

## **When Pop and Politics Collide: A Transcultural Perspective on Contested Practices in Pop Idol Fandoms in China and The West**

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Political engagement is often a conscious strategy for some celebrities and their fandoms, yet it can also be taken in unintended or undesired directions, most notably in contested practices such as calls for the cancellation of pop idols. This research compares fans' perception and reactive engagement in two such empirical cases in China and the United States, namely "the 227 Incident" and controversies surrounding Taylor Swift. Through close readings of these two cases, coupled with in-depth semistructured interviews, the authors compare how transcultural pop idols' fandoms interact with politics in China and the West. The authors propose to adopt the lens of neo-tribalism to study these practices to explore how fandoms as neo-tribes are framed in conventional politics and how fans negotiate between their neo-tribal and conventional political identities when in conflict.

*Keywords: fandom, pop idols, neo-tribalism, everyday political engagement, cancel culture, comparative study*

Despite pop culture being a form of entertainment and escapism, it increasingly emerges as a political arena. This study explores a rising form of politicized pop culture and fandom by establishing a comparative analysis of two cases with distinct cultural and political contexts. It serves to better understand the contestation between traditional political engagement and neo-tribalism as a basis for political engagement. The two cases discussed both highlight political controversies surrounding two celebrities or pop idols as we refer to them in this work.

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Date submitted: 01-25-2021

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the participants for sharing their experiences and thoughts that contribute to this study. Additional gratitude is expressed to peer reviewers and editors for their many insightful comments and suggestions as well as the time and effort.

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The first case is that of Xiao Zhan, a rising pop idol in China who was boycotted in February 2020 by a collective of netizens named the 227 United. The collective claims to consist of fanfiction writers, content creators, and other citizens who are concerned about freedom of expression (Li, 2020). In public discourse, the boycott was triggered by the shutdown of the fanfiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3) in China because of a report to government authorities made by Xiao Zhan fans. This report takes issue with a fan fiction featuring Xiao Zhan as a prostitute with dysphoria. The 227 United regarded the shutdown of AO3 as the loss of a safe haven for creative works. In response, they “canceled” Xiao by giving low reviews (“review bombing”) to Xiao-related products (Li, 2020). The so-called 227 Incident evoked open discussions of toxic fandom practices, the relationship between idols and fans, creative freedom in subcultures, and more generally, censorship in China. In this case, the cancellation of Xiao started from disagreements between fandoms and became a battle between political stances.

The second case addresses fan practices in Taylor Swift’s fandom: the so-called “Swifties” have been invited to review their narrative of the singer several times over the span of her career. Most recently, Swift has expressed her political views publicly. While keeping her music apolitical, in 2018, Swift announced on Instagram she would vote for a Democratic candidate in the U.S. midterm elections (Swift, 2018). In 2020, she announced her support for presidential candidates Biden and Harris via social media. These sudden political revelations brought praise and backlash: Some fans allegedly burned her CDs and boycotted her concerts (Stuart, 2018), while others were happy that she *finally* publicized her private politics (McNutt, 2020). By previously not responding to earlier feuds (West, 2018), or her appropriation by white supremacists (Prins, 2020), Swift had tried to steer clear from politics. Nevertheless, her fans defended her in online spaces and supported their idol throughout, like supporters of a political leader (van Zoonen, 2005). However, for some fans, her progressive viewpoints were unexpected, and these (conservative) fans allegedly boycotted Swift after she took control of her political narrative (Morris, 2018).

Such contested practices, like canceling or boycotting an idol, seem to be a current trend (Clark, 2020). Cancel culture can be understood as the most recent iteration of contestation among fan communities, in which practices, claims, and underlying political or ideological assumptions are addressed for the purposes of revision or rejection (Clark, 2020). Cancellation is thus both a contested practice—individual instances are openly debated as (in)appropriate—and a contested term—on meta-level, cultural critics may claim that the practice cannot be distinguished from other forms of critique or is merely an extension of earlier debates over “political correctness” (“A Letter,” 2020). Celebrities and fans are actively engaging in politics by calling out and canceling other individuals and brands (Andrews, 2020; Clark, 2020). Typically unsolicited, calling out or canceling occurs when a celebrity’s misdeeds are uncovered or when they become a symbol of a problematic ideology, in turn forcing celebrities and their sponsors to make a (public) political statement (Driessen, 2020). In recent years, the global trend of “cancel culture” has raised many discussions in both the public discourses and academia, either being praised as an effective way to keep individuals accountable (Shabazz, 2021) or raising alarms of causing large-scale self-censorship (Bokat-Lindell, 2020). To better understand the rise of contested practices like cancel culture globally, comparative and contextualized analyses on relevant cases should be conducted. Therefore, we compare the two aforementioned cases of pop idols being subjected to contested fan practices in China and the West. By taking a transcultural angle to approach this comparison (Chin & Morimoto, 2013), we acknowledge that

this comparison is complex because of the different economic, political, and cultural contexts, yet aids the process of discovering patterns of cancel culture as a global phenomenon.

As introduced, both Xiao and Swift have been canceled by some of their fans based on the grounds of opposing stances in culturally important political issues. For Xiao, these were about state-led censorship of media content in China; for Swift, they touched on the liberal versus conservative polarization. Both pop idols are or have been reluctant to make public statements on political issues for which they are criticized and canceled. Therefore, there is another layer of complexity to both idols' cancellation: Pop idols can be viewed as a symbol of a political stance even if they do not actively engage in politics (Street, 2012).

Despite their similarities, these two cases are also shaped by their respective cultural and political environments. Although from different backgrounds, comparing these cases offers an opportunity to understanding transcultural fandoms and fan practices, which are largely shaped by Chinese or American circumstances, yet may be reproduced far beyond these borders. Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that contemporary fandoms are often transcultural, which they describe as "the ways that fans interpret and interact with both media and one another in an ever-intensifying global media marketplace" (p. 93). In this study's cases, transculturality appears in the form of data fandom in China, which has a transcultural root and reach. In recent years, *liuliang mingxing* [data traffic idols] and *liuliang fenquan* [data fandom] have been on the rise in China (Yin, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). Data traffic idols refer to those "who gained their visibility and success through the active interventions of fans into the data circulating across social media" (Zhang & Negus, 2020, p. 501). Relatedly, the term data fandom serves to characterize the fandom of such idols. Chinese traffic idols inherit the production methods and aesthetic styles from South Korean and Japanese pop cultures, while the fandom also appropriates practices of *zuoshuju* [increasing the sale/clicks/votes] from K-pop fans and *kejin* [spending large sums of money to boost sales] from J-pop fans (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Chinese data fandom also attracted global attention when the fans of Kris Wu, a typical data-traffic idol, used their common tactic *zuoshuju* to boost the performance of his new album on the global iTunes charts, knocking Ariana Grande and Lady Gaga off the top spots (Deng, 2018). While a U.S. popular culture product, like Swift, also holds a global reach, the United States can be considered the most influential player in the Western entertainment industry, and as such provides content for everyday fandom practices in regions like western Europe (see, e.g., Kooijman, 2013).

To offer an insight into the transcultural phenomena in this article, we ask the following research question(s): how do fans perceive and negotiate (in) contested practices, like the cancellation of pop idols, in the West and China? Consequently, what can we learn from these modes of engagement about current trends like cancel culture or reframing one's political identity and engagement? This research highlights the transcultural yet often contextualized dynamics between fandom and political identities, as well as the convergence between entertainment and everyday political engagement across political systems and cultures.

### **Literature Review: Idol Fandom Practices and Everyday Political Engagement**

The relationship between fandom and political engagement has received ample scholarly attention, particularly in a Western context. Fandom is formed based on routine and emotionally invested consumption as well as the (re)production of a given popular narrative, text, or any form of cultural product (Jenkins, 2002;

Sandvoss, 2005). These cultural products are a means to express emotions, beliefs, and ideologies, and occasionally help to construct communities sharing a common political identity (Karaosmanoglu, 2020). Hence, celebrities might invoke sexual, ethnic, or partisan identities and mobilize their fans for particular political causes, either sincerely or strategically (Street, 2012; Wheeler, 2012). In addition to this "top-down celebrity-run model" of fan activism, fans also invoke their shared identities and communities to engage in social movements as an expression of a "bottom-up participatory" fan activism (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012, para. 2.2).

However, in mainland China, invoking political identities and engaging in fan activism requires a more delicate approach. While this is especially evident in recent years because of tighter state control over ideologies and public opinions (Repnikova, 2017), academic research on such an approach remains scarce (Zhang, 2016). Both celebrities and their fans in mainland China appear to limit their political engagements to less controversial issues and usually conform to mainstream social norms and political ideologies. Even if celebrities wield a progressive identity to brand themselves, they usually reframe these identities as less controversial. For example, homosexuality is disguised as friendship (Wang, 2019), and the term "strong woman" often replaces the more threatening term "feminist" (Cai, 2019, p. 7). As mentioned above, more cases can be observed in both societies where celebrities, as well as their fandoms, have slipped into political debates in recent years. When investigating this type of political entanglement, we need to analyze not only similarities between fandom practices and political practices (van Zoonen, 2005) but also how fandom can be politicized (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Moreover, politics can become fandomized, meaning that the fandom-like affective bond impacts the substance of political engagement (Sandvoss, 2013). This latter development is indicative of the highly mediated milieu in both Eastern and Western societies, especially among generations that have grown up with these platforms (Inthorn & Street, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

In this study, we consider pop idols as celebrities who attain fame and fortune because of extraordinary qualities (Lai, 2006). In the East Asian context, idol specifically refers to young celebrities who have been managed and trained by an entertainment management agency (Kang, 2017). With the rapid growth of domestic digital platforms and intra-Asia transnational influence of idol production, Chinese idols normally have some standardized characteristics such as youthfulness, with a strictly managed persona (normally by an agency), depending almost exclusively on the traffic on digital platforms provided by their fans (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Xiao Zhan is among such data traffic idols considered the most prominent of this category in 2019 (Sina Entertainment, 2019). Because of the different pop culture industry systems, there is no fully comparable celebrity category in the West. Although some Western celebrity categories might bear partial resemblance because of their manufactured compositions (e.g., Disney teen stars, 1990s boybands, and Internet-celebrities), Swift as a singer actually holds her own voice and writes her music (largely by) herself (McNutt, 2020). However, to avoid confusion and emphasize a more generic yet transcultural understanding of celebrity, we adopt the term pop idol in this study for both Xiao and Swift.

What makes pop idol fandoms relevant to this study is that they underscore the dynamics between fandom and politics through their more "mundane" everyday fandom practices. Fans' everyday consumption forms a major part of their fandom practice and fan identity (Jenkins, 2012). Some ways in which pop idol fans consume cultural products, however, do not only resemble but also internalize certain political practices, such as voting, actively sharing relevant information in the community, and rallying (online) against their perceived opponents (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; van Zoonen, 2005). Although these practices are deemed constructive

in fan studies, fans can also denounce and boycott idols (Driessen, 2020), stop consuming relevant products, and announce the idol's cancellation in fan wars, which may or may not be caused by political reasons.

In previous literature on fandom and politics, the left-versus-right electoral democracy often sets the foundation for analysis in the context of Western democracies (Dean, 2017), and the oppression-resistance narrative usually dominates the analysis in the context of authoritarian countries such as China (Fung, 2009). However, these frames allow a limited perspective on contemporary fandom and politics, particularly in a transcultural context comparison. Many scholars have pointed out the shift in civic engagement because of structural fragmentation, individualization, and various breakdowns in group memberships and institutional loyalties in many societies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012): The youth increasingly engage in connective actions that are more personal and fluid, expressed as personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances instead of traditional collective actions that depend more on strong political organizations such as churches, parties, and interest groups (Bennett, 2007; Hinck, 2016).

This new way of youth civic engagement is well explained by Maffesoli (1995) as interests-based neo-tribes—a more intrinsically motivated view instead of traditional ideal political engagement in civic society—and consider fandom practices as potential everyday political engagement. He argues that taste-based groups are becoming a more significant form of identity construction and social interaction. Neo-tribes are formed based on taste and interest in cultural products or lifestyles, which are facilitated and further fragmented by digital activities (Maffesoli, 1995). Identities formed in these neo-tribes are usually empathic, temporary, and relational to many overlapping groups. This means that group members develop and maintain their identities through constant momentary production or consumption practices and with attention to their intra- as well as inter-tribe relations (Maffesoli, 1995). Fandoms espouse many of these characteristics, and researchers have applied the concept of neo-tribes to analyze the formation and intra-dynamics of various fandoms, such as the Ibiza fandom (Sandvoss, 2014) and K-pop fandom (Chang & Park, 2018).

When adopting the lens of neo-tribalism, many features of fandom identities and practices are incompatible with ideology-based, stable, and rational political identities and engagements. Such incompatibility suggests that we need to go beyond the traditional political fandom frameworks that focus more on collective actions mentioned earlier in understanding fan-based political engagement, even if these frameworks are not entirely dismissed. Built upon Maffesoli's (1995) theory, Flinders and Wood (2018) argue that neo-tribe practices can be regarded as everyday politics that challenge conventional political institutions and social movements. Adopting this line of thought, we consider political fan engagement in a transcultural context as a mode to explore fandom and politics. Particularly, through the lens of fandoms being transcultural taste-based communities, we can go beyond the current understanding of the relationship between fandom and politics by studying their own discourse, repertoires, and practices, which will be further discussed in this study's analysis. Specifically, we focus on how fans negotiate their traditional political and neo-tribal identities when in conflict.

## **Methods**

To better understand how fans perceive and engage in contested practices, such as the cancelation of their idols in two vastly different political and cultural systems, we compare two cases: the political controversies surrounding Chinese idol Xiao Zhan and the political controversies surrounding U.S. idol Taylor Swift. We select

these two controversies not only because both fandoms are transcultural as explained previously, both controversies generated wide public discussion, and both cases are entangled with politics; we also select these two cases because of the different contexts where they took place, which can help to explore how contested fan practices such as the cancel culture as a global phenomenon may manifest similarly or differently given different economic, political, and cultural contexts. The research is mainly informed by 19 semistructured, in-depth interviews carried out between June 2020 and October 2020. The interviewees are 10 self-identified as female Xiao Zhan fans (aged 19 to 29), who are Chinese citizens but live (in addition to China) in various countries (China, the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia), who were recruited via a Xiao's fan chat group on WeChat and snowball sampling. Nine interviewees self-identified as female Taylor Swift fans (aged 18 to 32), living in Europe (the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom). They were recruited via Twitter (a post calling for fans of Swift in the Netherlands) and snowball sampling. All interviewees have a high school-level education or above.

The interviewees are selected on the grounds that they are young adults of voting age who are in the process of developing their political identity. Fandom might offer the interviewees a blueprint to understand both their fannish engagement and social and political engagement (Dean, 2017). None of the interviewees has the possibility to directly engage in the political issues these two idols are involved in via traditional political engagement such as voting: with the Xiao fandom, this is because most of the conventional democratic political participation is limited, and with the Swift fandom, this is because these fans are not American citizens. Although the international fans interviewed cannot formally participate in U.S. politics, such as voting or being a registered campaigner, these politics have gained ample media coverage across the world and are considered to have a global impact. Therewith, Swift, in her role as a celebrity politician but also a product of U.S. popular culture with a global reach and fanbase (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Kooijman, 2013), can offer an exemplary case study to better understand fans' political practices. And by focusing on non-American Swifties, we can also explore the political possibilities that lie outside traditional civic practices.

Interviewees were recruited via social media based on their willingness to discuss their experiences, emotions, and opinions on the topic, as well as by employing snowball sampling for recommendations. The interviews were conducted with the help of a semistructured interview guide (see Appendix 1) to allow for some flexibility while having some room for deviating from this list (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). All interviews began with questions related to the interviewees' personal demographic (e.g., what is your age, profession), education, and political backgrounds (e.g., how would you describe your political involvement). Later, interviewees were asked to describe and reflect on their fandom identities and fandom practices (e.g., how did you become a fan of Xiao Zhan/Taylor Swift? What kind of activities do you engage in as a fan?). Subsequent questions invoked descriptions, emotions, and opinions about relevant controversies (e.g., Can you describe what happened in the 227 Incident and how you felt? When Swift revealed her support for the Democratic senators, how did this make you feel? Why do you think Swift has come out politically?). To maintain interviewee privacy and for ethical concerns, all interviews have been anonymized. Before the start of the interviews, we sent them digital consent forms and recorded their explicit verbal consent. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, and they were conducted in Dutch, English, or Chinese (depending on the language most familiar to the interviewee to establish a good rapport and ensure the interviewee's comfort, see Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The research is also informed by existing primary and secondary sources of how both cases develop. Public posts on social media platforms (137 Sina Weibo posts and comments as well as 12 articles from WeChat public accounts in the case of Xiao Zhan, collected between February 27 and June 14, 2020; 118 Reddit comments in the case of Taylor Swift, collected in 2019 after her Instagram revelation), press coverage, and public statements by celebrities are consulted to identify key actors, events, and the discursive shaping of conflicts. These key documents not only shape our own case analysis but are also pivotal in the sense-making process of our participants. The timelines and public discourses of the chosen cases supplement the interview data and analysis.

All data (public posts, statements, and press coverage, as well as the interview transcripts) was subjected to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that this process facilitates a shift from open to thematic coding and helps identify latent themes in the data. Three levels of codes were assigned to the data, from open codes for the smallest units (fragments, sentences, words), axial codes for broader categories, and thematic codes for the major themes (Boeije, 2005). We then compared the different themes to our analyses to identify the main comparative and contrasting elements (see Sample Thematic Analysis in Appendix 2). These large themes are discussed in the next section.<sup>2</sup>

### **Findings and Analysis**

In this section, we draw upon case data to discuss how fans perceive and react to contested practices in relation to their idols and the controversies they got caught up in. We illustrate that these engagements are neo-tribal practices that are often framed in contemporary conventional political debates. We propose to understand these reactionary fan practices (Stanfill, 2019) as a form of negotiating the conflict between neo-tribal and conventional political identities.

#### ***Fan Engagement as Neo-Tribal Practices***

The fandoms in these two cases demonstrate several characteristics of neo-tribes. Our interviews clearly demonstrate that both fandoms are taste-based formations. While this may seem intuitive, we want to briefly dwell on this aspect as a starting point for our later analysis on other neo-tribal characteristics of these two fandoms. All Swifties state that they became a fan of Taylor for her music, and all Xiao's fans started their fandom journey because of his prettiness, his chemistry with Wang Yibo,<sup>3</sup> or the drama *The Untamed* (Wang & Han, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> See sample analysis via

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/j226xewvxj0h89c/Sample%20Thematic%20Analysis.xlsx?dl=0>

<sup>3</sup> Wang Yibo is the costar who plays Lan Zhan in the drama *The Untamed* (Wang & Han, 2019). Because the characters Xiao and Wang have a very intimate relationship in the drama (explicitly romantic in the original novel *Modao Zushi* but made vague and subtle in the drama because of the censorship in China), the chemistries between these two characters and even between the actors in real life become a source of fandom. This type of fans calls themselves "cpfen" (couple fans).

These taste-based communities are maintained and consolidated by empathy and affection (Maffesoli, 1995). Such empathy and affection are expressed in both Swifties' and Xiao's fans' narratives of their *authenticity*. For Swifties, not only are Swift's songs authentic and relatable, but her media presence makes them feel more "real" (see also McNutt, 2020). Swift mainly communicates with her fans—in addition to her music—via Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter. As explained by Teresa (28), fans know that there are time slots when she herself is behind the account, so they know when to respond and try to reach her, which gives the parasocial feeling of connection and increases the realness of Swift. For Xiao's fans interviewed in this research, his "common-people" experience (Dana, 20), meaning that he went to a non-entertainment-industry-related university and used work as a graphic designer, and his "multidimensional personality" (Fiona, 23) makes his fans empathize with him as a real person. When both idols are involved in controversies, such empathy and affection play an even more important role in their fandoms. For instance, when Swift was involved in fights with Ye (former Kanye West) and Scooter Braun and so on, fans felt sorry for her and started feeling bad for her about the mess she was entangled in. For example, Sanne (21) stated that "those messy situations she was in with (Kan)Ye, and now Scooter Braun with the record label. I felt sorry for her and felt bad about that situation for her." Xiao's fans also express a similar sentiment: they say whenever they think about how Xiao is experiencing all the hatred and failure in his career as a person with emotions, they feel sad, and some end up crying several times a day during and after the 227 Incident.

The two fandoms as neo-tribes are also fluid and temporal (Maffesoli, 1995). Since our interviewees are all current fans of the idols, they themselves do not present such fluidity and temporality. However, according to the complimentary public discourses we collected, there are indeed fans or to-be-fans who terminated their fandom identity after the controversies or some other reasons, such as the change in music style (as in Swift's fandom) or the bad acting in another drama (as in Xiao's fandom). Sometimes the fluidity can also occur in the form of being excluded by other fans, as illustrated by Teresa's previous statement about the xenophobic Swifties. However, we can also see that factors behind such fluidity are not only taste-based but also very often related to social norms, values, ideologies, and politics, which is quite obviously demonstrated in these two case studies. Therefore, even though we look at developments that are in excess of conventional political debates (e.g., left versus right), it remains that such framing plays a role in shaping the cancelation of pop idols and the contestation of/from their fandoms.

Consumption and reproduction of cultural products play a central role in neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1995). As for Xiao's fandom, fans actively consume and (re)produce Xiao-related cultural products both materially and immaterially. Lena (19) told us, "I always follow his activities. If I'm not a fan, I wouldn't have done that. I've also looked for previous news and information about him. I also watched all the dramas, reality TV shows, and interviews he was in." In addition to the more common fan consumer practices, such as purchasing music and merchandise and fan (re)producing practices such as creating celebrity-related content and maintaining fan communities (Fung, 2009), data fandom also incorporates a logic of platformization and develops some data-fandom-specific practices that dematerialize data/traffic as a new affective object, including *kejin*, *zuoshuju*, and *kongping* [manipulating comments and posts] (Yin, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). All interviewed fans purchase Xiao-related products, including *The Untamed* merchandise, Xiao's digital EP, and Xiao-endorsed brands. Five out of 10 fans interviewed are involved in various fandom WeChat groups. In these WeChat groups, fans share information about the shows, events, and media coverage that Xiao is engaged in. For fans who are not directly

involved in these chat groups, they also regularly follow relevant hashtags and the idol's own Weibo account to stay updated about Xiao. Active Xiao Zhan fans also adopt common data-fandom practices such as kongping or zuoshuju. Most interviewees describe their fandom practices for Xiao as an exception: Even though they dislike and/or did not engage themselves in these practices, they are willing to do so for Xiao Zhan. Yana (29) states:

For me, at that time, they (fans) seemed funny to me for some of their actions. However, after I became part of the fandom, I realized that wow, there are things that you just must do. Take kongping as an example. I want *luren* [passers-by, meaning people who are not fans] to see only positive things about my idol when they open a relevant topic.

Some forms of consumption and reproduction demonstrate the fluid, personal, and neo-tribal political engagement, also coined as lifestyle politics, where they live their civic ideals through everyday choices such as consumer or commodity activism (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). With the release of Swift's 2019 album *Lover* (Swift, 2019), some songs were telling in terms of Swift's own lifestyle politics. *Lover* was politically tinted and included signs of, for example, Swift's support for an American LGBTQ-organization (Aniftos, 2019). However, her 2020 releases of the albums *Folklore* (Swift, 2020b) and *Evermore* (Swift, 2020a) were devoid of politics, yet still commercially very successful. This motion of addressing politics in one album, and not doing so in the next ones, shows Swift's own fluid politics, which fans can decide to follow (or not). However, sometimes such political connotations of media consumption might be assigned by the broader public while not acknowledged by the fans. Marieke (30) considers focusing on politics on the one hand favorable for Swift:

She does hold a certain power position to do this; she is of a certain caliber to do this now[. . .] But that also leads to polarization among fans. That is why I think her current albums are not so focused on politics, to make it [the music] more future proof.

Similarly, in the 227 Incident, individuals who consume Xiao-related products are regarded as supporters of censorship and the "reporting culture" in China, which is not acknowledged by many of Xiao's fans. Anna (24) insisted:

I don't think their (some Xiao's fans) goal, in the beginning, is to report the whole platform. They only wanted to stop the circulation of this one [fanfiction] on Sina Weibo. But it went out of hands and Xiao Zhan became the collateral damage, which is beyond their (Xiao's fans who reported the fanfiction) expectations.

The misalignment of perceived and assigned meaning of Xiao's fans' consumption and production practices demonstrates fans' contested understanding of content moderation practices, social media affordances, and platform policies. More generally, relevant practices of kongping and zuoshuju are also the main causes of criticism against data-traffic stars and data fandom in Chinese society. Tatiana (25) believes that "the most fundamental reason why 227 ends up on such a large scale and huge impact is because the public has been tired and resenting some fandom practices for a very long time, such as kongping and zuoshuju."

### ***Framing Pop Idol Fandoms in Contemporary Politics***

We consider that even though these two fandoms and their practices lend substantial credibility to Maffesoli's (1995) theory of the increased significance of neo-tribes; there is still a strong presence and impact of conventional political identities and debates. Compared to the more temporary, relational, empathetic, and interest-based neo-tribal identities, conventional political identities are stable, rational, and ideology-based/demanding, often requiring more education, pressure, or socialization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Maffesoli, 1995). Common topics are relatively stable in these political and ideological debates, such as democracy and equality, which are also usually highly contextualized.

In both cases, conventional politics frame fandom practices by providing (and limiting potential) topics and stances with which the fans and the general public engage. As mentioned above, in the 227 Incident, the cancellation of Xiao is framed as a fight for freedom of speech and creative expression, as well as resistance against the culture of reporting and snitching to the government, which are two main political issues in China. Therefore, with such framing, the stances are limited to for-or-against cancelling Xiao, which maps onto debates for-or-against freedom of speech. Hence, the existing Chinese political debates limit the framing and stances in this case, which hardly allow other ways of interpreting everyday political engagement in Xiao's fandom in the public discourse. By acknowledging this complexity, we can strive for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between fandom and conventional political topics such as oppression and resistance.

Similarly, for Swifties, the American two-party political system and the binary liberal-versus-conservative debate also structured fans' engagement or disengagement in the fandom. When talking about Swift's political revelations, most interviewed fans agree with her "liberal approach" (as Anne, 25, describes it) to politics and consider there is a lack of choice for Swift to remain silent "in the current political climate" (Sanne and Marieke, 30). This is especially intriguing as even though our interviewees are not American citizens, they are still informed by the political topics and stances prevalent in the United States.

Pop idols and their fans can feel the pressure or necessity of avoiding or engaging in conventional politics. This is because these practices are always situated in specific cultural and political contexts in the societies where they take place. The irony of the 227 Incident is that the reporting action of some Xiao's fans is intended to make Xiao "apolitical"—Chinese fans often act proactively to prevent their idols from future political troubles—while this exact action is criticized as a political stance in this incident. As Tina (27) elaborates, "they (fans who report the fanfiction) thought that this could result in people criticizing their idol for being involved in teenage pornographic products [ . . . ] and then he might be banned." Such avoidance of political engagement has almost become a consensus strategy among Chinese idol fandoms because not antagonizing the state is a must for a state-sanctioned media presence, without which an idol will not last in the industry. However, it is the effort to avoid political engagement that renders Xiao's fandom negatively political in the eyes of the 227 United, which also makes Xiao a symbol of the threat to freedom of creative expression posed by both state censorship and data fandom culture in China.

If in Xiao's fandom, fans aimed to protect the idol from political involvement, the interviewed Swifties are supportive of the singer's outspokenness. Some, like Julie (18), wish she had done so earlier, "she was criticized for a long time because she simply did not express her opinion." Despite Taylor Swift

being in a political and cultural position to speak out freely, she has been hesitant in doing so. In the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana* (Wilson, 2020), it becomes visible how and why she had been reluctant to speak up but also why she decided not to stay silent anymore. Julie explains, "there were a lot of conservative people in her fanbase when she did country [music . . .], but politics is a question of human rights and extremely important to speak up about." Moreover, such a conservative country-music fanbase previously was involved in demonizing country-singers "the Chicks" (formerly the Dixie Chicks), which might be why Swift decided to remain silent about her personal political preferences. However, as interviewee Teresa comments on the political situation in the United States in 2020, if a "TV-celebrity Donald Trump [is] talking about politics and actually being the president of the U.S., [that offers an] open ground now for everybody to talk about politics." Therefore, Swift staying silent on politics, in stark contrast to what fans wanted from and for Xiao in the Chinese context, was no longer an option. However, just like what happened in Xiao's fandom, this led to a split in the fandom between those agreeing and disagreeing with Swift's politics (the latter, according to news media, allegedly burning her CDs and boycotting her tour).

The political topics that pop idols and their fandoms engage in are also shaped by the contingent political and cultural contexts. The 227 Incident is partially caused by the divergent understanding and attitudes toward "harmful erotic content." All interviewed Xiao's fans are young adults, and none of them finds the fan fiction "Xiazhui" offensive or problematic, even though Chinese regulation stipulates that it should be censored as erotic content. Yet some try to understand the teenage fans who think otherwise, as explained by Sara (25):

I don't think you can blame them for this because many of them are still very young and they grow up in an environment where mainstream education is still 'sex is evil' and the pornographic platform is illegal thus should be banned.

Unlike Taylor Swift and her music, which take shape and are largely consumed in a liberal (Western) cultural and political context, the Chinese state sets and maintains the ideological boundaries of various social activities, especially with a set of moralities that penetrate education, media, and cultural production (Fung, 2009). One of the beliefs is that sexual depictions and pornographic contents are harmful to society, and therefore need to be banned and punished. This belief is demonstrated in many waves of *Jingwang Xingdong* [Clean Net Campaign] in the past decades, including the one involved in the 227 Incident in March 2020.

A similar influence of contingent social context can also be observed in interviews with Swifties. Although the Swifties interviewed for this study are based in Europe, their media consumption is often America-focused. This offers them an adept understanding of current affairs in the U.S. context but also raises awareness of cultural and political differences. Dutch fan Marieke reflects, for example, on why she thinks that for some fans, Swift's open support for LGBTQ-supportive foundation GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) might be a delicate topic:

I think the situation in the Netherlands is quite different from that in the U.S. For example, when it comes to gay rights. [. . .] There [in the U.S.], gay marriage is still a topic of debate, while here that's not even an issue anymore.

In the Netherlands, same-sex marriage has been legal since 2001, in the United States only since 2015.

***When in Conflict: Negotiating Neo-Tribal and Conventional Political Identities***

By critically examining these seemingly conflicting phenomena and explanations, we aim to understand the transcultural political fan practices surrounding pop idols and their fandoms and potentially contested practices such as cancel culture (within fandom) more broadly. Fans' reactionary responses can be regarded as the contestation and negotiation between neo-tribal identities and conventional political identities. As a rising form of social grouping and community identity, the fluid taste-based neo-tribes are often framed and potentially in conflict with the more stable social division based on conventional political and ideological beliefs. When such conflicts occur, individuals need to negotiate these two types of identities: either by reconciling them for their coexistence or by abandoning one of them. Usually, if the abandonment needs to happen, the less stable taste-based neo-tribal identities are sacrificed in favor of conventional political identities. Thus, contested fan practices take place.

In a 2018 article by the *Washington Post*, where Swift's political coming-out was scrutinized as topic of discussion on a pro-Trump Reddit-thread *The\_Donald*, one of her fans is reported as writing, "GG, you just lost over half of your fanbase, including me" (Selk, 2018, para. 22) following this news. Likewise, an article by *Fortune*-reporter Chris Morris (2018) comments upon how

Social media posts show people, many of whom had convinced themselves Swift was a member of the far-right, burning posters of the music artist and destroying CDs of her work, presumably in protest to her Instagram post Monday endorsing a Democratic Senatorial candidate and urging people to vote. (para. 2)

So, allegedly, some fans vehemently disagreed with Swift's political stance, expressing their anger and discontinuation of their fan identity by burning merchandise and CDs.

After the 227 Incident, there are Xiao fans making public announcements on various Chinese social media platforms that they quit being his fans, many of whom are AO3 and Lofter users. The considerable overlap between Xiao Zhan/the Untamed CP fans and BL/fan fiction fans plays an important role. In these posts, ex-fans criticized Xiao for not actively condemning his fans for their various radical behaviors, such as reporting AO3, online bullying, and harassment (Weiniyouzi, 2020). A verse adapted from Martin Niemöller's post-war confessional prose "First They Came . . ." (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012) is also used in such announcement:

First, they came for the fanfiction, and I did not speak out—because I don't read fanfiction;  
Then they came for the Lolita,<sup>4</sup> and I did not speak out—because I was not one; [ . . . ] Then

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<sup>4</sup> Lolita is a Japanese subculture that also became popular in China. Fans of this subculture dress in a specific fashion style that is highly influenced by Rococo style.

they came for K-pop, and I did not speak out—because I don't follow K-pop; . . . Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me. (Anonymous User, 2020)

By adapting Niemöller's prose and comparing Xiao and his radical fans as oppressors, ex-fans of Xiao abandon their neo-tribal identities to stay true to their belief in freedom of speech. Similarly, ex-fans of Swift, who once believed that Swift was a member of the far-right just as they are, burnt her posters and CDs in protest to renounce their fan identity because her Instagram post endorsing a Democratic candidate conflicts with their right-wing political stance (Morris, 2018).

Even when we interview fans who remain in the fandoms after controversies, some still express their willingness to abandon these fandom identities if the idols or their ideologies are proven unworthy or no longer match the fans' values and political stance. Xiao's fan Dana says that "if Xiao Zhan did something super bad or illegal, like soliciting prostitutes, doing drugs, plagiarism or relationship affairs, I might stop being his fan." Similarly, Swiftie Marieke states that "if she voted for Trump, I would be out, I guess."

An idiom in Chinese fandoms states: "one starts the fandom journey for their (idols) pretty appearance, falls in love with them for their talents, and finally stays loyal for their integrities." It captures how fandoms as neo-tribes are taste-based, yet the "integrities"—might it be moralities or political stances—can result in the consolidation, negotiation, or abandonment of fans' neo-tribal identities.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As shown in our data and analysis, contested fandom practices can be regarded as a universal phenomenon that depends on negotiations between neo-tribal and conventional political identities. Such negotiation may seem different in China and the West because of diverging cultural and political environments that shape these fandoms, yet they present many universal patterns. Above all else, fandom practices seem to maintain congruence between cultural/neo-tribal and political identities, as a matter of self-preservation in both domains. Our findings contribute to the understanding of cancel culture and other contested fan practices as global phenomena. While cancel culture is often presented as limited to specific political progressives, the actual practices involved such as denunciation and boycotting are more firmly embedded in fan communities.

This research also demonstrates the importance of transcultural comparison and in-depth case studies as a sound exploratory method. Given the ease with which franchises as well as cultural practices traverse national boundaries, critical scholarly approaches should consider how comparable phenomena are manifest in diverging contexts. While seemingly at odds with the clarity and compatibility we might otherwise seek in a comparative account, the in-depth case study method remains faithful to situated contexts and enables researchers to see through the differences on the surface and identify otherwise masked universalities. For example, when comparing the two controversies in our research, that Xiao's fans try to shield him from controversial politics while Swifties hope she engaged in politics earlier might be dismissed as a contrast. However, upon contextualizing both reasonings in their social and political environments, we can see that both fandoms are trying to keep their neo-tribal and political identities aligned or at least not in conflict so that they don't need to abandon one.

There are several limitations in this study, which can be supplemented by relevant future research. While our respondents were candid when describing their witnessing of and participation in politicized fan practices, they provide only a partial account of these developments by virtue of their continued participation in these fandoms. Further research on contested fandom engagement would benefit from accounts of those who chose to abandon these communities, those who were rejected or “canceled” from these communities, as well as those who instrumentalized these communities as outsiders. Also, our analysis focuses on particular dimensions of the nexus between politics and entertainment. As such, some relevant aspects remain topics for future research. This includes the perceived authenticity and replaceability of pop idols in countries such as China and the United States, and how this influences these idols’ political credibility for fans. This comparative analysis also seeks to move beyond conventional binaries that characterize Western and Eastern political contexts. Though our cases support an understanding of everyday politics that is more closely aligned with mediated cultural practices, it would be reckless to claim that left/right or anti-/pro-government distinctions are eschewed. The way these might flare up in fans’ attempts to make sense of their political engagement will shed further light on how conventional political actors can appropriate these practices. Finally, the degree to which pop idols and their fandoms operate through digital media, and this also invites political engagement via such media, speaks to the need to consider the above developments in relation to platform economies (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). The contested fandom engagement as connective actions and data fandoms are inherently dependent on the affordances of social media platforms and are thus at least partly directed by their business models. Though exceeding the scope of our research, such influence is never far removed from the decisions taken by fandoms.

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**Appendix 1. Interview Guide*****Demographic***

1. What is your age?
2. Which gender do you identify with?
3. What is your profession?
4. What is your educational background?
5. How would you describe your political involvement?

***Fandom Identities and Practices***

1. When and how did you become a fan of Xiao/Swift?
2. Have you been part of any fandom before?
3. What kind of activities do you engage in as a fan?

***Controversies- and Politics-Related***

1. Can you describe what happened in the 227 incident and how you felt? (Xiao)
2. Why do you think Xiao and his fans did what they do? (Xiao)
3. When Swift revealed her support for the Democratic senators, how did this make you feel? (Swift)
4. Why do you think Swift has come out politically? (Swift)
5. As a fan, did you participate in any of the collective actions? Did you have any conflict or argument with other fans? Is there any disagreement among the fans?
6. What is the current situation of Xiao/Swift's fandom?
7. Was there any organized activity from his/her fans trying to solve consequences brought by the controversies?
8. Where do you think the public's strong emotions come from?
9. Do you have any struggle dealing with the different identities you have in this incident?