

# Polarization and Rectification: Misbehavior of Giant Panda Fans—Manifestations, Causes, and Governance

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**Abstract:** Fandom culture, as a form of subculture, has garnered widespread attention across various sectors in recent years. The giant panda, a cherished species in China, has seen many individuals rise to online fame recently, propelled by live streaming and short videos, attracting a large number of fans. However, public incidents such as the “Warmth the Panda being hit” controversy have revealed concerns about the encroachment of pathological fandom culture into the “panda community.” Based on participatory observation of the Weibo super topic “Giant Panda He Hua”, this study finds that the frequent occurrence of misbehaviors—such as malicious rumormongering, rival-bashing, and attacking pandas or keepers, and disrupting normal zoo operations—is driven by several factors. These include some fans’ feelings toward giant pandas evolving from an “interest” into an extreme, profound, and constructed mother-child relationship, as well as blind conformity under group pressure and the erosion of group values among fans. Correcting this radicalized phenomenon requires a multi-pronged approach involving the state, platforms, panda institutions, fan communities, and individual fans. The goal is to guide fans to integrate with mainstream culture while expressing their emotions, thereby fostering their self-development through rational engagement with pandas.

**Keywords:** Giant panda; Giant panda fan communities; Fandom; Fan culture; Fandom chaos and governance

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, giant pandas like Ya Ya, He Hua, Meng Lan, Xiang Xiang, and Fu Bao have gone viral, capturing global attention. In 2023, ticket sales at the Chengdu Panda Base increased ninefold year-on-year. However, problematic behaviors within panda fan communities have emerged, including attacks on rival fans, questioning keepers’ professionalism, spreading rumors, and personal attacks on staff.

It is imperative to explore the causes of such misbehavior, guard against fandom radicalization, and propose corrective measures. Currently, academic research rarely focuses on panda fan communities, while studies of

fan culture seldom examine specific groups. The giant panda fan community possesses distinct characteristics; unchecked polarization could have serious consequences for captive pandas.

This study investigates misbehavior among panda fans and its causes. Focusing on the fan community of He Hua on the Weibo super topic “Giant Panda He Hua”, this research draws on social phenomena and literature. It aims to offer governance insights, responding to the Cyberspace Administration’s 2021 “Clear and Bright” campaign against fandom chaos.

## 2. Literature review

Currently, research in communication studies on giant pandas mainly focuses on symbolic interpretation, “panda diplomacy”, and news media coverage. First, from a communication perspective, studies interpret the connotations, meanings, and functions of the giant panda as a symbol. Huang Lin (2013), using the combination of the Chinese panda and Chengdu as an example, systematically discusses the giant panda’s crucial role as a “new cultural envoy” in international exchanges. The study highlights the special and evident function of cultural expression and soft communication, marked by animal symbols, in shaping city brand images <sup>[1]</sup>. Wu Sijia (2013), integrating Eastern and Western cultural self-perceptions, delves into the Chinese cultural genes and metaphors in the American animated film *Kung Fu Panda*. The author argues that the giant panda, as a public symbol, is already familiar to people and plays a significant role in disseminating Chinese culture <sup>[2]</sup>. However, Maan Barua (2020), through an interpretation of the giant panda symbol on the World Wildlife Fund logo—modeled on “Chi Chi”, a panda gifted by China to the former Soviet Union—argues that the giant panda is a spectacular icon that has raised millions of dollars globally. It represents a means and political technique by which humans repurpose biological power as capital <sup>[3]</sup>. Second, research focuses on “panda diplomacy.” Falk Hartig (2013), based on an in-depth analysis of the resurgence of “panda diplomacy” since 2011, argues that it is a political undertaking, beyond all efforts to promote and support animal conservation and biological research. It emphasizes China’s ability to integrate international partners to shape its global image <sup>[4]</sup>. American zoologist George Beals Schaller, in his book *The Last Panda* (1998), discusses the excellent public impact of “panda diplomacy.” He suggests that exhibiting pandas residing in overseas zoos not only captures public attention but also reminds people of the necessity of protecting rare animals and their species <sup>[5]</sup>. However, Rosemary-Claire Collard (2013), analyzing reports on “panda diplomacy” in the context of the new era following the 2012 agreement between China and Canada, and based on mainstream media coverage in the UK and Canada, argues that emphasizing the symbolic meaning of China’s giant pandas can overshadow the substantive impacts on the species’ lives. Finally, some research analyzes differences in narrative, discourse, and rhetoric in news reports themed around giant pandas <sup>[6]</sup>. Lina Benabdallah (2015), comparing news discourse and accompanying images in reports on China-Africa relations from the UK’s *The Economist* and the African edition of *China Daily*, found that Western media often use wild animals like pandas and dragons to metaphorically represent China. Significant differences exist in the rhetoric, metaphors, and illustrations used by Chinese and Western media in their coverage of China-Africa issues <sup>[7]</sup>.

“Fandom” refers to a quasi-organized group bound by cultural ties and emotional discipline, subject to commercial capital intervention <sup>[8]</sup>. It is characterized by distinct organization, significant heterogeneity, prominent commercialism, and a pervasive entertainment orientation. In the fandom era, star-chasing groups exhibit large-scale characteristics in membership and collective actions. Chaos within fandom manifests as alienation, anomie, pan-entertainment, and radicalization <sup>[9]</sup>. Fandom alienation features irrational blind worship,

extreme self-doubt, and intense exclusivity. Fandom anomie refers to deviant behaviors attached to the idol industry, such as compulsive money-squandering, fraudulent traffic, and transgressive star-chasing <sup>[10]</sup>. Fandom pan-entertainment involves retreating into echo chambers and rejecting dissent, imbued with an entertainment-centric tone. Particularly problematic is the proliferation of deifying celebrities and engaging in pathological star-chasing. External causes of fandom chaos include the capital's uncontrolled pursuit of economic interests, distortion of the entertainment industry by "traffic-only" criteria, and interaction between fan groups and platform algorithms, resulting in data dependency and visibility hegemony <sup>[11]</sup>. From the fans' perspective, young people are induced by idols' manufactured personas, immersed in societal entertainment-orientation, coupled with blind obedience and lost value systems. From the idol perspective, promotion by celebrities and fandom organizers, along with idol-economy subjects becoming valuable tools manipulated by capital, further exacerbates disorder <sup>[12]</sup>. The impact on the social economy, mainstream culture, and young people makes governance urgent. Through diversified coordination and cross-domain cooperation, we must innovate online cultural community governance and strengthen cooperation among governance entities in digital supervision, culture, and economy <sup>[13]</sup>. It is also necessary to respect diverse value subcultures in virtual spaces, providing young fans with an inclusive space to establish behavioral norms consistent with real-world society <sup>[14]</sup>.

To date, academic research on giant pandas has rarely focused on their fan communities, while studies of fandom culture often adopt a macro and critical perspective, seldom examining specific fan groups or their underlying subcultures. However, the giant panda fan community possesses unique characteristics; if its unchecked radicalization into extreme fandom occurs, it could cause serious harm to society, particularly to the living environment of captive giant pandas. Therefore, it is necessary to manage and correct this fan community, guiding its members to jointly maintain a healthy and harmonious environment for panda development. In light of this, this study seeks to fill the research gap concerning this specific fan community in the field of journalism and communication, and proposes the following research questions:

Q1: What are the manifestations of misbehavior within the giant panda fan community, and what are the underlying causes?

Q2: How can this obsessive form of love for giant pandas be corrected, how can this phenomenon of extreme fandom be governed, and how can positive interaction among individual fans, fan communities, experts, institutions, and government be achieved to foster a harmonious and stable environment conducive to the healthy development of giant pandas?

### **3. Method**

From July 2022 to January 2024, this study conducted participant observation on the Weibo super topic "Giant Panda He Hua" by systematically recording daily posts and member interactions, focusing on documenting misbehaviors within this fan community.

## **4. Manifestations of misbehavior within the giant panda fan community**

### **4.1. Rival-bashing, rumor-mongering, and comment manipulation among "exclusive fans"**

As fandom culture increasingly permeates the panda community, a subset of "exclusive fans" has emerged. These individuals regard a single giant panda as their "true idol", directing their affection exclusively toward that animal. In extreme cases, this devotion manifests as rejection of all other pandas, earning such fans the label

“toxic exclusive fans.” In the minds of these fans, their chosen panda is the undisputed “top star”—supreme above all others, deserving of the most bamboo shoots, the greatest number of toys, the highest quality care, and maximum online traffic and exposure. Any perceived advantage enjoyed by another panda can trigger intense conflicts among rival fan factions. Some extreme fans resort to rumor-mongering, inter-panda disparagement, and coordinated online comment manipulation to gain recognition and attention for their favored panda.

## **4.2. Rumor-mongering and attacks against keepers and panda institutions**

Concerns arose among some devoted fans of He Hua regarding perceived deficiencies in her environmental enrichment (e.g., toys) compared to other pandas and a relatively low supply of bamboo shoots in spring. These fans voiced complaints and protests via the base’s hotline and mini-program. A rumor even circulated that keeper “Grandpa Tan” had taken He Hua’s bamboo shoots home for cooking. In reality, variations in the type, quantity, and timing of daily food provision are intended to encourage natural behaviors mirroring wild conditions; fixed routines can induce stereotypic behaviors in pandas. However, many fans rejected this explanation, viewing it as an excuse. A zoo official stated, “They quickly escalate from discussion to shouting, and then to verbal abuse. No matter our explanation, they are convinced we are lying.”

## **4.3. Video reposting and sales of self-printed merchandise**

Driven by the substantial economic benefits of the panda intellectual property (IP), many individuals, tempted by profit, engage in unauthorized downloading and reposting of others’ videos or merchandise to attract traffic and generate revenue without the consent of the original creators. For instance, some remove watermarks from painstakingly filmed videos, add sound effects, alter playback speeds, or edit and splice multiple clips together, superficially processing them before posting on social media platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu as their own content to drive traffic. Similarly, certain Taobao sellers reproduce hand-drawn comic illustrations of He Hua into phone cases for sale without obtaining authorization from the original artists. These actions constitute acts of plagiarism and copyright infringement.

# **5. Causes of misbehavior within the giant panda fan community**

## **5.1. Fans’ emotional expressions in the context of parasocial relationships**

In the face of a fast-paced society, individuals seek to reconnect with an unfettered “childlike state” through their engagement with giant pandas, deriving a sense of healing and happiness from it. Unlike media personalities on television, giant pandas are real beings, and the internet offers greater advantages than television for relationship formation. Consequently, fans’ emotional attachment to pandas tends to be more intense, and their connections more enduring and stable. For some fans, however, their feelings toward giant pandas have evolved from a mere “interest” into a profound, constructed mother-child relationship. These individuals come to regard their beloved panda as a “baby”—that is, a spiritual “child.”

## **5.2. Fans’ blind conformity under group pressure**

As highly disciplined organizations, fandoms are characterized by their closed nature, with each fan community enforcing strict membership requirements. This not only attracts highly engaged, high-quality fans but also strengthens individuals’ collective sense of honor within the group. Through the process of fighting side by side, fans deepen their emotional bonds, increasingly identifying with their fan identity and affirming collective action.

However, the greater the influence of core fans, the stronger their power to suppress lower-tier fans. Core fans hold the authority to establish fandom rules; any violation invites suppression from the entire community.

### **5.3. Erosion of group values amidst intense obsession**

Within fandoms, young individuals experience a heightened sense of being needed, as their every action garners support from others. When conflicts arise with other fan communities, members may derive a sense of satisfaction from collective cyberbullying. For some extreme fans, pandas serve both as objects of protection and as props or symbols used to rationalize the outpouring of emotions. They express their affection for pandas by constructing common enemies and engaging in battles against them.

## **6. Governance paths for misbehavior within the giant panda fan community**

### **6.1. The state: Strengthening comprehensive online governance and optimizing the content regulation system**

Relevant laws and regulations should be continuously refined to clearly define acts that disrupt online order. Enforcement agencies must strictly apply these laws, coordinating both joint and independent enforcement actions to rigorously combat gray interest chains—such as data fraud, malicious reporting, and improper marketing—on internet platforms. Legal judgments should establish norms, and these norms should, in turn, promote effective governance. Relevant authorities should also play a guiding role by collaborating with media outlets to vigorously promote proper internet usage concepts and disseminate media literacy knowledge, thereby attracting the attention of fan communities. For instance, “internet courts” should enhance the openness of their hearings to provide clear legal guidance.

### **6.2. Platforms: Taking targeted measures to contribute to fandom governance**

Platforms should abandon the “traffic-first” value orientation and establish a correct understanding of revenue generation. They should also leverage emerging technologies to crack down on unethical marketing accounts and promptly suspend or permanently ban accounts that have caused severe negative impacts, thereby effectively regulating fandom anomie. In designing relevant algorithmic mechanisms, platforms should give greater consideration to mainstream social values and strictly combat behaviors violating public order and good customs, such as mutual attacks and insults, and compulsive spending for ranking.

### **6.3. Panda institutions: Balancing commercial interests with social responsibilities to foster a healthy fandom ecosystem**

Panda institutions can leverage their official accounts to provide commentary during slow and mobile live broadcasts, engaging in interactive communication with fans. They can also produce interview programs and educational videos addressing concerns commonly raised by panda fans. When fans on-site identify health issues with pandas or witness inappropriate behaviors such as unauthorized feeding and promptly report these to keepers or institution officials, the institutions should provide timely feedback and take appropriate action. Furthermore, concerning certain extreme fans, panda institutions should offer counsel—for instance, by collaborating with science communicators and influential panda fans to promptly disseminate accurate information and debunk rumors, thereby soothing fan emotions and striving to cultivate a healthy fandom ecosystem.

#### **6.4. Key opinion leaders: Strengthening ethical guidance**

The internal operation of the giant panda fan community exhibits a certain degree of hierarchy, distinguishing between core fans and ordinary fans based on their access to information and the time and effort invested. Core fans possess certain managerial authority, enabling them to voice opinions within the group and shape the direction of public discourse. Opinion leaders within this organizational structure are the direct points of contact for the fan community and have access to extensive information sources and channels of influence. Therefore, these internal opinion leaders should enhance their level of self-discipline and establish positive value orientations.

#### **6.5. Self-regulating users: Promoting media literacy education and panda conservation knowledge, and reinforcing value orientation**

Establish a specialized system for media literacy education and actively explore practical approaches to its implementation. Mainstream values should fully leverage their appeal to young people, guiding them to actively participate in the construction and dissemination of these values. Young users can engage in lectures and science outreach activities—organized online or offline by public welfare organizations, research institutions, and media outlets—to support wildlife and environmental conservation through their own actions.

### **7. Concluding remarks**

Giant pandas are national treasures, but they are not—and must not become—the “mama’s boys” of their fans’ imaginations. They serve as cultural icons, yet they cannot be reduced to the status of “idolized celebrities who can do no wrong.” Some panda enthusiasts must not replicate the irrational, extreme behaviors of fandom culture in their pursuit of pandas. Such conduct not only unfairly targets dedicated professionals and hinders conservation efforts but also undermines the pandas’ own capacity for survival. As a rare species, giant pandas undoubtedly require special care; however, excessive concern and the deliberate creation of a “sterile” or “zero-harm” environment may ultimately impair their resilience. There is a fine line between care and overindulgence—only scientifically grounded guardianship ensures their healthy development.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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