

EMOTION, COMMUNITY, AND TECHNOLOGY: HOW FANDOM CULTURE SHAPES CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CONSUMPTION ATTITUDES

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Abstract

This study examines how fandom culture shapes consumption attitudes among Chinese university students, focusing on the parallel mediating effects of fan community social identity and algorithm-driven media influence. The research adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. First, structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to survey data collected from 400 Chinese university students to quantify path relationships. Second, semi-structured interviews with 30 highly engaged fans were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover the underlying contextual mechanisms.

Quantitative results show that fandom culture has a significant direct positive effect on university students' consumption attitudes ($\beta = 0.447$, $p < 0.001$). Social identity and media influence simultaneously play partial mediating roles, with indirect effects of 0.283 and 0.247, respectively. The aggregated total indirect effect (0.530) exceeds the direct effect, indicating that fandom culture primarily reshapes consumption attitudes through psychological identity construction and algorithmic media environment construction rather than direct stimulation. Qualitative thematic analysis further identifies three interconnected shaping mechanisms: (1) consumption functions as intra-group boundary certification and status legitimation within the social identity pathway; (2) social media algorithms create closed consumption gravitational fields that normalize fan spending as a moral obligation; and (3) emotional symbolic value synergistically amplifies consumption willingness alongside identity and media forces. This study systematically clarifies how emotion, community, and digital technology jointly construct youth consumption logics, providing empirical evidence and theoretical references for universities to implement critical media literacy education, rational identity guidance, and healthy consumption cultivation.

Keywords: Fandom Culture, Consumption Attitudes, Social Identity, Media Influence, University Students, Mixed-Methods Research

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media, platform-based entertainment, and digital commerce has transformed fandom culture in China from a loosely connected form of audience participation into an organized social and commercial system. Contemporary fan communities no longer merely gather around shared admiration for celebrities or cultural products; they coordinate content production, data promotion, purchasing campaigns, online interaction, and collective support. Chinese fandoms have consequently developed characteristics of quasi-organizational communities sustained by cultural bonds, emotional discipline, group identity, and commercial involvement (Dan et al., 2023). Within these communities, emotional commitment is increasingly translated into measurable activities, including online engagement, content circulation, data contribution, and financial consumption (Yin, 2021).

University students represent an important population for examining this phenomenon because their identity formation, social relationships, entertainment practices, and consumption experiences are closely integrated with digital platforms. Participation in fandom may provide emotional satisfaction, companionship, social belonging, and opportunities for self-expression. However, such participation may also reshape how students assess products, respond to celebrity endorsements, and interpret consumption as evidence of loyalty. Recent research on Chinese idol culture indicates that fan communities establish standards of authentic membership based on emotional commitment, as well as financial and data-based support. Community organizations may also monitor and regulate members whose behavior is considered inconsistent with the interests or commercial value of the idol (Williams & Wang, 2025). Consumption in fandom culture is therefore not solely an individual purchasing decision but may function as a socially recognized expression of identity and commitment.

The emotional dynamics of fandom are particularly important because digital platforms encourage fans to transform affection into ongoing participation. Yin (2021) explains that Chinese digital fandom operates through emotional capitalism, in which fans' emotional attachment, digital labor, and social relationships are incorporated into platform-based processes of value creation. Feelings of affection, responsibility, intimacy, and protectiveness toward an idol can motivate fans to promote content, purchase endorsed products, contribute to projects, and participate in activities intended to increase the idol's visibility. This process illustrates how emotion can move beyond personal appreciation and become tied to commercial consumption.

Fan-community social identity may further strengthen this relationship. Fan groups create distinctions between insiders and outsiders and establish expectations for what committed members should think and do. Dan et al. (2023) found that Chinese fan circles possess collaborative networks, internal hierarchies, collective discipline, and a strong sense of group identity. More recent evidence shows that Chinese fan clubs actively define the

meaning of a “real fan” and shape members’ everyday identities and practices through standards involving emotional loyalty, spending, and data labor (Williams & Wang, 2025). Students who strongly identify with a fan community may therefore develop consumption attitudes that correspond to group norms, as purchasing becomes a means of demonstrating belonging, maintaining status, and receiving recognition from other members.

Technology provides an additional mechanism through which fandom culture can influence consumption attitudes. Social media platforms repeatedly expose students to celebrity content, fan-generated information, product promotions, livestreams, rankings, and recommendations. These environments make consumption highly visible and facilitate comparisons with peers and influential community members. A study involving 544 Chinese undergraduates found that consumption information shared through social media could stimulate benign envy and subsequently increase consumption intention, demonstrating that media exposure can affect purchasing through emotional and social-comparison processes (Liu et al., 2024). Research on the Chinese livestreaming market has similarly shown that social media influencer streamers significantly affect consumers’ shopping attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intentions (Long et al., 2024). These findings indicate that digital media influence is not limited to information delivery but also shapes emotions, perceived norms, and evaluations of consumption.

Although recent studies have examined emotional labor, identity management, community organization, social comparison, and digital purchasing, these research areas remain insufficiently integrated. Studies of Chinese fandom frequently rely on ethnography, interviews, or specific fan communities to explain identity and organizational practices, whereas consumer studies tend to investigate social media sharing, influencer marketing, or livestreaming without locating these activities within the broader cultural structure of fandom. Consequently, there is limited large-sample evidence on how fandom engagement shapes the consumption attitudes of Chinese university students through both community-based social identity and perceived media influence. The independent mediating effects of these two mechanisms also remain unclear.

Accordingly, this study examines how engagement with fandom culture influences the consumption attitudes of Chinese university students and investigates the parallel mediating roles of fan-community social identity and perceived media influence. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design is employed, beginning with quantitative testing of the proposed direct and indirect relationships, followed by qualitative interviews that explain the statistical findings in greater contextual depth. The study contributes theoretically by integrating emotional, community, and technological explanations of fandom consumption; methodologically by connecting quantitative mediation analysis with qualitative interpretation; and practically by providing evidence for universities, families, digital platforms,

and relevant authorities seeking to promote media literacy, responsible fandom participation, and rational consumption among university students.

Literature Review

Fandom Engagement and Fan Consumption Behavior

Fandom engagement refers to the degree to which individuals invest their emotions, time, attention, social interaction, and financial resources in activities associated with admired celebrities, media personalities, or cultural products. In contemporary digital culture, fans are no longer passive recipients of entertainment content but active participants who create and circulate information, organize collective activities, promote cultural products, and sustain ongoing interaction across media platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Digital communication also enables geographically dispersed individuals to coordinate collective action through personalized networks, shared content, and platform-based participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Fandom engagement therefore encompasses emotional attachment, community involvement, digital participation, and consumption-related activity.

Fan consumption differs from ordinary utilitarian consumption because products associated with celebrities and fan communities often acquire emotional, symbolic, and social meanings. From a postmodern marketing perspective, consumption can help construct identity, communicate cultural affiliation, and enable participation in shared social experiences rather than merely satisfy functional needs (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Official merchandise, concert tickets, celebrity-endorsed products, subscriptions, and limited-edition goods can thus function as visible expressions of affection and loyalty. Positive associations with a celebrity or fan community may also transfer to related products and brands, thereby strengthening perceived value, brand preference, and loyalty (Aaker, 1991).

Emotional attachment offers an important explanation for these consumption practices. Fans may develop a sense of psychological closeness to media figures despite the absence of direct interpersonal relationships, a phenomenon described as parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This perceived intimacy can increase the personal significance of fan-related products, as purchasing becomes a way to express support and maintain a symbolic connection with the admired figure. Fandom can also become integrated into personal identity and broader self-narratives, particularly when cultural attachments extend across national and social boundaries (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Research on youth fandom further indicates that participation in fan culture can shape consumption values by encouraging emotionally driven, imitative, and identity-oriented purchasing (Chen et al., 2022).

Digital platforms reinforce these processes by integrating entertainment, communication, promotion, and purchasing opportunities within connected media environments. Repeated engagement with fan-related content can increase familiarity with endorsed products, strengthen favorable associations, and normalize consumption as part of

fandom participation. Accordingly, students who participate more intensively in fandom culture are expected to display more favorable attitudes toward fan-related consumption.

H1: Fandom culture engagement positively influences commercially oriented consumption attitudes among university students.

Social Identity and Normative Consumption

Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals define part of their self-concept through membership in social groups and tend to internalize the values, meanings, and behavioral expectations associated with those groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identity formation involves recognizing oneself as a member of a particular group, distinguishing that group from relevant outsiders, and adopting attitudes and behaviors consistent with group membership. Within fandom culture, shared admiration for a celebrity or cultural product provides the basis for social categorization, while repeated interaction with other fans reinforces the perception of belonging to a distinctive community.

Fan communities may satisfy the fundamental need for belonging by providing shared interests, emotional support, mutual recognition, and social inclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). At the same time, individuals seek a balance between similarity to other group members and personal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). Fandom enables both processes because members can identify with the collective while differentiating themselves through specialized knowledge, intensity of participation, cultural preferences, and ownership of fan-related products.

As individuals become more involved in fandom activities, they gain greater exposure to community language, symbols, rituals, and behavioral expectations. Participation in online discussions, promotional campaigns, content creation, and collective support activities may increase the extent to which fandom membership becomes part of an individual's self-concept. Digital media further intensify this process by enabling continuous interaction and the repeated circulation of shared meanings among members (Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, higher levels of fandom engagement are expected to strengthen fan-community social identity.

H2: Fandom culture engagement positively influences fan-community social identity among university students.

Strong social identity may subsequently shape consumption attitudes because individuals generally seek to behave in ways that are consistent with valued group memberships (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Within fan communities, purchasing official products, supporting celebrity endorsements, attending events, and participating in fundraising or promotional activities may become visible signs of commitment. Consumption thus moves beyond a private economic decision and functions as a symbolic act through which members communicate loyalty and affirm belonging.

Social comparison may further reinforce this process. Festinger (1954) argued that individuals evaluate their attitudes and behavior by comparing themselves with others,

particularly when clear objective standards are unavailable. Members of fan communities may compare their purchasing, participation, knowledge, or visible support with that of other fans. Such comparisons may generate informal standards for what committed membership should involve and influence perceptions of appropriate consumption. Interpersonal communication and opinion leadership can also strengthen community norms because influential members may interpret information, recommend products, and guide collective evaluations (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Consumption may therefore provide recognition, enhance status, and affirm identity within the community. Students who strongly identify with a fan group are consequently more likely to evaluate fan-related consumption positively because they perceive such behavior as consistent with group values and membership expectations.

H3: Fan-community social identity positively influences commercially oriented consumption attitudes among university students.

Perceived Media Influence and Consumption Attitudes

Digital media constitute a central environment in which contemporary fandom is created, sustained, and commercialized. Fans use media platforms to obtain information, follow celebrities, interact with other members, participate in cultural activities, and learn about fan-related products. Uses and gratifications theory suggests that individuals actively select media to satisfy needs related to entertainment, information, social interaction, identity expression, and emotional experience (Katz et al., 1973). Students who are highly engaged in fandom culture are therefore likely to spend more time consuming fan-related media content and to pay greater attention to messages relevant to their interests.

Media influence may become particularly significant when individuals depend on digital platforms to understand events, maintain relationships, or make decisions. Media system dependency theory proposes that the effects of media increase when audiences rely on media systems to fulfill important informational and social needs (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). In fandom environments, students may depend on platforms for celebrity updates, product information, community interpretations, event announcements, and guidance regarding participation. Greater fandom engagement may consequently increase both exposure to media content and the perception that such content influences personal evaluations and decisions.

Social media also facilitates the transnational circulation of popular culture, allowing entertainment content and associated consumption practices to move rapidly across national and cultural boundaries. Through repeated searches, views, shares, and interactions, users are likely to encounter increasingly similar content related to their interests. This repeated exposure can make celebrity-centered narratives, promotional messages, and fan consumption more salient. Therefore, students who engage more actively in fandom culture are expected to perceive a stronger influence from media environments.

H4: Fandom culture engagement positively influences perceived media influence among university students.

Perceived media influence refers to the extent to which individuals believe that media content, repeated exposure, and platform communication affect their attitudes and decisions. Media can influence consumption by increasing the visibility of selected products, repeatedly associating them with admired celebrities, and presenting purchasing as meaningful or socially desirable. Agenda-setting theory explains that media shape perceived importance by directing attention to particular topics through repetition and prominence (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In fandom environments, frequent exposure to merchandise launches, celebrity endorsements, purchasing campaigns, and reports of collective support may similarly increase the perceived significance of fan-related consumption.

Media influence may also operate through emotional framing. Products are often embedded in narratives of loyalty, intimacy, aspiration, and shared participation. Parasocial interaction can intensify the persuasiveness of these messages because audiences may respond more favorably to products associated with media figures to whom they feel emotionally close (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Brand equity theory also suggests that favorable associations surrounding a celebrity or cultural object can enhance the perceived value and attractiveness of related products (Aaker, 1991).

Repeated exposure may also reinforce prior emotional and financial commitment. Consumer decisions are not always based entirely on functional evaluation; they may be shaped by previous investment, perceived ownership, and psychological commitment (Thaler, 1980). Students who have already invested substantial emotion, time, and attention in fandom activities may therefore be more receptive to media messages that encourage continued support through consumption. Individuals who perceive media content as influential are consequently expected to develop more favorable attitudes toward fan-related consumption.

H5: Perceived media influence positively influences commercially oriented consumption attitudes among university students.

Integrated Conceptual Model and Mediating Hypotheses

The proposed conceptual model positions fandom culture engagement as the independent variable and commercially oriented consumption attitudes as the dependent variable. The model proposes one direct relationship and two parallel indirect pathways through fan-community social identity and perceived media influence. The first pathway reflects a community-based mechanism in which engagement strengthens identification with the fan group, and stronger identification subsequently promotes consumption attitudes consistent with group values and expectations. The second pathway reflects a media-based mechanism in which engagement increases exposure to, dependence on, and receptiveness to fan-related media content, which subsequently shapes consumption evaluations.

Social identity is expected to mediate the relationship because fandom engagement provides repeated opportunities for individuals to internalize community meanings, receive recognition, and align their behavior with collective norms. As fandom membership becomes more central to the self-concept, consumption may increasingly function as a means of demonstrating loyalty and confirming membership.

H6: Fan-community social identity mediates the positive relationship between fandom culture engagement and commercially oriented consumption attitudes among university students.

Perceived media influence is also expected to mediate the relationship because engagement increases exposure to celebrity-related narratives, promotional communication, platform-based interactions, and consumption displays. These media experiences may strengthen the perceived desirability and social relevance of fan-related consumption.

H7: Perceived media influence mediates the positive relationship between fandom culture engagement and commercially oriented consumption attitudes among university students.

Conceptual Model

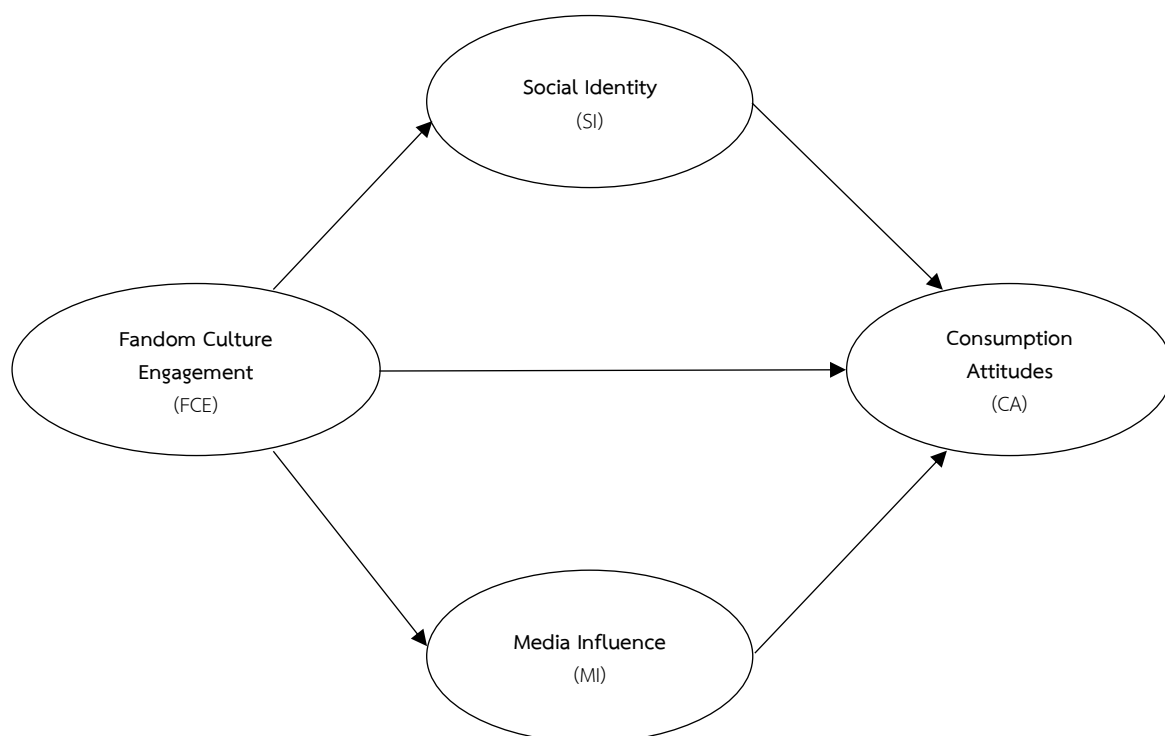


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. A quantitative questionnaire survey and SEM analysis are conducted first to test hypothesized path

relationships in a representative sample. Semi-structured qualitative interviews then follow to interpret the subjective meanings, situational contexts, and practical mechanisms underlying the quantified statistical relationships. The quantitative results establish generalizable correlational patterns, while the qualitative data provide contextualized interpretive depth, achieving methodological triangulation and complementarity.

1. Quantitative Research Design

1.1 Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

This study adopts a combined approach of stratified university selection and snowball non-probability sampling. Ten representative universities in Jiangxi Province were selected, including comprehensive universities (3), normal universities (2), universities of finance and economics (2), universities of science and engineering (2), and vocational colleges (1), to ensure institutional diversity. Questionnaires were distributed via the Wenjuanxing online survey platform, with 500 questionnaires sent in total. The screening criteria for valid samples included full completion of all items, a response duration of at least 120 seconds to exclude random careless responses, absence of patterned identical option selections, and logical consistency between related fan participation items. A total of 400 valid questionnaires were retained, yielding an effective response rate of 80%.

The sample includes college, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students aged 18–25, consistent with the age range of Chinese Generation Z college students and aligned with the enrollment structure of Jiangxi higher education institutions.

1.2 Variable Measurement and Scale Information

All latent constructs were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measurement items were adapted from established international and Chinese studies on consumer culture and fandom, and their wording was revised to ensure relevance to the fandom experiences of Chinese university students. Measurement quality was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Fandom Culture Engagement (FCE, Independent Variable): 20 items across four dimensions: idol worship and supportive behaviors, online social media engagement, cultural convergence and aesthetic identification, and commercial logic penetration. Sample item: "I view purchasing my idol's endorsed products as a necessary way to show support."

Social Identity (SI, Mediator 1): Adapted scale measuring intragroup belonging, normative compliance, and symbolic identity capital accumulation within fan communities.

Media Influence (MI, Mediator 2): Scale measuring algorithmic content exposure, parasocial interaction intensity, and platform consumption normative framing effects.

Consumption Attitudes (CA, Dependent Variable): Scale measuring preference for symbolic, emotion-driven, group-compliant fan consumption over utilitarian, practical consumption.

1.3 Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures

All quantitative data were processed using statistical software packages, following two analytical phases with standardized inspection procedures:

Preliminary data screening was conducted before the main analysis. Multivariate outliers were identified using Mahalanobis distance at a significance level of $p < .001$, resulting in the exclusion of six cases (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood estimation (Enders, 2022). Harman's single-factor test was also conducted as a preliminary statistical assessment of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Measurement Model Test: Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess construct reliability and validity. Convergent validity was verified via standardized factor loadings >0.70 , AVE >0.50 , CR >0.70 ; discriminant validity was tested via the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019).

Structural Model Test: Structural Equation Modeling to estimate standardized direct and indirect path coefficients. Model fit standards: $\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI >0.95 , TLI >0.95 , RMSEA <0.06 , SRMR <0.08 (Kline, 2016). The complete chi-square value and degrees of freedom were reported, and all modification indices were inspected without arbitrary model adjustments. Bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to test mediation effects; mediation was confirmed when 95% bootstrap confidence intervals excluded zero.

2. Qualitative Research Design

2.1 Purposive Maximum Variation Sampling and Interview Implementation

From the 400 valid quantitative respondents, 30 interviewees were selected using maximum variation stratified sampling across three stratification dimensions derived from the quantitative results: fandom engagement intensity (low/medium/high, based on FCE scale quartiles); dominant consumption attitude type (rational/utilitarian vs. symbolic/emotional, derived from a cluster analysis of CA scores); and primary social media platform (Weibo, Douban, Xiaohongshu).

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted via Tencent Meeting, with written informed consent obtained and audio recorded. Each interview lasted 42–68 minutes ($M = 54.3$ minutes). The interview outline was developed based on significant quantitative paths and included open-ended core probes, such as: “Describe a recent purchase you made solely due to fandom identity. What emotions, group pressures, or platform content guided your decision?” All participants were anonymized using unique codes (S01–S30).

2.2 Thematic Analysis Procedures

Interview transcript coding followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework using NVivo 12 software: (1) full transcript immersion; (2) open initial coding; (3) preliminary theme aggregation; (4) theme validation against raw transcripts; (5) theme definition refinement; and (6) final thematic reporting.

Multiple trustworthiness protocols were implemented to guarantee qualitative rigor:

Inter-coder reliability: Two independent researchers coded 40% of transcripts (12 samples), Cohen's $K=0.86$ for primary themes, $K=0.79$ for subthemes; coding discrepancies resolved through consensus discussion (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Reflexive researcher journals documenting pre-existing fandom assumptions and interpretive shifts throughout analysis.

Negative case analysis: Active identification and theoretical integration of respondents who resisted normative fan consumption to avoid one-sided thematic conclusions.

3. Ethical Assurance

This research received formal ethical approval from the Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Institutional Review Board (IRB reference: IRB-2024-087). All participants provided written informed consent before completing questionnaires and participating in interviews. Full anonymization was enforced: all personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts and datasets, with only coded identifiers retained for analysis.

Research Results

1. Quantitative Analysis Results

1.1 Sample Demographic Characteristics

Data were collected from 10 universities in Jiangxi Province, yielding a final valid sample of 400 respondents. Descriptive demographic statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics (N=400)

Basic Information	Classification	Count	Percentage
Gender	Female	234	58.50%
	Male	166	41.50%
Educational Stage	Junior College	49	12.25%
	Undergraduate	287	71.75%
	Master's Student	45	11.25%
	Doctoral Student	19	4.75%
Age	18 years old	37	9.25%
	19–21 years old	119	29.75%
	22–24 years old	169	42.25%
	25 years old	25	6.25%
Regularly follow celebrities/idols	Yes	376	94.00%
	Occasionally	14	3.50%
	Never	10	2.50%

Female participants accounted for 58.5% of the sample, consistent with gender distribution patterns in Chinese fan groups documented in previous literature. Undergraduate students comprised the majority (71.75%), aligning with higher education enrollment structures in Jiangxi. Most respondents (72%) were aged 19–24, representing core Generation Z college students immersed in algorithm-driven fan economy development. A total of 94% of participants reported regular celebrity-following behaviors, ensuring that the sample had direct fandom experience suitable for mechanism analysis.

1.2 Descriptive Statistics of Fandom Culture Engagement Construct

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all 20 FCE measurement items on a 7-point Likert scale. Item means ranged from 4.60 to 4.77, moderately above the scale midpoint of 4, indicating moderate to high overall fandom engagement among respondents. Item CCAA1 (“Supporting idols represents trendy youth culture”) recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.77$), reflecting widespread normalization of fandom culture as mainstream youth fashion. Standard deviations ranged from 1.888 to 2.039, indicating substantial individual variation in fandom participation intensity across the sample.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Fandom Culture Engagement Scale Items (N=400)

Item Code	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
IWSB1	400	1	7	4.72	1.933
IWSB2	400	1	7	4.70	2.039
IWSB3	400	1	7	4.71	1.888
IWSB4	400	1	7	4.60	1.905
IWSB5	400	1	7	4.73	2.019
OSMC1	400	1	7	4.68	1.962
OSMC2	400	1	7	4.66	1.990
OSMC3	400	1	7	4.70	1.966
OSMC4	400	1	7	4.75	1.941
OSMC5	400	1	7	4.67	1.907
CCAA1	400	1	7	4.77	2.006
CCAA2	400	1	7	4.69	1.930
CCAA3	400	1	7	4.67	1.954
CCAA4	400	1	7	4.70	1.978
CCAA5	400	1	7	4.70	1.918
CP1	400	1	7	4.65	1.951
CP2	400	1	7	4.69	1.969
CP3	400	1	7	4.61	1.988
CP4	400	1	7	4.70	1.985
CP5	400	1	7	4.70	1.985

1.3 Structural Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing Results

The hypothesized dual mediation structural model demonstrated excellent global fit indices: $\chi^2/df=2.31$, CFI=0.96, TLI=0.95, RMSEA=0.059 (90% CI [0.052, 0.066]), SRMR=0.038, all meeting established publication thresholds for SEM model adequacy. Standardized path coefficients, p-values and hypothesis outcomes are summarized in Table 3. All seven proposed hypotheses received full statistical support at $p<0.001$.

Table 3. Standardized Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Test Outcomes

Hypothesized Path	Standardized β	p-value	Hypothesis Result
H1: FCE $\rightarrow$ CA	0.447	<0.001	Supported
H2: FCE $\rightarrow$ SI	0.682	<0.001	Supported
H3: SI $\rightarrow$ CA	0.415	<0.001	Supported
H4: FCE $\rightarrow$ MI	0.745	<0.001	Supported
H5: MI $\rightarrow$ CA	0.332	<0.001	Supported

Table 4 presents bias-corrected bootstrap mediation results (5,000 resamples). Both indirect mediation paths yielded 95% confidence intervals that excluded zero, confirming significant partial mediation effects for social identity and media influence (supporting H6 and H7).

Indirect effect via Social Identity (FCE $\rightarrow$ SI $\rightarrow$ CA): $\beta=0.283$, 95% CI [0.201, 0.371]

Indirect effect via Media Influence (FCE $\rightarrow$ MI $\rightarrow$ CA): $\beta=0.247$, 95% CI [0.175, 0.326]

Total indirect effect: $\beta=0.530$, exceeding the direct effect of $\beta=0.447$

Total standardized association between FCE and CA: $\beta=0.977$ ($p<0.001$)

Table 4. Bootstrap Mediation Effect Decomposition

Effect Type	Standardized Effect Value	95% Bootstrap CI	Significance
Direct Effect: FCE $\rightarrow$ CA	0.447	[0.352, 0.538]	Significant
Indirect Effect 1: FCE $\rightarrow$ SI $\rightarrow$ CA	0.283	[0.201, 0.371]	Significant
Indirect Effect 2: FCE $\rightarrow$ MI $\rightarrow$ CA	0.247	[0.175, 0.326]	Significant
Aggregated Total Indirect Effect	0.530	[0.432, 0.635]	Significant
Total Effect: FCE $\rightarrow$ CA	0.977	[0.892, 1.068]	Significant

1.5 Prudent Interpretation of Effect Magnitudes

The total standardized association value of 0.977 reflects a strong statistical correlation between fandom culture engagement and consumption attitudes within this cross-sectional sample, rather than definitive causal evidence. Holding other covariates constant, a one-standard-deviation increase in fandom engagement is associated with a 0.977-standard-

deviation increase in symbolic, fandom-oriented consumption attitudes. The social identity indirect effect (0.283) slightly exceeds the media influence indirect effect (0.247), indicating that group identity construction exerts somewhat stronger predictive power over consumption attitudes than algorithmic media exposure. This pattern aligns with Chinese collectivist cultural norms that prioritize intra-group recognition and communal symbolic legitimacy, where visible consumption functions as tangible proof of in-group membership. Readers should be reminded that cross-sectional data cannot confirm strict causal sequences or rule out the risk of reverse causality.

2. Qualitative Thematic Analysis Results: Mechanism Elaboration and Mixed-Method Integration

Qualitative interview data validate the dual quantitative mediation pathways while unpacking three interconnected, synergistic mechanisms that shape the links among emotion, community, and technology. Each theme is cross-referenced with its corresponding quantitative pathway and supported by participant interview excerpts, including negative cases.

2.1 Mechanism 1: Identity-Based Consumption as Boundary Work and Status Legitimation (Corresponds to SI Mediation Path)

Within fan communities, consumption functions as ritualized boundary work that distinguishes in-group members from outsiders and formalizes internal hierarchies. For new fan participants, purchasing idol-related goods serves as a threshold for gaining peer acceptance; members who refuse normative spending are labeled free riders and socially marginalized. Long-term senior fans convert accumulated consumption capital into intra-group authority, with extensive collections and high-volume purchases giving their opinions greater weight within the community.

S12 excerpt: “If you never buy the idol’s endorsed products, other fans won’t recognize you as a true supporter– people call you a free rider, and you get ignored in group chats. Buying things is the clearest public signal of loyalty.”

S22 excerpt: “Once you’ve spent enough and become an established senior fan, your recommendations carry weight. New fans will follow your purchasing guidance, and your spending history becomes proof of your standing in the community.”

Negative case S09: “I only watch idol works and never buy peripheral products. I don’t care about others’ comments; my support does not need to rely on consumption.”

Consumption behavior simultaneously fulfills two functions: externally, it marks the boundary between fans and non-fans; internally, it creates stratification that maintains a hierarchical order rooted in visible monetary participation.

2.2 Mechanism 2: Algorithmic Media Shaping as Consumption Normalization (Corresponds to MI Mediation Path)

Social media algorithms construct personalized consumption “gravitational fields” that continuously push idol endorsement ads, fan purchase showcase posts, and sales

challenge content. Platform technical features redefine consumption as a moral duty rather than a voluntary choice: limited-time flash sales, real-time livestream interactions, and virtual try-on simulations trigger instant impulsive spending urges. Text-based community platforms (Weibo, Douban) collectively construct shared narratives that frame purchases as collective group honor, while short video platforms rely on sensory saturation to amplify emotional consumption stimuli. Algorithms narrow users' information horizons, creating filter bubbles that exclude rational price-comparison information and present fan spending as a noble expression of idol support.

S05 excerpt: "Xiaohongshu's algorithm instantly locks onto my favorite idol. Within minutes, my entire feed fills with endorsement ads and fan purchase screenshots. It stops feeling like optional shopping and starts feeling like something I owe my idol."

2.3 Mechanism 3: Emotional-Symbolic Synergistic Amplification of Fan Consumption (Corresponds to Direct FCE→CA Path)

Instant emotional stimuli, such as idol award celebrations and limited-edition peripheral launches, are the direct emotional drivers of fan consumption. However, large-scale, non-rational spending arises from the synergistic overlap of emotional impulse, identity pressure, and algorithmic media framing. During synchronized product sales campaigns, media platforms launch sales-ranking challenges (media path), fan communities recast sales targets as collective honor missions (identity path), and real-time order screenshots trigger emotional urgency (emotional path). These three forces mutually reinforce one another, producing consumption decisions that deviate from utilitarian rationality.

S18 excerpt: "I originally only planned to buy one item, but constant order screenshots popping up in the group chat and rising real-time sales numbers pushed me to buy three. I wanted to show my support, fit into the group, and participate in the collective achievement all at once."

Discussion

The quantitative findings show that engagement with fandom culture significantly predicts the consumption attitudes of Chinese university students through both direct and indirect pathways. The significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.447$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that greater participation in fandom activities is associated with more favorable attitudes toward celebrity-endorsed products, official merchandise, event tickets, and other forms of fandom-oriented consumption. This finding is consistent with Yin (2021), who found that Chinese digital fandom transforms emotional attachment into measurable forms of economic participation and data labor, integrating affection, platform activity, and commercial value. It also corresponds with Dan et al. (2023), who described Chinese fan circles as highly organized communities characterized by collective coordination, emotional bonds, internal divisions of responsibility,

and commercial participation. More importantly, social identity and perceived media influence partially mediated the relationship, with indirect effects of 0.283 and 0.247, respectively.

The combined indirect effect of 0.530 exceeded the direct effect, indicating that fandom engagement shapes consumption attitudes primarily through psychological identification and media-related processes rather than through immediate promotional stimulation alone. The slightly stronger mediation through social identity aligns with Williams and Wang (2025), who showed that Chinese fan clubs construct and manage standards of authentic fan identity through emotional loyalty, financial support, and data-related participation. These findings extend recent research by quantitatively demonstrating that group identification is not only an outcome of fandom participation but also a mechanism through which such participation is translated into consumption attitudes. Nevertheless, because the data were cross-sectional, the total effect should be interpreted as a strong predictive association rather than as definitive evidence of a causal sequence.

The qualitative findings offer contextual explanations for the significant paths identified in the structural model. The first theme shows that fan-related consumption functions as boundary work and status legitimation, as purchasing behavior publicly distinguishes committed members from outsiders and can provide recognition or influence within the fan community. This result closely corresponds with Williams and Wang (2025), who found that Chinese fan organizations actively define authentic membership and evaluate fans according to their emotional, financial, and digital contributions. It is also consistent with Dan et al. (2023), whose analysis revealed that Chinese fan circles contain internal hierarchies, specialized roles, collective expectations, and mechanisms of informal control.

The second theme showed that digital platforms repeatedly expose users to endorsement advertisements, sales rankings, purchase displays, limited-time offers, and emotionally framed messages, thereby increasing the perceived normality and urgency of fan consumption. This finding is supported by Liu et al. (2024), who studied 544 Chinese undergraduates and found that consumption-related sharing on social media can stimulate consumption intention through social comparison and emotional responses. The third theme revealed that emotional attachment, community expectations, and platform stimulation operate synergistically rather than independently. This interpretation aligns with Yin's (2021) concept of emotional capitalism, in which emotional commitment is converted into platform-mediated participation and economic value, and with Saiyinjiya et al. (2025), who showed that Chinese online fandom develops through collaborative content production, emotional bonding, and the affordances of platforms such as Weibo. However, the negative case represented by participant S09 indicates that fandom engagement does not inevitably lead to material consumption. Some fans separate emotional support from purchasing and resist community expectations, suggesting that individual autonomy, financial awareness, self-

control, and critical media literacy may weaken the effects of identity pressure and platform exposure.

The mixed-methods integration offers a more comprehensive explanation of how emotion, community, and technology jointly shape consumption attitudes among Chinese university students. The quantitative model shows that engagement with fandom culture operates through a direct path and two parallel indirect paths, while the qualitative findings clarify the mechanisms underlying those statistical relationships. The social identity pathway works by transforming consumption into visible proof of authentic membership, a resource for peer recognition, and a means of maintaining community boundaries. The media influence pathway works through repeated exposure, algorithmically organized visibility, social comparison, interactive promotion, and the emotional framing of fan-related products.

Emotional attachment connects both pathways by rendering community expectations and platform messages personally meaningful. This integrated explanation aligns with contemporary Chinese fandom research, which increasingly conceptualizes fandom as an interconnected system of affective investment, identity construction, collective organization, digital labor, and platform participation rather than an isolated form of celebrity admiration (Dan et al., 2023; Saiyinjiya et al., 2025; Yin, 2021). At the same time, the present study extends these largely qualitative, case-based studies by providing large-sample evidence that social identity and perceived media influence simultaneously mediate the relationship between fandom engagement and consumption attitudes. The findings therefore indicate that fandom-oriented consumption should not be understood solely as impulsive purchasing or a simple response to celebrity endorsement; instead, it emerges from the interaction of emotional value, group norms, identity authentication, interpersonal comparison, and platform-mediated exposure. This interpretation supports the development of university programs that strengthen critical media literacy, independent identity formation, financial awareness, and the capacity to distinguish emotional support from socially pressured or algorithmically stimulated consumption.

Suggestion

The findings make several theoretical contributions to the study of fandom, social identity, and digital consumption. First, the study extends Social Identity Theory by showing that commercial consumption within digital fan communities' functions not merely as a personal preference or symbolic display, but as a key mechanism through which membership, loyalty, and status are recognized and negotiated. Purchasing official merchandise, joining coordinated spending campaigns, and displaying consumption records can become visible indicators of authentic participation, demonstrating that commercial practices are structurally embedded in the formation of fan identity. Second, the study proposes a dual-process explanation of algorithmic media influence.

Algorithmic immersion continually exposes users to personalized, emotionally appealing, consumption-oriented content, while social trust delegation encourages them to rely on influential fans, community leaders, and highly visible peer opinions when evaluating products and deciding whether to purchase. These processes may vary across platform types, with short-video platforms relying more heavily on sensory stimulation and personalized recommendations, while discussion-based platforms reinforce consumption norms through repeated interaction and group consensus. Third, the findings conceptualize fan consumption as a form of institutionalized emotional and digital labor. Fans contribute not only through purchasing but also through content creation, data promotion, ranking maintenance, and interactive participation, all of which increase the symbolic and commercial value of idols. Digital platforms subsequently convert these activities into measurable indicators, such as sales figures, engagement rankings, and interaction metrics, thereby integrating emotional investment into platform-based commercial systems.

In practical terms, universities should strengthen critical media literacy, consumer education, psychological support, and opportunities for diverse social belonging. Media literacy programs should move beyond basic digital skills to help students understand recommendation algorithms, emotional marketing, scarcity tactics, influencer persuasion, and the commercial use of user-generated data. Students should also be encouraged to compare prices, evaluate actual product value, distinguish artistic appreciation from consumption pressure, and recognize how peer displays and platform design may shape purchasing decisions. Universities can further promote healthier sources of identity and recognition through academic societies, volunteering, sports, creative activities, and community engagement, while counseling services can help students develop independent decision-making, emotional self-regulation, and resistance to group pressure.

At the governance level, digital platforms should improve advertising transparency, provide clearer risk warnings for limited-time and competitive purchasing campaigns, and reduce mechanisms that encourage excessive spending through sales rankings or repeated promotional exposure. Fan organizations and entertainment businesses should also strengthen financial transparency, protect young consumers from coercive fundraising or speculative spending, and place greater emphasis on cultural quality and responsible participation. Any university-based early-support system for students experiencing harmful spending patterns should be voluntary, confidential, proportionate, and consistent with privacy and data-protection principles rather than relying on intrusive financial surveillance.

Limitations and directions for future research

1. Sampling limitation: Non-probability snowball/stratified sampling restricted to Jiangxi University students limits cross-population generalizability to rural youth, vocational school students, and older adult fan cohorts. Future research should adopt nationally

stratified random sampling and cross-cultural comparative designs (Chinese, Korean, Japanese fan ecologies) to test model boundary conditions.

2. Cross-sectional design limitation: Single-wave questionnaire data cannot establish strict causal temporal ordering or capture reciprocal feedback loops (e.g., consumption behavior reinforcing identity over time). Longitudinal three-wave panel surveys or high-frequency experience sampling methods are recommended to track dynamic shifts in fandom engagement, identity, and consumption attitudes.

3. Self-Report Bias Limitation: Questionnaire and interview data rely on self-reported fan behavior, introducing potential social desirability bias and common method variance. Future mixed-methods research could incorporate objective behavioral data (platform interaction records, spending receipts) for triangulation.

4. Variable Boundary Limitation: The current dual mediation model excludes multi-level moderators, including individual-level factors (self-control, family socioeconomic background, materialism) and structural factors (platform regulatory policies, campus media literacy courses). Subsequent research should incorporate moderating variables to identify protective, risk-buffering factors.

5. Functional One-Sidedness Limitation: This study primarily analyzes consumption risks associated with fandom culture; follow-up research should also examine constructive fan community benefits (collaborative cultural inheritance, ethical consumption advocacy, disaster relief crowdfunding) to develop positive youth guidance frameworks rather than focusing solely on risk prevention strategies.

Conclusion

Fandom culture reshapes Chinese college students' consumption attitudes through three interconnected, mutually reinforcing forces: instantaneous emotional-symbolic stimulation, fan community identity and normative construction, and the structuring of the algorithmic media environment. These three dimensions form a complex socio-technical system that reorganizes youth consumption desires, the perceived legitimacy of consumption behaviors, and independent decision-making capacity in digital consumer spaces.

Education departments and higher education institutions should not limit intervention to superficial digital skills training. Systematic, multi-level guidance strategies must be implemented: integrating critical media literacy and rational consumption ethics into formal curricula, developing diversified campus identity-building activities to reduce overdependence on virtual fan communities, and collaborating with social media platforms to adjust algorithmic structural incentives that drive excessive fan spending. Such combined interventions help college students recognize and resist commercial manipulation embedded within fandom culture, while actively interpreting and reshaping youth subcultural forces toward rational, sustainable consumption values.

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