecting a growing scholarly interest in the interplay between fandom and political behavior among fans (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Hinck & Hardin, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2015). The study investigated the relationships among idol worship, cognitive needs, fan community engagement, and fandom nationalism in the context of Chinese digital fandom. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of participatory culture and previous discussions on fandom nationalism (Hailong, 2020; Liao & Fu, 2022), the research examined whether emotional and cognitive motivations are associated with fans' participation in communities and their expressions of nationalist sentiment. The study further explored whether fan community engagement mediates these relationships.

The findings revealed several noteworthy patterns. First, both idol worship and cognitive needs were significantly associated with fan community engagement, confirming that affective and rational motivations coexist in shaping participatory behavior. Second, cognitive needs showed a significant and direct positive association with fandom nationalism, whereas idol worship did not. Third, fan community engagement was not significantly related to fandom nationalism, and the hypothesized mediation effects were not supported. These results suggest that emotional-affective attachments are more strongly associated with fan community engagement, while rational-cognitive factors are more strongly associated with fans' expressions of nationalism in China's digital environment. Importantly, because this research employed a cross-sectional design, the relationships observed should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

Existing research identified two contrasting psychological dimensions of fan motivation, sensibility (idol worship) and sense (cognitive needs) that may underlie nationalist expression.

The data provide partial support for this framework: while both forms of motivation were positively related to fan community engagement, only cognitive needs were significantly associated with fandom nationalism. This finding may suggest that Chinese fans' nationalist sentiment is more cognitively grounded than emotionally driven. This pattern aligns with psychological consistency theories (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946), which propose that individuals strive for coherence between personal values and collective beliefs. Fans with strong cognitive engagement may internalize ideological narratives that align with their self-concept and identity as national citizens. It is plausible to speculate

that rather than acting purely on emotional attachment, some fans may rationalize their participation within broader socio-political frameworks. In this sense, fandom nationalism might not solely stem from emotional contagion but may also reflect a form of identity-based alignment, potentially sustained by meaning-making, knowledge seeking, and self-definition processes (Yang et al., 2024).

The findings may demonstrate that rational-cognitive motivations may provide a stronger basis for translating participatory energy into national identification in China. One possible explanation lies in the broader sociopolitical environment of China, characterized by rigorous online regulation, the pervasive reach of patriotic education, and a positive media discourse. These forces may collectively shape and amplify fandom nationalism to a greater extent than individual-level emotional devotion, though it remains for future research to test this possibility.

Contrary to expectations derived from the affective dimension of fandom, idol worship was not significantly associated with fandom nationalism. This suggests that emotional attachment to idols does not necessarily extend to national identity, even though fandom nationalism borrows the language and rituals of idol culture. As discussed in the literature review, Chinese fans often invest intense emotion and labor in idol support (Duffett, 2013). Yet these practices primarily serve intra-community recognition and status rather than external political expression. Idol worship reinforces loyalty toward specific figures, not toward the abstract entity of the nation. While this study did not directly examine symbolic connections between idols and national narratives, it is plausible that in their absence, emotional energy tends to remain localized within the domain of entertainment. This interpretation also partly aligns with He and Li (2023)'s argument that fans' civic participation may not necessarily be driven by genuine civic intention, but rather constitutes a performative form of pseudo-participation. Another explanation may lie that the broader observation that Chinese fandom, though passionate, is heavily structured by commercials that redirect affect toward consumption and data-making rather than political reflection (Gao, 2018; Hammonds, 2020). It is possible that although emotional drive fuels the fan economy, its influence on nationalist identification may be inconsistent or context dependent.

The results show that fan community engagement was significantly associated with idol worship and cognitive needs but not with fandom nationalism. This suggests that while community engagement embodies active participation, interaction, and collective organization, it does not necessarily serve as a conduit for nationalist sentiment in the context of China. The outcome stands in contrast to assumptions derived from participatory culture theory, which often celebrates fan communities as incubators of civic participation and political agency ((Brough & Shresthova, 2012). In China, however, the participatory affordances of fan communities appear to be contained within cultural, social, and commercial boundaries. However, the data suggest that in the Chinese context, fan community engagement does not readily translate into nationalist expression. It is possible that the *affective collectivism* that characterizes Chinese fandom is primarily self-referential, reinforcing solidarity, efficiency, and belonging within the community, rather than expressing outward ideological commitments, though this interpretation warrants further empirical investigation.

Several contextual factors help explain this limitation. First, fan communities operate within a system of *platform governance* that promotes "positive energy" discourse while discouraging confrontational expression (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). This regulatory environment normalizes enthusiasm and conformity rather than critique. Second, commercial intermediaries capitalize on fan mobilization, transforming collective enthusiasm into consumer behavior rather than political participation (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Third, the structure of fandom nationalism itself is often reactive: fans mobilize defensively in response to perceived external provocations, rather than proactively constructing political agendas. Taken together, these dynamics point to distinctive characteristics of fandom culture in China, which diverge in important

ways from Western democratic contexts.

The significant association between cognitive needs and fandom nationalism underscores the importance of rational-cognitive engagement in understanding China's digital nationalism. Fans who exhibit stronger cognitive motivation tend to seek coherence between personal values, community identity, and national discourse. Their participation is not purely emotional but also reflexive, they consume, interpret, and evaluate information in ways that align with their self-concept as informed, responsible citizens. In this sense, fandom nationalism in China may not emerge from emotional intensity alone but from *cognitive internalization* of symbolic meanings embedded in media and state discourse. Also, this cognitive motivation may be related to the relatively high educational level observed among members of fan communities.

The absence of mediating effect through fan community engagement indicates that community participation does not statistically explain the link between individual motivations and nationalist sentiment. This implies that fandom nationalism may stem from personal cognitive alignment rather than from ideological diffusion within fan networks. It refines the participatory culture framework by emphasizing that not all collective participation leads to ideological convergence. The applicability of participatory culture theory's claim that fan communities cultivate political mobilization capacity remains uncertain in the Chinese context, and this effect may be overstated. One possible explanation is that the environment shaped by platform governance in China. Alternatively, this finding may reflect the nature of the sample, which spans a wide range of fan communities. A more targeted examination of politically active fandoms might yield different results. As such, it should be interpreted with caution, either way, the assumption that fan collectivity necessarily cultivates political mobilization deserves further empirical scrutiny.

The findings invite a reconsideration of participatory culture theory within non-Western and semi-authoritarian settings. Jenkins (2013) envisioned participatory culture as an emancipatory force that empowers individuals to become active citizens. However, the observed patterns in China point to a model of *managed participation*, where fan collectivity is encouraged, celebrated, and mobilized, but within boundaries compatible with state ideology. Fan communities in China may function less as vehicles for civic empowerment and more as potential sites of *affective governance*, possibly contributing to social stability and reinforcing ideological coherence, this interpretation remains tentative and warrants further investigation.

This study contributes to the growing literature on fandom and nationalism in three keyways. First, it demonstrates that cognitive motivation is more strongly associated with nationalism than emotional motivation among Chinese fans. This challenges the assumption that emotional intensity necessarily drives political alignment. Second, it provides empirical evidence that fan community engagement, despite its organizational power, does not automatically bridge individual motivations and political sentiment. This decoupling emphasizes the contextual limits of participatory culture in environments where media governance and commercialization shape engagement trajectories. Third, it extends the understanding of fandom nationalism as a context-dependent, discursively mediated phenomenon rather than a direct product of fan emotion or collective participation.

7. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its cross-sectional design captures relationships among variables at a single point in time, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences. The associations identified, particularly between cognitive needs and fandom nationalism should therefore be interpreted as correlational rather than directional. Second, the findings are context-specific, derived from Chinese online fan communities that operate within distinct cultural and political conditions. As such, the results may not be

generalizable to other national or media environments. Future comparative and longitudinal research could examine whether similar patterns emerge in different sociopolitical contexts and over time. Third, the study did not focus on a single fan community but instead included a broad range of fans. While this enhances the generalizability of the findings across fandoms, it may also introduce heterogeneity that dilutes specific group-level dynamics and introduces noise into the data. Finally, the boundary between *idol worship* and *fan community engagement* may be particularly context dependent. Given that fan participation practices differ across cultural contexts (e.g., Western vs. East Asian fandoms), the overlap observed in the Chinese context may reflect a localized integration of emotional investment and communal activity. Future research should seek to disentangle these dimensions by developing culturally sensitive instruments that can better differentiate the constructs within Chinese fandom and by analyzing specific fan communities to capture more granular insights.

8. Conclusion

In summary, this study provides initial insight into the relationship between fan participation and nationalism in contemporary China. The results indicate that *cognitive needs* are significantly associated with *fandom nationalism*, whereas *idol worship* and *fan community engagement* are not. These findings suggest that rational-cognitive motivations may be more closely linked to national identification within Chinese fan culture than emotional attachments or collective participation.

While participatory culture has been theorized to offer fans spaces for civic expression and community formation, our findings suggest that, in the Chinese context, such community engagement may not straightforwardly translate into nationalist identification. Chinese fandom may exemplify a form of participation that is cognitively rationalized yet affectively regulated, supporting coordinated enthusiasm without necessarily fostering autonomous civic awareness. This raises the possibility that fandom nationalism in China involves a complex, context-dependent interplay between emotional investment, identity formation, and sociopolitical structures. These results also open space for further inquiry into how participatory cultures function under varying ideological and regulatory environments.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jie Lan: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Moniza Waheed:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rosmiza Bidin:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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