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The Generation of Willingness to Pay in Cross-Platform Fan Communities: A Comparative Study of the Mutual Constitution of Platform Policies and Community Behavioral Dynamics

Yuxi Chen

Humanities College, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China
1308979077@qq.com

Abstract. The proliferation of platform-based fan communities has transformed how cultural content is produced, consumed, and monetized, yet the relationship between platform payment architectures and the cultural norms that emerge within fan communities remains poorly understood. As platforms increasingly shape not only what fans can pay for but also how payment itself is understood, understanding how payment cultures are generated across different platform environments has become urgent. This study examines how platform monetization policies and fan community norms interact across four platforms—Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Lofter, and AO3—to generate distinct and self-reinforcing payment cultures. Through a comparative case study design incorporating community observation, textual analysis, and semi-structured interviews with 16 active members, we identify four consumption models arrayed along two axes: consumption drive (commercial vs. affective) and linkage mode (collective vs. atomistic). A self-constructed commercialization index reveals a negative correlation between platform commercialization intensity and perceived community agency, suggesting that less intensive platform governance may paradoxically foster deeper community loyalty on members' own terms. Content creators emerge as pivotal mediators in this bidirectional feedback loop.

Keywords: fan community, platform culture, payment willingness, behavioral dynamics

1. Introduction

Digital platforms where fan communities gather have become stages of significant economic and cultural importance. Over the past fifteen years, Chinese fan communities have migrated from early internet forums and Baidu Tieba to a fragmented, multi-platform ecosystem encompassing Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Lofter, and AO3. These distinctly different institutional frameworks collectively shape what constitutes payment within each community, who benefits from it, and how society evaluates these practices. Recent academic research has significantly deepened our understanding of "platform-based fan culture." Yin and Xie introduced the concept of "platform-based language games" to explain how Chinese fan communities on Weibo have developed unique discursive

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practices by selectively appropriating the logic of social media [1]. In parallel research, Cui and Wu proposed an "operational perspective" on fan culture, arguing that fans' routinized and interconnected practices across multiple platforms should be viewed as a new logic of participation that gives rise to unique identities and lifestyles [2]. Based on ten months of fieldwork, James developed the theory of "emotional engagement from the in-between" [3]. Zhang, adopting a platform ecology perspective, demonstrated how fans flow between commercial platforms, fan-operated platforms, and external platforms [4]. Shen and Hallinan revealed how platform policies construct relationships between users and idols through intimate connections behind paywalls [5]. Furthermore, a growing body of research has explored fan labor and data production within the context of platform capitalism (Zhang and Neges), as well as platform governance and the regulation of fan communities [6, 7]. Most existing research treats individual platforms as self-contained universes, comparing monetization mechanisms as static features rather than viewing them as dynamic forces that co-evolve with community responses. Although scholars have called for greater attention to cross-platform fan practices, few studies have systematically examined how different platform policies dynamically interact with community behavior to shape distinct and self-reinforcing paid fan cultures over time [4].

This study fills this research gap by examining the bidirectional interaction between payment structures and fan community practices on four platforms: Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Lofter, and AO3. Unlike previous studies that focused solely on a single platform or cultural practice, we explicitly compare how monetization policies across different platforms interact with community dynamics to give rise to distinct consumer cultures. We pose the following questions: (1) How do these platforms' monetization policies interact with the dynamics of their respective fan communities to produce unique and self-reinforcing consumption cultures? (2) What mediating role do content creators play in this two-way process? What relationships exist between the intensity of a platform's commercialization and individuals' consumption habits as well as their perceptions of community agency? This study employs a comparative case study design, combining structured questionnaire data (N=180 valid responses) to construct a "platform-community two-way interaction" model that transcends the one-way narrative of platform power. This approach aims to address the pressing need to understand how platform policies and community norms mutually constitute one another, particularly in light of the current trend toward the increasing platformization and commercialization of fan culture.

2. Theoretical framework

This study builds on three theoretical pillars. First, platformization theory provides the foundational premise: digital platforms are not neutral infrastructures but active organizers of social and economic life. Drawing on Kornberger et al.'s concept of "evaluative infrastructures," we treat platforms' ranking systems, recommendation algorithms, gamification mechanisms, and payment interfaces as accounting devices that establish orders of worth—they do not merely facilitate transactions but construct what counts as valuable behavior, whom it benefits, and how it should be evaluated [8]. This lens helps us analyze how Bilibili's leaderboards, Xiaohongshu's algorithmic curation, Lofter's gift-unlock logic, and AO3's donation charter each instantiate a distinct evaluative regime. Second, the moral economy of fan consumption informs our understanding of how communities interpret and normalize payment practices. Following Liang and Shen and Drenten et al., we recognize that the same monetary transfer can be framed as a transaction, gift, or donation depending on the social context in which it occurs [9, 10]. Platforms' payment tools do not determine this framing unilaterally; rather, they provide raw materials that communities, often led by

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creators, actively interpret and transform into shared normative frameworks. This allows us to examine how each platform's evaluative infrastructure interacts with community meaning-making to produce distinct consumption logics. Third, Foucault's capillary power theory provides the political dimension [11]. We treat platforms as apparatuses that produce consumer subjects not through coercion but through the shaping of desires and the normalization of practices. Two concepts are particularly useful: "regimes of truth" (each platform establishes micro-truths about what constitutes "good" consumption) and "governmentality" (platforms govern by making users want what the platform needs them to want). This perspective reveals that platform consumption norms are not naturally occurring but politically constructed—and therefore open to contestation and renegotiation by communities.

Synthesizing these three strands, we propose a bidirectional feedback loop model that serves as the analytical framework for this study: (1) platforms set behavioral scripts for consumption through evaluative infrastructures; (2) communities (led by creators) appropriate, reinterpret, and ritualize these scripts into shared norms; (3) these norms, through collective practices and occasional confrontations, exert reverse pressure on platforms, reinforcing or modifying policy trajectories. This model positions creators as the critical hinge in the loop—translating platform signals into community language and channeling community expectations back to platforms.

3. Research methods

This study employs a multiple-case holistic design [12]. Around comparable media texts, one fan community was purposefully selected on each of four platforms—Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Lofter, and AO3—yielding four cases in total. Case selection aimed to maximize variation along two dimensions: platform monetization logic (for-profit vs. non-profit; gamified vs. gift-oriented; commercially integrated vs. prohibited) and the type of evaluative infrastructure deployed.

Community selection criteria for each platform: (1) the IP type is domestic online literature or domestic animation (ensuring cross-platform comparability); (2) active community membership is at least 5,000 (estimated via publicly available platform indicators such as super-topic followers, topic discussion volume, or tag-based work counts); (3) the community exhibits observable payment/donation behaviors (tipping records, charging data, crowdfunding participation, etc.); (4) the community has been active for no fewer than 12 months.

Data collection employed three primary sources.

(a) Community observation: routine interactions, consumption-related discussions, and responses to platform policy changes were documented.

(b) Textual corpus: platform policy documents, community rules, and consumption-related public posts were systematically collected.

(c) Semi-structured interviews: 16 active members (3-4 per community, including content creators) were recruited through purposive sampling via community announcements and super-topic posts, with selection criteria of platform usage ≥2 years, at least one payment/donation on the target platform, and community interaction ≥3 times per week. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes each (approximately 20 hours total) and were conducted online via instant messaging and audio calls.

Interviews centered on four dimensions: experiences with platform payment features, decision-making processes behind payment behaviors, community norms, and cross-platform differences. Sixteen respondents were recruited through purposive sampling (4 per platform on Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Lofter, and AO3, each including at least one creator). The sample comprised 14 females and 2 males, aged 19–33 (mean 24.7), with internet experience of 9–18 years (mean 13.2)

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and fandom involvement of 4–15 years (mean 8.6). Thirteen of the 16 reported active participation across multiple platforms.

(d) A structured questionnaire (N=180 valid responses, including those who selected "not in any fan community" or "other" for platform affiliation) provided descriptive statistics on consumption patterns, platform policy perceptions, and community norms. The majority were young adults aged 18-24 (75.0%), followed by those aged 25-30 (15.0%), with smaller proportions under 18 (4.4%), 31-35 (4.4%), and above 35 (1.1%). Female respondents constituted the largest gender group (62.2%), followed by males (29.4%), with non-binary or undisclosed gender accounting for the remainder (8.3%). In terms of platform reach—considering both primary affiliation and cross-platform usage—Bilibili and Xiaohongshu were the most widely used, each reaching over three-quarters of the sample, while Lofter and AO3, though smaller in primary-user numbers, nonetheless achieved substantial cross-platform reach (e.g., AO3 was reported by 23.3% of respondents, or 42 individuals, as one of their active platforms). Nearly all respondents (approximately 90%) reported being simultaneously active on more than one platform. Regarding community tenure, over half of respondents (55.6%) had been active in their primary fan community for more than two years, and 21.1% for one to two years, indicating that the sample skews toward experienced, deeply engaged participants rather than casual newcomers.

This study adopts a theory-driven weighting approach to construct two novel indices:

Platform Commercialization Index: a weighted composite score (0-100) derived from five dimensions. Based on the three properties of evaluative infrastructures (relationality, generativity, protocol), the five dimensions were ranked by theoretical centrality

- Payment penetration rate (Q3, weight 20%): proportion of users with consumption behavior
- High-spender proportion (Q4, weight 20%): proportion of users spending over 1,000 yuan
- Transactional perception (Q7, weight 25%): proportion of users selecting "transaction" as the platform's monetization feel
- Functional dependency (Q8, weight 20%): proportion of users feeling "very disappointed" if payment features were removed
- Non-affective consumption drive (Q6A, weight 15%): average proportion of respondents selecting "seeding (grass-planting)," "identity ranking," and "atmosphere-driven."

Scores 80-104 indicate "high consumerism," 55-79 "moderate consumption habits," 30-54 "light consumption habits," and 0-29 "low consumption/resistance."

The results are shown in Figure 1.

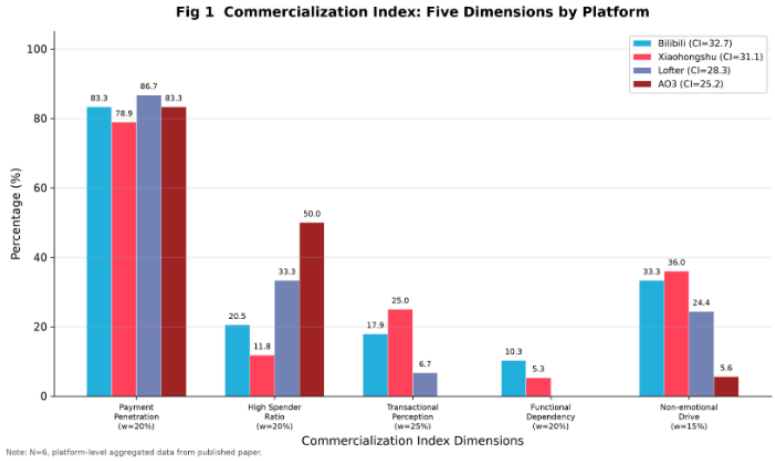

Figure 1. Commercialization index: five dimensions by platform

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(b) Personal Consumption Habit Score (0-104):

Weighting Logic for Personal Consumption Habit Score (Abridged)

Each dimension is weighted according to a progressive logic of consumption intensity and degree of commercialization:

- Q3 (Whether consumed): Binary (20/0), sets the basic threshold for consumption behavior, equal weight to Q4.
- Q4 (Spending amount): Tiered scoring (5/10/15/18/20), 501-1000 bracket receives 18 (below >1000's 20), reflecting diminishing marginal discrimination.
- Q5 (Willingness to pay): Attitudinal quantification (25/20/12/5/0), the highest weight, as willingness is presumed to lead consumption behavior.
- Q6A(Non-affective consumption): Three items at 8 each (seeding/identity ranking/atmosphere-driven), totaling 24, reflecting non-gift consumption motives.
- Q7 (Transactional perception): Perception scoring (transaction 15/competition 10/gift 5/unsure 0), distinguishing the core axis between commercialized and affective consumption.

Score ranges (80-104 high / 55-79 moderate / 30-54 light / 0-29 resistance) are based on natural breaks in score distribution.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis for within-case analysis, identifying how each community interpreted platform monetization tools, normalized consumption behaviors, and responded to policy changes. Cross-case comparison was structured along the two axes of the proposed typology.

4. Case analysis: four consumption models

4.1. Bilibili: the collective-commercial model (the competitive gifting loop)

Bilibili's evaluative infrastructure—leaderboards, "Grand Voyage" membership tiers, and charging rankings—incentivizes competitive gifting. The platform provides behavioral scripts through visible, gamified hierarchies; creators adapt by mobilizing fans toward collective goals; and communities ritualize consumption as a public display of loyalty that strengthens overall community identity. Atmosphere-driven consumption accounts for the highest proportion across all four platforms at 37.2%, and the platform's commercialization index stands at 32.7 out of 100.

4.2. Xiaohongshu: the atomistic-commercial model (the trust-commerce loop)

Xiaohongshu's evaluative infrastructure—recommendation algorithms, review ecosystems, and integrated e-commerce—creates a trust-driven consumption loop. The platform frames consumption as an informed choice in a spirit of "sincere sharing"; creators cultivate authentic personas; and users make purchasing decisions based on the perceived trustworthiness of specific individuals. Consumption linkage is one-to-many (creator to fans), forming a network of atomized trust relationships. Seeding (grass-planting)-driven consumption dominates on Xiaohongshu at 68.4%, while its transactional perception is 25.0%.

4.3. Lofter: the atomistic-affective model (the intimate gift loop)

Lofter's evaluative infrastructure—gift-unlock mechanisms, tipping systems, and creator-fan interaction design—cultivates an intimate gift economy. The platform constructs consumption as a personal exchange between creators and fans; creators strategically manage intimacy boundaries;

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and communities construct consumption as relational gift-giving. The connection is deeply personal: "I support this specific creator because their work moves me." On Lofter, gift perception reaches 60%, whereas transactional perception is only 6.7%.

4.4. AO3: the collective-affective model (the moralized donation loop)

AO3's evaluative infrastructure—donation system, anti-commercial charter, and community governance—generates moral lock-in. The platform defines consumption as civic maintenance of a public good; creators embrace anti-commercial ethics; and communities develop strong normative prohibitions against monetization. Individual donations are collective rituals reinforcing shared moral identity. If payment features were removed from AO3, the disappointment rate would be zero, and 31% of users believe the platform would actually be better off without them.

5. Cross-case comparison and discussion

5.1. A two-dimensional typology of four-platform consumption models

The four cases synthesize into a two-dimensional typology along consumption drive (commercial vs. affective) and linkage mode (collective vs. atomistic). Bilibili falls into the "Collective-Commercial" quadrant; Xiaohongshu, the "Atomistic-Commercial"; Lofter, the "Atomistic-Affective"; and AO3, the "Collective-Affective."

5.2. The paradox of platform commercialization policies

The commercialization index reveals a clear hierarchy: Bilibili (32.7), Xiaohongshu (31.1), Lofter (28.3), and AO3 (25.2). Critically, a negative correlation emerges between commercialization level and perceived community agency. This finding extends Vallas and Schor's [11] concept of "permissive potentates," suggesting that the direction platforms "permit" can be bidirectional: toward commercial competition (Bilibili) or toward community autonomy (AO3). The more a platform attempts to reinforce its discursive power through commercialization, the more it may inadvertently weaken community affective bonds and provoke moral resistance. Conversely, when platforms de-emphasize commerciality, community agency strengthens—paradoxically producing a more sustainable consumption culture, but one directed by the community rather than the platform. Supporting evidence: users in high-commercialization environments are 3.6 times more likely to exhibit high consumerism than those in low-commercialization environments; there is a 55.3% versus 11.1% gap in perceived community pressure; AO3's zero "disappointment" rate versus Bilibili's 10.3% if payment features were removed.

5.3. Cross-analysis of personal commercialization environment and consumption habits

As shown in Figure 2, cross-tabulation reveals that among users in high-commercialization environments, 33.3% are high consumerists and only 4.2% are low-consumption/resisters; among those in low-commercialization environments, 9.3% are high consumerists and 20.9% are low-consumption/resisters. The Chi-square test confirms a significant positive correlation ($\chi^2 \approx 24.5$, $p<0.001$). Average personal consumption habit scores: Bilibili (62.5) > Xiaohongshu (58.7) > Lofter (55.3) > AO3-associated users (54.2).

Creators serve as core mediators of mutual constitution across all four cases. They translate platforms' evaluative infrastructures into community norms and relay community expectations back

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to platforms. Depending on platform contexts, they act as competitive mobilizers, trust-building entrepreneurs, intimacy managers, and moral guardians respectively. Their dual ecological position is not fixed but recursively co-produced alongside platform evaluative regimes, supporting the study's mutual-constitution model.

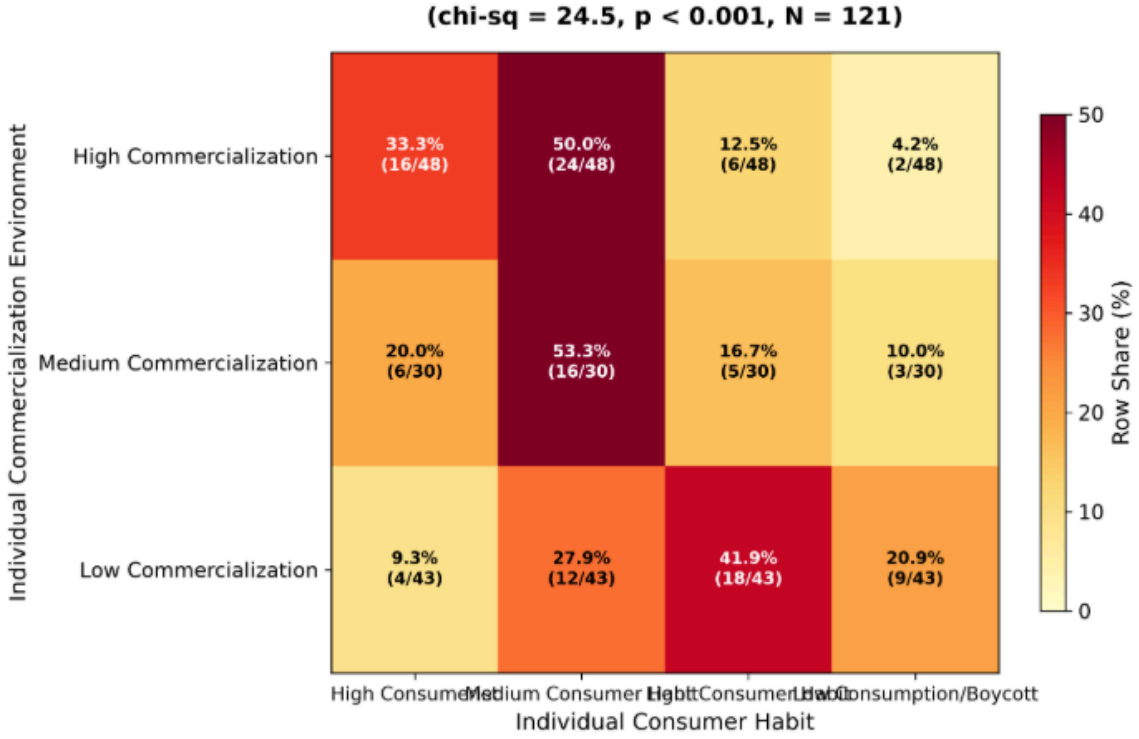

Figure 2. Commercialization environment×consumer habit cross-analysis

6. Conclusion

The answer lies not in any single variable but in the ongoing, bidirectional interaction between platforms' evaluative infrastructures and communities' normative engines. Each platform has evolved a distinctive consumption model through a feedback loop. At the heart of each loop are content creators. The significant positive correlation between the commercialization environment and consumption habit intensity confirms the role of platforms' evaluative infrastructures as disciplinary apparatuses. Yet the negative correlation between commercialization and community agency reveals a paradox: the most lightly governed platforms may cultivate the most deeply loyal communities—but on the community's own terms. This study has one primary limitation. The cross-sectional nature of the case comparison limits our ability to fully trace the temporal dynamics of the feedback loop, as we observe each platform-community ecosystem at a single point in time rather than tracking its evolution through policy changes and community responses over time. Future research could pursue longitudinal studies tracking single communities through platform policy changes, or examine moments of "loop rupture" when platform policy changes encounter strong community resistance, revealing the boundary conditions of the mutual constitution framework.

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