https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2025.067

Fan Support Activities as Media Literacy Practice: Identity Construction in TNT (Time Teens) Fan Culture

Tao Yingshu
University College London
Liantai Tianxi, Honggutan District, Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province
Corresponding author, E-mail: Tao2741633402@163.com

Abstract

This study examines how fan support activities in Chinese "nurturing idol" culture function as media literacy practices and identity construction processes, focusing on TNT (Time in Teen) fan culture. Using Burn & Durran's 3Cs media literacy framework and Connected Learning theory, we analyzed TNT fan activities on Bilibili and Weibo across 2019, 2021, and 2023. Results show that the "parallel growth" model, where teenage fans develop alongside similarly-aged idols, creates unique opportunities for media literacy development through cultural understanding, critical interpretation, and creative production. Fans evolved from passive consumers to active cultural producers, developing technical skills and critical thinking through collaborative content creation. However, this participatory culture operates within platform capitalism structures that transform fan creativity into digital labor. The findings reveal the dual nature of fan participation: while empowering youth identity formation and media literacy development, it simultaneously subjects participants to commercial exploitation, highlighting tensions between agency and structural constraints in digital youth culture.

Keywords:

media literacy, fan culture, identity construction, participatory culture, nurturing idols, digital labor, connected learning

Introduction

In the digital age, the rise of social media platforms has created unprecedented opportunities for interaction between fans and idols, while also opening up new possibilities for fans' media literacy development. In recent years, one of the most discussed phenomena in China's entertainment industry has been 'nurturing idols'. In Chinese youth culture, the emergence of these nurturing idols (where both performers and fans are experiencing parallel development) provides a unique case study for examining the intersection of fan practices, media literacy, and identity construction. This research focuses on TNT (Time in Teen), a group established in 2020. Consisting of seven teenage members, TNT is currently one of the most influential and representative nurturing idol groups in China's entertainment industry, exemplifying a new model of idol-fan

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

relationships that emphasizes the experiences of growing together.

This study aims to explore how TNT fans develop media literacy through participatory practices (fan support activities) and how this process influences their identity construction within the context of "parallel growth" with their idols. Based on Connected learning theory and the 3Cs media literacy framework (Burn & Durran, 2007), this research suggests that TNT fan culture demonstrates a unique model of media literacy development, where fan support activities serve as both learning practices and identity construction processes. Moreover, TNT's distinctive position as nurturing idols brings multidimensional influences to fans' self-identification. Building on this, the study analyzes how TNT fans cultivate media literacy skills through content creation, community interaction, and platform navigation, while simultaneously constructing their identities through interaction with peer idols.

Through comparative analysis of TNT fans' support activities on Bilibili video platform and Weibo from 2019, 2021, and 2023, this research helps understand how youth media literacy develops through fan activities in the digital era. These three time points were chosen because 2019 marked TNT's debut year, and comparing fan support activities across three different periods clearly shows the development track of fans' media literacy and the evolution of identity formation. Furthermore, this study extends Marwick's (2013) research on social media relationships by exploring how "parallel growth" dynamics create unique identity construction opportunities through parasocial connections. The findings reveal that when fans and idols are at similar developmental stages, fan support activities become not only crucial spaces for media literacy learning and identity formation but also foster a unique participatory learning pattern in the digital environment. Through this model, as fans grow alongside their idols during support activities, they not only develop a deep understanding of social media platform mechanisms but, more importantly, cultivate self-developmental awareness and critical thinking about youth digital culture through observing, participating in, and reflecting on their peer idols' growth journey. This age-based resonant interactive experience allows fans to more authentically project their own growth experiences through creative expression, thereby forming a distinctive paradigm of youth media practice.

Parallel Growth Model in Fan Culture

The emergence of Chinese nurturing idols was not a sudden phenomenon. Since its establishment in 1975, Johnny's & Associates in Japan has focused on cultivating male artists and male idol groups. Their artists typically join the company in their teens, undergoing years of comprehensive training in singing, dancing, and stage performance while building popularity before the most talented ones can debut. This long-term cultivation model is not only considered the prototype of nurturing idols (Yu, 2022) but has also profoundly influenced the artist training system in East Asian popular culture industries. It provided a reference model for South Korea's trainee system and inspired China's idol industry to systematically train young artists (Galbraith & Karlin, 2020), ultimately leading to the emergence of groups like TNT.

The concept of nurturing idols creates a unique environment for fan participation and identity formation. This "parallel growth" model, where fans grow together with artists, fundamentally differs from traditional idol-fan relationships. Traditional fan culture often involves clear hierarchical differences, with fans viewing

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

idols as unreachable person. However, nurturing idol groups like TNT break this established pattern, as fans' individual growth occur simultaneously with and influence their idols' development.

Jenkins (2013) contrasts the term 'participatory culture' with older notions of passive media viewing behavior. Unlike the past where media producers and consumers or fans were seen as completely separate roles, we now view them as participants who interact and influence each other according to new rules. The unique parallel growth characteristic of nurturing idols is reflected in their practice of Jenkins' (2013) participatory culture: Similar to traditional fans, they are not just consumers but also content creators and cultural practitioners, documenting and sharing their idols' growth through fan works, video editing, and support campaign planning. The difference lies in how these contents capture the shared growth journey of fans and idols, such as the growing maturity of video editing skills, as they build a mutually supportive creative community through various support activities.

Moreover, fan participation in "nurturing" support activities extends beyond helping idols at final stage of their debut through support campaigns and voting. 'Parallel growth' is also reflected in how fans and idols set goals together and support idols in achieving the goal of economic benefits. For example, when accessories worn by TNT members at events are verified by brand official accounts on social media platforms like Weibo, fans express gratitude on these accounts to help strengthen the relationship between TNT and brands for future collaborations (Figure 1). Thus, every step of the idol's growth is accompanied by fan support and witness. This demonstrates how fans participate in the construction of idols identity through media consumption. This reflects the mutual promotion and supervision characteristics of the parallel growth model, where fans gain a sense of achievement and self-realization through participating in their idols' growth, while the idols' progress motivates fans to grow in their own fields. On this basis, idols and fans gradually construct a deep parasocial intimate relationship based on shared growth experiences (Zhao and Wang, 2022). This relationship goes beyond traditional idolatry; specifically, the parallel growth model in nurturing idol culture essentially creates a two-way developmental supportive relationship, breaking the one-way worship pattern of traditional idol culture and forming a new fan-idol relationship based on shared growth.

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Figure 1: The official Weibo account of the Qeelin brand confirmed the accessories worn by the TNT members, and fans expressed their gratitude in the post below

This unique model transforms fan participation in fandom from simple support to shared growth practices. This participation not only demonstrates Jenkins' (2002) emphasized "collective intelligence" - the collective creativity formed through fans' collaborative planning of support activities, resource sharing, and data voting - but more importantly, it forms developmental fan practices. These practices reflect the parallel growth characteristics of fans and idols: as fans develop cognitive abilities through content creation, idols improve their performance skills; as fans build emotional connections through shared experiences, idols develop their interactive relationships with fans; as fans engage in social learning within groups, idols also grow through team activities. This bidirectional development process continuously promotes fans' media literacy while influencing their identity construction.

Media Literacy Development Through Fan Participation

After analyzing the parallel growth model of nurturing idols, to further explore how this model influences fans' media literacy development through specific fan support activities, it is meaningful to examine TNT fans' participatory practices within Burn & Durran's 3-Cs media literacy model to explore the development process and staged outcomes of fans' media literacy.

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Burn and Durran (2007, pp.1-22) argue that literacy has transformative and creative qualities. It involves not only understanding texts but also rewriting them to varying degrees. Based on this view, they developed a theoretical framework for media literacy known as the 3-Cs framework, where the three Cs represent Cultural, Critical, and Creative dimensions.

First, the Cultural dimension emphasizes understanding and participation in media cultural contexts. This involves Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) concept of discourse, defined as "knowledge of (some aspect of) reality" and how it is encoded and decoded in specific cultural contexts. In TNT fans' participatory practices, the Cultural dimension shows clear developmental progression. In 2019, when the group first debuted, fan-made support videos on Bilibili primarily focused on stage performance shooting content (Figure 2), reflecting fans' basic understanding of idol presentation symbols. Notably, during this phase, fans often used referential terms like "high school students" and "2005 generation" rather than the group's full name (Figure 3&4). This choice reflects fans' understanding of their target audience, as TNT's main fan base consists of young people the same age as the group members. It also demonstrates how they attracted broader attention through shared identity labels when the group's recognition was still low, emphasizing how fans supervise idol development under the parallel growth characteristic of nurturing idols. This process itself also cultivated fans' media literacy in encoding and decoding idol labels. As Livingstone (2019) discusses: "ordinary people can creatively participate in and utilize media texts to demonstrate their subjectivity and values." Fans' strategic selection and use of these identity labels demonstrate their ability to interpret cultural symbols and how to establish cultural connections with target audiences through these symbols.



Figure 2: TNT's Stage Shot was released on the Bilibili platform in 2019

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Figure 3&4: TNT's performance video released on the Bilibili platform in 2019, titled '05 generation and high school students

By 2021 and 2023, as TNT developed, fan creations began to explicitly use the group's full name and connect content with broadly influential social topics like the Olympics and military themes. This transformation not only demonstrates fans' improved media literacy but also reflects their deepened understanding of cultural value construction. For example, in 2021, fans created a support video combining TNT's song "Zhuque" with Olympic athletes' competition content, which resonated widely and achieved 1.387 million views (Figure 5). Such creations demonstrate fans' ability to interpret and reconstruct media texts on multiple levels: they not only understand the spirit of perseverance conveyed in the song but also keenly capture social trending topics, connecting idol works with broader cultural contexts, achieving both song promotion and creative transformation of media content. This shift from single fan support culture to broader social value expression indicates fans' media literacy development in the Cultural dimension - they are no longer limited to simple fan cultural expression but can understand and utilize more complex media symbol systems, organically combining idol culture with mainstream social discourse. As Livingstone (2019) points out, this reflects how audiences deepen their understanding and application of media texts through creative participation.

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Figure 5: A video on Bilibili combing TNT's song "Zhuque" and the Tokyo Olympics had 1.387 million views

Secondly, the Critical dimension focuses on critical interpretation and judgment of media content. In this dimension, interpretation plays a central role. As Burn and Durran (2007, pp.1-22) state, 'interpretation' is a two-way dialogic process: it involves both how we understand encountered media texts and how this understanding guides our creation of new texts. This bidirectional nature is fully demonstrated in TNT fans' support practices. Fans are not passive receivers but active meaning constructors. They first spend considerable time and effort interpreting original texts like idols' stage performances and musical works, understanding their meaning and value; then, based on this understanding, they further create new media content, demonstrating their own interpretation and thinking. In this process, fans resolve gaps and explore other details and undiscovered potential (Jenkins, 2013).

In TNT fans' practices, this development of critical interpretation ability is particularly evident. For example, in support videos created during the 2023 Army Day, fans chose to combine TNT's song "Dashidai" with footage of Chinese military (Figure 6). The lyrics repeatedly mentioning "strength," "great era, crown me, the scarred but unforgettable growth" and "my fist is strong so I make the rules" align perfectly with the spirit of Chinese soldiers' fearless struggle against strong opponents. Notably, fans carefully select footage that corresponds to the lyrics during the video editing process. For instance, when the lyrics "time teaches me to bloom and bear fruit" appear, fans chose footage of soldiers training under harsh conditions (Figure 7). This matching of footage and lyrics demonstrates fans' deep understanding and creative reconstruction ability of both texts. As Burn and Durran (2007, pp.1-22) emphasize, literacy's transformative and creative qualities suggest that text comprehension necessarily involves reconstruction. Through such careful editing choices, fans not only demonstrate accurate interpretation of the original text but also create a new layer of meaning, generating resonance between the individual struggle spirit in idol songs and the collective dedication spirit of soldiers.

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Figure 6: Video in Bilibili, TNT's song "Dashidai" with footage of Chinese military



Figure 7: "time teaches me to bloom and bear fruit" appear, fans chose footage of soldiers training under harsh conditions

In this creative process, fans gradually form their learner identity through interpreting and reconstructing media texts. In the creation process, TNT fans need to understand military spirit, grasp mainstream social values, and skillfully combine these elements with idol works. This deep involvement transforms them from mere idol followers into cultural creators with social responsibility. This shift from simple fan support culture to broader social value expression demonstrates fans' reconstruction of self-positioning in cultural practice. As Marwick (2013) discusses, users in social media environments continuously adjust and reconstruct their online identity expression. Through creatively connecting idol texts with social issues, fans achieve the transformation from content consumers to cultural producers, demonstrating the role of participatory practices in promoting learner identity construction.

Finally, the Creative dimension emphasizes the ability to create and recreate media content. This directly relates to the design and production processes proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). In TNT fans' practices, the development of this creative ability is reflected in multiple aspects of support video production. For instance, in 2019, fans mainly produced simple stage performance clips, focusing cameras on idol performances, demonstrating basic video editing skills (Figure 2). By 2021, fans began experimenting with

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

more complex creative forms, such as using complex editing techniques to achieve 'quick-change' effects with stage performances of the same song from different periods (Figure 8). By 2023, fans' creations became more mature, as they considered not only the matching of visuals and music when producing Army Day support videos but also emphasized emotional expression through camera language and editing rhythm (Figure 6).



Figure 8: Video in Bilibili, 'quick-change' effects video in 2021

This track of creative ability development clearly demonstrates how participatory practices facilitate the formation of learner identity. As Burn and Durran (2007, pp.1-22) emphasize, media literacy includes reinterpreting and creating texts. Through continuous creative processes, fans develop from learners of single skills into content creators who can comprehensively utilize multiple media elements, understand narrative structures, and grasp audience psychology. This process not only cultivates their technical skills but, more importantly, fostered their identity as cultural producers.

These three dimensions mutually reinforce each other in TNT fans' parallel growth process. As Livingstone (2019) discusses, media literacy is manifested in the interaction between text production, representation methods, and audience strategies across multiple levels. Through continuous support creation practices, fans have achieved significant growth in cultural cognition, critical thinking, and creative expression, forming a complete media literacy development system. Meanwhile, the continuous development of TNT fans' support methods and content has to some extent urged TNT to enhance their idol group skills in dance and singing, making them aware of their responsibility as public figures to play a positive role for fans and the general public.

Identity Construction in Nurturing Fan Communities

Within TNT's fan community, the "Nurturing" characteristic provides a unique developmental space for fan identity construction. As Ito et al. (2013) point out in Connected Learning theory, learning truly takes root when young people find peers who share their interests and receive institutional recognition and community resource support. This theoretical framework helps understand how TNT's fan community becomes a field for collective learning and identity construction.

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Taking the 2023 fourth anniversary support video as an example, the video documents the shared growth journey of the fan community and their idols. From initial simple on-site support and slogan creation, to later more systematic collective creative practices, such as fans creating complete support videos based on TNT's musical works, meticulously planning everything from material selection, storyboard design, and music editing to final production (Figure 9); initiating charity projects in TNT's name, combining support activities with social value (Figure 10). This deepening process of creative practice demonstrates fans' increasing participation. When these support works resonate within the fan community, they trigger a unique emotional transfer process: the resonant emotions produced by other fans in reading the texts transfer to the idols, leading to their participation in the collective construction of idol identity. This transforms fans from content consumers to active participants in idol identity production.



Figure 9: Posted on the Bilibili platform, TNT fans co-curated a support video for TNT



Figure 10: Charitable activities initiated or participated in by TNT fans in the name of TNT

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This participation and identity construction is further deepened in Weibo Super Topic (a fan communication platform based on specific topics). The "Fan Creation" section, as a learning space focused on shared goals and creation, embodies the social belonging and participatory values emphasized in Connected Learning. In there, fans establish close connections through nicknames, personal profiles, and comments, developing from online interactions to offline meetings, forming real social relationships (Guo, 2021). This multi-level interaction not only strengthens identification among fans but also creates a safe space for exploring and constructing self-identity. Especially for teenage fans aged 12-18, this stage is crucial for forming interests and social identities, as emphasized by Ito et al. (2013).

The charity activities initiated by fans in TNT's name in 2021 demonstrate an even deeper transformation. Through participating in collective actions like voting and support activities, fans experience a sense of influence - the feeling of ability to help idols achieve certain accomplishments strengthens their self-identity recognition(Guo, 2021). Meanwhile, applying organizational and creative skills learned in the community to social practice reflects the "open network" characteristic emphasized in Connected Learning theory - learning breaks through single environment limitations, connecting to broader opportunities and development spaces(Ito et al., 2013). This practice enables fans to not only participate in idol nurturing but also explore new ways of understanding and participating in the world in the internet era through meaning production and community interaction.

Critical Analysis and Conclusion of Fan Participation

Although the TNT fan community demonstrates how participatory practices influence learner identity development, youth fan culture's impact on participants' development as a form of media literacy requires more comprehensive consideration. When deeply examining the relationship between fan participation and identity construction, the following dimensions need critical consideration.

First, from a digital labor perspective, young fans' investment in content creation and promotional activities shows significant influence. With China's internet users reaching 1.051 billion (as of June 2022), internet platforms and entertainment capital use technologies like big data and algorithms to convert fans' emotional investment into quantifiable data production (Guangming Daily, 2022). On social media platforms like Weibo, fans become "data laborers" that platform economies rely on through activities like "Super Topic" rankings and data support. Platforms turn fan activities into labor through mechanisms like "Star Power Rankings" and "Super Topic Levels," making data production a battlefield for fans' "labor of love." (Zhao and Wang, 2022). This participation under datafication not only affects fans' learning engagement but also reflects how platforms convert fans' emotions and creativity into economic value. Considering TNT's status as a nurturing idol group, their fans who have accompanied their development have stronger emotional connections and stickiness than ordinary fans, suggesting they might more willingly become unpaid data laborers. Through simple repetitive data labor, they gain higher spiritual experiences, which motivates fans to actively become "data laborers," giving personal meaning to data production(Zhao and Wang, 2022). However, fans' positive cultural producer identity and participation consciousness explored and constructed in participatory culture are weakened and dissolved within the massive rule order constructed by capital. And the so-called "technological empowerment" that brings participation rights in cultural production to audiences

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

and fan groups is gradually weakened and obscured(Zhao and Wang, 2022).

Moreover, regarding identity formation dynamics, the age proximity between idols and fans creates unique identification mechanisms. As Dezuanni (2020) found in studying micro-celebrity communities, fans establish intimate trust relationships similar to 'sister or brother' through commenting and creating fan works. This model based on personal connection and interaction not only deepens fans' emotional identification with idols but also encourages their participation in content creation and community interaction. Meanwhile, Marwick's (2013) research on parasocial relationships in the social media era shows that platforms' instant interaction features make these psychological connections closer. However, when fans invest significant time in data production, these relationships that should support self-identity development might instead restrict their autonomous personality development.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that fan support activities in TNT nurturing idol culture serve as a complex field for media literacy development and identity construction, revealing unique educational significance. Through examining fans' participatory practices within the 3-Cs framework and Connected Learning theory, I observe a deep interactive relationship between media literacy learning and identity formation. The unique parallel growth characteristic of nurturing idol culture creates a distinctive environment where fans' identity construction occurs simultaneously with their media literacy development. However, this relationship is not without tension. While fans develop critical interpretation abilities, creative expression skills, and cultural understanding through support activities, their participation is simultaneously influenced by platform capitalism and digital labor dynamics. The case of TNT fan culture reveals both the empowering potential and limiting effects of participatory fan practices on youth identity development. Therefore, fan participatory practices in nurturing idol culture not only reflect the complexity of youth media literacy development in the digital era but also highlight the importance of balancing development and constraints in understanding and guiding youth cultural practices.

References

[1]Alice Emily Marwick (2013). Status Update : celebrity, publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[2]Burn, A. and Durran, J. (2007). Media literacy in schools : practice, production and progression. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, pp.1–22.

[3]Dezuanni, M. (2020). Micro-Celebrity Communities, and media education: Understanding fan practices on YouTube and Wattpad. 17-23: The Handbook of media education research.

[4]Guangming Daily (2022). The 50th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China was released. [online] www.gov.cn. Available at: https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-09/01/content_5707695.htm.

[5]Guo, N. (2021). RESEARCH ON THE CULTURE OF THE FANS OF ‘FORMING’IDOLS ——TAKE JACKSON FANS FOR EXAMPLE. Xi’an International Studies University.

[6]Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J. and Watkins, S.C. (2013). Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

[7]Jenkins, H. (2002). Interactive audiences? The collective intelligence of media fans. The New Media

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Book, pp.157–170.
[8]Jenkins, H. (2013). Textual Poachers : Television Fans and Participatory Culture. London: Routledge.
[9]Kress, G.R. and Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). Multimodal Discourse : the Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication. London: Arnold ; New York.
[10]Livingstone, S. (2019). Audiences in an Age of Datafication: Critical Questions for Media Research. Television & New Media, 20(2), pp.170–183. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418811118.
[11]Marwick, A.E. (2013). Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age. Yale University Press. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699014531208.
[12]Yu, W. (2022). Contemporary Nurturance Idol Culture: Representation, Cause and Guidance. Journal of Shandong Youth Political College, (04), pp.45–50.
[13]Zhao , L. and Wang, W. (2022). From Participatory Culture Producers to 'Digital Labor': Research on Fan Identity Evolution and the Generation of 'Fandom' Chaos. Film Review, (13), pp.1–6.doi:https://doi.org/10.16583/j.cnki.52-1014/j.2022.13.014..

© 2025 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)