

The Relationship between Commerce and Virtual Singer Fandom as a Subculture: The Case of Luo Tianyi

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Abstract

Subcultures were generally interpreted as featuring traits of innovation, originality, and rebellion and always being in opposition to commerce. However, the rapid development of globalization and new media technologies has seen remarkable changes in the relationship between subcultures and commerce. Now that relationship appears to be one of interdependence and interconnection. Given the global context in which it arose, virtual singers' fandom cannot help but be closely connected with commerce. This research takes the fandom of Luo Tianyi, China's most successful virtual singer, as a case to analyze the relationship between commerce and virtual singers' fandom to interpret the effects commerce could exert on the development of virtual singers.

Keywords: *Subculture, Youth, Commerce, Virtual singer, Fandom, Luo Tianyi*

1. Introduction

The relationship between subcultures and commerce has always been topical in subcultural studies. Many scholars believe that commerce and subcultures are opposites. Under the incorporation of commercial interests, subcultures have shown compromise and retreat, using 'subcultural capital' in exchange for economic capital and social capital. Consequently, subcultures lose resistance and become dangerous in decline and death [1]. John Clarke thinks that the Beatles era is one of the most dramatic examples of the ways what was in origin a sub-culture style became transformed, through increasingly commercial organization and fashionable expropriation, into a pure 'market' or 'consumer' style [2].

However, with the advent of new media, consumer society, and globalization, the relationship between subcultures and commerce has fundamentally changed. The positive role of commerce in the dissemination and development of subcultures has gradually been recognized, and it can even become a driving force for the generation of new subcultures. Virtual singer fandom as a subculture can be seen as a typical case. The virtual singers mentioned in this research refer to those based on Vocaloid. In China, it can be seen that virtual singers' fandom now enjoys a relationship of interconnection and interaction with commerce. This research, based on the subcultural theories, takes the fandom of Chinese virtual singer Luo Tianyi, China's most famous and successful Vocaloid-based virtual singer, as a case to analyse the relationship between Chinese virtual singers' fandom and commerce. The objective is to explain the positive role commerce plays in the generation, dissemination,

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and development of subcultures in the current time and thus promote more distinctive subcultures to bloom.

2. Theoretical base

The earliest user of the ‘subculture’ concept in the scholar field can be seen as Milton M. Gordon, an American sociologist, who retrospect the concept of subculture to ‘sub-division’ that recorded in the *Dictionary of Sociology* in his essay ‘The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application’. He finds that subculture ‘refers to sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual’ [3]. However, the Chicago School had already begun to conduct systematic research on subcultural groups such as immigrants and criminal youths since the 1920s. They interpreted subcultures as forms of deviance and delinquency. Albert K. Cohen mentioned in his book *Delinquency Boys: The Culture of Gang* that the deviant behaviors of young people from the lower class, that is, the formation of their subcultures, is for ‘problem solving’ [4]. The problems here refer to the status frustration of working-class youth in confrontation with the mainstream values represented by the bourgeoisie. So far the research on subcultures had not paid much attention to their relationship with commerce, but focused on class culture.

From the 1970s to the early 1980s, the spotlight shifted to the Birmingham School. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham emerged in 1964. Introducing class, hegemony, symbol and other theories and analytical methods, they contend that ‘subculture’ as a symbol system that constitutes a specific lifestyle of a minority group, which is ‘style’ [4]. Based on the studies of the Birmingham School, John Fiske and others made a clear definition of ‘style’ in *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. Style enjoys ‘how cultural identity and social location are negotiated and expressed styles are related to how certain things are done style is often defined as elusive, an indefinable something that, often implicitly, signifies or expresses recognizable difference or similarity [5]. Additionally, the Birmingham School began to concentrate on commerce impacts on subcultures because the subcultural groups established their styles by leisure and consumption, but they believed that subcultures and commerce are opposites, so subcultures should always be aware of the ‘incorporation’ by commerce.

From the late 1980s, post-subculture theories emerged as an innovation to the Birmingham School. They suggest using ‘neo-tribes’ other than subcultures in the research on youth culture. Andy Bennett put forward ‘neo-tribes’ drawing upon Maffesoli’s concept of tribus (tribes) in ‘Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste’. According to Maffesoli the tribe is ‘without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferable to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form’ [6]. He argues that ‘those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships’ [7], which are neo-tribes. In other words, subcultures manifest in the identities of individuals other than a rebellion against dominant cultures, which become more about consumerism and entertainment and less about resistance and shared identities. Therefore, the post-subculture theory recognizes the positive role of commerce and thus the influences of commerce on subcultures have changed from the initial antagonistic relationship to a positive interaction with each other.

Virtual singers are a new type of cultural form and content born with technological advancement. With fans mainly being the youth, its fandom culture reflects the unique lifestyle, consciousness, habits and values of the young generation, which is a typical subculture. It inherits resistance and also has typical post-subculture characteristics. More importantly, its emergence is closely related to commerce. This study adopts observation method and text analysis methods to analyse the relationship between Luo Tianyi’ fandom and commerce. The author observed the activities, communication, and behaviour of Luo Tianyi’s fans from March 2020 to July 2020 on Bilibili, Weibo, Douban, Baidu Tieba, and other online platforms. And the videos, pictures, reviews, and other texts left by her fans in cyberspace have been analysed to better understand the role of commercial activities in the development of virtual singers’ fandom. Then the author mainly discusses two aspects. The first one is commodity consumption and subcultural styles, which includes fans’ consumption of physical products, as well as media texts and their text reproduction. The second is commercial inclusion and subcultural styles. Commercial inclusion happens not only after the styles emerge, but also from the very beginning. Virtual singers’ fandom can be interacted and interconnected with commerce, and commerce can become the root cause of its emergence.

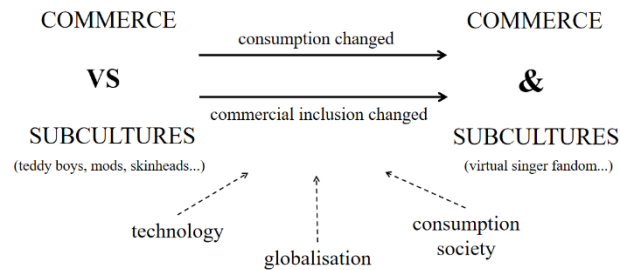


Figure 1. The framework of analysis

3. Case study: Luo Tianyi’s fandom and commerce

In this chapter, the fandom of Luo Tianyi, one of China’s most popular virtual singers, will be taken as a representative case to analyse the changes in the relationship between commerce and virtual singers’ fandom.

3.1. Virtual singer Luo Tianyi

Virtual singers are singers with no physical presence. There are many types of virtual singers, but the ones who have popularised this genre around the globe are Vocaloid virtual singers. Vocaloid is a singing voice synthesiser software that enables users to synthesise ‘singing’ by typing in lyrics and melody. To let the synthesiser make various sounds to meet users’ needs, various voice banks have been released, each of which is sold as ‘a singer in a box’ designed to replace an actual singer. They are often marketed as ‘virtual singers’ [8]. Luo Tianyi was the first Chinese voice bank released in 2012. She is now considered the most successful and only profitable virtual singer in China, and also the first virtual celebrity to become famous. She and her fandom are viewed as a subculture in China but she has started to frequently appear on mainstream media in recent times [9]. From the very beginning of Luo Tianyi’s emergence, this subculture has an intimate connection with commerce.



Figure 2. A picture of Luo Tianyi from Baidu Baike

3.2. Relationship between commerce and Luo Tianyi's fandom

This chapter will discuss how commodity consumption and commercial strategies exert significant influences on the emergence and the formation of the styles of Luo Tianyi's fandom.

3.2.1. Commodity consumption and subcultural styles

The previous subcultures involve resistance, which can be seen as the core reason for the existence of subcultures. And subcultures have the characteristic of 'stylisation'. To resist, subcultures adopt not fierce and extreme methods but moderate negotiation [10]. It is not a direct but an imaginary solution to real-life problems, which manifests 'meaningful and unique' styles in everyday life in aesthetics, leisure, consumption, and so on. As consumerism prevails in recent times, the youth rely more than ever before on commodity consumption to construct their styles and identities. Jean Baudrillard, in his *Consumer Society*, pointed out that the purpose of consumption is not to satisfy needs but to constantly pursue the satisfaction of created and stimulated desires. In other words, what people consume is not the use value of goods and services but their symbolic meaning. 'The use value of commodities has given way to exchange value. People construct and confirm their identity, status, and tastes in the world of signs through consumption' [11].

The consumption of Luo Tianyi fandom demonstrates the characteristics of the 'consumer society'. A fan nicknamed '墨枫--沉迷嘟嘴傲娇洛天依' wrote this post on Weibo (a Chinese microblogging website) on 30 July 2020: 'I'm back! The lemon figure is soooooo beautiful. It's already on display. I thought about putting one in the school but found that there was no place at all'. This fan bought the newly launched figurine of Luo Tianyi and displayed her complete collection of Luo Tianyi's merchandise. The two-shelf bookshelves were full. There are not only official figures but also products endorsed by Luo Tianyi, such as Coca-Cola cans with her image, and a water cup. Such consumption shows that the use value of products related to Luo Tianyi has given way to exchange value. Fans confirm their status and taste in the world of symbols through commodity consumption.

3.2.2. Textual production of Luo Tianyi's fandom

Besides those physical products, Luo Tianyi's fans also consume media texts. As watching or listening to media texts, they spontaneously interpret the texts to meet their own needs and become producers of meaning, pleasure, and social identity, and the new media technology enables the audience to participate in producing, adapting, and disseminating texts. De

Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* discusses how people individualise mass culture by interpreting texts beyond the dominant meaning that has been decided by the elite (such as academics, teachers, and authors), who monopolise control over the readings [12]. Henry Jenkins takes the active audience theory and applies it to fan cultures. He defines textual poaching as 'an impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable' [13]. Media fans 'poach' from their beloved text to create new texts such as fan fiction, folk songs, and manuals/dictionaries to develop further details not originally explained in the text.

Luo Tianyi fans are much more active in producing texts than fans of 'real' singers or celebrities. It can even be said that Luo Tianyi is an idol created by fans. On the one hand, fans created Luo Tianyi's character, which was modified from the work named 'Yayin Gongyu' (雅音宫羽), one of the grand prize-winning works selected by fans at the Vocaloid China Project contest [14]. On the other hand, Luo Tianyi's songs are mainly written by fans through Vocaloid. Furthermore, most of Luo Tianyi's best-known songs are fans' efforts. Therefore, as Luo Tianyi's image, personality, and music come from fans, they have gone beyond being merely fans; they have become Luo Tianyi's creators and nurturers.

Overall, Luo Tianyi's fans express their love and admiration for her by purchasing music albums, merchandise, concerts, and other products. In the meantime, they also consume media texts related to Luo Tianyi. The consumption of media texts now does not stop at viewing but also involves creating. Based on their own social experiences and values, fans produce and reproduce new texts to express ideas, relieve stress and build self-identity and self-satisfaction. Therefore, fan-made texts have become one of the primary styles of Luo Tianyi fandom as a subculture.

3.3. Commercial inclusion of subcultural styles

Subcultures inevitably become co-opted after they establish their own styles. Those conspicuous styles of subcultures ultimately would be co-opted either by main ideologies or by their pervasive use by commercialism. However, many scholars have affirmed the positive influences of commerce and believe that commerce and subcultures have a relationship based on mutual interaction. For example, Angela McRobbie believes that commerce and subcultures are never opposed to each other. 'The entire Punk culture used mass media to promote itself and some shops sold clothes to young people from the very beginning.' [15] Subcultures not only formed styles but also passed subcultural symbols through small-batch production and market circulation, providing jobs for some young people and thus generating funds for subcultural movements.

Some fans of Luo Tianyi who know how to paint have painted portraits of her based on their own creativity and preferences. As the paintings gain recognition and popularity, some may begin to produce merchandise, such as picture albums and desk calendars. Fan-made portrait paintings not only satisfy the fans' desire for self-expression but can also generate income. Some fans even use this as a career or their main means of livelihood. Fans writing songs for Luo Tianyi are no exception and some of them even have become professional music producers.

Moreover, in the current context of new media communication, how commerce incorporates subcultures have undergone profound changes. Commerce has penetrated the source of subcultures and tried to create subculture phenomena to promote or shape new subcultures [16].

On the one hand, products deliberately pre-program the style or characteristics of one subculture to obtain the emotional attachment of a specific youth group to stimulate a new subculture. When Luo Tianyi was launched, the positioning for her was that ‘except for her singing voice, everything about her is still blank. The encounter with you will be the beginning of her story and growth’ [17]. Luo Tianyi is different from other characters because she has no extensive set of character traits. The power to give her core identity has been entrusted to fans, and thus the intention to advocate a subculture of innovation, pioneering, and freedom seems obvious. All of those styles and traits can be credited to Luo Tianyi’s fans, so fans create music for Luo Tianyi by Vocaloid, draw her portraits, buy her works and merchandise, and watch her holographic concerts. Those behaviours and activities all embody distinctive rebellious qualities, thus completing the construction of self-identity.

On the other hand, the rapid advance of new media technology has greatly functioned. The new media technology controlled by enterprises provides a convenient and inexpensive place for marginalised groups and individuals to speak out. Many companies regard young people as their ideal consumers, so they subdivide young people overall in terms of demographics, psychological characteristics, lifestyle, and so on to pre-emptively cultivate specific consumption habits and values of youth, thereby establishing a huge consumer market. The result is that nowadays, more and more young people discover their own identity and values through consumption and the market rather than traditional channels such as families and schools.

To conclude, the relationship between subcultures and commerce can no longer be viewed as resistance through style or ‘inclusion means death’; it is now a field of interdependence, which is a diverse, complex and dynamic system [18]. Some subcultures may be born and shaped by business logic from the very beginning. These situations can all exist simultaneously in the context of globalisation and new media. The relationship between Luo Tianyi’s fandom and commerce is likewise complicated. From its very beginnings to the consumption and production of fans, and the dissemination of its symbols as a subculture, it has been inextricably related to commerce. Moreover, there would be no Luo Tianyi or Luo Tianyi fandom without commercial logic and commodity consumption.

4. Conclusion

This research, based on the subculture theory, analyses the relationship between the virtual singer Luo Tianyi’s fandom and commerce. It cannot be denied that commerce may serve as a booster or shaper of Luo Tianyi’s fandom. Commodity consumption has become a way for fans to express their subcultural styles and construct a self-identity. Moreover, the formation of styles has been embedded in the processes of commercial production, circulation, and communication. Most importantly, commerce can also influence Luo Tianyi’s fandom from the very beginning. In other words, virtual singers are developed by commerce to provide the young people ‘tools’ to create their own subcultures or styles or neo-tribes, which delicately meet their demands to conduct self-identity.

This research affirms the positive and even fundamental role of commerce in the development of virtual singers’ fandom culture through a case study on China’s most successful virtual singer Luo Tianyi. This could provide a new perspective to the research on both virtual and real singers that suggests how to take premium advantage of the power of fans. Moreover, it can also be used as reference material for the study of virtual singers and the subculture of fandom. It is hoped that this research can contribute to the development of virtual singers and the global entertainment industry. For a deeper understanding of the virtual

singer fandom subculture, comparison with the fandom of 'real' celebrities is necessary and this will be carried out in future research.

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