The Individual Identity Construction of Chinese Fans of American TV Series in Social Media

Ruohua Zhang, Mohd Nizam Osman, Hani Salwah Binti Yaakup, Feroz De Costa

Department of Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 434000 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: coriander023@gmail.com

Abstract
With the progress of globalization and the penetration of digital media into people's daily lives, this has brought significant convenience to the dissemination of American TV series in China. At the same time, it has also brought various influences to the Chinese audience, especially for fans of American TV series. These TV series offer rich imaginative resources for their fans. Simultaneously, the internet and social media provide fans with additional channels and spaces to construct new fans identities. It is highly worthwhile to pay attention to how Chinese fans of American TV series creatively utilize these resources on the online platform, and how they construct their identity as fans through practical activities. Therefore, in order to better understand the construction of fan identity, this research focuses on fans of American TV series on the Chinese social media platform Baidu Post Bar. It combines the looking glass self theory and employs virtual ethnography for online participatory observation. The aim is to explore how these fans construct their personal identities through their practices on social platforms. This research found that the construction of individual identities among fans is a complex cultural behavior. They build their identities through a combination of practical activities, personalized text consumption, and the amalgamation of ideal self and peer evaluation. The results of this study also provided a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between media usage and audience identification.
Keywords: American TV Series Fans, Identity Construction, Social Media, China

Introduction
Modern society is a media-driven society where everyone perceives the world through the media. In the current information age, the use of digital technology is ubiquitous, and an unstoppable trend is impacting various fields. Digital media has become an essential tool and primary content of human existence. From traditional media represented by newspapers and television to digital media dominated by the internet, information products such as mobile phones, computers, social media websites, and various communication devices continue to innovate. This is not only a technological revolution dominated by information and

communication but also a social revolution. This digitalization and informatization have brought about a new mode of existence and communication for people, allowing them to engage and interact in virtual spaces through internet technology. It is not just a recreation of the social material foundation; more importantly, it influences the shaping of individuals and gradually changes people's ways of thinking about the world, the forms of communities, and our self-identity (Tan, 1998).

With the rapid development of digital technology and globalization, the crisis of identity has become one of the important factors in discussions about modern society. The rise of the internet has eroded the influence of traditional factors such as geography or religion that served as the basis for identity. Digital media has brought people from different ethnicities and cultures into the same arena, competing for discourse power. In this process, cultures and values of various ethnic groups can collide and be reconstructed. At the same time, modern identity has become more complex with the deepening of globalization, exhibiting characteristics such as fluidity, complexity, and fragmentation. As Woodward suggests, studying issues of identity can help us understand how people perceive changes in society, culture, and economics, as it encompasses various aspects of society and politics. Therefore, discussing the construction of identity through media is essential.

In traditional contexts, individuals actively maintain their self-identity through religion, rituals, customs, etc. (Carr et al., 2018), and self-identity during this time is primarily upheld by the stability of an individual's social status within a group (Tian, 2000). In this scenario, an individual's social status becomes their identity, and this concept of identity is also formed through an individual's social interactions with others. This brings forth the questions of "Who am I？". However, in the virtual society created by the internet, the fluidity and complexity of identity have given rise to new challenges for both of these aspects.

McLuhan (1964, cited in He, 2011) argued that "media is an extension of the human body". The perception of self by the subject is initially manifested through the perception of the body, and subsequently, people begin to use media to enhance their perception of themselves and the external world. The rise of the internet has greatly accelerated the process of mediaization in society, with media infiltrating all aspects of social life. People's everyday lives are invariably enveloped by media, and the virtual spaces constructed by the internet gradually overlap with the real world. In a media society, individuals have long been enveloped by a constantly changing cultural landscape, and diverse values are enveloped within the waves of information gathered from various sources, constantly impacting and changing the lives of each individual in modern society. In this diverse culture, the desire to reshape a consistent and stable identity has become a fantasy, and the subject no longer possesses unity and consistency (Kellner, 2013).

In the virtual world, most people choose aliases or nicknames to conceal their true identities, reshaping one or multiple aspects of themselves online, and then switching between and testing multiple identities. On the other hand, self-identity should gradually develop in relation to others, and the internet allows people to transcend the constraints of time and place. It enables individuals to explore self-identity with others in this virtual community, enhancing the effects of fantasy interaction and having an impact on individual psychology (Tan, 1998).

In the world shaped by media, "fandom" communities have emerged as an important component. In this realm of virtual interaction and emotional needs, digital media technology and internet culture have brought people together, forming new online communities of individuals with shared interests (Li, 2017). The media not only provides them with a stage for

performance but also encompasses all the media they discuss and describe. Media brings forth new identities and desires, allowing people to redefine themselves without the limitations of real-world rules. To some extent, fan culture represents the construction and creation of new identities in the media-shaped world. In other words, the development and application of communication technology have facilitated the emergence of a new phenomenon of "non-territorial social groups" , which are temporary alliances based on specific cultural, religious, gender, or racial identities. Media serves as a resource and means for them to construct self-identity, pursue their own interests, and shape role models. Audiences living in the online world are increasingly accustomed to perceiving interpersonal relationships and identities in new ways, where meaning becomes less stable. People can freely construct their fluid identities in the online space .

Meanwhile, Baudrillard argues that consumption is a primary factor in shaping and representing people's cultural and self-identities. Consumption expression shapes individuals' self-imaginations, thereby constituting important elements of self-identity. In subcultures, symbolic consumption becomes a prop through which people showcase their unique spiritual world and personal image. Compared to traditional societies, Yao (2006) suggested that in modern society, consumption is seen as a means to fulfill dreams. In other words, the essence of consumption lies not only in the selection, purchase, and use of goods but also in the product of a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. Therefore, people seek self-identity through intentional symbolic consumption of this nature.

It must be noted that in consumer culture, the media also plays a significant role. Li (2017) argues that media entertainment, through its audiovisual and spectacular nature, always aims to create a pleasant mood for the audience and can induce audience members to identify with certain ideas and positions. When media and consumption are combined, they can generate thoughts and actions that align with existing values, thoughts, and practices.

It is not difficult to notice that the significance of modern consumption lies not only in providing practical value of goods but also in replacing emotional experiences and psychological sensations, with fan economy being an important component of it. The participatory culture of fans transforms the experience of media consumption into new texts and even generates new cultures and communities (Jenkins, 2013). In the past, fans might modify and replicate the texts they enjoyed. However, with the development of the Internet, fans are no longer passive consumers but have become "prosumers" who intertwine the roles of information producers and consumers, and they proudly exhibit this identity. Western researchers often refer to fans as "over-consumers" (William, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that contemporary media consumption is characterized by fluidity and mediacy, leading to an ongoing process of identity construction and reconstruction. Therefore, in this process, individuals define themselves through the consumption culture on the internet, and it may not be achieved all at once. On the contrary, for different groups, individuals may engage in collective identification and self-categorization based on different circumstances. This diverse and multi-directional process of identity construction is prevalent in everyday life. In the early 21st century, emerging new media seemed to indicate a diminishing role for television in the lives of audiences. However, in recent times, television and the internet have become a highly successful example of media convergence, as both media activate audiences and create a more participatory television culture (Nikunen, 2007). For instance, the capability of video-sharing technologies like YouTube allows individuals to easily share their favorite shows, and as a result, the distribution and consumption of television programs are no longer bound by national borders (Lobato, 2018; Mikos, 2016; Thornton, 2010). Driven by

streaming technologies, foreign television programs have seen a significant increase in television viewership, and the formation of fan cultures consuming international television programs online has become increasingly common.

In 1980, China introduced its first American TV series, and by 2004, Chinese online video companies began purchasing streaming licenses from American television companies. Meanwhile, with the development of the internet, online viewing allowed Chinese audiences to choose programs according to their own schedules and preferences. American TV series had become the fastest-growing television category in China. From 2011 to 2012, the viewership of American TV series increased by approximately 400% (Feng&Wang, 2014). The United States produces approximately 200 new television series each year, and in 2014, Chinese video websites imported nearly half of them. This made American TV series one of the most popular imported television programs in China. Some Chinese scholars argue that American TV series have become one of the most influential American cultural products in China (Huang, 2015; Ma, 2013; Yang, 2015). American TV series have become a cultural symbol on Chinese online video platforms. In China, based on the number of registered members on major American TV series fan forums, the number of American TV series viewers in China exceeds 24 million (Chen, 2013). Additionally, an increasing number of Chinese internet users show potential for future growth in American TV series viewership, indicating that a significant proportion of fans will be devoted to following American TV series.

Therefore, whether it is in terms of social identity belonging or personal identity established through consumption, fans can serve as a good starting point, providing avenues for individuals to continuously improve themselves and establish a sense of identity. This study will start with American TV series fans and explore how individual fans construct their self-identity through practices in virtual communities of online media. In the virtual online world, individuals' understanding of self-image and identity is largely achieved through the virtual world created by various symbols, making the issue of identity more complex, and media plays an important role in identity construction. Taking the practices of American TV series fans as an example and using it as a starting point, this study provides new insights into how individuals continuously improve themselves, construct self-identity through online communities, and has significant practical implications.

Literature Review
Identity
Identity is a real existence, as well as an imaginary existence, composed of the representation of psychological forms and the essence of logical unity (Thomas, 1989). Real existence is related to language, age, geographic location, gender, race, social movement, etc., and imaginary existence is related to social belonging, psychological cognition, etc. Some researchers regard the identity perception formed by memory or imagination as the main way of identification (Verne, 1981).

The constructivist approach shifts the focus from an individual's inner consciousness of identity to the interpersonal construction of identity. In postmodern approaches, identity is seen as a "patchwork" of different roles in a person's life. For example, "I am a student, I am an actor." Identity is conveyed in various ways. Goffman (1967) concept of "face-work" suggested that people do not necessarily have to reveal their true and innermost selves to others, instead, they can use a mask as a tool for social interaction. In the virtual world created by the internet, people find it easier and more convenient to construct their self-identities, creating multiple identities through language, symbols, and so on (Kersten & Lotze, 2020).

Therefore, identity is not a fixed and unchanging entity but rather something that is constantly reshaped through new cultural practices, it is an ongoing process.

Identity and Internet

Edensor (2002) was among the early explorers of how people, in the context of the internet, engage in processes of self-exploration and seek identity, reflecting the postmodern characteristics of diversity and fragmentation in self-identity. Mckenna & Bargh (1998), through their examination of the online behavior of adolescents, argued that the internet serves as an important means for them to engage in multidimensional self-reconstruction and seek self-identity. Building upon this, Yurchisin & Johnson (2000) further elaborated that individuals have the ability to access online spaces, allowing them not only to reconstruct their identities but also to reshape their real-life identities. This form of identity reconstruction through the internet can influence behaviors and emotions in the real world. Kersten & Lotze (2020), in their research, focused on how individuals use language to construct their self-identities in the online sphere. They emphasized that on the internet, people construct their identities and images through the use of language, symbols, and establish connections with belonging groups. Smutradontri & Gadavanij (2020) also endorsed this view, suggesting that individuals adopt different identities when they engage in social activities, indicating that identity can be constructed through discourse.

With the advancement of internet technology, online communities have emerged as a new form of community established through online media. These online communities connect individuals with common interests, hobbies, and values, forming a network of like-minded individuals who share information, exchange ideas, and stay in close contact with each other. Online communities provide these fan groups with a vast and liberating space and platform Bury (2003), allowing individuals to use screen space to showcase themselves, their knowledge, and their work (Haythornthwaite, 2009).

American TV Series Fans Study in China

In China, the research on fans is relatively late. It began to take shape in 2005 with "Super Girls" (a popular singing competition hosted by China's Hunan TV since 2004). After more than ten years of development, domestic fan studies have sorted out theories on western fans to empirical studies on Chinese fans groups. After sorting out and summarizing, the current researches on fans in China could be roughly divided into three main directions: Firstly, from the perspective of the audience, starting from the psychological motivations of fans, to explore the interaction between fans and media texts and the reproduction of culture. In general, this kind of research uses virtual communities as research sites to analyze the impact of the Internet on fan groups (Zhang, 2010; Chen, 2014; Fang, 2015). Secondly, from the perspective of sociology, fan community is regarded as a part of subculture, and the characteristics of fan culture and the communication mechanism of cultural community are mainly described (Huang & Luo, 2006; Sun, 2006; Cai, 2014). The last category is to investigate a series of economic and cultural phenomena caused by fan groups from the perspective of consumption (Liu & Wang, 2011; Yang, 2012).

It is precisely the American TV series carrying different cultures that have been introduced to China, and their cultural differences and exotic customs have attracted a large number of Chinese audiences, as the result, fans and fans groups of American TV series gradually formed in China. With the development of the Internet and the innovation of new media technology, it also brings opportunities and challenges for the development and change of fans groups.

The main form of communication of American TV series in China still relies on network communication. Therefore, fans of American TV series gradually gather together on the Internet, and fans establish virtual groups on the Internet for a series of activities such as obtaining information more efficiently. It started by sharing information about resources through Chinese social software such as QQ and Sina. When American TV series attracts more and more people's attention, the simple communication carrier has been unable to adapt to the change of group function diversification. Therefore, under the call of some fans, fan members continue to establish new virtual carriers on the Internet, such as BBS, post, and other places that can accommodate more groups for interaction and communication, and form some network communities. At the same time, it is precisely because of the formation and development of these online communities that they provide a place for fans to communicate and interact, which has created the current online fans groups of American TV series.

In China, when the dissemination and influence of American TV series are getting stronger and stronger, many scholars have done a lot of research on the culture contained in American TV series, as well as cultural communication, cross-cultural communication and communication methods. In database paper retrieval websites such as the Chinese Journal Full-text Database (CJFD), when searching for key terms related to American TV series, such as American TV series, American TV series network communication, etc., the searched journal articles are rich in content. After summarizing, the current in-depth discussions on American TV series in mainland China can be roughly divided into the following categories:

The first category is the research on the production, operation and marketing characteristics of American TV series. It is mainly about the in-depth study of the industrialization of American TV series and its marketing strategies. In the study of Suo (2018), Game of Thrones, an American TV series with the highest audience rating in China, was selected as an example to analyze the reasons for its popularity in China from the perspectives of its communication ideas and communication techniques.

The second category is the study of American TV series texts. In China, much of this research started with popular TV series, like Friends, Prison Break and Desperate Housewives. Among a large number of domestic articles on American TV series texts, Lv (2011) "Hope in Despair--Comment on American TV series 'Desperate Housewives'" is very special. It mainly starts an in-depth analysis of American TV series from "Desperate Housewives" , frequently quotes the plot and dialogue in the TV series , and makes textual analysis from both the narrative method and the plot content.

The third category is the research on the cross-cultural communication of American TV series. Zhou (2019) made a very comprehensive and detailed analysis of cross-cultural communication and its influence in "Research on the Cross-cultural Communication of American TV series in China" . The fourth category is American TV series audience research. Lin (2013), in "Analysis of the Audience of American TV series in China" , focused on analyzing the types of audiences and viewing situations of American TV series in China, and also applied the "use and satisfaction theory" , pointing out the different needs of fans to watch American TV series. At the end of the study, the impact of American TV series on the audience's daily life and cultural spirit was mentioned, but it only mentioned the general impact of the collision between American culture from American TV series and Chinese local culture, and did not analyze dialectically the situation after the audience's acceptance.

Fans, Identity and Internet

In fan studies, fan identity is a key focus. Some fans consider their fan identity as one of the distinguishing markers that sets them apart from the general audience. Booth (2010) mentioned in their research that regardless of whose fans they are, fan identity can be seen as a part of one's self-identity. Sandvoss (2005) similarly supported this view, suggesting that fan identities formed through internet-mediated interactions can be considered a part of fans' self-awareness. Media also plays a crucial role in the study of fan identity (Booth, 2010).

Fans engage in self-reflection and imagination, often portraying themselves in an "ideal" manner, influencing their "real" selves through exploration, performance, and affirmation (He et al., 2021). These methods are further facilitated in the online realm.

Online American TV series fans represent a unique form of social organization rooted in online communities. They generate a strong sense of collective emotion through participatory interactions, forming group consciousness, and establishing a group identity (Sugihartati, 2017). People can forget and cast aside various norms and constraints of their real-life social roles, following their interests and desires to engage in proactive self-presentation and online interactions. They can even shape a brand-new "self" and construct an entirely new network of interpersonal relationships (Cai, 2014). Tan (2012) took the online forum of "Desperate Housewives" as the research field, and put fans in the group for investigation. However, it neglects the sociological impact on the group, so it falls into a relatively isolated research. Jian (2020) used the example of the online fan community of the American TV series "Friends" to study the motivations behind fan behaviors on social media. Within fan communities, emotional needs of fans are primarily met through engaging in practical activities and interactions. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that there is a part of research on fans and their groups in China. But most research stops at the level of theoretical integration and feature description. Then, there is still lots of space for discussion in the construction of fan self-identity and psychological analysis.

Methodology

According to the definition of Hine (2000), it is an ethnographic study on the network and the use of the network in a virtual environment. In other words, virtual ethnography is the process of constructing ethnography in a virtual online environment using different data collection tools. Some scholars have directly defined it as network observation, a qualitative method to study the information exchange of members in online communities (Kozinet, 2006). Thus, it takes the virtual environment of the network as the main research background and environment, and uses the expression platform and interactive tools of the Internet to collect data, so as to explore and explain the Internet and related social and cultural phenomena.

Participation and observation are the core of ethnographic methods, so virtual ethnography is no exception. It also means that researchers should be intrusive and long-term participants in the culture or community with the observed person, and then attempt to understand and convey reality through in-depth, detailed, and cultural descriptions and explanations (Kozinets, 2010).

One of the research locations in this study is "American TV series post" of Baidu Post Bar. First of all, "American TV series post" has 2.42 million followers and more than 13.03 million posts. The profile of Baidu Post Bar is "The largest gathering place for fans of American TV series in China" . Therefore, researchers will use this Baidu Post bar as the first choice for participatory observation and searching for interviewees.

At the same time, in order to make the research results more rich. In this study, the researcher will select the top three different types of American TV series from Douban's "The Top 10

Most Popular American TV Series in China in 2023" , and find the corresponding Post in Baidu Post Bar for analysis. Douban is China's main comment-based social network (Yecies et al., 2016). This is a Chinese social networking site (SNS), which is dedicated to setting up discussion groups to share their views on movies and TV series. Compared with other websites, this website not only uses the membership system to comment, but also invites professionals from the film and television industry to participate. Therefore, the ranking of American TV series on this website is more credible and authoritative.

Researchers will select the top three most popular American TV series through judgment sampling, the top three American TV series are Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad and Shameless , then find their corresponding fan communities in Baidu post bar for research. The final research locations are determined to be four fans communities in Baidu Post bar, which are "American TV series" , "Game of Thrones" , "Breaking Bad" and "Shameless" . In this way, the research on fans of different types of American TV series are also easy to compare their commonalities and differences. The reason is that judgment sampling is a method based on researcher own judgment. The advantage is that the samples are selected according to the needs of the investigators, so it better meets the special investigation needs.

Therefore, researchers will register on Baidu Post Bar with "Carol" as the ID name, and pay attention to the post bar about "American TV series" , "Game of Thrones" , "Breaking Bad" and "Shameless" . Browse related posts from time to time, record the discussions and narration of fans, and pay attention to the social interaction and cultural production of fans in the virtual community. Some electronic texts in this research have become basic research and analysis data.

Cooley explained the theory of "Looking-glass self" . In the construction of self-identity, the self is formed in the imagination established between the individual and own body. At the same time, the influence of others should not be overlooked and run through the whole process. Cooley pointed out that "if other individuals and groups do not exist, then 'I' , as a product of relative relations, naturally cannot be perceived" (Li & Liu, 2018). Self-construction can only be completed when self-imagination and other people's evaluation are nearly unified. Therefore, this study will also use the looking-glass self theory to better understand how fans of American TV series construct their self-identity in the post bar through practice.

Result and Discussion
Self-Discovery and Identification as an "Individual Fan": Constructing the Self in Practical Activities
Establishing Virtual Identity: Personalized Design
On the virtual stage of the internet, individuals should first create their virtual identities before engaging in social interactions and identity construction. Initially, individuals need to provide their personal information, which may be consistent with reality or entirely opposite to it. These pieces of personal information sketch the individual's virtual image and represent the initial presentation of their virtual persona.

In the case of Baidu Post Bar, creating an ID is the first step in setting up a virtual identity. Since users can easily join and participate in communities that align with their interests, usernames and profile pictures on Baidu Post Bar reflect a diverse range of forms. Through observation, it has been noticed that fans of American TV series often choose their favorite TV series characters as their ID avatars. They also use interesting character names as their usernames, which is particularly prominent in specific categories of communities.

The Fan with the username "The Walking Dead OLO" in the American TV series Post Bar appears to be an early member of the fan community, judging by the selection of their ID image, the establishment of their name, and the year of registration on the Post Bar. Despite being a fan in the American TV series Post Bar, it is evident from the choice of avatar and username that this fan's ultimate love is "The Walking Dead" . Upon further exploration of this fan's follow list, in addition to following the American TV series forum, they also follow many other TV series forums such as "The Walking Dead" , "Game of Thrones" , "Friends" and many others.

In the realm of the internet as a medium, individuals can temporarily break free from the fixed meanings and rules imposed by social constraints. They need only adhere to the behavioral norms within their respective online communities, and in comparison to the real world, the internet offers a degree of liberation. Furthermore, the internet provides fans with a greater and more extensive space for self-expression and interaction, which can be attributed to increased equality and diversity. People can temporarily escape the constraints of physical and social characteristics such as race, skin color, gender, language, age, and appearance, gaining a greater right to engage in equal and diverse interactions. At the same time, the choice of usernames and profile pictures not only facilitates the expression of one's identity on the internet but also increases an individual's sense of belonging to a specific online community. The selection of profile pictures strengthens the relationship between users and their preferred subjects (Chen, 2020; Kersten & Lotze, 2020).

Therefore, the characteristics of online media not only enhance and facilitate fans' individual identity identification but also provide the foundation for individuals to extend themselves in the online realm. Through unique digital ID accounts, fans can reconstruct their idealized new identities and achieve new identity constructions.

Information Dissemination and Communication
Discuss Doubts
In the observed American TV series Post Bar, some posts that seek responses from other fans often begin with a label, such as "Original" , "Resources" , "Discussion" , "Help" and so on . The purpose of this is to make their posted content more easily identifiable from the title and draw attention. Among this series of posts, the most common category is "Discussion" . When it comes to the content of American TV series or questions that arise during the viewing process, initiating a discussion among the community members proves to be an effective way to quickly gather responses from other members. This way, everyone can freely express their opinions and engage in discussion.

Creative Production
Creative production can be seen as a distinguishing characteristic of fans that sets them apart from regular television audiences. This is because if individuals do not have a deep passion for and involvement in TV series, "creative production" is generally not put into practice. Therefore, fans are not mere passive consumers. In addition to having a strong ability to identify and critique, they also possess a certain level of production capability.

Fans not only consume the TV series and its associated products but also engage in innovative practices like reinterpreting or rewriting text and videos of the TV series. They create new

derivative works and a range of related innovative products, thus generating a collection of distinctive cultural products with unique identifiers. In this series of consumption and production activities, each individual Post Bar has specific and well-defined roles and divisions of labor, such as translation teams and content sharing teams. The Post Bar operates in an orderly manner, with each group or team diligently fulfilling its responsibilities to maintain the development of Post Bar and obtain various types of resources.

The productivity of fans is further reflected in the enthusiastic use of emojis and stickers. Emojis and stickers are extremely prevalent on media platforms. There is no doubt that emojis and stickers are products of the new media era. Nowadays, they go beyond simple expressions of internet language. Fans have the right to use technology to customize and reinterpret internet emojis. The communication style of fans has evolved beyond the limitations of text-based methods, shifting towards a primarily dynamic format of "images + text" through the use of emojis and stickers. Different types of emojis and stickers symbolize the personalized expressive needs of fans (Figure 4.1).
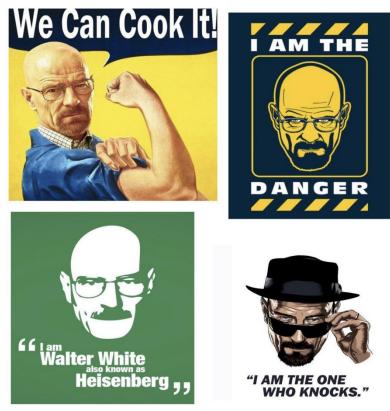

Figure 4.1: From Breaking Bad Post Bar

Construct Self-identity through Text Consumption: Consumption from Symbols
In the modern consumerist economy, culture and economics are inseparable. Fans are essentially a form of consumption, based on personal emotions. In the process of consumption, fans are able to construct their self-identity, and the two are mutually influential.

Despite the gradual transition from the era of traditional media to the internet age, the methods of communication and the spaces for interaction among fans have changed. However, the emotional attachment of American TV series fans to their series and their

consumption practices related to American TV series have not seen significant changes. In the traditional media era, fans primarily engaged in consumption activities through traditional media channels, for instance, purchasing physical media related to American TV series, like magazines or CDs. At the same time, during the traditional media era, due to the underdevelopment of new media, interactions between fans were not as convenient, and it was more challenging to find like-minded communities. In summary, during this period, fan consumption tendencies were more inclined towards the consumption of "physical items".

However, in the internet age, due to the convenience of the internet and the emergence of online communities, it has become easier for fans to connect with like-minded individuals, providing a more diverse range of choices for fan consumption. Besides physical items like magazines and CDs, fans have gradually shifted their attention to "online" digital products, such as text documents, e-magazines, and online interactions. This shift is more towards "symbolic consumption". Therefore, fans have moved from "item consumption" to "symbolic consumption or data consumption".

In the Game of Thrones Post Bar, a fan showcased posters, books, stickers, and other merchandise related to Game of Thrones purchased in 2015, expressing overflowing affection for the products. In the replies, many other fans expressed envy, "Wow, so envious", "Are these genuine products purchased through a proxy? They must be expensive" and "Haha, I also have many similar items." This indicates a strong desire among fans to acquire physical merchandise related to the series, especially considering the limited accessibility of such products in the early stages of their popularity in China. Fans want to acquire peripheral products, and the majority of consumer goods are physical items.

The power of dissemination and production within online communities provides a fertile ground for fan consumption. The development of new media technologies has increased the channels for obtaining videos and images while reducing acquisition costs, expanding the ways fans access information. With the emergence of fan-created graphics, text, and videos, transforming original images and items into multimedia online symbols, fans have gradually shifted their focus from offline physical consumption to a greater emphasis on online symbolic consumption. Turner (1997) used the term "celebrity commodity" to describe how the fan economy operates. On the one hand, entertainment companies produce related products for profit motives. On the other hand, fans choose to purchase such products based on emotional connections. The value of celebrity commodities lies more in their symbolic and emotional value rather than their utility. This is precisely the psychology that drives American TV series fans to be enamored with peripheral products associated with the series.

Therefore, in the consumer culture, the aesthetic pleasure consumers derive is boundless, as the public continuously consumes to satisfy their desires for happiness. Eventually, consumption becomes a means for people to channel their emotions and release their feelings. Jenkins (1992) in "Textual Poachers", highlighted that fans are active and engaged consumers. When fans purchase idol-related merchandise, their primary concern is not the utility of the product but the additional meaning and emotional desire that it carries. Many fans use the purchase of American TV series-related merchandise to affirm their fan identity while simultaneously satisfying their fantasies by obtaining items similar to those used by the characters in the series.

Personality Consumption and Self-Identity

In traditional society, the construction of identity through consumption primarily pertains to the construction of social identity. Consumers' sense of belonging to a certain class or group is mostly confirmed through the content and manner of their consumption because each group has its distinct consumption behaviors and methods. The individual's choice of specific consumption methods is precisely for the purpose of confirming their social identity.

However, the identity construction function of consumption is continually evolving, and one particularly interesting and significant change in the process of identity through consumption is the emergence of "self-sense" (Yao, 2006). The essence of self-sense is a form of group detachment, wherein individuals emphasize that they do not belong to any specific group or class through their consumption choices, thus positioning their identity and expressing individual differences (Yao, 2006). This personalized consumption, which manifests individual differences in both the content and manner of consumption and is often marked by a personal touch, can be referred to as "personalized consumption". What sets personalized consumption apart from the general consumption mentioned earlier is that it is not intended to construct social identity but rather focuses on the formation of self-identity. It represents a form of consumption where self-identity is most fully realized.

In online American TV series fan communities, each member exhibits personalized consumption in their own unique way. They engage in cultural consumption within the fan community through their individual practices, having the freedom to conduct their distinct cultural consumption. This sets them apart from other members of the group, allowing them to express their individuality, pursue differences, and achieve unique self-realization in the process of consumption. However, the fact that some American TV series fans manifest differences from others through personalized consumption does not necessarily imply that this behavior affects their group identity. Consumption can serve the purpose of distinguishing oneself and showcasing a unique self-image, but it can also be a means of fitting into a group and being accepted (Lu, 2005). Through the researcher's semi-participatory observation of the Baidu Post Bar community, several typical forms of personalized consumption were identified.

"Critical Interpretation" Expresses Individual Consumption

In the Baidu Post Bar community, American TV series fans initially gather together because of their love for American TV series. Therefore, their attitude towards their beloved objects is mostly positive and enthusiastic, with a lot of praise. However, there are also some American TV series fans who engage in personalized consumption through their unique practices, which can be described as a "critical" interpretation of the text. This is done to showcase their uniqueness and set themselves apart.

> *"When the Vacuum Cleaner Uncle was taking photos for the lawyer, the Canon 350D camera's flash did not pop up, and there were no wireless or wired triggers (the kind used in photography studios) on the camera!! Where did the flash come from?? Furthermore: when the lawyer imported the photos into the computer, the Uncle became even more mysterious. At 2'6 S, the Uncle finished taking photos and just placed the camera on the table, without taking out the CF card.*

> *Then the photos appeared, but the fact is that the camera did not have any Bluetooth or Wi-Fi devices attached at that time!"*

This is a post by the fan "Jueming123" in the Breaking Bad Post Bar regarding a "goof" from the 15th episode of the fifth season. It includes 52 replies and discussions.

Furthermore, "WSZT" also discovered another goof in the 15th episode of the fifth season of "Breaking Bad" .

> *"In two consecutive shots, the amount of wine in Walter White's glass is different. After taking a sip in one shot, in the next shot, there's actually more wine inside."*

This post led to 10 discussions on this issue. A group of people represented by "Jueming123" and "WSZT" stands out, as they watch TV series far more frequently than others. In order to pinpoint flaws and errors among numerous scenes, they must meticulously watch in a "carpet-style" . Furthermore, in the Breaking Bad Post Bar, the majority of fans post about plot interpretations, character discussions, or mystery analysis related to "Breaking Bad" . However, "Jueming123" and "WSZT" approach their discussion of continuity errors in "Breaking Bad" from a completely different perspective, employing a "carpet-style" search and a "critical interpretation" approach. This "nitpicky" viewing style could also be seen as a form of personalized consumption. Such personalized consumption sets these fans apart from other fans, and it is a core part of constructing self-identity.

In the past, some scholars Jensen (1992); Lewis (1992) believed that "fans" were extreme television audiences without discernment. However, individuals like "Jueming123" and "WSZT" and their personalized consumption directly refute this view. They are rational and loyal fans who do not lose their sense of self due to their fondness and do not regard their beloved subject as "perfect" , thereby losing all critical capacity. On the contrary, they tend to voice objections and criticism of the things they love, confirming their identity as rational fans of quality TV series. Simultaneously, they invest a significant amount of time and effort in engaging in this form of personalized consumption, showcasing their knowledge and abilities. As a result, they use this personalized consumption to affirm their own capabilities and worth, thereby achieving self-identity construction within this community. However, there are also some comments below these posts, for example:

> *"Just enjoy the series, why nitpick so much?"*
> *"Why be so critical; everyone makes mistakes, you know."*

This also reflects that, despite being fans, each person has a different way of reading and watching. There can be voices and discussions from all directions because everyone has their own way of interpretation.

"Alternative Observation" Expresses Individual Consumption
Based on observations, it is noticed that whether the comments are positive or negative, most posts tend to revolve around a few aspects. These include assessments of the series' quality, character development, visual presentation, and discussions about the merits and shortcomings of the series. These aspects can be seen as discussions arising from the

content of the TV series. However, some individuals choose to break away from this conventional thinking. They identify less conventional entry points and, drawing on their own knowledge and life experiences, engage in alternative interpretations that are often overlooked by the general audience.

> *"In Slaver's Bay, Meereen is of the slave class, and the Unsullied are mercenaries employed by slave owners. On the western continent, despite claiming religious purposes, the majority are peasants and manual laborers, constituting the commoner class. Houses like House Targaryen and House Stark belong to the large feudal landlords, sustaining themselves through agricultural rents from peasants. Families like House Tyrell and House Baratheon can be categorized as small feudal landlords, providing various services to the major landlords. Characters such as Varys and Littlefinger, by virtue of talent and fortunate circumstances, have elevated themselves beyond the commoner class and become vassals of the major landlords, akin to the historical Chinese concept of 'scholar-officials'. Recognizing the class distinctions among the feudal lords and their vassals, one can better interpret the peculiar behaviors of characters in the series. "*

This is a post from a "Game of Thrones" fan "ZQH" in the Game of Thrones Post Bar with the title "Analyzing 'Game of Thrones' from a Class Perspective" . The distinctive aspect of this post is that it adopts an analysis method known as "class attributes" , which was previously an uncommon interpretative approach.

"ZQH" utilizes reservoir of knowledge about class, providing distinctive categorizations and analyses of characters in "Game of Thrones" from an alternative perspective. It is because of this that some fans underneath the post praise it with comments like,

> *"Impressive, the analysis is spot on" , "You're amazing, being able to analyze it this way is truly a rare skill" , "Suddenly understood the reason why Daenerys had to die in the end, but it also resulted in the poor ending of the series, quite regrettable " .*

A fan named "Chaos" has posted about the "World Hierarchy in the Game of Thrones" . "Chaos" believed that

> *"Gods' World, Magic World, and Human World. In this world, gods influence the human world through magic, and the characters in the series simply live in the human world. Some accessories or weapons are considered magical objects or enchanted items" .*

There are many replies below praising the post, for instance,

> *"Thumbs up, unique perspective" and "Well written, and it makes a lot of sense! I've thought about many of these aspects too!" .*

The posts by "Chaos" and "ZQH" stand out among numerous character analyses by employing a personalized consumption approach through alternative interpretations. It is their

substantial knowledge base and willingness to delve into thoughtful reflections that allow these unique consumption styles to emerge. By investing so much effort and time in creating and sharing their insights for collective discussion, they not only contribute to the successful construction of their fan identity but also receive feedback and recognition from other fans, shaping their self-identity within the fans group.

Imagination and Fantasy of Fans
Emotional Projection and Identification
Emotional projection is primarily about the subject understanding the object, and then the subject make opinions about the object by projecting their emotions onto these opinions, hoping that through the evaluation of the object, they can ultimately understand their own self, reveal the subject's true nature, and thus facilitate self-identity construction.

When emotional projection is applied in the practices of American TV series fans on Baidu Post Bar. This primarily involves American TV series fans understanding and experiencing the significance of the characters or emotions within the series, and expressing their feelings about these characters or the plot through posting or writing comments. The emotions and evaluations expressed through written words become the objects of emotional projection for these TV series fans. This process could assist fans in recognizing themselves and could also lead to a sense of resonance in the responses of other members of the online community, ultimately facilitating the construction of self-identity.

The fan "xiaoxiaogushi" from the Game of Thrones Post Bar has made some comments about the characters in the series

> "All the characters in the series are complex individuals with their own loneliness.
>
> Jaime. When I first watched Game of Thrones and saw him push Bran out of the tower, witnessed him stab Ned Stark, I thought he was too ruthless. Gradually, I realized that his regicide was not for power but for justice. He pushed Bran the reason is he want to protect the woman he loved the most, showing true loyalty to love. His loneliness stems from within, with no one to confide in.
>
> Cersei is a complex character with a dual nature. Indeed, she can be ruthless, even committing acts of wanton violence. However, I've glimpsed her pitiable side. When she asked her husband, "Have you ever loved me, even a little?" and was ultimately betrayed, I saw a girl longing for true love, not a heartless queen. Moreover, she regards Tyrion Lannister as family and sheds tears in front of him. She's just a vulnerable woman who disguises her fragility with coldness, and it is this facade that isolates her from others.
>
> Sansa Stark. In the music video for the Game of Thrones theme song, the lyrics 'Rolling her sorrow and pain' perfectly match the scene of Sansa, draped in a black cloak, standing alone in the icy wilderness. Her profile is so beautiful, yet her gaze is filled with melancholy and sadness. Her loneliness stems from the inability to choose her lineage. Due to her family's circumstances, Sansa, as a young girl, is compelled to assume the heavy responsibility of being the Lady of

Winterfell, owing to the complete loss of male heirs in her family due to war. "

As a fan of the TV series "Game of Thrones" , there are naturally many interpretations and feelings about this series. From the comments above, it is evident that "xiaoxiaogushi" provides evaluations of the main characters in this American TV series. These evaluations on the surface do indeed appear to be about the characters in "Game of Thrones" , and they mostly stem from the interpretation of the plot. However, beneath these surface-level comments, the blogger is actually projecting emotions. The real projected emotion is the "xiaoxiaogushi" perception of "complex human nature" . In the emotional world of the "xiaoxiaogushi" , there seems to be a profound appreciation for complexity to the extent that, whether the characters are portrayed positively or negatively, whether they lean towards evil or justice, or whether they act out of self-determination or are compelled to do so, this blogger discovers the common thread of "complex human nature" within them. In the process of projecting their own emotions into their reviews, this blogger not only gains self-awareness but also allows other fans of the series to experience the blogger's feelings.

The practices of these fans, as well as their interpretations and analyses of this content, are not aimed at delving into the character development and plot of the TV series. Instead, this blogger projects their own complex insights and experiences about human nature onto their commentary about the TV series. Through this process of projection, they come to understand their own perceptions about the "complexity of human nature" , deepening their self-awareness and, in the process, developing their self-identity construction.

In addition to this, there are other comments of fans in this post expressing admiration, "Well written, great analysis" . Such praise from fellow members of the same community also contributes to the self-identity formation of blogger.

Achieving Self-Identity in the Balance Between Ideal Self and Others' Evaluations
Ideal Self
According to the theory of the looking glass self, the mirror stage is a process of self-infatuation initiated by illusory images, marking the starting point of imaginative thinking. Everyone possesses such a kind of illusory, idealized self-imagination. Though this imagination is unreal, it serves as a driving force, propelling individuals tirelessly toward the pursuit and efforts to achieve their own ideals. In other words, this ideal self can be seen as an intrinsic psychological need for individuals. Regardless of the extent to which a fan engages in group activities, there is an element of illusionary, idealized self-perception. Perhaps individuals in real life cannot pursue the perfect self, so they immerse themselves in online communities to fulfill these needs.

> *"In reality, I had to take up this job just to save face for my parents, but it doesn't bring me joy. I find true fulfillment in working within my preferred field. I've been active in online communities, and it's here that I believe I can genuinely contribute and experience the satisfaction that resonates with my inner self."*

Statement from "LY" from the Shameless Post Bar. In real life, things have not been going well for LY. It seems that only in online communities can she truly play her role, and achieve balance and satisfaction by pursuing the illusory self and building the ideal self.

The creative production and personalized consumption mentioned in the above section are processes that require labor. Individuals need to invest time, energy, and financial resources, and fans must personally engage in these activities. Fans of American TV series conduct cultural labor and production within groups in a personalized manner. They dedicate their time, energy, and financial resources, immersing themselves completely in various practices such as interpreting story lines, adding subtitles, organizing episodes, and engaging in fan creations. Although these efforts contribute to the collective, they are accumulated through the cultural labor and creative work of individual subjects. Through the presentation of cultural capital, fans express their ideal selves.

Reach Agreement with Others' Evaluations

"Others' evaluations and attitudes towards oneself are like a 'mirror' , reflecting one's self, through which individuals come to understand and grasp themselves."
--------Cooley

In their real-life experiences, it seems challenging for them to find a "perfect" self, so they turn to virtual online communities to seek fulfillment. Each fan's self-awareness contains elements of fantasy and idealization. In various idealized thoughts and emotions, people rely to a great extent on the self-image as perceived by those they respect (Cooley, 1999). Therefore, it is evident that individuals place significant importance on the evaluation and impression of themselves by others in social groups. When the ideal self and the evaluation of the self by others align, self-identity can be constructed. The content actively presented by individuals within a group, which is known as cultural capital, can be seen as a bridge between these two aspects.

In the Breaking Bad Post Bar, fan "ALB" posted a thread titled "Today, I revisited Breaking Bad and shared some thoughts on the characters" . Additionally, "YJGRBH" shared a post titled "Compilation of Breaking Bad Seasons 1-5 in both English and Chinese, available for self-retrieval" . In the Game of Thrones Post Bar, "DPD" posted a thread titled "Discussing the Major Families in the Series" . In the Shameless Post Bar, "7RCV6" shared a post titled "Discussing the Evaluation of Key Characters in Shameless" , while "TZSKGRY" posted a thread titled "Reflections on the Character Image of Fiona, the Eldest Sister" , and "LJDFM" shared a post titled "Discussing the Character Development of Mickey" .

This category of posts is the most common type in Post Bar. Such posts tend to spark enthusiastic discussions among fans, and fans of various levels eagerly participate by leaving comments. Fans are particularly attentive to the attitudes of fellow fans toward their creative efforts. When they receive praise and admiration from others within the same fan community, any additional effort invested seems more than worthwhile. Despite often not knowing each other personally, fans offer mutual support in their comments. This sense of camaraderie establishes a bond generated by the fans (Prabasmoro & Ridwansyah, 2020).

A fan with the username "giorgiano" posted a thread with the title

> *"Watched Breaking Bad several times, also checked out posts about location visits, feeling impulsive myself"*

Subsequently, the fan continuously updated the thread with their itinerary related to the filming locations of Breaking Bad. The post garnered 2,874 comments, and here is a selection:

> *"Is this a live broadcast of your journey? Looking forward to it, waiting for updates." , "Your English must be excellent, right? Or perhaps your work is connected to foreign countries?" , "You're awesome, OP (blogger). Learning English is important, and having money is crucial too. I also want to explore the world." , "Thanks, OP (blogger) ! It's really great that you can visit the sacred places of Breaking Bad."*

The most significant difference between the American TV series Post Bar and other Post Bar lies in their reliance on English to disseminate non-native television content. Therefore, the English proficiency of fans becomes crucial. If a fan's English proficiency is outstanding, it can become a standout cultural capital among many fans. Of course, having sufficient financial support is also crucial. Although economic capital has gained importance within fan communities, it is not to be underestimated.

The fans who can post content demonstrate acknowledgment and confidence in their abilities. Otherwise, they wouldn't invest time and effort in creating such content and engaging in discussions with others. This self-constructed and imagined "confident image" can be considered a mirrored "ideal self" . The comments and acknowledgments beneath the posts can be seen as evaluations from others. Therefore, the construction of personal identity can be viewed as a two-way process (Prabasmoro & Ridwansyah, 2020), representing a continuous synthesis of self-definition and others' definitions of oneself (Jenkins, 2008). When the imagined self and the recognition from others align, self-identity is constructed.

Conclusion

This study found that fans of American TV series use various approaches through the medium of Baidu Post Bar to achieve self-identity construction. Baidu Post Bar can be considered one of the most popular social media platforms in China. Fans of American TV series congregate here to form a community and engage in practical activities and identity construction through posting and interaction. On the internet, fans can build virtual identities that are no longer influenced by age, gender, or social status. Therefore, within the community, they can choose to create virtual identities first, constructing personalized IDs to build their virtual personas. The research results show that fans interact with other members through information sharing and communication on Post Bar, with the most enthusiastic discussions focusing on text doubts, creative production, and symbolic consumption. This indicates that fans use Baidu Post Bar for interaction and self-expression, interpreting and re-creating the source text through various types of content such as text, images, drawings, and videos.

Secondly, the media consumption of the American TV series fan community is a form of cultural consumption, and cultural consumption is inseparable from self-identity. Fans, through the consumption of media content and consumption methods, engage in a process of self awareness and self evaluation. Within the community, individualized consumption methods are a pathway to self realization. In the Baidu Post Bar community of American TV series fans, they actively and proactively use the media. Through critical interpretation, they express criticism and questioning of American TV series texts. Additionally, through

alternative observation, they summarize and analyze the texts from different perspectives based on the individual knowledge base. American TV series fans choose this distinctive and differentiated practice to gain interaction and praise from other fans within the community, all of which contribute to the construction of their self identity.

Additionally, American TV series fans invest their subconscious "emotions" in the interpretation of the TV series text. They express their feelings and insights from their interpretations in written form, presenting them through posting on Baidu Post Bar. The content of their posts can be seen as the object of their emotional projection. Through the presentation of these textual contents, fans can recognize the authentic thoughts within their inner consciousness, which is a crucial aspect of the self identity construction process.

Furthermore, everyone harbors an idealized self-image. Although such an image may not be realistic, it can serve as a driving force, propelling individuals toward an idealized state. Simultaneously, this idealized state represents an inner psychological need. When the idealized self receives recognition from others, this need is satisfied, leading to the fulfillment of self identity. This study found that some fans, unable to pursue or satisfy this state in the real world, instinctively turn to online communities such as Baidu Post Bar, where they share common interests with like-minded individuals. Here, they aspire to achieve the realization of their ideal selves. In Baidu Post Bar, fans engage with each other through various forms of posting. When they receive recognition and praise from others, the alignment of the idealized self with the acknowledgment of others leads to the realization of self identity.

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