Politicizing for the idol: China's idol fandom nationalism in pandemic

Yan Wang[a,b] and Ting Luo[c*]

a Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

b London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom

c Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

*The corresponding author, t.luo@mmu.ac.uk

Notes on Contributors:

Yan Wang is Lecturer in Digital Sociology at the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. Before she was a Research Fellow at School of Public Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research seeks to understand the issues of state legitimacy, public opinion, and the redistribution of public goods.

Ting Luo is Senior Lecturer of Political Communication at Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom. Her research interests include comparative politics, digital politics, elections and democratization, and Chinese politics. She holds a Ph.D. in Government (2014) and an MSc in Public Policy and Administration (2007) from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Abstract: Chinese idol fans have been identified among the main forces in cyber nationalist activisms in recent years, acting as the nationalist fans protecting the state as an idol in response to external political shocks. Their skills in acknowledging, involving, and even reinventing the image of the state and national pride in cyber nationalist activisms do not emerge in a vacuum. This article examines how idol fans involve and reinvent the nationalist discourse in their everyday fan activities – idol promotion. We focus on the pandemic in 2020 as it provides a specific social and political context that allows us to understand better the interaction between idol fans and the state in their mundane fan activities. We construct our analysis under the computational grounded theory framework with over 6 million fan posts collected from Weibo and 11 in-depth interviews with active idol fans. Our findings show that when engaging in pandemic-related discussion, idol fans actively borrowed official discourse on nationalism and strategically responded to key political and social events in their idol promotion activities. The idol images they built are not only positive but also nationalist. Therefore, they play not only the commercial logic commonly seen in the Japanese and Korean K-pop/idol culture but also the political logic propagated by the state in China.

Keywords: Idol fan; Fandom nationalism; China; Computational grounded theory; Social media

Introduction

In 2017, fans of Jackson Yee (*Yi Yangqianxi*), a former member of the popular boy band TFBoys in China, purchased and put up birthday advertisements for their idol on four main subway lines in Berlin, lasting for a month.[1] Similarly, in South Korea, fans seek different ways to celebrate their idol's birthdays, and subway station advertisements are among the most popular ways (Yang, 2022). Similar to other East Asian countries, idol fans in China are transforming from passive consumers of products by idols to active participants and market promoters of popular culture, striving to grow their idols' popularity, reputation, and business value. The combination of fandom and consumption activities has contributed to the growth of the Chinese idol industry and fan economy in recent years – an estimated 100 billion RMB of the Chinese idol market size in 2020.[2] In promoting idols, fans have demonstrated their ability to use commercial logic, such as negotiating with entertainment companies, datafication on social media, and even crowdsourcing to project their idols' image on the Times Square billboard in New York.

In the meantime, Chinese idol fans were found to act as one of the main forces along with many other digital groups in cyber nationalist activisms, supporting the Chinese state's core values in recent years (Liu, 2006; Han, 2015a; Fang & Repnikova, 2018). Political incidents often trigger these eruptions of nationalist expressions. The most notable example is the 'Diba Expedition' following the Taiwan election in 2016, whereby fans – including sports fans, game fans, idol fans, and others – organized an expedition to attack the Facebook pages of Taiwanese politicians with emojis and memes (Yang, 2019). In these events, fans reportedly show a high degree of organization and discipline, using various memetic and discourse strategies to promote nationalism. Their skillful deployment of strategies online is not built in one day. To better understand these fan groups and their nationalist activism, we need to examine the flow of nationalism in their interaction with the state and mainstream discourse in

their ordinary fan activities, such as idol promotion, which set the ground for such possibilities of nationalist activism.

This study joins the literature on fandom nationalism, focusing on nationalist expressions in China by idol fans in promoting their idols online and deciphering the rationale behind it. We choose to focus on the Covid-19 pandemic-related discussion and identify idol fandom discourse among this discussion. Covid-19, though it appeared first as a health emergency in early 2020 in China, has become a new normal in China up until today under the general policy choice of the 'Zero-COVID' model. In this regard, it sets as the long-term scenario ideal for unraveling the nationalist expression by idol fans in their mundane fan activities. In particular, we systematically analyze how idol fans reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic and built their idol celebration and worshiping expressions by coopting the statist nationalism. Our main analysis is based on over 6 million Weibo posts on the Covid-19 pandemic containing idol promotion from December 2019 to December 2020. With in-depth interviews with active idol fans, we unpack their strategies and agencies for engaging in the mainstream discourse to broadcast and glorify their idols. Moreover, by employing the computational grounded theory framework (Nelson, 2020) in our analysis of the social media data, we demonstrate how computational analysis of big data can unravel hidden patterns of fandom nationalism and provide new knowledge about China's idol fans.

Idol fans and fandom nationalism in China

Thriving fan communities and fandom culture rely on fans' emotional involvement and activities. Fans consume, share, and create content about an art object, which helps build fan communities and enhances community identity (Jenkins, 2008; Turk, 2014). The labor fans devote to idols is immaterial and affective, originating from their common interest and love for the idols (Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Lazzarato, 1996). In China's idol fandom culture,

through the process of producing, exchanging, and reciprocating idols as the product, idol-fans and idols even create a type of parakin relationship and co-cultivate idols as family members (Yan & Yang, 2021), from which the fans gained emotional satisfaction, community belongness, and even self-fulfillment.

With the rapid growth of social media in China in recent years, idol fans have moved their active participation in making and promoting idols to the online sphere. Chart beating is an important part of fandom in China as well as other countries in East Asia. Fans actively participate in the consumption of idol products to boost sales and thus the ranking of idols in various ranking lists, creating their own stars (Yang, 2009). Social media have amplified the importance of rankings and facilitated the proliferation of various charts, such as Weibo's celebrity ranking lists, and provided ample online opportunities for chart beating (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Fans actively engage in posting about, commenting on, and voting for their idols, thus producing as individuals and co-producing as organized groups positive images of their idols. Self-governed fan clubs also organize these activities, often involving the efforts of the entertainment companies, therefore showing the 'two-way traffic' (Duffett, 2013) between fans and entertainment companies within the industry. Data fans understand how their online activities are tracked and monitored to produce quantified measures of cultural products, adopting individual and collective strategies to influence the statistical, metric, and semantic data collected by social media (Negus, 2019; Zhang & Negus, 2020).

A unique feature of idol fan activities in China is the high involvement of the state and the respective mainstream culture that features nationalism. Nationalism is a cultural and cognitive ideology relating to a community's collective identity, cultural cohesion, and social solidarity (e.g., Hayes, 1932; Gellner, 1983, 1987; Smith, 1983, 1986; Hardin, 1997; Anderson, 1991). In China, nationalism is better understood as a state-motivated nationalism, where '(the) rulers who spoke in a nation's name successfully demanded that citizens identify themselves

with that nation and subordinate other interests to those of the state' (Tilly, 1994, p.133). More specifically, nationalism in China portrays the communist state as the embodiment of the nation's will and demands loyalty to the 'socialist system and road chosen by all nationalities in China under the leadership of the Communist Party' (Zhao, 1998, p.291). This notion of nationalism is propagated top-down. The Chinese state integrated 'old methodology, such as using entertainment as a vehicle for political thought work, with new methodology and technology such as political [public relations] (PR) and the Internet' (Brady, 2009, p.87). In this new model of propaganda work, the state introduced entertainment-oriented elements into the dissemination of official ideologies and discourse, making the propaganda message more appealing and entertaining while also fulfilling propaganda requirements (Lagerkvist, 2010). In China's cyberspace, Internet commentators, known as the 'fifty-cent army', actively channel online discussions into creating pro-regime messages and evincing nationalistic opinions (Hung, 2010; Han, 2015b). The flourishing of official microblogging accounts is another measure aiming to promote positive images of the government and guide public opinion (Esarey, 2015). In the emerging form of soft propaganda, the state media organizations even actively appropriate digital populism and popular culture online to attract and engage patriotic netizens in reinventing official culture, national pride, and solidarity in cyberspace (Guo, 2018).

Social media have provided a venue for the mobilization of both nationalism and fandom activities, the combination of which gives rise to fandom nationalism online. The 'Diba Expedition' and the involvement of 'Little Pinks' are often cited as the best example of fandom nationalism online (Liu, 2019; Fang & Repnikova, 2018). In this case, fans of an online novel forum applied tactics and organizational logic they have used in popular culture/product worship to protect the state as their idol and the 'cyber great wall' of the country (Liu, 2019; Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Yang, 2019). This dynamic of fandom nationalism has spread to various political incidents after 2016, such as the South China Sea issue, the Zhao Wei incident,

the Horton event, THAAD dispute (Wu, Li & Wang 2019). These examples of fandom nationalism are simultaneously top-down and bottom-up. It is a top-down process as fans acquire the notion of nationalism from state propaganda and the nationalist movement was noticed and supported by the state (Liao, Koo & Rojas 2022). It is also bottom-up, as fans organize themselves and collaborate to produce memes and emojis that convey nationalist messages. Such an approach echoes existing literature that identified the agency of individuals in engaging political expression with user-generated content and respective ideas and emotions (Gries, 2004; Hyun & Kim, 2015). Fang and Repnikova (2018) further consider the efforts of fans reframing the imagery of nationalism as digital activism rather than just a manifestation of state propaganda or radical nationalist expression in China's cyberspace.

While much is known about idol fans' salient role in these nationalist activisms to protect the state as an idol, how they use the nationalist discourse in their everyday fan practices on social media – such as engaging with the idol industry, promoting their idols, producing and exchanging fans artwork – remain relatively under-researched. Their skills in acknowledging, involving, and even reinventing the image of the state and national pride in the above-mentioned nationalist activisms do not emerge in a vacuum. We treat these fan activities as mundane practices in the sense of everyday social media communication for fans, in contrast to formal politics such as policies or institutions (Merelman, 1998; Highfield, 2016; Murru & Vicari, 2021). Yet politics may arise and evolve from these mundane social media fan practices. To fill these gaps, we examine their interaction with the state and their use of the nationalist discourse in one of their fandom activities for idol fans, specifically idol promotion.

We focus on the pandemic in 2020 as it provides an extraordinary context to help unravel the interaction between idol fans and the state in their mundane fandom activities. As China adopted the 'Zero Covid' policy, Covid has become the new normal in Mainland China until the end of 2022. In this sense, the pandemic serves as both a special case and an everyday

setting for our research on idol fans and fandom nationalism. On the one hand, the pandemic as a public health crisis brings uncertainties and anxieties, and people are likely to comment and respond to messages from the government in such times (Dai et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). On the other hand, as the pandemic becomes the new normal, people adjust to the new socio-economic situations in their everyday practices – for instance idol fans need to continue their idol promotion. Thus, the pandemic provides an interesting scenario for us to investigate the activities of idol fans in their mundane fan practices, and the feature of fandom nationalism emerged from their activities relevant to the pandemic. We address the following research questions:

> RQ1: How did idol fans use nationalist expressions in pandemic-related discussion to promote idols?

> RQ2: How did the prominence of idol fans' nationalist expressions change over time and respond to temporary political and social events during the pandemic?

Methods

Data

We study idol fans' presentation of nationalism by examining the most popular micro-blogging platform in China, Sina Weibo. In recent years, Weibo has transformed into a platform for marketing and entertainment use, especially for fandom activities (Jia & Han, 2020), and plays an important role in online nationalist activism (Schneider, 2017). The introduction of the celebrity ranking list and the 'super-topic' community in 2014 enabled idol fans to build fan communities and organize public-oriented activities on Weibo.[3] The celebrity ranking list aims to gauge the popularity of celebrities and take into account the number of a celebrity's followers

and frequency of Weibo activities related to a celebrity. Therefore, it is ideal for our research on idol fans' interaction with the state when promoting idols during the pandemic.

Our main data are from a publicly available Weibo data set, the Weibo-COV dataset, containing widely defined Covid-19-related posts collected retrospectively by Hu, Huang, Chen, and Mao (2020), with an analytical period from 31 December 2019 to 30 December 2020. To obtain the dataset related to idol fans' expressions, we define idols as influential celebrities in the entertainment industry whose idol status is created and maintained through the cultivation of fans (Yan & Yang, 2021). To identify the influential celebrities, we used the top 100 celebrity ranking lists published monthly by Weibo from January to December 2020. We confined the region to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, resulting in 372 unique idols. To be on the list, fans are motivated by the ranking algorithm to post content on Weibo that mentions their idol's name. Thus, Weibo posts directly mentioning an idol's name capture fans' idol promotion activities – what we call fan posts.[4] In the full dataset of 65,175,112 Covid-19-related posts, we selected posts that mentioned the names of the top 372 influential idols, resulting in 7,140,433 posts, about 11 percent. We dropped fan posts by verified users who were likely to be institutional users or big influencers on Weibo and only kept fan posts by unverified individual users, yielding a sample of 6,130,730 posts. We understand that users behind the posts may have multiple identities. However, our research only focuses on the publicly observable role of idol fans and their respective actions following that role.

During May and June 2021, we interviewed 11 idol-fans online – two K-pop fans and nine fans of popular culture celebrities in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. First, we hired five research assistants who were idol fans and familiar with idol-fan groups and culture in China for this study. They were the initial interview participants. Although it was possible to directly

identify and approach idol fans on Weibo based on their publicly displayed fan posts, to our knowledge, they are usually suspicious of invitations to study their community by people from outside of the community. Thus, additional participants were recruited via snowball sampling by those initial participants through their fan networks. Interviews ranged from one to two hours each. We include the detail of the data, our pre-processing of the data, the basic demographic features of the interviewees, and the semi-structured interview questions in the appendix.[5]

Analytical procedure

We employ the computational grounded theory framework in our analysis of the Weibo data (Nelson 2020). The computational grounded theory suggests a three-step process to efficiently produce content analysis results that are rigorous and fully reproducible: pattern detection, pattern refinement, and pattern confirmation. Figure 1 shows the methods we used for each of these three steps and the research questions each step addresses.

We started with an inductive computational exploration of fan posts using an unsupervised machine learning model – non-negative matrix factorization (NMF), a linear-algebraic model that reduces high-dimensional data into low dimensions with non-negative components (Berry & Browne, 2005). It is often used to identify unknown sets of possible topics and novel patterns in the data by decomposing complex text into words and topics. We followed the standard procedure of running NMF, which includes pre-processing text data and identifying the optimal number of topics (K). Our pre-processing of the text data followed common standards, including removing stop words, numbers, and symbols and excluding the most frequent and infrequent words (Denny & Spirling, 2018). We used the C_V coherence measure (Roder et al., 2015) to identify the optimal number of topics (K) – the topic model

with the highest coherence score. The coherence scores for topic models with a range of topic numbers can be seen in Figure B1 in the Appendix.

Step 1: Pattern Detection
Step 2: Pattern Refinement

- Unsupervised machine learning: Non-negative matrix factorization
- Human deep reading guided by theories on nationalism
- RQ1: How did idol fans use nationalist expressions in pandemic-related discussion to promote idols?

Step 3: Pattern Confirmation

- Superivised machine learning: Multiple naïve Bayes classifier
- RQ2: How did the prominence of idol fans' nationalist expressions change over time and respond to temporary political and social events during the pandemic?
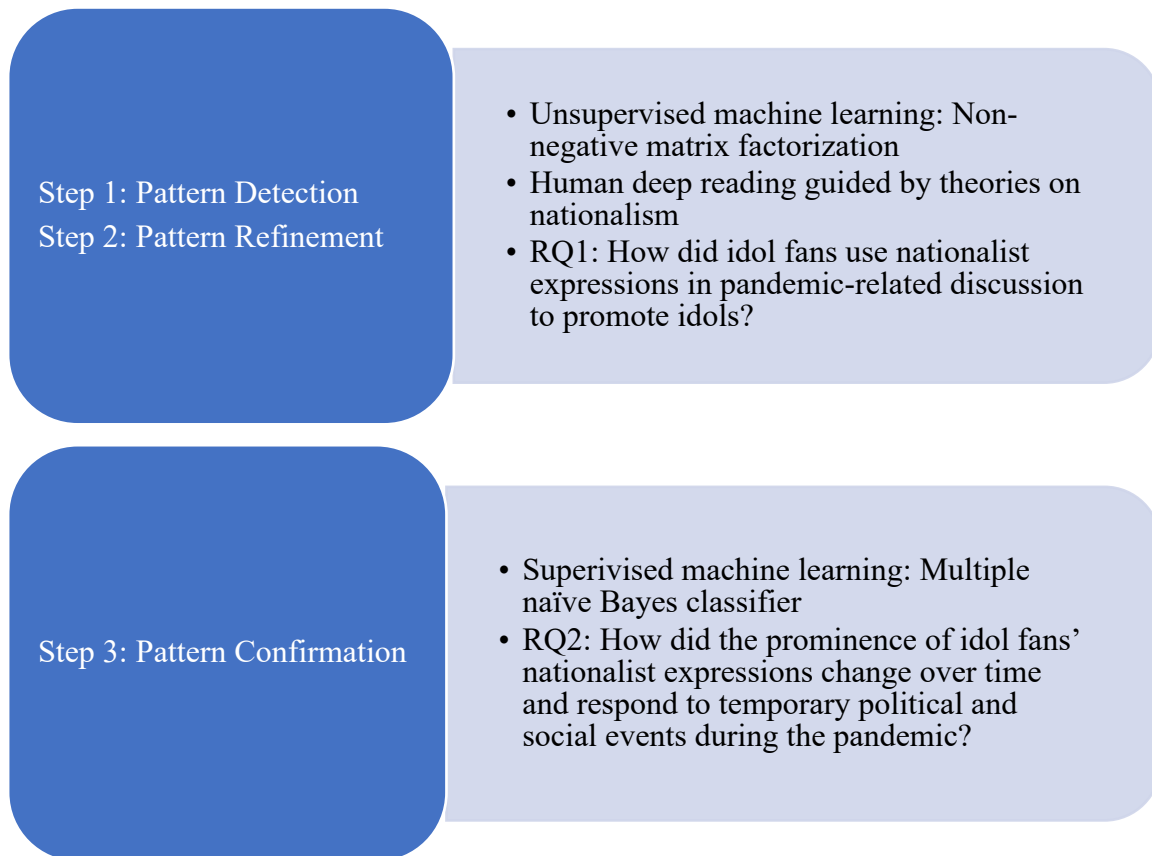
Figure 1. Framework of the Analytical Procedure

In the second step, we performed in-depth reading of topics and representative text materials to identify the emerging patterns, interpret the results, and modify the identified patterns to better fit the existing conceptualization of nationalism in general and fandom nationalism in China, combining these with our interpretation of the fan posts.

In the final step, we tested deductively whether the identified patterns hold for the full Weibo dataset with text classifications using the supervised machine learning model. We constructed the training set data with 1,800 randomly selected fan posts. The training set was human coded into the identified patterns. We selected three classifiers to conduct the

classification with the hand-coded training set. We evaluated the performance of the three classifiers and chose the Multiple naïve Bayes classifier for the supervised classification of the full dataset, considering both the performance of the classifiers and the time needed to classify the full dataset. The coding flowchart, sample posts for each category of nationalist representations, and validations of classifiers can be found in the Appendix.

The public and observable fan posts were the activities of idol fans on Weibo. Although the content analysis of these posts can reveal their expressions, it cannot reveal the rationale behind the expressions. Therefore, we used our interview data to unravel the rationale behind their observable expressions on Weibo.

Findings

Building positive idol images

To answer RQ1, we first examine what pandemic-related topics idol fans engaged in to promote idols. As shown in Figure 2, our NMF model identified 11 topics ranked according to the share of the full sample. The top 15 words for each topic can be seen in Table B1 in the Appendix.

Topic distribution of the full fan posts

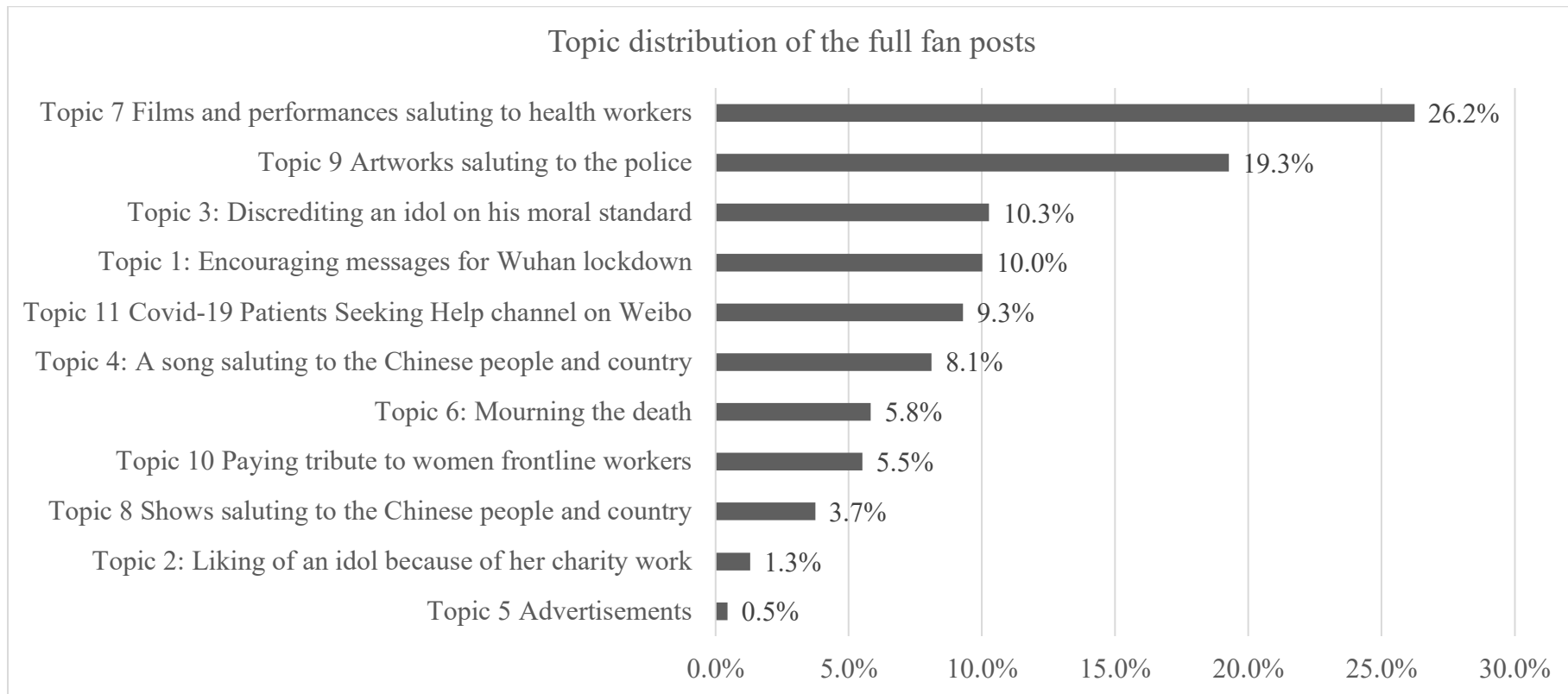| Topic	Percentage
Topic 7 Films and performances saluting to health workers	26.2%
Topic 9 Artworks saluting to the police	19.3%
Topic 3: Discrediting an idol on his moral standard	10.3%
Topic 1: Encouraging messages for Wuhan lockdown	10.0%
Topic 11 Covid-19 Patients Seeking Help channel on Weibo	9.3%
Topic 4: A song saluting to the Chinese people and country	8.1%
Topic 6: Mourning the death	5.8%
Topic 10 Paying tribute to women frontline workers	5.5%
Topic 8 Shows saluting to the Chinese people and country	3.7%
Topic 2: Liking of an idol because of her charity work	1.3%
Topic 5 Advertisements	0.5%

Figure 2. NMF Topic distribution of the full fan posts

Most posts are related to the work of idols, including films, performances, artworks, and songs idols have contributed to. Four topics, namely, 4, 7, 8, and 9, discuss cultural recreation, such as artworks, performances, music, and shows, that show respect and recognition to people who helped to fight the pandemic, including the police, health workers, Chinese people, and the country. Three topics were directly related to external events. Topic 1 discusses Wuhan's lockdown by highlighting encouraging discourse such as 'come on', 'fight to win', 'grateful'. Topic 6 is about mourning the deceased and wishes idols and their fans sent for the national mourning event on 4 April 2020. Topic 10 contains idols and their fans paying tribute to women frontline workers and is associated with the state-directed campaign for International Women's Day on 8 March 2020. Topic 11 relates to the launch of the 'Covid-19 patients seeking help channel' on Weibo by the People's Daily Official Account. Two topics, Topic 2 and Topic 3, contain discussion on the actions/work of specific idols in relation to the pandemic and assessment of their trustworthiness. Finally, only a very small proportion of the posts, Topic 5, contain advertisements.

We further examine the most representative posts of each topic and identify distinctive patterns of nationalist expressions in these fan posts. In general, idol fans were keen to associate their idols with positive images and deliberately linked them to the state directly or indirectly. These discussions contain nationalist expressions, and there are different ways to frame nationalist expressions and build these positive images.

The most popular form is to associate their idols with positive contributions to society, which can be in the form of material contributions or artworks promoting collective solidarity, sacrifice, etc. Some posts cited the exact term of the popular catchphrase – 'positive energy' (*Zheng Nengliang*) – a term actively promoted by the state in the Xi era and referring to a cheerful mentality, deeds conforming to social norms, and national economic and cultural superiority (Yang & Tang, 2018). Existing studies have well-documented the promotion and

creation of positive energy as a category of fandom nationalism (Liu, 2019). In promoting positive energy, fan posts frequently referred to values promoted by the official discourse, such as charity activities, collective solidarity, collectivism, and contributions to society. For example, in Topic 1, encouraging messages and support for Wuhan's lockdown, one fan-post associated positive energy with charity work:

> #idol_name positive energy idol# idol_name's fans are beautiful and kind# idol_name volunteering with us# Wuhan Come on [Heart] [Help to fight the epidemic] idol_name and the fan group help Wuhan.

Fans actively engaged in charitable work, such as donating money and resources in the names of their idols, especially at the very beginning of the pandemic when resources were scarce. There is even an identified topic – Topic 2 – devoted to the discussion of charity work by an idol. We further probed idol fans' deliberate act of doing charitable work in their idols' names in our interviews. A fan (JW-Z-0523) shared her understanding of the benefits of charity activities to idols:

> Charity activities (of fans) actually started way before the pandemic... The charity contributions during the pandemic basically follow the same logic in the pre-pandemic period – fan activities in the name of their idols. The key difference is that the pandemic is an issue that can draw the whole country's attention, so we (idol fans) have to do something, it is like political correctness. In normal times, if you do (charities), it is like a bonus point; it will not hurt you if you do not. But since idols are all public figures, you need to be a model (now).

Some others associated positive energy with emotional support and the emphasis on sacrifice and collective solidarity promoted by idols' artworks. For example, in Topic 4, an idol

fan posted a new song by his/her idol and commented that the lyrics – *the mountains and rivers are unharmed as first seen; no matter how high the mountain is and how deep the water is, there are people who carry the burden and move forward* – 'full of positive energy'.

Idol fans acknowledge that positive energy is important during dark times as it is in human instinct that we need positive vibes to carry on in difficult times. An interviewee revealed how idol fans carefully selected the content and framed their messages in their posts directly referencing their idols (CZ-Z-0508):

(During the pandemic) It was a dark time for everyone, and we needed some positive energy. Just do not send messages containing some directives, like, the medical resource in Wuhan is terrible, or they are handling it poorly; this kind of message would cause panic. ... Just use more neutral ones, like keep fighting, Wuhan be better.

When promoting positive energy, some posts directly refer to the nationalism discourses that emphasize the pride of the nation-state, the sense of belonging to a nation, and heroic actions/sacrifices by a group of people for a nation/the people during the pandemic. In so doing, idol fans signal their idols' loyalty to the national identity, which encompasses the people, the government, and the party state. The uncritical identification with the state in general and the equating of the nation to the party state in China is well documented as a form of nationalist expression in existing literature (Druckman, 1994; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Woods & Dickson, 2017). The expression of national pride and the signaling of idols' loyalty to the national identity is commonly found in Topic 6, mourning. For example, on April 4, 2020, there was a state-directed national mourning ceremony to mourn ordinary people who died from Covid-19 and frontline workers who sacrificed their lives during the pandemic. Idol fans actively joined the state-directed

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campaign and expressed national pride while quoting their idols in the posts. A typical idol fan post was the following: '@Idol_name: In memory of our compatriots, may the deceased rest in peace. Thank you for all your perseverance and dedication and pay tribute to every hero'.

Similar expressions of national pride are also observed in other topics. For example, in Topic 4, when promoting a song by idols that salutes the Chinese people and country, idol fans emphasized the hardships the Chinese people had been through during Wuhan's lockdown and paid tribute to 'our heroic motherland, heroic era, and heroic city (Wuhan)'.

Loyalty to the national identity for Chinese idols and adherence to the political bottom line for non-Chinese idols are identified as 'the default', as revealed in our interviews. One fan pointed out that 'there are simply no idols before the state' (ZY-S-0523). Another commented that 'Worshiping an idol should firstly put the state as a premise......that is why I never adore foreign (idols), they might have position risks (carrying a different political stand on certain issues)' (CZ-Z-0508).

Finally, a small proportion of idol fan posts called for compliance with rules during the pandemic, for instance, spreading information about available support channels, reporting close Covid-19 contacts, wearing masks, and washing hands. For example, in Topic 11, idol fans actively forwarded a message on the launch of a COVID-19 help channel on Weibo by the official account of the People's Daily and added their idols' names to the posts, with a few positive comments on the trustworthiness of their idols. In some other posts, they called for people to observe COVID-19 restrictions, such as observing social distancing, wearing masks in public areas, not having mass gatherings, etc., while quoting their idol names to demonstrate that their idols are setting a good example of following the rules. Given that idol fans seek loyalty to the state, the maker of rules in this land, as the default setting, as mentioned above,

such compliance with rules during the pandemic can be considered the minimal form and extended practice of nationalism.

The three forms – positive energy, national pride, and compliance with rules during the pandemic – are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they emphasize different aspects of fandom nationalism and complement each other to give a comprehensive picture of idol fans' use of nationalist expressions in the pandemic-related discussion to promote idols.

A delicate duet: idol fans' conditional agency with the state

After having identified the topics and nationalist expressions in idol fans' public and observable pandemic-related discourse aiming to promote idols, the next important question is whether the identified patterns of idol fans' nationalist expressions hold for the full data set and respond to temporary political and social events during the pandemic (RQ2). Theoretically, the prominence of different forms of nationalist expression should fluctuate over time and in response to external events related to the state if the idol fans strategically take advantage of those events to promote idols.

We used supervised machine learning to classify all fan posts into three categories. We defined a post as 'positive energy' if it contained the promotion of positive vibes and calling out for solidarity and charitable acts; as 'national pride' if it contained a direct reference to the state, nation, people, national identity, or Chinese culture when talking about the pandemic and idols; and as 'rule compliance' if it contained a direct reference to social rules during the pandemic and asked people to obey the Covid-19 measures while specifically mentioned the idol's name in the post.
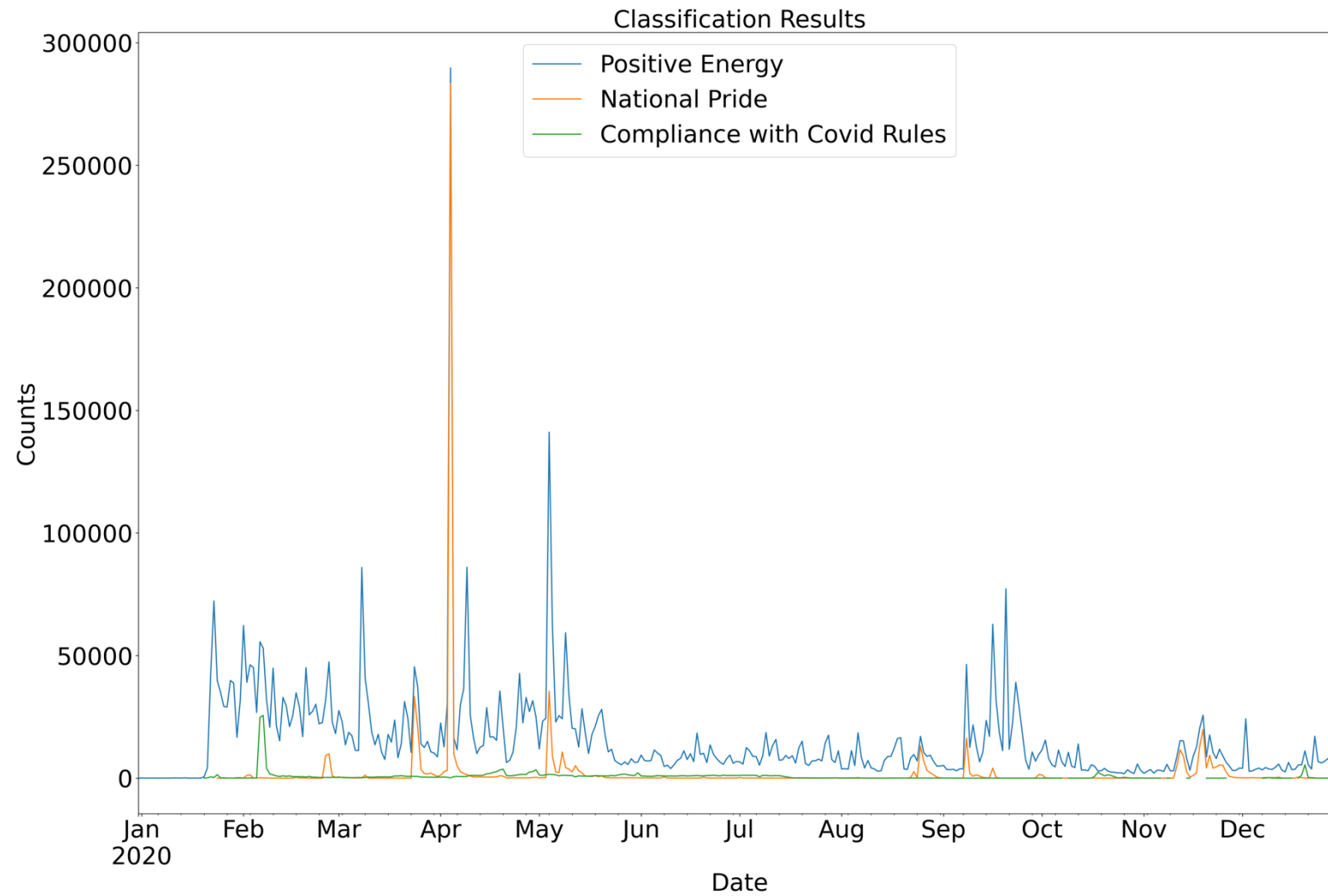
Figure 3: Number of nationalist fan posts and key political and social events

Figure 3 shows changes in the volume of each form of nationalist expression over time from December 31, 2019, to December 30, 2020. We see spikes in nationalist expression around specific dates or periods, and our analysis indicates that most are associated with events directed by the state or official media. The specific events that idol fandom discourse followed are indicated in the figure. Most activities were observed in the first half of the year, especially during the Wuhan's lockdown. The largest spike in positive energy occurred on April 4, 2020, when the state held a day of national mourning for Covid-19 victims. Other events resulting in activity spikes in promoting positive energy included the announcement of the Wuhan lockdown on January 23 by the State Council, a state-directed campaign to pay tribute to women front-line workers on March 8, and the lifting of the Wuhan lockdown on April 8. During the Wuhan lockdown from the end of January to early April, there were several spikes in promoting positive energy, which involved charitable activities and donations promoted and organized by idol fan groups.

Spikes in expressing national pride in the first half of the year followed state-directed campaigns highlighting the sacrifice made by frontline workers. These spikes emphasized the greatness of the Chinese people and the nation, for example, the mourning ceremony on April 4, and emphasized the contribution and devotion made by the youth on May 4. The largest spike in compliance with Covid-19 rules appeared after the state announced the Wuhan lockdown, expressing support for the lockdown and calling for compliance with Covid-19 restrictions. Calling for compliance with Covid-19 rules declined in volume after the lifting of the Wuhan lockdown.

In the second half of the year, most activities followed cultural recreations organized by the state and official media. Expression of positive energy and national pride boosted around similar events. Several spikes in both followed several 'main melody' TV series, which repackaged and reinvigorated propaganda in an entertainment-oriented format (Lagerkvist,

2010). Many idols played a role in these shows. These cultural recreations commended and paid tribute to COVID-19 role models, including health workers and police, and emphasized collective solidarity and the greatness of the Chinese people and the state. These events were the TV series 'The most beautiful person who goes in the opposite direction' live on CCTV on September 17, 'We are together' organized and led by the National Radio and Television Administration live on September 28, 'The Police war during the pandemic' produced by the National Radio and Television Administration and Ministry of Public Security live on November 13. In addition, a spike was observed on September 8, when the top leader hosted a national commendation ceremony of role models during the pandemic. Calling for compliance with Covid rules almost disappeared in the second half of the year, partly because Covid-19 was contained in China by then. There were only two small spikes of Covid-rule compliance in December, coinciding with local outbreaks of Covid-19 cases in two provinces of China.

With such a picture in mind, what is idol fans' rationale for responding to the key events? Idol fans see participation in events organized by the state and official media as 'being recognized by the state', thus distinguishing their idols from others. For example, being invited to the China Media Group's Spring Festival Gala, a momentous occasion hosted by the China Central TV Station each year, is an honor for idols and their fans. As one interviewee (ZY-Z-0523) pointed out, fans may not treat an idol as superior to others if he/she attended the Gala, but such recognition from the 'official authority' is necessary for idols to stay in the Chinese public sphere. Idol fans believe that public endorsement from the state and official media makes their idol more lovable, likable, and 'worshipable' (ZYS-0523) to the public, and safer, less likely to flop, 'like an iron bowl somehow' (JW-Z-0523).

For idol fans, recognition by the state brings not only material benefits but also political status and reputation for their idols. They are aware that, similar to consuming the cultural products of their idols, recognition from the state will definitely help boost idols' commercial

value (YF-Y-0523). But they value something more than just that. As one interviewee (ZY-Z-0523) pointed out:

> We want to make our idol appear as a high-class artist. To achieve the goal, we need evidence of our idol being invited to and participating in performances/shows by the official media or the state. (Without recognition from the state) no matter how well an idol's album sells, people would consider the idol no more than an online influencer.

Because of this understanding of recognition from the state, more and more idol fans actively construct the 'nationalist' image of idols in public by joining the events hosted or directed by the state and official media or by retweeting the tweets of official accounts of these organizations on special occasions (such as National Day). Through actively engaging with official discourse and events, idol fans play both the commercial logic – boosting their idols' commercial value – and the political logic – boosting their idols' political reputation and status.

Finally, idol fans are not against the notion that fans should follow the state's lead. One interviewee (CZ-Z-0508) argued that fan groups are a huge group, and their online discussion would definitely shape the public discourse; therefore, the state should take advantage of fan groups, strengthen guidance on fan groups and use the fan groups to promote nationalism, which is also acknowledged by the state[vi].

Discussion and Conclusion

Our work examines idol fans' mundane fan activities – idol promotion, and their interaction with the state in these activities on the pandemic-related discussion on social media. The pandemic provides a specific social and political context that allows us to understand better the

interaction between idol fans and the state in mundane fan activities. For idol fans, idol promotion forms an important part of their everyday fan practice. We demonstrate that when engaging in pandemic-related discussion, they actively borrowed official discourse on nationalism and strategically responded to key political and social events in their idol promotion activities. Such fandom nationalism is different from the one identified in existing literature, which idolizes the state and protects the state as an idol in the instance of external political shocks. In our case, idol fans take advantage of the nationalist discourse and play political logic to promote their idols. However, these two fandom nationalisms are connected. The usage of political logic in their everyday fan practices prepares fans for the eruptive nationalism facing external political shocks and can help them easily project the 'love for idols' to the 'love for the state'.

The topic modeling results show that idol fans engaged in the pandemic-related discussion to promote their idols. They actively framed albums, songs, films by idols as contributing to the pandemic and engaged in charity works in the name of their idols. In essence, these activities are typical chart beating behavior of fandom to boost the popularity of idols and create their own star (Yang, 2009). Idol fans in our study behaved similarly to data fans (Negus, 2019; Zhang & Negus, 2020) in that they understood the logic of the celebrity ranking lists on Weibo and actively engaged in posting and commenting to create positive images of idols. What makes them distinct from data fans portrayed in existing studies is the making of nationalist idols. The idol images they built are not only positive but also nationalist.

Our reading and supervised machine learning results show how they use nationalist expressions to build nationalist idols. Idols are role models of positive energy, making positive contributions to society and creating a positive vibe even in difficult times. Idols are loyal to the nation, the people, and the party state in idol fans' public expression of national pride and compliance to rules during the pandemic set by the state. In these fan activities, idol fans are

skillful in reinventing and repacking idols and connecting idols to the nationalist discourse by the state. Idol fans have deliberately framed idols' work as promoting a cheerful mentality, framed charity work and compliance with rules by idol fans as deeds conforming to social norms and expressed cultural/national superiority in difficult times.

Our interviews show idol fans' rationale for using nationalist expressions in idol promotion. Idol fans consider nationalism as loyalty to the national identity and adherence to the state's policies and rules, and they deliberately demonstrated this understanding in their fan posts on Weibo. They also purposively responded to political and social events in promoting their nationalist idols. In addition to commercial strategies such as subway advertisements, music streaming, and crowdfunding, they see participation in events organized by the state and official media as recognition by the state, which can bring both material benefits and political status and reputation for their idols, ultimately boosting the popularity of their idols. Therefore, they play not only the commercial logic common in Japanese and Korean K-pop/idol culture but also the political logic propagated by the state in China. Idol fans demonstrated the characteristic of spontaneous nationalism in that they assert their power and express their ideas and emotions to the nation, the people, and the state (Gries, 2004).

Methodologically, the use of the three-step computational grounded theory framework (Nelson, 2020) for the analysis of the Weibo data provides unique advantages. The unsupervised topic modeling allowed us to identify novel patterns in the data and avoided limiting our analysis to prior knowledge and theories. The remaining two steps – pattern refinement and confirmation – allowed us to validate identified patterns and produce rigorous and reproducible results with workable measurements of different presentations of fan-generated nationalism in China. Furthermore, we complemented our big data analysis with in-depth interviews with idol fans, unraveling the rationale and logic behind their online expression. Together, this mixed-method approach allowed us to map idol fans' nationalist

discourse and unravel their strategies and agencies of using the official culture to glorify and broadcast their idols.

Our work contributes to the research on idol fans in China by further picturing the features of this group and the rationale behind their online activities. We also add to the literature on China's fandom nationalism by unpacking the content and practice of nationalism in fans' mundane activities. More importantly, we discuss its difference and connections to eruptive fandom nationalism under the trigger of specific political events and the projection of making the state the new 'idol' in such scenarios. Future studies can probe the difference between nationalist expressions stimulated by political events and those that are not.

Our findings also have implications for civic engagement in authoritarian regimes. Idol fan groups in our study demonstrate a sophisticated set of skills essential for civic engagement, including but not limited to organizational skills, the ability to understand the official culture and read between lines, and communication skills in making strategic use of official discourse. They cultivate a set of useful engagement rationales and respective tactics in proceeding with their fandom activities in public and social life. Despite the political boundaries for the idol fans and their fan circles, these groups can be a double-edged sword for the authority. From this perspective, a series of crackdowns on unhealthy fandom activities, such as astroturfing and illegal fundraising on Weibo, in the summer of 2021 can be seen as an attempt by the state to rein in potentially destabilizing fandom activities and possible spill-over to other areas. The effect of this move by the state remains to be seen.

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[4] There may be concerns over the existence of bots, water armies, or astroturfing in the dataset. We consider this acceptable in our research object since the bots as data manipulation are among strategies of the datafication of fandom activities—idol fans would buy or manually control bots to boost the positive posts about their idols, and a larger proportion of positive posts means a smaller proportion of negative posts can be seen in the public sphere. Some related reports can be seen: Global Times, Illegal support: idol fan sentenced to five years in prison for app that artificially inflates popularity of social media posts, May 2021. [online] Available at https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1224691.shtml; Masha Borak, Weibo is trying to put a stop to China's extreme celebrity fan culture, Abacus, Jul 20, 2020. [online], Available at https://www.scmp.com/abacus/culture/article/3093941/weibo-trying-put-stop-chinas-extreme-celebrity-fan-culture. [Accessed 16 June 2022]

[5] Contrary to common understanding, idol fans tend to be highly educated. According to the 'Sina Weibo 2020 Entertainment Industry White Paper', 79.8% of idol fans are studying for or already have a college or postgraduate degree. Our sample of idol fans selected for the interview matches this composition of idol fans on Weibo. Please see http://f.sinaimg.cn/ent/2020/2020WeiBoYuLeBaiPiShu.pdf, accessed November 5, 2022.

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