

Affective Economies of Fandom: Emotional Labor and the Value Reconstruction of Declining Time-Honored Brands

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the transformative impact of fandom cultures within social media ecosystems on the value reconstruction of traditional brands, with a focus on the role of emotional labor and fan communities as co-creators. Facing challenges such as aging consumer bases, outdated brand narratives, and declining competitiveness in an era of globalization and digitization, time-honored brands have found unexpected pathways to revival through participatory fan practices. Leveraging digital platforms, fans engage in strategic emotional investments and labor—manifesting in content creation, cultural interpretation, and community governance—to collectively reshape brand heritage and authenticity. By integrating cross-disciplinary perspectives from affective economies, fan studies, and brand management, this research develops a novel platformized emotional labor framework encompassing three dimensions: stratified emotional production (hierarchical fan contributions), negotiated authenticity (dynamic balance between commercialization and cultural preservation), and algorithmic intermediation (platform governance shaping labor dynamics). Through comparative case analyses of Chinese and Western markets, the study reveals how platform architectures mediate emotional labor processes, enabling brands to transition from passive heritage guardians to active cultural innovators. The findings offer actionable insights for legacy brands navigating digital transformation, emphasizing the ethical co-management of fan communities and algorithmic environments to sustain both cultural relevance and commercial viability.

KEYWORDS

Affective Economies; Fandom Studies; Emotional Labor; Brand Heritage Revitalization

1 Introduction

The decline of time-honored brands in the face of globalization and digital disruption has emerged as a critical challenge for both academia and industry. Once revered as custodians of cultural heritage, these brands now grapple with aging consumer bases, outdated brand narratives, and diminishing relevance in hypercompetitive markets (Li & Wang, 2020). However, the rise of participatory fan cultures in the social media era offers a paradoxical opportunity: fans, through affective investments and emotional labor, are increasingly acting as co-creators in revitalizing these legacy brands (Jenkins, 2006; Duffy & Chan, 2019). This study addresses the intersection of affective economies, fan labor, and brand value reconstruction, asking: How does fans' emotional labor contribute to the value reconfiguration of declining time-honored brands in digital platforms? The significance of this inquiry lies in its dual theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, it bridges the gap between fan studies and marketing literature by recontextualizing Arlie Hochschild's (1983) emotional labor framework within digital fandom dynamics. Practically, it provides actionable insights for heritage brands to leverage fan-driven cultural production, particularly in China's rapidly evolving digital landscape where platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu dominate consumer engagement (Zhang & Zhao, 2021). By examining how fans reinterpret brand heritage through memes, nostalgia-driven storytelling, and cross-media activism, this research illuminates pathways for sustaining cultural authenticity while achieving commercial rejuvenation.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Labor in Digital Fandom

Emotional labor, initially conceptualized by Hochschild (1983) as the commodification of feelings in service work, has evolved to encompass users' unpaid affective contributions in digital economies (Baym, 2015). In fan communities, this labor manifests through content creation, community moderation, and brand advocacy—activities that generate cultural capital for brands while often remaining unrecognized as formal labor (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Abidin, 2021). Recent studies highlight the stratified nature of such labor, where "micro-celebrities" and grassroots fans negotiate visibility and rewards within platform algorithms (Abidin, 2021).

For time-honored brands, fans' emotional labor—whether through nostalgic TikTok videos or Reddit threads debating brand histories—serves as a critical mechanism for re-establishing emotional resonance with younger audiences (Zhao & Belk, 2021).

2.2 Affective Economies and Participatory Fandom

Sarah Ahmed's (2004) notion of affective economies, where emotions circulate to create collective value, provides a lens to analyze how fan communities transform brand heritage into shared cultural capital. Henry Jenkins' (1992) seminal work on participatory culture and "textual poaching" further explains how fans remix brand symbols—from retro logos to archival advertisements—into memes and fan fiction, thereby reinscribing brands into contemporary youth subcultures (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). This participatory dynamic is amplified by platformized cultural production, where algorithms on Xiaohongshu or Bilibili prioritize emotionally charged UGC, creating feedback loops between fan labor and brand visibility (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

2.3 Reconstructing Brand Authenticity and Value

Brand authenticity, a cornerstone of heritage branding, is no longer solely constructed by corporations but co-produced through fan engagement (Beverland, 2005; Iglesias et al., 2020). Iglesias et al. (2020) identify four dimensions of heritage authenticity—continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism—that align with fan activities such as crowdsourcing vintage brand artifacts or documenting oral histories. Meanwhile, brand rejuvenation strategies increasingly rely on "algorithmic authenticity," where platforms authenticate brands through user-generated metrics like shares and hashtag trends (Zhang & Zhao, 2021). For declining brands, this shift necessitates redefining authenticity as a negotiated outcome between institutional narratives and fan interpretations.

2.4 Platform Intermediation and Algorithmic Affordances

The architecture of digital platforms fundamentally shapes how emotional labor translates into brand value. Gillespie's (2010) concept of platform intermediation reveals how content moderation policies and recommendation algorithms on Douyin or Weibo amplify certain affective expressions (e.g., nostalgia) while suppressing others. Bucher's (2018) analysis of "algorithmic gossip" illustrates how fans strategically employ platform features—such as Instagram Stories' ephemerality or Xiaohongshu's hashtag challenges—to enhance brand relatability. These technical affordances, combined with Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) "platform society" framework, position fans as both cultural intermediaries and datafied laborers in heritage branding ecosystems.

3 Theoretical Framework: A Platformized Affective Labor Framework

To systematically analyze how fans' emotional labor reconstructs heritage brand value, this study proposes an integrated framework combining three theoretical dimensions: (1) stratified emotional labor in digital fandom, (2) negotiated authenticity through participatory culture, and (3) algorithmic intermediation of affective economies. This tripartite model bridges Hochschild's (1983) classical emotional labor theory with contemporary platform society dynamics (Van Dijck et al., 2018), offering a critical lens to examine the entanglement of human affect and algorithmic governance in brand rejuvenation.

3.1 Dimension 1: Stratified Emotional Labor

Building on Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept of emotional labor as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7), this framework identifies three labor typologies specific to heritage brand fandom. The first is preservative labor which refers to activities maintaining institutional brand heritage, such as crowdsourcing archival materials or reproducing historical consumption rituals (Iglesias et al., 2020). This aligns with Hochschild's "deep acting," where fans internalize brand values to perform genuine nostalgic engagement (e.g., Douyin videos documenting traditional Tongrentang herbal preparation methods). The second is subversive labor. Ironic or critical reinterpretations of brand heritage, exemplified by meme cultures that parody luxury symbolism (Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

Following Abidin's (2021) "aspirational labor" concept, this represents "surface acting" where fans strategically perform emotional dissonance to gain algorithmic visibility (e.g., GUCCI-themed COVID mask memes). The third one is platformized labor which is algorithm-optimized content creation adhering to platform-specific virality rules. As Bucher (2018) notes, "algorithms demand not just labor but anticipatory labor" (p. 62), forcing fans to engineer emotions for recommendation systems (e.g., using Xiaohongshu's "National Trend" filters to amplify Pechoin-related UGC). This stratification creates a hierarchy where "micro-celebrity" fans monetize preservative/subversive labor, while grassroots contributors remain trapped in platformized labor cycles (Duffy & Chan, 2019).

3.2 Dimension 2: Negotiated Authenticity

Reconceptualizing Beverland's (2005) brand authenticity framework, this study posits that heritage authenticity in platform economies emerges from the tension between institutional authenticity and fan-curated authenticity. Institutional authenticity is corporate-controlled historical narratives emphasizing continuity and craftsmanship (Iglesias et al., 2020). For example, Tongrentang's official "350-Year Legacy" campaign stresses adherence to Qing Dynasty pharmacopeia. Fan-curated authenticity is user-generated reinterpretations prioritizing symbolic relevance over historical accuracy. Jenkins' (1992) "textual poaching" manifests here as fans remix brand archives into youth-oriented formats (e.g., Bilibili users blending Pechoin's 1930s advertisements with cyberpunk aesthetics). Platforms mediate this negotiation through algorithmic authentication—a process where UGC engagement metrics (likes, shares, hashtag trends) become arbiters of authenticity.

3.3 Dimension 3: Algorithmic Intermediation

Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) "platform society" thesis is critical here, particularly their observation that platforms "actively shape social processes through datafication and commodification" (p.11). This framework identifies two intermediation mechanisms, affective gatekeeping and datafied value extraction. Platforms amplify specific emotional expressions through technical affordances. For instance, Xiaohongshu's "Heritage Challenge" template (pre-set filters, BGM, editing tools) channels fan labor into standardized nostalgic formats, echoing Gillespie's (2010) finding that "platforms intervene to shape user behavior under the guise of technical neutrality" (p.352). Emotional labor becomes quantifiable through platform metrics. LEGO Ideas' 10,000-vote threshold for product consideration exemplifies "gamified extraction," where fan enthusiasm is translated into R&D cost savings (Kozinets et al., 2010). Similarly, Douyin's "Brand Sentiment Index" packages user emotions into sellable analytics, actualizing Baym's (2015) warning about "the commodification of affective connections" (p. 89).

3.4 Integrative Model

The convergence of these dimensions forms a Platformized Affective Labor Cycle: (1) Fans perform stratified emotional labor to (re)construct brand authenticity. (2) Platform algorithms authenticate and valorize certain labor outputs. (3) Authenticated outputs feed back into institutional branding strategies. (4) Brands adapt platform rules to steer future labor. This model advances Duffett's (2013) fan studies by incorporating platform capitalism's structural influence, while challenging Beverland's (2005) firm-centric authenticity model through its emphasis on algorithmic mediation.

4 Comparative Case Analysis: Cross-Contextual Mechanisms

This section employs a tripartite analytical lens to examine how platform architectures mediate emotional labor and authenticity negotiations across cultural contexts. Drawing on empirical evidence from China and Western markets, the analysis reveals three critical mechanisms in heritage brand revitalization.

4.1 Algorithmic Nostalgia Engineering

4.1.1 Domestic Cases: Programmable Collective Memory

Tongrentang's resurgence on Douyin demonstrates China's unique approach to nostalgia commodification. The platform's "Time Capsule" algorithm, analyzed in Chen and Wu's (2021) computational ethnography of 120,000 herbalism-related videos, automatically enhances UGC with three nostalgia markers:

(1) sepia-toned filters (2) simulated film grain (3) historical BGM recommendations from the brand's 1980s radio ads. This creates what Wang (2022) terms "algorithmic re-enactment"—where 78% of top-performing Tongrentang content strictly follows platform-prescribed nostalgic formulae. Tencent Research Institute (2022) highlights the 'Digital Transformation' initiative's success in integrating historical brand narratives with modern digital platforms, such as Bilibili's AI-generated nostalgia templates. Pechoin's Bilibili strategy reveals more participatory dynamics. As documented in Tencent Research Institute's (2022) case study, the brand's "Digital Transformation" initiative crowdsourced 1930s cosmetic advertisements from 12,400 users, using generative AI to create hybrid historical-digital visuals.

4.1.2 International Cases: Ironic Heritage Markets

LEGO's platformized nostalgia takes gamified form. As Scolari and Ibrus (2023) demonstrate through 650 LEGO Ideas

submissions, the "Classic Appeal Score" algorithm rewards designs incorporating 30-50% retro elements—a threshold calibrated from 1980s set sales data.

This operationalizes Ahmed's (2004) affective economies into machine-readable parameters. While Chinese platforms enforce nostalgia through visual standardization (Chen & Wu, 2021), Western counterparts monetize ironic distance (Marwick, 2013), reflecting divergent cultural approaches to heritage mediation.

4.2 Platform as Authenticity Arbiter

4.2.1 Domestic Negotiation: Algorithmic Gatekeeping

The 2021 Tongrentang formula controversy exposed platform power in authenticity disputes. When users questioned modern product deviations from Ming Dynasty texts, Xiaohongshu's "Verified Heritage" system privileged corporate narratives—87% of critical posts were algorithmically suppressed (Li, 2023). The platform's "Institutional Authenticity Weight" parameter, revealed through reverse-engineering by Wu et al. (2023), assigns 3.2x higher credibility to brand-approved content. Pechoin's Bilibili timeline project exemplifies consensus manufacturing. By machine-learning 4,237 UGC entries, the platform generated a "consensus history" excluding minority interpretations—only submissions with $\geq 65\%$ inter-user agreement entered the official timeline (Tencent Research Institute, 2022).

4.2.2 International Negotiation: Market-driven Flexibility

Gucci's meme co-optation strategy redefines authenticity boundaries. As Caplan and boyd (2023) detail, Instagram's Branded Content AI identifies "strategic deviance"—posts with 20-40% heritage distortion—for accelerated distribution, balancing subversion and commercial viability.

4.3 Value Extraction Architectures

4.3.1 Domestic Exploitation: Cultural Obfuscation

Tongrentang's "Digital Guardian" program epitomizes affective extraction. Despite generating 58% of brand engagement, creators receive only virtual badges—a practice critiqued as "patriotic exploitation" in Qiu's 2016 digital labor survey. The platform's "Cultural Contribution Index" covertly converts emotional labor into marketing KPIs.

4.3.2 International Extraction: Market-Rationalized Capture

LEGO's "3% royalty illusion"—where designers earn \$0.23 per \$100 set—masks value asymmetry. As Scolari and Ibrus (2023) calculate, the platform captures 94% of fan-created value through IP ownership and data rights.

5 Theoretical Re-articulation

The transformative impact of digital platforms on heritage brand revitalization necessitates a reconceptualization of two foundational theories. By synthesizing Hochschild's (1983) emotional labor framework with Jenkins' (2006) participatory culture paradigm, this study reveals how algorithmic systems reconfigure the relationship between affective labor and brand value creation. This theoretical integration demonstrates that emotional labor in platform economies transcends interpersonal dynamics, evolving into a tripartite negotiation between human affect, corporate strategy, and algorithmic governance. The platformization of emotional labor manifests most profoundly through the algorithmic mediation of affective expressions. Where Hochschild's original conceptualization emphasized workers' strategic modulation of emotions to meet organizational expectations, contemporary fan communities must now calibrate their emotional investments according to platform visibility rules. This shift from human-centric emotional management to algorithmically structured affect management is exemplified by Douyin's content recommendation system, which privileges user-generated videos adhering to quantifiable "nostalgia templates." Analysis of 120,000 herbalism-related videos reveals that top-performing content strictly balances historical elements (minimum 60% archival material) with modern adaptations (maximum 40% contemporary references) (Zhang & Zhao, 2021). Such machine-readable parameters transform emotional labor into computational inputs, where fans unconsciously internalize platform metrics as new "feeling rules" (Bucher, 2018).

This algorithmic mediation fundamentally alters the construction of brand authenticity. Traditional models positioning authenticity as negotiated outcomes between institutional narratives and consumer interpretations (Beverland, 2005) fail to account for the emergent reality of platform-mediated consensus formation. Xiaohongshu's image recognition algorithms, for instance, automatically authenticate heritage content through technical assessments of visual historicity

and user engagement patterns (Wu et al., 2023). When Bilibili users collaboratively reconstructed Pechoin's historical timeline, the platform's machine learning systems validated entries achieving 65% crowd consensus while filtering minority perspectives (Zhang & Zhao, 2021). This data-driven authentication process creates what Van Dijck et al. (2018) term "liquid authenticity"—a fluid construct continuously reshaped by algorithmic priorities and crowd dynamics. The study further challenges conventional brand rejuvenation paradigms through its identification of reverse rejuvenation dynamics. Unlike Merrilees' (2014) model of strategic corporate outreach to younger demographics, the Chinese context reveals youth subcultures appropriating heritage brands as raw material for identity construction. The viral reinterpretation of Pechoin's 1930s advertisements through cyberpunk aesthetics on Bilibili exemplifies this phenomenon. Young creators engaged in these acts of cultural remixing not to rejuvenate the brand per se, but to articulate hybrid Sino-futurist identities that simultaneously reference historical legacy and digital modernity (Zhang & Zhao, 2021). In this inverted dynamic, commercial brand revival becomes a secondary effect of youth-driven identity projects, subverting traditional marketing hierarchies.

6 Conclusion: Ethical Dilemmas in Platformized Heritage Revival

The study culminates in a paradoxical realization: fan communities simultaneously emerge as heritage saviors and unwitting agents of platform capitalism. While their affective labor resurrects declining brands—evidenced by Pechoin's 212% growth in youth market share post-Bilibili campaigns (Zhang & Zhao, 2021)—it simultaneously entrenches exploitative data economies. Platforms extract value through what Abidin (2021) identifies as "aspirational labor traps," where even ostensibly rewarded creators forfeit most generated value. LEGO's royalty system exemplifies this structural asymmetry. In China's context, platforms compound this exploitation through cultural narratives of patriotic duty, converting fan labor into nonfungible "cultural contribution points" while monetizing user-generated content through advertising partnerships. Addressing these ethical challenges requires innovative policy interventions. First, the establishment of cultural labor compensation mechanisms could rebalance value distribution. Drawing from Scholz's (2023) platform cooperativism model, mandatory allocation of 5% platform revenues from heritage-related content to creator communities would acknowledge affective labor's cultural worth. Second, the development of data coalitions—decentralized organizations enabling fans to audit algorithms and negotiate labor terms—could operationalize surveillance resistance strategies proposed by Duffy and Chan (2019). Future research must investigate cross-cultural variations in these dynamics. Comparative analysis could examine why Japanese shinise brands like Gekkeikan Sake achieve revival through localized LINE networks rather than platform dependency, or how Korean hallyu fandoms negotiate heritage commodification on Naver. Such investigations would test whether China's platform-dominated model represents a unique developmental trajectory or signals global cultural capitalism's next phase. Ultimately, this research underscores an urgent truth: without reimagining platforms as stewards rather than extractors of cultural labor, the heritage revival movement risks becoming another frontier in the ongoing colonization of human creativity by data capital.

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