

# Intentional echo chamber management: Chinese celebrity fans' information-seeking and sense-making practices on social media

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to investigate how Chinese celebrity fans seek and make sense of information oriented toward their interpretations of celebrities while deliberately forming and managing their own echo chambers. These activities provide insights into how contemporary people can obtain information online not to gain knowledge but only to reinforce beliefs and how echo chambers can be shaped not only by the human subconscious and online algorithms but also by intentionality and mastery of platform functions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study uses unobtrusive observation and semi-structured interviews to investigate the information practices among a social media-based fan community surrounding two Chinese musical actors, Ayanga and Yunlong.

**Findings** – Fans selectively process sought information to match their predetermined interpretations while intentionally following like-minded people and blocking differing views. As fans themselves acknowledge this practice of forming and managing echo chambers, they ground their subjectivity in compartmentalization of fantasy and reality: defining fandom as playful, imaginary and existing only in their own minds, fans accept only information that reinforces their interpretations, yet when “serious” matters occur in celebrities’ realities, fans break out of their chambers to seek alternative information sources and form less biased perceptions.

**Originality/value** – The celebrity fan practices examined in this study indicate that, nowadays, people have evolved from intuitively and inductively acquiring information to actively dictating what information they interact with on social media, using echo chamber management as one way to assert this agency.

**Keywords** Information-seeking, Information sense-making, Echo chamber, Predetermined interpretations, Subjectivity, Online agency

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

As contemporary celebrity fans conduct their practices on social media, they often seek and make sense of abundant information that centers on their interpretations of celebrities (Lin, 2020). Through intentional adaptation of social media features, fans actively manage the interpretation-centered information they receive and interact with, individually and collectively, to ensure it aligns with their fandom pleasure and beliefs. For example, after interpreting a celebrity as having a “sweet boy” personality, fans may search online for cute photos of that celebrity for enjoyment while also using this content to validate their “sweet boy” perception. Similarly, when fans interpret two celebrities as “secret lovers,” they may seek clues in interviews and shows that they believe prove the celebrities’ “intimacy,” further solidifying their interpretation. As fans seek and make sense of this information, they use

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platform functions to build like-minded networks by following, blocking, “liking” and “disliking” relevant accounts and/or content. These activities are especially prevalent within Chinese celebrity fan culture, where, for millions of fans and fan groups, consuming celebrity-interpretation-related information is an indispensable part of daily online practice (Lin, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

Both scholarship and the Chinese public hold a negative attitude toward these activities, believing that fans seek and make sense of information only within unknowingly formed online echo chambers (Figà Talamanca and Arfini, 2022; Wei, 2021). Some scholars suggest that since fans subconsciously seek information congruent with their interpretations, a tendency that is intensified by social media algorithms, they remain biased toward a singular perspective on a celebrity without realizing they lack objective information (Wei, 2021). Supporting this scholarly view, many common Chinese netizens consider celebrity fans “brainless” for consuming only their own thinking while neglecting to access “real” knowledge. However, fans often argue online that these judgments oversimplify the explicit logics that drive fans to seek and make sense of information, claiming that their echo chambers are not formed “unknowingly” or “brainlessly” but are carefully managed by underlying intentionality.

In this way, Chinese celebrity fans appear to propose new perspectives on information-seeking and sense-making and on echo chambers, which warrant scholarly exploration to not only justify fandom practices but also deepen information sciences research at large. On one hand, investigating these fans’ logics and behaviors can help challenge the perception and stigmatization of fans as “brainless” by offering evidence of their critical reasoning (Jenkins, 1992). On the other hand, the exploration can showcase how people seek and make sense of information not to solve problems or generate new knowledge as described in existing scholarship (Gorichanaz, 2018; Ocepek, 2018), but to enjoy and reinforce their predetermined interpretations. It can also enhance scholarly understandings of the echo chamber effect, especially on how chambers can be shaped not only by the human subconscious and by platform algorithms (Colleoni *et al.*, 2014) but also by users’ intentionality and mastery of social media functions. In a broader sense, studying celebrity fans, who are already regarded as experts in navigating online spaces (Yin, 2020), has the potential to help understand how contemporary netizens develop their practices while negotiating with online features in the evolving digital age.

This research investigates Chinese celebrity fans’ interpretation-centered information-seeking and sense-making as well as their intentional management of echo chambers on social media. Based on unobtrusive observation and sequential semi-structured interviews, this paper foregrounds fans’ own perspectives and presents findings on (1) how fans individually seek and make sense of information to match their predetermined interpretations while deliberately using platform functions to manage echo chambers; (2) how fans collectively make sense of their sought information to further reinforce their interpretations and (3) how fans embrace the inherent subjectivity and imaginative nature of their fandom and how they “break” their echo chambers to process more serious real-world matters. These fans’ ongoing, interpretation-oriented information-seeking and/or sense-making practices and the compartmentalization of fantasy and reality they accomplish in managing echo chambers exemplify how broader social media practices have evolved from intuitive and inductive knowledge acquisition to active dictation of what information is to be accepted and consumed.

## Background

### *Information-seeking and sense-making*

Information-seeking and sense-making has been a critical research topic in information sciences since the 1990s, when Savolainen (1995) built the foundational approach that regards information not as an entity apart from human activity but as a transmission constructed by human information behaviors. Savolainen (1995) separates information-seeking and sense-making into two dimensions – seeking *orienting* information to understand current events and seeking *practical* information to solve a specific problem – both of which emphasize how people

deal with information to keep things in order. Multiple scholars adopt this theory to investigate human information behavior in specific contexts, such as dining out (Aspray *et al.*, 2014), backpacking (Chang, 2009) and learning about diseases (McCaughan and McKenna, 2007). Some literature further argues that information behavior research should not stop at considering how people identify information sources but should investigate how a person is “being informed” and how they gain “the associated knowledge” throughout the sense-making process (Gorichanaz, 2018, p. 143). Scholars also focus on how people interact with information on a personal and fundamental level, namely the “meaning making” wherein individuals compare new information with their previous experiences and knowledge (Ocepek, 2018, p. 405).

As social media progressively becomes an essential part of everyday life, scholars also increasingly explore how individuals seek and make sense of information on these platforms. It is pointed out that young people in particular consider social media a significant information source that can fulfill their regular information needs (Hamid *et al.*, 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2014). Akin to Savolainen’s (1995) theory, the purposes of information-seeking on social media can also be generally categorized into two aspects: (1) seeking opinions or background knowledge related to certain situations (e.g. going to a new school; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Sin, 2015) and (2) seeking solutions for specific problems (e.g. easing a health issue). Some scholars further address how hobbyists, such as amateur genealogists, urban explorers, food bloggers, etc., casually seek and exchange information in their online community spaces to enrich their knowledge and support their hobby-related research (Cox and Blake, 2011; Fulton, 2009, 2017). In the context of fandom, existing research explores how fans gather fan fiction from different online platforms (Hill and Pecoskie, 2017), consume information for their own fandom pleasure (Price, 2017; Price and Robinson, 2016) and gain information through observing other fans’ interactions (Waugh, 2018). While these findings may be partially transferable to information behaviors in other online contexts, scholarship has yet to adequately discuss how information-seeking is ultimately driven by intense passions and information sense-making can be inherently guided by personal interpretations and beliefs, a gap that is explored by examining fan practices in this paper.

#### *Echo chamber effect*

By definition, the “echo chamber effect” occurs when a group of people with similar views interact primarily with one another while seeking information that only confirms and reinforces their perceptions (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Sunstein, 2009). In the age of social media, scholars believe that many users fall into online echo chambers due to both their own subconscious and platform algorithms (Figà Talamance and Arfini, 2022; Song *et al.*, 2024). Describing it as a “self-filtering” process, research highlights that people on social media tend to look for and consume information aligning with their prior beliefs, during which process they resonate and build social ties with other like-minded people (McPherson *et al.*, 2001; Moe *et al.*, 2023; Santos, 2021). The effect of these subconsciously formed echo chambers is considered to be further enhanced by social media algorithms and operators that provide filtered feeds to users based on their existing preferences and block them from reality (Avin *et al.*, 2024; Colleoni *et al.*, 2014; Himelboim *et al.*, 2013). Often regarding it as a negative phenomenon, scholars argue that, especially in political settings, the echo chamber effect tends to diverge netizens into extremely separate groups and thus encourages homophily and polarization (Colleoni *et al.*, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2014). This may further increase both the spread of misinformation and the growth of ideological radicalism among online and offline societies (Bastoin *et al.*, 2018; Vicario *et al.*, 2016; Wojcieszak, 2010).

Inheriting this common view of the echo chamber effect, scholars often consider celebrity fans a typical “example” of being negatively affected by online echo chambers. Chinese celebrity fans in particular are reported to be biased and deceived as they “unknowingly” and “inevitably” echo each other’s opinions and consume only information promoted by social media platforms to suit their fandom pleasure (Wei, 2021). While some studies argue that

contemporary people tend to avoid the online echo chamber effect, motivated by their distrust of social media to adopt additional information sources (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Dutton *et al.*, 2017; Newman *et al.*, 2017), scholars have yet to discuss how users, especially Chinese celebrity fans, may start to seek control of this effect when interacting with information online.

### *Chinese celebrity fandom influenced by social media*

Contemporary Chinese celebrity fan culture is publicly recognized as “malformed” and “chaotic” (Lin, 2020); scholars believe that, in addition to the echo chamber effect, fans are further influenced by social media algorithms that entice them to obsessively create promotional information and to fight with each other extensively (Guo, 2022; Yin, 2020; Zhang and Negus, 2020). Research points out that it has become a primary mission among fans to generate more “traffic data” for their celebrity by fulfilling daily social media requirements for “voting, topic posting, reposting, and commenting” (Yin, 2020, p. 481). Many fans thus identify themselves as voluntary “digital workers” who devote free labor for platform-promoted data contribution (Lyu, 2021; Zhang, 2016). Meanwhile, when reading “negative” posts about their celebrities, many fans are encouraged to engage in fierce arguments or report those posts to the platform (Lin, 2020). Unlike “stan fans” who seek personal gratification in frequently arguing and posting about celebrities or ousting certain group members (Bercero and Abadiano, 2021; Deller, 2018), Chinese fans are driven by a supposed “obligation” to boost traffic data and maintain a “clean” online space for their celebrity while negotiating with platform algorithms and containing their fandom within a manageable circle (Lin, 2020; Zhang, 2019, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). While these social media-influenced practices contribute to the scholarly perception of fan culture as “chaotic” and the public perception of fans themselves as “brainless” (Zhang, 2020), fans’ explicit understandings and information practices are rarely explored.

In general, while these scholarly findings enlighten this study, the review of previous literature reveals two major research gaps: (1) a deeper connection between netizens’ information activities with fandom passions and beliefs, which can expand how scholars explain people’s information-seeking and sense-making as “to understand situations,” “to solve problems” and “to gain pleasure” (e.g. Hamid *et al.*, 2016; Price, 2017; Savolainen, 1995) and (2) a less passive side of online echo chambers and seemingly chaotic fan practices, which may surpass how scholars understand netizens as being entirely manipulated by their subconscious, platform algorithms, or “obligative” fan culture (e.g. Avin *et al.*, 2024; Lin, 2020; Song *et al.*, 2024). To address these gaps, this paper thus foregrounds fans’ own perspectives, passions and logics to investigate their information-seeking and sense-making in connection with the echo chamber effect and social media algorithmic functions.

### **Methods**

As a portion of a broader project studying celebrity fans’ information behaviors, this research uses unobtrusive observation and semi-structured interviews to examine the practices amongst a broad, social media-based fan community surrounding two Chinese musical actors, Yunlong Zheng and Ayanga. Since their rise to fame in the 2018 reality show *SuperVocal*, both actors have attracted over one million fans who conduct daily information activities on Weibo, the largest Chinese social media platform. Sharing similarities with Twitter, Weibo allows users to create and like and/or dislike (re)posts and comments that can contain text, images, hashtags, links and @s. While people can choose to read a default feed populated only by users on their following lists, Weibo’s interface also provides an additional algorithm-based feed with recommended posts from mostly unfollowed accounts; users can ignore and comment on this secondary feed while following and/or blocking those accounts and asking Weibo to reduce recommendations of certain content or authors. Meanwhile, Weibo offers a unique “supertopic” function that enables users to build community spaces based on interests

(e.g. a movie, a hobby, a celebrity, etc.); thus, celebrity fans often request Weibo administrators to form specific supertopics for their celebrities.

Within the broad fan base surrounding Ayanga and Yunlong, three major supertopics are established by three groups of fans who (1) exclusively love Ayanga, (2) exclusively love Yunlong and (3) love both actors while considering them a “couple,” either friends or lovers. Referencing themselves as Ayanga-exclusive, Yunlong-exclusive and couple (CP) fans, these fans conduct abundant information-seeking and sense-making activities oriented toward their interpretations of two primary facets of both actors: their individual personalities and their relationship. As the active information practices within these fan groups make a fruitful site for this research, the three supertopics became the main spaces for observation data collection and interview recruitment.

*Unobtrusive observation*

To leave fans’ opinions and actions uninterrupted, observation was conducted unobtrusively between June and August 2021 in two steps to collect and analyze fans’ interpretations and information practices. Step one was to identify general interpretation categories for the two facets of Ayanga and Yunlong, personality and relationship, across all three fan groups. Data collection was conducted by browsing the three supertopics and looking for descriptive (re) posts and comments containing sentences like, “Yunlong is a strong person in that [. . .]”, “I think Ayanga is so sweet [. . .]” and “Ayanga and Yunlong are so intimate [. . .]”. As each fan may hold their own unique interpretations, the goal was to identify and record the most common ideas amongst their interpretations. Thus, initial coding terms such as “nice,” “sweet,” “strong,” “stubborn,” “being friends,” etc. were established in observation memos to describe fans’ viewpoints of the actors’ personalities and relationships. Observation ended when over one million posts (created by fans between early 2019 and mid-2021) were browsed and when there were no new interpretation ideas to discover.

The codes were then inductively analyzed by the author following [Elo and Kyngäs’ \(2008\)](#) “open coding, coding sheets, grouping, creating categories, abstracting” (p. 109) process that allows more generalized names for categories to flow from the data. Eventually, fans’ interpretations of Ayanga’s and Yunlong’s personalities and relationship were generally classified into eight distinct categories, namely Ayanga as *alpha male* or *sweet boy*, Yunlong as *strong* or *fragile* and their relationship as *friends*, *lovers*, *acquaintances* and *enemies* (see [Table 1](#)). These interpretation categories were then employed throughout this research as fundamental but neutral fandom elements ([Lin, 2020](#)) to examine how fans seek and make sense of information centering on these interpretations (rather than comparing how fans may act differently based on each different interpretation).

Step two in observation was to select 80 active Weibo fan accounts (each with a minimum of 1,500 (re)posts and representing each of the eight interpretations) as the primary subjects for observing fans’ information practices. Fans’ (re)posts and comments from early 2019 to mid-2021 were looked through; since it is difficult to readily identify fans’ exact information-seeking practices from the basic observation setup, the observation emphasized three types of information: (1) fans’ posted understandings about information-seeking and echo chambers, (2) fans’ elaborations on how they perceive their sought information and (3) fans’ following

**Table 1.** Fans’ interpretations of Ayanga and Yunlong

|         | Personality |           | Relationship |         |               |         |
|---------|-------------|-----------|--------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| Ayanga  | Alpha male  | Sweet boy | Lovers       | Friends | Acquaintances | Enemies |
| Yunlong | Strong      | Fragile   |              |         |               |         |

**Source(s):** Table by the author

lists. Notes and memos written during observation were once again open coded, grouped, categorized and abstracted following [Elo and Kyngäs' \(2008\)](#) inductive approach; these results also served as reference in the sequential interview design and data analysis.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

The research then moved to semi-structured interviews with 30 individual fans (ages 18–50) who were recruited from the 80 observees with convenience sampling and theoretical sampling ([Charmaz, 2014](#)) and whose interpretations span all eight interpretation categories. Conducted via WeChat voice call and guided by a list of open-ended questions, the interviews regarding the section about fans' information-seeking and/or sense-making and echo chambers often lasted 30–60 min and were recorded with fan consent. The conversations began with fans' own fandom experiences and how they interpret Ayanga and/or Yunlong as well as their relationship. The sequential questions emphasized how fans obtain information, what content most interests them, how they perceive the information they sought and how they understand and engage with echo chambers. Integrating these interview transcripts with observational results, the data were analyzed following [Braun and Clarke's \(2012\)](#) thematic analysis approach to examine the patterns and themes in fans' information-seeking and/or sense-making and echo chamber practices. Findings are presented as three sections in this paper, emphasizing (1) from an individual perspective, how fans seek and make sense of information as they are oriented by their interpretations, while forming an echo chamber for themselves and actively managing it; (2) from a collective perspective, how fans together make sense of their sought information to further validate each other's interpretations and (3) how fans perceive and react to the limitations of their echo chamber-centered practices.

### *Translation and research ethics*

Following [Cormier's \(2018\)](#) “late translation” approach that suggests keeping participants' words in their original dominant language “as long as possible” (p. 336), this study carried out both data collection (observation and interviews) and analysis in Mandarin Chinese, while essential elements such as findings, quotes, screenshots, etc. were translated into English by the author upon concluding the research. To address the ethical challenges that may be raised by observation (quoting without permission) and interviews (causing harm to participants), this study will not quote any individual fan's words in the original Mandarin or reveal any fan's account and/or real name but will attribute translated quotes only to fan groups for the purpose of identifying general types and patterns of interpretations and behaviors. All interviews were conducted with participants' informed consent. All interview participants were free to share as much or as little as they wished with any interview questions, and they had the option of withdrawing from the study. The identifiable data in both observation and interview processes remain confidential and securely stored on the author's password-secured computer, and the author is the only researcher with access to these restricted files of this study.

## **Fans' information practices from an individual perspective**

### *Interpretation-oriented information-seeking and sense-making*

While Ayanga and/or Yunlong fans are often motivated by pure fandom enjoyment to look for celebrity-centered information ([Duffett, 2013](#); [Lin, 2020](#)), an interpretation-oriented purpose implicitly underlies their information-seeking and sense-making. After establishing their interpretations of the actor(s), fans frequently engage in both specifically seeking interpretation-related content and generally searching for more information from fan-created posts or officially released materials. One interview participant (a pro-*sweet-boy*, pro-*acquaintances* Ayanga-exclusive fan) shared her experiences:

I usually search for Ayanga's previous pictures, videos, and interviews . . . I really like finding his childlike moments, like there's one time he kept playing with a stuffed animal during an interview, and he often wears hats or bags with Pikachu on it. I also love how he speaks to other people, it's just so cute . . . Besides these, I go to the Ayanga supertopic to see if other fans have found materials that I didn't, and some cute fanart depicting Ayanga as a baby sheep or a bunny . . . Oh, sometimes I also look up his name with "cute", "funny", "gentle", or "Pikachu", and it's much easier to find stuff I like or missed in this way.

This statement exemplifies a common form of interpretation-based information-seeking and sense-making. While discussing her broad information-seeking behaviors, this participant also naturally tried to make her interpretation of Ayanga as a *sweet boy* more convincing by explaining her sense-making process, demonstrating that she perceived most information as reinforcing her view. Similar intuitive attempts surfaced during interviews with other fans, suggesting that fans can selectively process generally sought information to match their pre-established interpretations and that they consider such sense-making a natural rather than deliberate fandom practice. That fans also conduct more specific searches using interpretation-oriented keywords further highlights their underlying expectations that the acquired information should not only provide them enjoyment (e.g. appreciating Ayanga's cuteness) but also confirm and enrich their interpretations (e.g. Ayanga being a *sweet boy*).

While fans primarily seek information that aligns with their interpretations, they may still encounter content on Weibo that opposes their views. This is mainly because fans often post about their differing interpretations of the actor(s)' personalities and relationships (e.g. *alpha male* vs. *sweet boy*, *lovers* vs. *enemies*) in supertopics, making this content easily browsable by others. Therefore, in cases when fans come across opposing opinions, they may feel compelled to seek information in a more intense way to reassure their beliefs. For instance, one interview participant (a pro-*alpha-male*, pro-*fragile* and pro-*lovers* CP fan) shared her experiences:

There was a time when I often saw exclusive fans on both sides claiming how Ayanga and Yunlong betrayed each other . . . Like once Yunlong-exclusive fans said Ayanga stole a job opportunity of endorsing Li-Ning [a sportswear company] from Yunlong, obviously you can tell how impossible that could be. So, I just went back and checked a lot of initial posts about this gossip and from people who might work in Li-Ning, and it showed Ayanga was the original person for this job and those Yunlong-exclusive fans were lunatics.

This statement demonstrates that fans become more determined in seeking and making sense of information in order to dispute opposing views and validate their interpretations. Many interview participants also implied that when their beliefs are challenged, they are often driven by anger to intensify their information-seeking. Meanwhile, their sense-making processes remain relatively unchanged as they still expect sought information to support their interpretations.

In general, as fans take initiative to search for interpretation-related content, both for enjoyment and for disputing challenging views, they gradually follow accounts that provide their desired content and then acquire substantial information from their daily feeds. Through mutual following, fans establish interpretation-based networks with like-minded people, an environment that enables them to also seek further information. As one participant (a pro-*sweet-boy*, pro-*acquaintances* Ayanga-exclusive fan) explained:

Not long after I became a fan . . . I just followed some accounts, like his studio, his fan club, some fans who always post news about him, and other fans I like. You know as you search more [information], you become familiar with people who post things you like and dislike, and you can start to discuss things and ask questions from people you like. But there are some fans who always say Ayanga is old or dominant, but he's definitely not . . . so I just block those people and make my Weibo feeds clean.

This explanation demonstrates how fans adjust their following lists to obtain more desirable information (e.g. Ayanga's adorableness) and avoid opposing interpretations (e.g. Ayanga as a dominant *alpha male*). The sense-making of this information naturally, once again, matches

their pre-established interpretations. Through this process, fans increasingly connect with people who share their interpretations, forming overlapping sub- and cross-group networks that allow fans to seek information from each other.

#### *Intentional echo chamber management*

As they seek and make sense of information primarily to match their predetermined interpretations, follow like-minded people and avoid opposing views, fans may indeed border on causing an echo chamber effect, by definition (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Sunstein, 2009). However, contrary to the scholarly view that people often fall unknowingly into echo chambers to receive only filtered information, almost all interview participants displayed a clear understanding of the echo chamber effect and did not deny the existence of such chambers within their fandom. In fact, these fans believe that they are actually forming their own echo chambers, openly acknowledging that they enjoy acquiring information within and deliberately reinforcing these “chambers.” One interview participant (a *pro-strong*, *pro-friends* Yunlong-exclusive fan) shared:

Yes, I understand what you called “echo chambers”, and I am building a chamber for myself. I follow only people who also admire Yunlong’s personality because I don’t want to see others treat him like a doll made of glass, because he is such a strong person in that . . . based on the newest posts I see, I keep changing whom to follow, unfollow, and block . . . I also often “like” posts complimenting his character so that Weibo will promote more similar content to me, and I click “stop recommending this type of content” for those posts that I dislike.

This statement shows that fans not only adjust their following and blocking lists to actively manage their interpretation-oriented chambers but also try to “train” the Weibo platform algorithm to recommend more desirable information, reinforcing their echo chambers. Meanwhile, in contrast to scholarly discussions of this effect as “problematic” (Moe *et al.*, 2023), fans consider echo chambers beneficial and efficient as they allow fans to easily and consciously gain interpretation-centered fandom pleasure. As one interview participant (a *pro-alpha-male*, *pro-strong*, *pro-lovers* CP fan) suggested:

I am in a “chamber” and I’m very happy staying in my “chamber”, we can block those exclusive fans who say the actors’ relationship is not real. I know how other people think celebrity fans are just stupid, that they are foolishly and unknowingly affected by echo chambers, so they can’t learn any real things. But I believe in the things [intimate moments between Ayanga and Yunlong] I’ve seen, and we’re actually not that “closed”, we still follow new people and read new information.

This explanation demonstrates that as fans admit they enjoy remaining within interpretation-oriented echo chambers, they also perceive themselves as relatively uninfluenced by the negative echo chamber effect. This confidence stems from fans’ trust both in their established interpretations and in how they manage chambers by adjusting following and/or blocking lists and exposing themselves to new information. In this sense, the process of initially forming their own echo chambers and then continuously curating information sources appears to be a beneficial approach that helps fans to cope with and enjoy fandom pleasure amidst massive online information.

#### **Fans’ information practices from a collective perspective**

While fans’ information-seeking processes are conducted individually, sense-making often becomes both an individual and collaborative endeavor; thus, interpretation-oriented practices are reinforced through in-network discussions. These collective sense-making activities occur especially when fans seek to dispute opposing views, which happens both continuously and when a sudden incident is encountered.

When reinforcing an interpretation generally against a longstanding opposing view, fans often repeatedly provide and analyze evidence within their networks to reinforce communal

beliefs, highlighting information that was “overlooked” by the opposing side. For instance, to dispute the *strong* (“impulsive and rough”) interpretation of Yunlong’s personality, one *pro-fragile*, *pro-enemies* Yunlong-exclusive fan posted her articulation of how Yunlong’s sensitive facet was neglected by the opposing side (with photos shown in Figure 1), which received many supportive comments reinforcing the argument.

[post] A strong person with impulsive and rough personality. Is Yunlong really like this? . . . He may sometimes seem rough, but don’t overlook the gentleness deep inside. You probably didn’t know how he encouraged Shen [one SuperVocal contestant] when he was in self-doubt and how he helped Lu [another SuperVocal contestant] but never forced him into anything . . . You probably also overlooked how he can chat with kittens for a long time and always buys treats for them even when he is frugal for himself. Who hasn’t been angry out of frustration or reckless in their youth? But those can’t shadow his kind and sensitive heart.

[Most liked comments for the post above].

- (1) Let me add just one thing. Yunlong is not an aggressive person, and you can tell that from the way he responded when asked for recommendations of his works to watch. He didn’t even suggest specific works but left the choice to the person who asked, as he doesn’t believe in influencing others [ . . . ]. How can such a gentle person be impulsive?
- (2) Yunlong is really very, very delicate now. You can tell he’s a good-natured kitten just by watching a few more of his interviews.

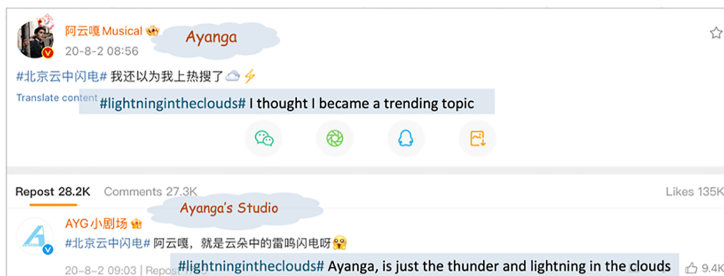
Similarly, when encountering a particular incident that suddenly challenges their interpretations, fans’ collective sense-making often involves using sought information to co-create alternative explanations for what the opposing sides suggest. One typical example is Ayanga-exclusive fans disputing CP fans’ perceptions of an incident wherein Ayanga and Yunlong formed their respective studios on the same day. On July 31, 2020, Ayanga disbanded his official fan club (following exclusive fans’ request that he stop collaborating with Yunlong) and registered an official account for his own studio on Weibo; on the same day, Yunlong also launched his studio account. Many CP fans passionately consider this an indication that Ayanga and Yunlong made the decision together due to their close (either *lovers* or *friends*) relationship. On the other hand, facing this incident that challenged the *enemies*’ relationship interpretation, Ayanga-exclusive fans collectively proposed an alternative explanation of the incident as a setup for Ayanga. They claimed that Ayanga had neither knowledge of Yunlong’s studio plans nor the intention to launch their studios together; instead, Ayanga was betrayed by



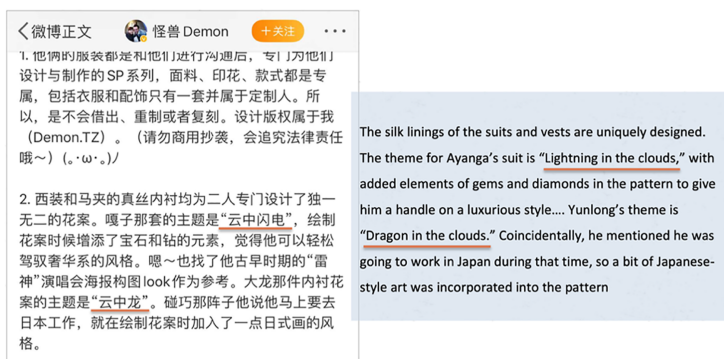
**Figure 1.** Selected screenshots included in the post above, English summaries in translucent boxes. Source: Figure by the author

his agent, who schemed to gain favor for Yunlong among CP fans while irritating Ayanga's exclusive fans. Since pro-*enemies* fans could not acquire direct information to support this alternative explanation, they reanalyzed previous "evidence" of Ayanga disliking Yunlong to reassure each other that the two could not possibly have formed studios together.

As an incident develops, fans continue collectively making sense of information to reinforce each other's interpretations. Two days after the two actors' studios were launched, Ayanga posted a brief message on Weibo with the hashtag #lightningintheclouds# and emojis of clouds and lightning. His studio account swiftly reposted this with the caption "Ayanga is just the thunder and lightning in the clouds," as shown in Figure 2. Pro-*enemies* Ayanga-exclusive fans perceived this post as Ayanga announcing his connection with exclusive fans: the term "lightning" symbolizes Ayanga's name, while "clouds" is a reference to his fans. These fans thus posted updated articulations of this incident, symbolic expressions such as "☁️ + ⚡️ = ♥️" and previous evidence of Ayanga appreciating exclusive fans to convince each other that this was Ayanga's way of consoling them and endorsing their perception of his lack of awareness around the same-day studio formation. Meanwhile, pro-*friends/lovers* CP fans co-created alternative explanations that Ayanga's post was a figurative attempt to "use lighting as a weapon to strike exclusive fans" because he was so annoyed by them. They also suggested that the "lightning in the clouds" was actually the theme of one particular suit of Ayanga's, designed for a performance with Yunlong; fans circulated a screenshot of the designer's announcement (see Figure 3) to support this sense-making and, in turn, reinforce their *friends'/lovers'* interpretation.



**Figure 2.** Post from Ayanga and repost from the studio account, English translations in boxes. Source: Figure by the author



**Figure 3.** Screenshot of the designer's post explaining "lightning in the clouds," English translations in boxes. Source: Figure by the author

The posts and comments for both ongoing and incident-based collective sense-making showcase how fans within a network contribute their own ideas to complement each other and, in turn, reinforce each other's interpretations. Similar to their individual practice, fans' collective sense-making also processes sought information to match predetermined beliefs in an intense manner. Meanwhile, as these communal practices lead fans to gradually build greater trust toward both network members and their information environment, they further encourage fans to remain in their interpretation-centered echo chambers. However, most interview participants admitted that they indeed influence each other during collective practices, complicating the belief that their individual information-seeking and sense-making is relatively uninfluenced by the echo chamber effect.

### Fans' reactions to echo chamber limitations

#### *Acknowledging fandom subjectivity*

While fans believe that their interpretations are correct and that their adjustment of following and/or blocking lists makes them less "closed," they also recognize that their immunity to the echo chamber effect is not absolute. For fans, this uncertainty can be attributed to the fact that collective information sense-making might hinder each fan in forming their own independent understandings and force all fans in a network to perceive certain information in the same way (Santos, 2021; Wei, 2021). However, instead of considering this mutual influence negative, as described in scholarship (e.g. Figà Talamance and Arfini, 2022), fans embrace, as an inherent aspect of fandom, the subjectivity of processing information to match predetermined interpretations, both individually and collectively. As one interview participant (a pro-*alpha-male*, pro-*fragile*, pro-*lovers* CP fan) responded to the question as to whether fans' opinions could influence each other:

Yes, that can happen, but we already all believe in the same thing, so the influence should be small. It's not a life-or-death thing anyway, we don't have to do strictly unbiased research about it, we just want fun, it's just our own fandom.

This statement indicates fans' belief that the results of their collective sense-making "should be" consistent with those of their individual sense-making, extending their individual confidence to the collective. It also reveals how fans acknowledge that their views may be biased within these deliberately formed networks or chambers, yet they still embrace the fact that their fandom practices inherently prize playfulness and subjectivity, no matter how much weight is placed on their interpretations. Other interview participants further implied that fans often choose "desirable" information, which enriches and validates their interpretations, over information that is "correct" or "new." This deep subjectivity is grounded in fans' underlying acknowledgment that, unlike how hobbyists engage with real-world collections or research (Cox and Blake, 2011; Fulton, 2009), fandom falls into a mostly imaginary realm (Duffett, 2013), which, as many interviewees pointed out, exists only in their "own" minds and causes little harm in reality.

Fans' echo chamber management and acknowledgment of subjectivity share similarities with how media fans build "headcanons" to create alternative characteristics and/or stories around fictional characters while agreeing that their imaginings differ from official canons (Scahill, 2019). However, Ayanga and Yunlong fans diverge from this in that acknowledging subjectivity does not equate to accepting interpretations as pure fantasy. Although these fans may not believe entirely in their interpretations, they still hold a high and persistent hope for those interpretations to actually be the "truth" about the actors in reality, unlike how headcanons act as transformative (re)interpretations of fixed narratives, and they understand that they are curating echo chambers to maintain space for their preferences and their hopes. Ultimately, as fans remain steadfast in the essentialness of their interpretations, they believe they have "the right" to not read or not accept other opinions when seeking and making sense of information for fandom pleasure.

### *Breaking out of echo chambers*

As fans' embrace of this deep subjectivity is grounded in the pleasurable and imaginary nature of fandom, they do deal with real-world "life-or-death" situations in a more serious and objective manner. When serious matters do occur in the celebrities' lives, fans assert that they will "stop hoping" and "unbiasedly" examine whether, by breaking their "chambers" and seeking alternative information sources, they can continue to enjoy their fandoms. For fans, such "life-or-death" matters may involve Ayanga or Yunlong committing acts that breach common Chinese moral or legal standards. For example, multiple interview participants shared how they "broke the chambers" in response to the incident of Yunlong being questioned about a housing permit: In early July 2020, a former *SuperVocal* contestant announced on Weibo that Yunlong illegally obtained the "Beijing household registration permit" after graduating from college in 2013 because he did not meet the criteria for acquiring such a permit. As a result, Yunlong's legality came under wide scrutiny from common netizens, which also prompted authorities to initiate an investigation into the matter. During that time, even though Yunlong-exclusive and CP fans "wanted to believe in Yunlong," they refrained from echoing this preconceived opinion with each other in their own networks. Instead, many fans took the initiative to "unbiasedly" research 2013 registration policies and seek advice from professional lawyers regarding similar cases to obtain unbiased viewpoints beyond their echo chambers. Based on these external information-seeking activities, fans eventually reached the conclusion that Yunlong was innocent, which was also later supported by the official government investigation. These out-of-chamber explorations further give fans confidence in their deliberate, two-pronged information-seeking approach to forming echo chambers: enjoying interpretation-oriented fandom content and maintaining objectivity for serious matters.

Besides encountering serious matters, fans may also terminate their echo chambers when their established interpretations can no longer be supported by individual or collective sense-making. As fans ultimately confirm their interpretations by seeking information or "evidence" from the actors' realities and the actors' realities change over time, it can become more difficult for some fans to validate their beliefs while easier for others. The most prominent example involves exclusive and CP fans reinforcing their interpretations of the actors' shifting relationship through the years. Throughout 2019 and into early 2020, Ayanga and Yunlong collaborated in multiple shows, songs, galas, and other media events, during which time Ayanga frequently announced how great their relationship was. These gestures allowed CP fans to easily celebrate their *lovers* or *friends* interpretations while leading exclusive fans in both groups to struggle with validating their *acquaintances* or *enemies* beliefs: for Ayanga-exclusive fans, these announcements signaled that Ayanga was "too polite and professional" to openly express his dislike toward Yunlong, while Yunlong-exclusive fans convinced each other that Ayanga was taking advantage of the relationship to steal away Yunlong's job opportunities. The situation changed as Ayanga and Yunlong reduced their collaborations in 2020, giving exclusive fans the confidence to reinforce their *acquaintances*' or *enemies*' interpretations and forcing CP fans, on the other hand, to struggle to confirm the existence of romance or friendship. During both time periods, fans across all three groups felt it was impossible to maintain their interpretations, thus breaking out of their chambers by either changing their beliefs or stopping their fandom entirely.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Ayanga and Yunlong fans exhibit strong and decisive agency as they navigate information on social media, the practices of which surpass established scholarly perspectives on information-seeking and sense-making and on echo chambers. Fans' innovative actions and logics are demonstrated in how they generate meaning not to learn new perspectives but to match predetermined interpretations and how they shape echo chambers not subconsciously but intentionally. These information practices also serve as a significant representation of evolving user behaviors on social media, exemplifying how both celebrity fans and others with passion-driven online engagement interact with information in the digital age.

*Generating meaning to match interpretations*

Traditionally, scholars have emphasized how people seek and make sense of information primarily to educate themselves about particular events and/or situations or to find solutions for a problem (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2014; Savolainen, 1995), during which process people inductively use new information to assess previous understandings and thus gain new knowledge (Gorichanaz, 2018; Ocepek, 2018). However, the information practices of Ayanga and Yunlong fans differ in two key aspects. On one hand, fans' information-seeking is driven not by instance-based need for specific events and/or problems (Kim *et al.*, 2014), but by their passion-motivated fandom that is inherently ongoing in their minds and identities. When fans search for both broad actor(s)-related information and specific interpretation-centered content, their seeking behaviors constitute a continuous process motivated by the desire to enjoy and reinforce fandom interpretations. Even when particular instances arise and fans seek evidence to dispute opposing views, they still consider such information-seeking essential for their inherently ongoing interpretations rather than for that one instance only. On the other hand, fans' sense-making shows further divergence from existing scholarship, as, instead of adopting information to generate new knowledge (Savolainen, 1995), fans selectively process and wield it to match and enrich their pre-established interpretations. This shows that when enjoying their fandom, fans remain steadfast about the essential fandom aspect – their interpretations – and have the decisive goal of employing any new information toward better reinforcing established beliefs.

*Managing deliberate echo chambers to compartmentalize fantasy and reality*

Ayanga and Yunlong fans acknowledge that their interpretation-based information-seeking and sense-making play out within online echo chambers where like-minded fans reinforce only similar interpretations (Moe *et al.*, 2023). However, the innovative, intentional type of echo chamber formation and management demonstrated by these fans differs essentially from how the echo chamber effect is described in scholarship as an “uncontrolled” practice manipulated by the human subconscious and online algorithms (Santos, 2021). Fans contend that they consciously and deliberately form interpretation-oriented echo chambers to more efficiently acquire only desirable information and that they continuously manage these chambers by adjusting their following and/or blocking lists and training Weibo's algorithmic promotions to cater to their preferences.

In contrast to causing “chaos” or being “brainless” (Lin, 2020), fans demonstrate strict logic in their echo chamber practices, grounded in how they compartmentalize fantasy and reality. Defining their fandom as inherently “imaginary” and existing only in their own minds, fans embrace the subjectivity of desiring only information that aligns with their interpretations and supports their intense hope for those interpretations to be true. However, regarding certain matters as “serious” reality, such as the actor(s) breaking moral and/or legal rules or significantly changing career paths, fans break out of their chambers to seek alternative information sources in order to generate less biased perceptions. In this sense, fans' deliberate formation of echo chambers becomes a crucial approach for them to enjoy fandom while maintaining objectivity as needed. This active management of echo chambers thus presents a significant difference from prior scholarly understandings of how people are only manipulated by platforms or betrayed by their own subconscious without seeking to benefit from those chambers (Himelboim *et al.*, 2013) while also giving insights into the academic discussion of how people can escape echo chambers (Nguyen, 2020).

*Representing evolving human information practices on social media*

Fundamentally, contemporary celebrity fans themselves form a substantial segment of the social media user population; in the Chinese context in particular, one singer or actor can easily have millions or tens of millions of Weibo followers. As many of these fans actively engage in daily information activities, they have ceased to remain an unnoticed subculture as described

in previous fan studies scholarship (Forcier, 2017) but rather constitute a significant portion of contemporary online culture. Additionally, since they may also employ their information-seeking/sense-making logics and their platform management strategies – both of which developed through fandom activities – in other leisure or work-related discussions, celebrity fans ultimately embody how considerable numbers of people act on social media.

Behaviorally, celebrity fans can also represent a large number of social media users who are driven by ongoing passions in various domains (e.g. movies, politics, sports, brands, etc.) and who thus exhibit fan-like behaviors online. Supported by their proficiency with social media functions, many people appear to have grown from intuitively and inductively acquiring information (Aspray *et al.*, 2014; Fulton, 2017) to actively dictating what (passion-related) information they interact with, managing echo chambers as one way to assert this agency. For instance, people passionate about politics may consistently search for content not to be informed but to reinforce their pre-established beliefs and hope for those beliefs to emerge true. People who love shopping for specific brands may continuously seek information highlighting and defending the superiority of their chosen brands. While these netizens are often perceived by outsiders as overly biased or “crazy” – for embracing their subjectivity and rejecting “unhappy” information that contradicts their opinions – their approaches to dealing with information remain “critical” according to their own passion-driven standards. As celebrity fan practices can be transferable to other passion-driven communities, insights gained from studying fans can help comprehend how the vast majority of Internet users acquire and consume media content and how they openly define and separate their own thinking from reality. By exploring fans’ innovative practices in detail, this research thus deepens scholarly perspectives on how people navigate or

It is crucial to note that, since this research is positioned in the particular setting of Chinese celebrity fandom, the findings may not be exactly transferable to every type of fandom or online community setting worldwide. However, future research on manipulate information on social media in an intensely evolving digital age can delve into how different social, technological, cultural or fandom (e.g. headcanon) factors affect people’s echo chamber-centered information behaviors and compartmentalization of fantasy and reality. Additionally, as many netizens often engage with multiple online platforms, it can be valuable to investigate how fans extend their information activities beyond single platforms and how they maintain their echo chambers during this process. Studying this evolving online practice exemplified by fans can also provide insights into how netizens navigate desirable features from various sites and how different platform functions allow users to form and manage their own echo chambers.

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