Understanding BNFs' Language Strategies in Mobilizing Large-scale Fan Actions: A Case of Fan Club Activities for the Film Article 20

Xiran Zhou

School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
Angelzhou0311@outlook.com

Abstract: In China, Big Name Fans (BNFs), acting as opinion leaders within fan communities, exert significant influence in orchestrating large-scale fan activities. Although the profound impact of fandom on the entertainment industry is widely recognized, the underlying strategies and mechanisms that facilitate this mobilization process remain largely unexplored. This study adopts the Discourse-Historical Analysis framework to delve into the linguistic strategies employed by BNFs on Weibo, China's premier social media platform for fan clubs, to mobilize large-scale and voluntary fan actions that demand substantial fan labor. The findings reveal that the predominant language strategies utilized are nomination and predication, which align closely with the emotionally charged environment of Weibo. Beyond examining the specific use of these language strategies, this study seeks to shed light on the underlying mechanisms that empower BNFs in their mobilization endeavors.

1. Introduction and Related Studies

1.1. Introduction

In April 2024, the search term "Fandom Chaos Affect Film-Watching Experience" soared to the Hot List on one of China's largest social media platforms, Weibo, shining a spotlight on the malicious scoring behavior of fan groups towards certain film works. Although fan clubs are defined primarily as sub-cultural groups[1], their voluntary fan activities have significantly bolstered the prosperity of the fan economy and impacted the trends in the entertainment industry. For instance, it is a widely acknowledged fact that fan clubs contribute substantial amounts of money to sway box office results, movie ratings, and sales volumes.

Private movie screenings serve as a prime example of the fan economy in action, where individual fans voluntarily purchase multiple tickets (sometimes even exceeding 1000) for a film and invite random people to watch it, thereby promoting the film's publicity and boosting box office figures. Take the film *"Article 20"* as an example. The film revolves around the theme of justice and was released during the 2024 Spring Festival in China. Featuring two influential stars, Z and L, the film significantly benefited from the efforts of the fan communities of the two stars, who organized over

500 and 700 private screenings respectively. These activities significantly contributed to the film's outstanding performance, propelling it to the top of the pre-sale rankings amidst fierce competition from other Spring Festival releases[2].

Currently, private movie screenings have emerged as a well-established segment of the fan economy, with Chinese ticketing platforms like Maoyan having developed dedicated functions on their APPs for such events. Despite their prevalence, the underlying mechanisms that fuel such large-scale and voluntary movements remain captivating. Among the multiple factors shaping highly motivated fan clubs, the pivotal role of Big Name Fans (BNFs) stands out prominently. As opinion leaders and organizers of fan activities, including private screenings, BNFs wield significant influence, commanding dedicated followings and orchestrating substantial fan movements. Illustratively, the BNFs of Z and L have garnered widespread acclaim online for their remarkable ability to mobilize countless volunteers for private screenings of "*Article 20*", contributing significantly to its box office success. Intriguingly, their accomplishments are achieved through seemingly simple methods: posting compelling content on their Weibo pages and engaging in direct communication with their followers.

Given the impressive reach and effectiveness demonstrated by these BNFs, this study aims to delve deeper into their language strategies. By analyzing the influential BNFs of Z and L who played crucial directorial roles in private movie screenings, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the language strategies that empower these fan leaders and uncover the secrets behind fan clubs' remarkable capacity to execute large-scale, impactful actions that drive their success.

1.2. China's Fandom Culture, Fan Hierarchy and BNFs

In China, fandom culture is generally acknowledged to have originated in the early 2000s, sparked by the popularity of the TV show *Super Girls*[1][3-4]. Since then, Chinese fandom culture has evolved significantly, transforming fans from passive recipients into active participants who shape the entertainment industry through various forms of voluntary fan labor; this has led to the development of a fandom culture with strict discipline, clear division, and strong motivation[3]. The thriving fan economy is heavily reliant on fan labor, encompassing voluntary contributions of time, energy, and financial resources[5].

Fan labor is diverse, leading to the emergence of distinct fan identities. For instance, "Chanchu Fans" engage in creative endeavors such as drawing and writing fan fiction[6], while "Zhandou Fans" focus on digital labor, combating negative comments about their idols online [5]. In contrast, "Big Name Fans" (BNFs) occupy a prestigious position within the fan community. Renowned for their access to multiple information channels and extensive fan labor, BNFs are trusted and respected. They function as celebrities within fan clubs and own thousands of followers themselves.

BNFs and their followers constitute a hierarchical structure within fan clubs, challenging the idea of a prevalent "grassroots culture" on the internet where all voices are equal, as described by Zhou[7]. In fandom culture, BNFs sit atop the hierarchy, dominating discourse and serving as pivotal figures within fan clubs. Through their posts and comments on fan sites, BNFs wield significant influence over their followers.

1.3. Research Questions

In China, sociolinguistic studies on fan languages are mainly descriptive, focused on understanding the jargon and specialized language usage within fan clubs, as well as portraying the image of young star-worshipers[4][8-9]. While this cumulative research has taken the first step in comprehending "who they are and what they are like", there remains a gap in understanding how language is employed to call for large-scale fan actions and voluntary labor, which is key to

understanding the distinct feature in fandom culture.

Thus, this study aims to explore the language strategies employed by Big Name Fans (BNFs) to effectively mobilize large-scale activities within fan clubs. Centering on the case of private movie-screening activities in Z and L's fan clubs, the following research questions are proposed:

(1) What strategies are utilized in BNFs' language to mobilize large-scale activities?

(2) How do these strategies generate such significant mobilizing power?

2. Research Method

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is a widely used method for uncovering discursive strategies. According to DHA, "strategies" are employed to direct social practices towards specific goals, with clear intentions behind them, and will ultimately result in "actions" [10]. The framework comprises two main parts: the analysis of triangulation based on context, and linguistic analysis. Given the focus of this study on uncovering BNF's language strategies, we will concentrate on how the five primary discursive strategies in DHA—nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification or mitigation—are utilized in the target discourse, along with brief contextual reviews (Figure 1).
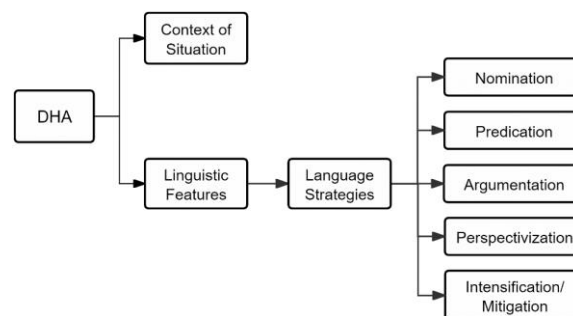

Figure 1: Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

According to Wodak[11], nomination refers to the way in which individuals, events, ideas, or social groups are named or labeled within discourse. It usually takes the form of categorizing membership or defining in-groups and out-groups through naming, deictics, and metaphors. Predication, on the other hand, involves the discursive qualification of actors or events, giving them more or less positive or negative evaluative attributions. This can be achieved by using explicit predicates, collocations, comparisons, metaphors, or other devices that suggest approval or disapproval. Argumentation means justifying the legitimacy of certain movements through discourse, often utilizing a series of "topoi" such as urgency, authority, and history. Perspectivization refers to the positioning of the speaker's or writer's point of view, either showing their involvement or distance from the related event. This can be indicated through quotations, metaphors, deictics, and other linguistic devices. Lastly, intensification and mitigation are a pair of techniques used to emphasize or downplay certain information within the discourse, thereby shaping a particular perspective.

Collectively, these five strategies form the main categories of strategy analysis within DHA, providing a robust set of tools for uncovering how influential discourse shapes public opinion and motivates actions. Derived from the standpoint of the weaker party in power relations, DHA offers a critical lens for pointing out the intentions behind the discourse of those in power and elucidating the nature of persuasive discourse. As such, it is well-suited as the analytical framework for this study, enabling us to clarify the reasons behind the significant appeal of BNFs' discourse.

2.2. Data and Methodology

Weibo is one of the major social media platforms in China and is the largest hub for Chinese fan communities. Thus, this research zeroes in on the unique linguistic expressions within this fan-centric ecosystem. In this study, BNFs signify individuals with over 10,000 followers on their personal Weibo pages, owing to their ardent fandom of celebrities. Employing purposive and snowball sampling methodologies, we identified 2 BNFs of Z and 7 of L in total. The chosen BNFs were also active members in organizing and mobilizing private movie screenings for "*Article 20*" from January to February this year.

Subsequently, we conducted a keyword search for "Bao Chang" (the Chinese term for "private movie screening") across the BNFs' Weibo accounts, gathering all 35 relevant posts discovered. These posts constitute the linguistic corpus for our in-depth analysis. The description of the selected data is outlined below in Table 1.

After data collection, each post underwent meticulous manual reviews to guarantee precision. Within the DHA framework, discursive strategies were carefully identified and coded, with the corresponding contexts verified to ensure a profound and accurate comprehension of the discourse under analysis.

Table 1: Information of the selected data (Data selected on June 26, 2024).

Streaming Star	BNF's ID (Last two words in Chinese Pinyin)	Number of Followers	Number of Posts
Z	*Doubao	46k	5
	*Zhinan	39k	2
L	*Cuitao	11k	4
	*Latte	165k	4
	*Xiaogou	14k	3
	*Liuping	38k	4
	*Wanxue	53k	11
	*Yuanhui	1.2m	2

3. Data Analysis

Upon meticulous examination, the discursive strategies employed in the 35 posts have been concisely categorized and presented in Table 2. This table reveals that predication (accounting for 36%) and nomination (comprising 33%) are the predominant language strategies utilized in the mobilization discourse of the BNFs. In the sections that follow, we will undertake a detailed analysis of each of these discursive strategies.

Table 2: Distribution of each discursive strategy.

Strategies	Number of Examples (Percentage)
Nomination	13 (33%)
Predication	14 (36%)
Argumentation	6 (15%)
Perspectivization	4 (10%)
Intensification/Mitigation	2 (5%)
Total	39 (100%)

The selected examples, originally in Chinese, have been translated into English through a literal translation approach in Tables 3-7, aiming to enhance clarity and fluency while preserving the core meaning of the original messages.

3.1. Nomination

In the discourse of BNFs analyzed in this study, nomination is primarily manifested through the naming of their own fan groups, rivalries, and the celebrities they admire.

Table 3: Examples of nomination.

Number	Example of Nomination (Literally translated from Chinese)
1	"The deadline is 10:00. So strive for it in the last two hours! Let's see if there are any missing fish!"
2	"Such is L's treatment in your company and you expect L's fans to send you money? Where is your face?"
3	"(We) invite Full Moons to come with passionate love~"
4	"What pain point have the unaccomplished fans of those variety show stars been poked again?"
5	"You guys are such great movie fans!"
6	"(Let's) care what the movie fans should care about."

For instance, Example 1 labels the fans who haven't contributed to the activity as "missing fish", emphasizing the determination to involve all fans in the action. In Example 2, the use of "your" to modify "company" taps into a deeply entrenched conflict within fandom culture: the tension between idol management companies and fans. Fans often hold high expectations of these companies, believing they fall short in providing idols with adequate resources. This sentiment motivates fans to engage in voluntary fan labor, aiming to help idols secure more resources. Consequently, Example 2 accentuates the divide between the company and fans, reinforcing the fans' commitment to and sense of responsibility for this particular activity.

Example 3 refers to the fans of Z as "Full Moon", the collective name given to members of Z's fan club, exemplifying the strategy of naming in action. Naming serves as a means of constructing identity within fandom culture, where virtually every celebrity's fanbase bears a unique name, either coined by the fans themselves or by the celebrity's management company. When mobilizing fans for large-scale events, BNFs resort to this name frequently to evoke a sense of identity and belonging among the fans, thereby leveraging a united identity to drive collective action.

Examples 4, 5, and 6 employ nomination by naming rival fan groups and themselves differently. In the context of the entertainment industry, movie actors are often viewed more prestigious than variety show stars in terms of artistic competence. Consequently, the term "movie fans" emphasize the superiority of L's fans, thereby fostering their enthusiasm for boosting L's box office sales.

3.2. Predication

In the language data analyzed in this study, predication is mainly used to evaluate or label the traits of diverse actors or processes. The objects of the predication process encompass a range of objects, with a particular emphasis on private movie-screening events, the admired movie stars, and the fans themselves. The usage of predication in this context serves to highlight and categorize these key entities and their associated characteristics.

As the target audience of BNFs' persuasive posts, fans—especially the followers of BNFs—are frequently subjected to assertions in their discourse. Example 7 illustrates how a BNF defines the responsibilities of fans by compellingly suggesting that a responsible fan should actively participate in the activities, which strongly appeals to fans who identify with the fan community.

Table 4: Examples of predication.

Number	Example of Predication (Literally translated from Chinese)
7	"The word 'fans' is a responsibility but also a shackle. During special times, the fans should shoulder more responsibility..."
8	"We said many years ago that we would give you the best, and now we are here."
9	"We gather here because of our love for Z, and we will strive to move forward with Z for her love and go to the Grand World together!"
10	"It brings us together to stand up for what is right."
11	"Aaaah! First-level readiness for the battle!!"
12	"My babe has always been like this: as long as he sees a fan, he will give it back sincerely."

On the other side, private movie-screening activities are framed as a great mission that will have profound significance on the things the fans care about. For instance, Examples 8, 9, 10, and 11 describe these activities as "the best gift for the star", laying the groundwork for "going to the Grand World together", a just act of "standing up for what is right", or a "battle" waiting for the fans to fight for. Through these descriptions, the activities are portrayed positively, imbued with multiple noble meanings, rather than simply being seen as a costly endeavor.

The movie stars are also subject to discourse predication and often play the role of faith maintainers. This can be demonstrated by Example 12, where a BNF emphasizes the rich reward of this action by portraying L as a grateful person. In summary, by depicting private movie screening as a meaningful, rewarding, and worthwhile action that is also considered the responsibility of fans, BNFs are more likely to succeed in raising sufficient funds for their purposes.

3.3. Argumentation

Argumentation is less prevalent in BNFs' posts, likely due to the immediacy and brevity of Weibo posts, which leave little room for the relatively calm and objective strategy of argumentation. Instead, slogan-like and emotionally charged language is more frequently used on the platform, which mainly resorts to predication and nomination. In the selected texts, when argumentation does occur, it often leverages topoi of urgency and definition.

Table 5: Examples of argumentation.

Number	Example of Argumentation (Literally translated from Chinese)
13	"Up till now, the number of people is not ideal, which may fail to meet the requirements for private movie screenings. Princess, please join our chat group! Our prince is sending you heartfelt love."
14	"L is the lead actor... what's wrong with those who ask for a bigger screen for ads instead of private movie screenings?... Isn't the screen in the cinema big enough for you?"

For instance, Example 13 (in Table 5) resorts to topos of urgency and argues that they need more people to participate, otherwise the activity will have to be canceled. Example 14 applies topos of definition, arguing that because L is the "lead actor" in the film, he deserves to have the entire theatre booked exclusively for him; it further asserts that merely asking for a big advertising screen would be a waste. Argumentation, by clearly articulating the necessity and importance of these activities, complements the first two strategies well. Nevertheless, although it is more direct and clearer, it remains relatively marginal within the overall discourse style of the BNFs.

3.4. Perspectivization

In this study, perspectivization is often employed when BNFs are trying to encourage participation

by sharing personal examples. This is because within fandom culture, BNFs are typically the more senior and well-established members whose actions can function as models for others. Thus, perspectivization enables BNFs to shift their perspective—from someone calling for action to someone sharing their own experiences—thereby subtly influencing their followers.

Table 6: Examples of perspectivization.

Number	Example of Perspectivization (Literally translated from Chinese)
15	"In the past two days, all my friends have increased their efforts. They are fighting their lives for more publicity. Whenever I open my Little Red Book, all I see are my bright red posters for it."
16	"Awesome! I am buying two more Imax tickets for it now!"

For instance, Examples 15 and 16 showcase the endeavors of their own or their friends around them, like "increased their efforts", "fighting their lives for more publicity", and "buying two more tickets". BNFs base these posts on their own perspectives and expose their efforts to thousands of followers. This may result in potential pressure on the remaining fans who have not yet participated due to the authority and influence of the BNFs.

3.5. Intensification and Mitigation

In the selected texts, both intensification and mitigation have been helpful tools in dispelling people's worries about the expenses of engaging in private movie screenings.

Table 7: Examples of intensification and mitigation.

Number	Example of Intensification and Mitigation (Literally translated from Chinese)
17	"Everyone knows about the ticket prices for the Spring Festival. This is really very favorable!"
18	"Just skip one cup of bubble tea, and you can afford a ticket."

Example 17 is a case of intensification, where double modifiers "really" and "very" are used to emphasize the "favorable" ticket price. Example 18, on the other hand, is a case of mitigation. It compares the price of participating in private movie screenings to the price of a cup of bubble tea. As a product highly popular among young people, bubble tea has now become a daily consumer item to some extent. The phrase "the price of a cup of bubble tea" has become a common metaphor in Chinese for describing "something being inexpensive". Equating "the cost of a cup of bubble tea" with the expense of participating in a private screening event, the sentence evidently weakens the public impression that "private booking events" are relatively expensive, thus alleviating people's concerns about spending and promoting participation.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As previously discussed, the five strategies play different roles in the mobilization discourse of BNFs (Big Name Fans). It has been observed that BNFs tend to utilize nomination and predication as primary means to shape public opinions. These strategies primarily involve defining and making judgments about the various actors engaged in the activities. In contrast, argumentation and perspectivization mainly serve supportive functions. When considering the specific context, particularly the characteristics of fan culture, each strategy addresses key psychological aspects of the fans, which is crucial for the success of mobilization. Overall, we found that the following strategies, among others, underpin the underlying mechanisms of the mobilization power.

Constructing "we-ness": Sneijder et al. [12] highlighted the significance of "we-ness", or group identification, in the successful mobilization of social movements. Through nomination and predication, in-groups and out-groups are shaped, and the responsibilities of being a member of fan

clubs are clearly outlined. When fans identify themselves with fanhood, they become susceptible to such nomination strategies, leading to the development of goals and ideals that align with the collective. Such group identification lays a solid foundation for further collective actions.

Passing on anxiety: Anxiety is prevalent in the discourse of BNFs. Whether they are highlighting the inadequacy of current participation, advocating for the urgency, or describing their own efforts from their perspective, this anxiety is conveyed from the BNFs to their audience, inspiring them to take action as the BNFs have urged. Furthermore, portraying companies as inactive exacerbates the pressure on fans, motivating them to make even greater contributions. These strategies are effective in reducing hesitancy and encouraging participation.

Enhancing the sense of purpose: Reconstructing private movie-screening activities is essential because they rely heavily on voluntary fan labor. Without the positive portrayal of these activities by BNFs, private movie screenings may be deemed unworthy, as it is highly altruistic to donate one's own money to buy movie tickets for strangers. However, by framing the activity as a collective mission that benefits multiple parties and holds exceptional significance, BNFs successfully transform the costly behavior into a noble cause. Notably, the use of predication plays a pivotal role in redefining the event and helps to boost the sense of purpose among participants.

In conclusion, language strategies were extensively applied in the mobilizing posts on BNFs' homepages, effectively conveying targeted messages to their followers and contributing to the success of their activities. These strategies may well be one of the underlying factors behind fan clubs' strong motivation and their significant influence on the entire entertainment industry. However, the question of whether this BNF-centric discourse system constitutes an unequal power relationship remains a topic worthy of further exploration.

References

[1] Chang Jiang, Zhu Silei. Fan Culture: Scope, Changes, and "Breaking Out of the Circle" [J]. Youth Journalist, 2021(19): 9-11.

[2] https://weibo.com/3848628727/NEoRfqE1u?refer_flag=1001030103_

[3] Wang Yixuan. The Formation Mechanism of Online Fan Community in the Internet Era—Taking Luhan's Fan Groups for Example [J]. Academic Circles, 2017, (3): 91-103.

[4] Chen Feng. An Analysis of Chinese Fans Network Jargons from the Perspective of Semiotics [J]. Modern Linguistics, 2021, 9(3): 612-616.

[5] Tong Qi. Fandom Girls'Battleground for Traffic: Data Labor, Affective Consumption and Neoliberalism [J]. Journal of Guangzhou University (Social Science Edition), 2020, 19(05): 72-79.

[6] Xu Jing and Wang Jinghan. Digital Pastoral Leadership and the 'Fan Community' Governance Techniques: Power Production within the Fan Community Organizations from a Platform Perspective[J]. Journalist, 2022, (12):67-80.

[7] Zhou Yan. Cultural Criticism and Discourse Analysis on Network Buzzwords [J]. Journal of Shandong University, Philosophy and Social Sciences, 2019, (4): 117-125.

[8] Yan Shangyuan. A Cognitive Approach to the Names of Fans of Supergirls and Happyboys [J]. Journal of Changsha University, 2008, 22(06): 81-82.

[9] Kong, Yaxin. Analysis of the Language Phenomenon of the Star-worshiping Group in the Entertainment Circle of the New Media Era [EB/OL], 2021-11-10. <https://www.sinoss.net/c/2021-11-10/567405.shtml>

[10] Zhao Linjing. Discourse-historical Analysis: Perspective, Method and Principles [J]. Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2009, 20(03): 87-91.

[11] Wodak, R. (2015). Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach. In K. Tracy, T. Sandel, & C. Ilie (Eds.), The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction (1st ed., pp. 1–14). Wiley.

[12] Sneijder, P., Stinesen, B., Harmelink, M., & Klarenbeek, A. (2020). The Discourse of Social Movements: Online Mobilising Practices for Collective Action. In M. A. Demasi, S. Burke, & C. Tileagă (Eds.), Political Communication (pp. 149–173). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60223-9_6>