

# The Influences of Commerce on Virtual Singer Fandom as a Subculture: The Case of Luo Tianyi

 Yuexin SUN<sup>1</sup>,  Jongoh LEE<sup>2</sup> and  Heejae CHOI<sup>3\*</sup>

Graduate of School, Global Culture & Contents, College of Education, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, 107, Imun-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02450, Korea

\*Corresponding author. Email: hjchoi@hufs.ac.kr

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## Abstract

Subcultures are generally considered to be closely related to the youth who usually explore their identities in a rebellious way. Therefore subcultures are generally interpreted as resistance to the dominant culture and commerce. Commerce has been thought of as one of the main forces that could wipe out subcultural styles by incorporation. However, the relationship between subcultures and commerce has been remarkably changed by the rapid development of globalisation and new media technologies. This research is a case study on the fandom of Luo Tianyi, who is currently viewed as China's most successful virtual singer. The influences that commerce has exerted on Luo Tianyi's fandom are analysed in order to explain the new relationship between subcultures and commerce given today's social context

**Keywords:** Subculture, Commerce, Virtual Singer, Fandom, Luo Tianyi

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between subcultures and commerce has always been topical in subcultural studies. Many scholars believe that commerce and subcultures are opposites. Under the incorporation of commercial interests, subcultures have shown compromise and retreat, using 'subcultural capital' of in exchange for economic capital and social capital. Consequently, subcultures lose resistance and become dangerous in decline and death.[1] John Clarke thinks that the Beatles era is one of the most dramatic examples of the ways what was in origin a subculture style became transformed, through increasingly commercial organisation and fashionable expropriation, into a pure 'market' or 'consumer' style.[2]

However, with the advent of new media, consumer society, and globalisation, the relationship between subcultures and commerce has fundamentally changed. The positive role of commerce in the dissemination and development of subcultures has gradually been recognized, and it can even become a driving force for the generation of new subcultures. Virtual singer fandom as a subculture can be seen as a typical case. The virtual singers mentioned in this research refer to those based on Vocaloid. In China, it can be seen that virtual singers' fandom now enjoys a relationship of interconnection and interaction with commerce. This research, based on the subcultural theories, takes the fandom of Chinese virtual singer Luo Tianyi, China's most famous and successful Vocaloid-based virtual singer, as a case to analyse the relationship between Chinese virtual singers' fandom and commerce. The objective is to explain the positive role commerce plays in the generation, dissemination, and development of subcultures in current time and thus promote more distinctive subcultures to bloom.

## 2. THE SUBCULTURAL THEORIES

The earliest user of 'subculture' concept in the scholar field can be seen as Milton M. Gordon, an American sociologist, who retrospects the concept of subculture to 'sub-division' that recorded in *Dictionary of Sociology*(1944) in his essay 'The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application'(1947). He finds that subculture 'refers to sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual.' [3] However, the Chicago School had already begun to conduct systematic research on subcultural groups such as immigrants and criminal youths since the 1920s. They interpreted subcultures as forms of deviance and delinquency. Albert K. Cohen mentioned in his book *Delinquency Boys: the Culture of Gang*(1955) that the deviant behaviors of young people from the lower class, that is, the formation of their subcultures, is for 'problem solving'. [4] The problems here refer to status frustration of working-class youth in confrontation with the mainstream values represented by the bourgeoisie. So far the research on subcultures had not paid much attention to their relationship with commerce, but focused on class culture.

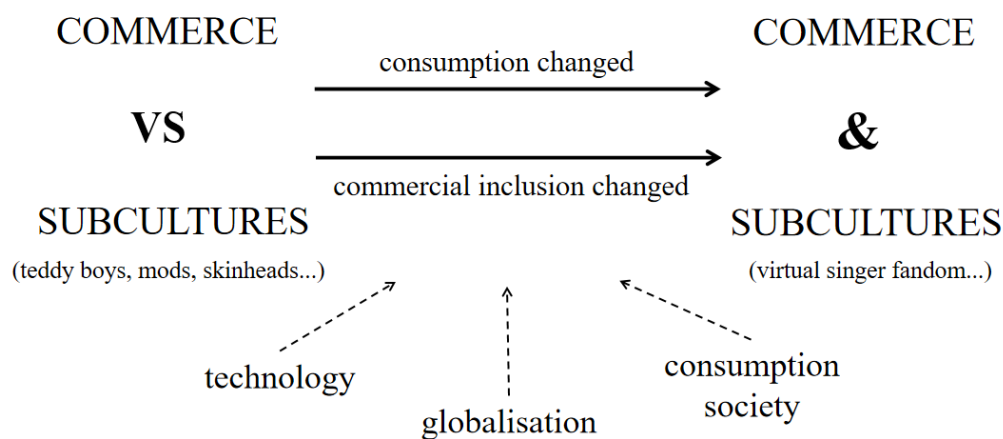
From the 1970s to the early 1980s, the spotlight shifted to the Birmingham School. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham emerged in 1964. Introducing class, hegemony, symbol and other theories and analytical methods, they contends that 'subculture' as a symbol system that constitutes a specific lifestyle of a minority group, which is 'style'. [5] Based on the studies of the Birmingham School, John Fiske and others made a clear definition of 'style' in *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*(1994). Style enjoys 'the means by which cultural identity and social location are negotiated and expressed ..... styles are related to how certain things are done ..... style is often defined as elusive, an indefinable something that, often implicitly, signifies or expresses recognizable difference or similarity'. [6] Additionally, the Birmingham School began to concentrate on commerce impacts on subcultures because the subcultural groups established their styles by leisure and consumption, but they believed that subcultures and commerce are opposites, so subcultures should always be aware of the 'incorporation' by commerce.

From the late 1980s, post-subculture theories emerged as an innovation to the Birmingham School. They suggest to use 'neo-tribes' other than subcultures in the research on youth culture. Andy Bennett put forward 'neo-tribes' drawing upon Maffesoli's concept of tribus (tribes) in 'Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste'(1999). According to Maffesoli the tribe is 'without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form'. [7] He argues that 'those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships,' [8] which are neo-tribes. In other words, subcultures manifest in the identities of individuals other than a rebellion against dominant cultures, which become more about consumerism and entertainment and less about resistance and shared identities. Therefore, the post-subculture theory recognizes the positive role of commerce and thus the influences of commerce on subcultures has undergone a change from the initial antagonistic relationship to a positive interaction with each other.

Virtual singers are a new type of cultural form and content born with technological advancement. With fans mainly being the youth, its fandom culture reflects the unique lifestyle, consciousness, habits and values of

the young generation, which is a typical subculture. It inherits resistance and also has typical post-subculture characteristics. More importantly, its emergence is closely related to commerce. This study adopts observation method and text analysis methods to analyse the relationship between Luo Tianyi's fandom and commerce. The author observed the activities, communication, and behaviour of Luo Tianyi's fans from March 2020 to July 2020 on Bilibili, Weibo, Douban, Baidu Tieba, and other online platforms. And the videos, pictures, reviews, and other texts left by her fans in cyberspace have been analysed in order to better understand the role of commercial activities in the development of virtual singers' fandom. Then the author mainly discusses from two aspects. The first one is commodity consumption and subcultural styles, which includes fans' consumption of physical products, as well as media texts and their text reproduction. The second is commercial inclusion and subcultural styles. Commercial inclusion happens not only after the styles emerge, but also from the very beginning. Virtual singers' fandom can be interacted and interconnected with commerce, and commerce can become the root cause of its emergence.

Figure 1. The Framework of Analysis



### 3. CASE STUDY: LUO TIANYI'S FANDOM AND COMMERCE

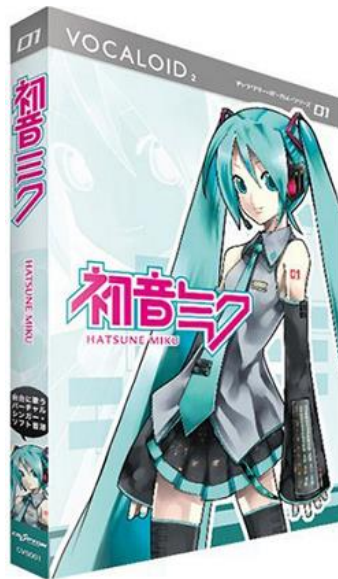
In this chapter, the fandom of Luo Tianyi, one of China's most popular virtual singers, will be taken as a representative case to analyse the changes in the relationship between commerce and virtual singers' fandom.

#### 3.1 VIRTUAL SINGER LUO TIANYI

Virtual singers are, as the name suggests, singers with no physical presence. There are many types of virtual singers, but the ones who have popularised this genre around the globe are Vocaloid virtual singers. Their main representative is Hatsune Miku.

Vocaloid is a singing voice synthesiser software that enables users to synthesise 'singing' by typing in lyrics and melody. It uses synthesising technology with specially recorded vocals of voice actors or singers. To create a song, the user must input the melody and lyrics, a piano-roll-type interface is used to input the melody, and the lyrics can be entered on each note. It can also change the stress of the pronunciations, add effects such as vibrato, or change the dynamics and tone of the voice. To let the synthesiser make various sounds to meet users' needs, various voice banks have been released, each of which is sold as 'a singer in a box' designed to replace an actual singer.[9] They are often marketed as 'virtual singers'. Some have gone on to perform at live concerts as an on-stage projection, like Hatsune Miku.

Figure 2. A Picture of Hatsune Miku from Wikipedia



Luo Tianyi was the first Chinese voice bank and was released for the Vocaloid 3 and Vocaloid 4 engines in 2012. She is now considered the most successful and only profitable virtual singer in China, and also the first virtual celebrity to become famous. She and her fandom are viewed as subculture in China but she has started to frequently appear on mainstream media in recent times.[10] She has held a concert with 10,000 people in Shanghai and co-hosted another concert with the well-known Chinese pianist Lang Lang; she used to be the advertising mascot for KFC; and she often appears on programs of Chinese Central Television.

Figure 3. A Picture of Luo Tianyi from Baidu Baike



One of the most significant features of Luo Tianyi, apart from her being a virtual character with no physical existence, is the relationship between her and her fans. Most of the songs Luo Tianyi sings are created by her fans as a labour of love, and the music independently produced by fans has made her more famous and successful. For example, her first step into mass culture was a song named 'Normal Disco', which is an original Vocaloid Chinese song created by a fan with the screen name of 'ilem', who posted it on the video platform Bilibili. This song has received over 10 million views, and numerous famous singers have covered it on famous broadcasts from 2015 to 2018. This fan-written song not only is approved by professional musicians but also can be considered a way for people with no interest in ACG to get to know Luo Tianyi and virtual singers. Aside from 'Normal Disco', there are also many other fan-made songs or videos playing

the same role. In other words, the texts produced by fans have boosted Luo Tianyi's popularisation process. From the very very beginning of Luo Tianyi's emergence, this subculture has intimate connection with commerce.

### 3.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMERCE AND LUO TIANYI'S FANDOM

Luo Tianyi is a Vocaloid-based virtual singer whose only existence is as a voice bank. However, fans view her not merely as software but as a person who is much more real to them than others are, due to their love for her. This chapter will discuss how commodity consumption and commercial strategies exert significant influences on the emergence and the formation of the styles of Luo Tianyi's fandom.

#### 3.2.1 COMMODITY CONSUMPTION AND SUBCULTURES' STYLES

Fiske and others defined the concept of subculture based on a systematic study on the Birmingham School theories. 'As the prefix "sub" shows, subcultures are, within a broader culture, meaningful and unique negotiations. They correspond to the special status, ambiguous conditions, and specific contradictions experienced by certain social groups in the large structure of society and history'.<sup>[11]</sup> This definition basically outlines the Birmingham School's main understanding of 'subculture'. First, subculture involves resistance. 'Certain social groups' have encountered a certain situation and have had 'specific contradictions' with the broader culture, which leads to heresy and deviant tendencies. Second, subcultures have the characteristic of 'stylisation'. To resist, subcultures adopt not fierce and extreme methods but moderate negotiation. It is 'not a direct but an imaginary solution to real-life problems,' which manifests 'meaningful and unique' styles in everyday life in aesthetics, leisure, consumption, and so on. Therefore, resistance can be seen as the core reason for the existence of subcultures, and the method of resistance is to form styles different from those of the dominant cultures. This kind of 'soft' resistance, moreover, is frequently achieved through commodity consumption.

Phil Cohen has conducted research on working-class children in the East End of London. He finds that after World War II, the traditional British working class found itself caught between two contradictory ideologies: the traditional working-class lifestyle and post-war consumerism. Working-class people increasingly dreamed of a middle-class lifestyle, yet in reality, most workers' lives had not yet improved at all. In order to 'resist', that is, to solve this problem, they developed their own unique styles, such as skinheads' wearing of black leather jackets with metal chains and boots. In an article in *Youth Studies*, Ma Zhonghong notes that in such a style, completely unlike the culture of the elder generation, commodity consumption has become a resource for exploring identity between the native culture, based on life experience, and the mass communication culture, based on consumption and enjoyment.<sup>[12]</sup>

Under current historical conditions, subculture studies have stepped into the post-subculture stage. With the advance of the global economy, globalisation, and technology, the clashes between classes have considerably subsided, and the resistance of subcultures has been mitigated correspondingly. What young people urge the resolution of is mainly the conflicts between generations and self-identification. Especially when consumerism prevails, the youth rely more than ever before on commodity consumption to construct their identities.

Jean Baudrillard, in his *Consumer Society*, pointed out that the purpose of consumption is not to satisfy needs but to constantly pursue the satisfaction of created and stimulated desires. In other words, what people consume is not the use value of goods and services but their symbolic meaning. The consumption of Luo Tianyi fandom demonstrates the characteristics of the 'consumer society': it is not satisfied with the mere possession and use of physical products but must also engage in the consumption of its symbolic

meanings. 'The use value of commodities has given way to exchange value. People construct and confirm their identity, status, and tastes in the world of signs through consumption.' [13] A fan nicknamed '墨枫--沉迷嘟嘴傲娇洛天依' wrote this post on Weibo (a Chinese microblogging website) on 30 July 2020:

'I'm back! The lemon figure is soooooo beautiful. It's already on display. I thought about putting one in the school but found that there was no place at all'.

This fan bought the newly launched lemon-colored figurine of Luo Tianyi and displayed her complete collection of Luo Tianyi's merchandise. The two-shelf bookshelves were full. There are not only official figures but also products endorsed by Luo Tianyi, such as Coca-Cola cans with her image, and a water cup.

Figure 4. A picture of a bookstore full of Luo Tianyi-related products from 墨枫--沉迷嘟嘴傲娇洛天依's Weibo



These commodities are all displayed, indicating that they have never been used, only collected, because they are related to Luo Tianyi, her object of fascination. Buying and obtaining those products is an expression of the fan's love. Such consumption shows that the use value of commodities has given way to exchange value for Luo Tianyi fans. They confirm their own status and taste in the world of symbols through commodity consumption.

Judging from the Weibo posted by this fan, Luo Tianyi's fans, as a special group of consumers, have projected considerable emotion on the object of Luo Tianyi, so their emotional attachment has given rise to a collection-style consumption. Collection can be considered a significant consumption model presented by Luo Tianyi fans, which has been internalised as a part of the fan culture. On Baidu Tieba, the most-used Chinese communication platform hosted by Chinese search engine company Baidu, many new fans expressed their desire to collect all the albums and other works of Luo Tianyi issued since her debut. For example, a fan named '花开不见伊' wrote:

'Bosses, I wanna collect all the albums and CDs Luo Tianyi has released. Hope you all show me the way'.

There were 92 replies to this post. Other fans kindly advised this new fan on the approximate cost of such items, how to collect them, and where to buy them. They also told him which albums were most valuable to collect and patiently gave him many tips to avoid possible pitfalls. This indicates that such collecting is a practice engaged in by many in Luotianyi's fan community and is an important part of Luotianyi's fan culture.

The aforementioned characteristics of Luo Tianyi's fandom consumption reflect the intervention of commercial interests in its fan culture. The intervention involves using the emotional capital of her fans to create an emotional economy. Luo Tianyi's fans deeply invest their emotions in her. The merchants take note of this strong emotional attachment and turn it into huge consumption possibilities. Luo Tianyi is a sound library of Vocaloid. Her company makes a profit from selling the Luo Tianyi sound library, but this is not the company's main source of revenue. As she is the only virtual singer in China that has achieved profitability, the primary revenue model for her is brand endorsement and image authorisation. According to Luo Tianyi's official Weibo account 'Vsinger\_洛天依', in the first half of 2020 alone, Luo Tianyi has served as an ambassador for nine brands, including food and hygiene products, online games, mobile phones, cars, washing powder, hand cream, and banks. All these brands have managed to harness the emotional capital and consumption capability of Luo Tianyi fans to convert them into potential consumers of their own products. Meanwhile, Luo Tianyi, as a representative of the two-dimensional ACG subculture, has also expanded her reputation and popularity to a certain extent through linkage with these well-known brands, which can be viewed as a win-win for both Luo Tianyi and the brands.

Commodity consumption has been one of the the main tools for subcultures to construct styles. Although Luo Tianyi is a virtual singer, different from 'real' singers and idols, her fans express their love and admiration for her by buying albums, merchandise, and products of tied-in brands to announce their identities as Luo Tianyi fans, show their distinctive style, and form their self-identity. However, Luo Tianyi, as a virtual singer, produces many more virtual media products – that is, media texts – than physical goods, and fans consume these media texts in a more frequent, wider, and deeper manner.

French sociologist De Certeau emphasises how users engage in creation in their daily life practice. The initiative of users allows them to change the form of the product during use. As for the audience's consumption of media texts, he has put forward the concept of 'poaching'. De Certeau argues that audiences are not passive consumers but rather are active interpreters. This follows Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication, in which each person creates their own meaning from the same text, depending on their situation and unique background. De Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* discusses how people individualise mass culture by interpreting texts beyond the dominant meaning that has been decided by the elite (such as academics, teachers, and authors), who monopolise control over the readings. De Certeau compares audience members to poachers by describing how they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not plow, despoiling the country's wealth to enjoy it for themselves.[14]

Jenkins' book takes the active audience theory and applies it to fan cultures. He defines textual poaching as 'an impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable.'[15] Media fans 'poach' from their beloved text to create new texts such as fan fiction, folk songs, and manuals/dictionaries to develop further details not originally explained in the text. Jenkins' extension of the term 'poaching' discusses how a fan can interpret a text through both the dominant and the oppositional reading simultaneously, allowing readers to stick as closely to the 'canon' (official rules and principles put forward in the original text) as they wish.[16] Poaching blurs the line between producer and consumer by giving the readers power to produce their own works based upon their own interpretations. It also offers a form of escapism from reality through the subcultures and fan communities created.

De Certeau offers us an additional key insight into fan culture. It is that readers are not simply poachers; they are also 'nomads', always in motion, 'not here or there', not constrained by permanent property

ownership but rather constantly advancing upon another text, appropriating new materials, and making new meanings.[17]

Both academic and popular culture discourse label fans in connection with a particular show or star. Although this connection is not absurd, it is very misleading. Media fan culture, like other popular reading cultures, should not be understood as an exclusive hobby for a certain TV series or genre. 'Rather, media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of media texts.' 'Fans, like other consumers of popular culture, read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials.' [18] In other words, the theory of textual poaching emphasises fans' subjective ability to not only make new meaning out of the source texts but also select what they need intertextually and textually. Henry Jenkins, following in this same tradition, focuses on media fandom as 'a discursive logic that knits together interests across textual and generic boundaries'. While some fans remain committed exclusively to one show or star, 'many others use individual series as points of entry into a broader fan community, linking to an intertextual network composed of many programs, films, books, comics, and other popular materials'. [19]

The rapid development of network technology provides more direct and powerful support for fan viewpoints. Web 2.0 technology has given birth to a new situation in which users can create content by themselves. Its most notable features are decentralisation, openness, and sharing. It has changed the Internet from a system dominated by a few resource controllers to a new one ruled by numerous users, which has returned the dominant power of Internet communication to individuals. [20] The new media technology enables the audience to participate in producing, adapting, and disseminating texts, and they have transformed from being only consumers to also being producers. Furthermore, the progress of media technology has changed the way of communication and the mode of information dissemination. The position of individuals in information dissemination has shifted from passive consumer to active creator. Individuals have mastered the use of certain media resources as well, which is to say that subcultural groups can also express themselves through media technology.

The textual productivity of fans is reflected in the positive reconstruction of media texts by fans. Through the strategies of interpretation, re-reading, poaching and misappropriation, the narratives are transformed into meanings and entertainment related to the fans' own social situation, constructing a unique world of artistic creation belonging to fans themselves, a world that operates outside the direct control of media producers. Moreover, the production of new texts by fans can be a way for fans to express their dissatisfaction with and resistance to the existing texts. The active production ability of fans has also become a prominent 'style', a method for 'resistance', of fandom as a subculture. In post-subculture times, its aim is more likely to satisfy the psychological needs of self-expression and self-identification. Luo Tianyi fans are no exception. They boast a strong capability for text reproduction and production. Furthermore, Luo Tianyi fans are much more active in producing texts than fans of 'real' singers or celebrities. In other words, textual production is one of the most notable expressions of Luo Tianyi's fandom. It can even be said that Luo Tianyi is an idol created by fans.

On the one hand, fans created Luo Tianyi's character, which was modified from the work named 'Yayin Gongyu' (雅音宫羽), one of the grand prize-winning works selected by fans at the Vocaloid China Project contest. [21] Moreover, only minimal background information such as birthday, age, and gender were provided so that a maximum creative space was left open for fans. For example, Luo Tianyi is known as a 'foodie'. However, this personality trait was created not by the company but by fans. Thus Luo Tianyi has

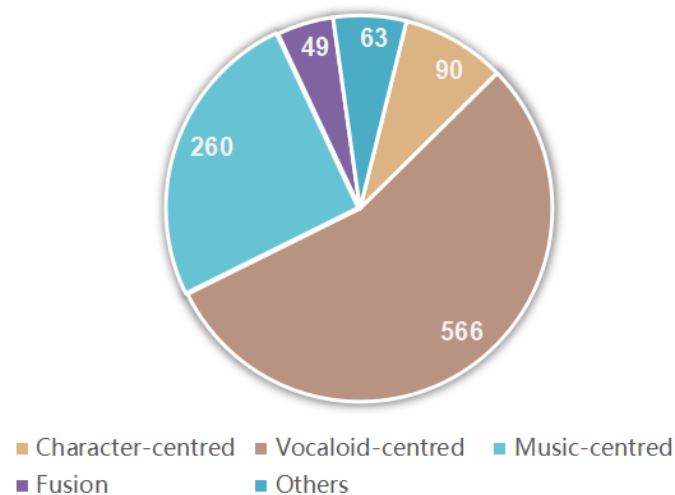


many traits, some of which are accepted by most fans and gradually become a convention in fandom, while others are extremely personal and belong only to the fans themselves.

On the other hand, Luo Tianyi's songs are mainly written by fans through Vocaloid. There are thousands of songs under Luo Tianyi's name (the exact number is unknown), but of these, only a bit more than 150 songs have been officially released by her company. Thus most songs of Luo Tianyi are original works by her fans. Furthermore, most of Luo Tianyi's best-known songs are fans' efforts, including all of her songs that have been covered by famous Chinese singers on TV programs. Therefore, as Luo Tianyi's image, personality, and music come from fans, they have gone beyond being merely fans; they have become Luo Tianyi's creators and nurturers.

Fans not only produce texts about Luo Tianyi directly but also recreate or reproduce texts created by other fans. On 24 June 2020, the authors investigated the types of fan-made texts about Luo Tianyi at Bilibili, the most active video site for Luo Tianyi's fandom creation, and selected the 1000 most-viewed videos. As 72 of these were not related to Luo Tianyi, the remaining 928 videos were placed into five categories as follows.

Figure 4. The Proportion of Five Different Categories of Fan-made Videos about Luo Tianyi on Bilibili



Among them, 50% are videos of music creation by Vocaloid, which is the main type of textual production at Bilibili by Luo Tianyi fans. The second-largest type is videos reproduced based on other fans' original creations, accounting for 28% of the total. This is one of the most remarkable differences between Luo Tianyi's fans and fans of real singers.

For example, the original song 'Darapongba' (达拉崩吧), written by 'ilem', is one of the most popular songs of Luo Tianyi and also one of the songs most adapted by other fans. It tells a fairy tale about a boy warrior who fights a fierce dragon to save a beautiful princess and ends up marrying her. It is written as a dialogue among the boy warrior, the king, the dragon, and a storyteller. The most interesting part of the song is the chorus, whose lyrics consist of the names of the boy warrior and the dragon. Their names are not meaningful words or sentences but an assortment of meaningless words that rhyme well. Because of the song's innovative structure and catchy melody, both popular singers and other fans of Luo Tianyi love it. It has been covered, remade, and adapted in numerous versions. One of the remade songs from this is one on the theme of online lectures in the era of the coronavirus pandemic. It retains the tune and structure and its lyrics reference the bothersome online lectures so that the subjects of conversation apply to teachers, principals, and parents. Moreover, the chorus, which is the highlight, has been adapted to include

the names of software or platforms used by schools for Internet classes. Thus students express their dissatisfaction with Internet lectures and also their desire to return to class quickly.

Fans' text creation is generally reconstructed on the basis of original texts through strategies such as misappropriation and reorganisation, to produce texts that are exclusive to fans and satisfy their own consumption needs.[22] However, due to Luo Tianyi's virtual existence and the company's positioning for her, she and her media texts do not have that many meanings for fans to poach and reproduce. Thus it is fans other than the company that grasp the greatest creative space, which can mobilise their enthusiasm for textual production to the largest extent. Through this voluntary and active textual production, Luo Tianyi's fans can acquire some useful skills that may enhance their future career development, and they gradually establish self-identity in this process.

Overall, the emergence of subculture is rooted in class society and clashes between social classes. In order to solve real-life problems such as being oppressed and excluded, young people resort to a kind of 'gentle resistance'. They consume commodities and combine some unrelated elements to establish styles that are completely different from the ruling class or parent culture, in order to solve the problems in their 'imagination'. Although the resistance of post-subcultures has weakened considerably, the method of using commodity consumption to shape styles persists. The prevalence of consumerism sees the youth pay more attention to the symbolic meaning of commodities compared with their use value, and eventually, they utilise consumption to complete self-identification.

Luo Tianyi's fans express their love and admiration for her by purchasing her music albums, merchandise, concerts, and other products. In the meantime, they also consume media texts related to Luo Tianyi. The consumption of media texts now does not stop at viewing but also involves creating. Based on their own social experiences and values, fans produce and reproduce new texts to express ideas, relieve stress and build self-identity and self-satisfaction. Therefore, fan-made texts have become one of the primary styles of Luo Tianyi fandom as a subculture.

### 3.3 COMMERCIAL INCORPORATION OF SUBCULTURAL STYLES

Subcultures are considered to involve resistance. They demonstrate their resistance by establishing styles that are sharply different from the dominant cultures or parent cultures. However, it is undeniable that subcultures also come from dominant cultures, which can be proved by the fact that the styles of subcultures are formed by the use of a 'collage' of some elements of dominant cultures. This can explain why subcultures inevitably become co-opted after they establish their own styles. Those conspicuous styles of subcultures ultimately would be co-opted either by main ideologies or by their pervasive use by commercialism. Dick Hebdige points out in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that 'the creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power - both mod and punk innovations fed back directly into high fashion and mainstream fashion.'[23] With the emergence of a certain scale of subcultures among young people, the cultural industry will eventually push the styles and innovations of subcultures to the overall consumer market to make a profit. Commercial interest groups will inevitably incorporate subcultures and transform them.

The Birmingham School believes that once the subculture styles are used commercially, their resistance to mainstream ideology or hegemony is weakened, which leads to the bitter loss of their creativity and independence. The subcultures must therefore continue to resist commerce. However, this point of view has been questioned and criticised since the 1980s. Contradicting the views of the Birmingham School,

many scholars have affirmed the positive influences of commerce and believe that commerce and subcultures have a relationship based on mutual interaction. For example, Angela McRobbie believes that commerce and subcultures are never opposed to each other: 'The entire Punk culture used mass media to promote itself and some shops sold clothes to young people from the very beginning.' [24] Subcultures not only formed styles but also passed subcultural symbols through small-batch production and market circulation, providing jobs for some young people and thus generating funds for subcultural movements.

Some fans of Luo Tianyi who know how to paint have painted portraits of her based on their own creativity and preferences. In their paintings, Luo Tianyi displays a variety of different shapes, expressions, and appearances while preserving her most prominent characteristics. Each Luo Tianyi in fans' works has its own distinctiveness, but they are all Luo Tianyi. In other words, everyone has the same Luo Tianyi in their own hearts. As the paintings have gained a certain degree of recognition and popularity among the fan community, some may begin to produce some merchandise, such as picture albums, desk calendars, and T-shirts. Fan-made portrait paintings not only satisfy the fans' desire for self-expression but can also generate enough income, through small-scale production and circulation, to keep these creative activities going. Some fans even use this as a career or their main means of livelihood. In an interview, Huang Changping, who served as Luo Tianyi's music producer for the first two years after she debuted, explained the relationship between fan creation and money as follows:

'Money is very important. The problem is not about whether my love for her is pure or impure, because money is a very important foundation. I am an adult. I can't act like those younger Luo Tianyi fans who are still being supported by their parents. They don't need to think about earning a livelihood and can just be themselves by dreaming.... If you want to hold a concert for Luo Tianyi, or want to make her a movie, or want to hold a Luo Tianyi painting exhibition, or want to be able to make more high-quality PVs (promotion videos), all of these cost money. Only with money can these beautiful ideas be realised, allowing Luo Tianyi to develop better'.

The words of the music producer Huang Changping indicate that the formation of subcultural styles and the organisation of events all require financial support. In other words, the development of subcultures is inseparable from commercial funding. The relationship between the two is not an antagonistic one, but one of mutual help and achievement.

Moreover, in the current context of new media communication, the relationship between commercial culture and subcultures has again transformed into a model of unprecedented complexity. In other words, the ways in which commerce incorporates subcultures have undergone profound changes. Commerce is no longer satisfied with the use and transformation of existing subcultures but has penetrated into the source of subcultures, trying to create subculture phenomena in order to promote or shape subcultures.

On the one hand, products deliberately pre-program the style or characteristics of one subculture to obtain the emotional attachment of a specific youth group to stimulate the emergence of a new subculture. When Luo Tianyi was launched, the positioning her company promoted was that she 'has a healing voice and comes from a world different from ours. Except for her singing voice, everything about her is still blank. The encounter with you will be the beginning of her story and growth.' In other words, Luo Tianyi is different from other characters because she has no extensive set of character traits, such as personality, habits, or past experiences. Everything about her is 'blank', waiting for fans to fill it in. The power and the task to give her core identity as been entrusted to fans and their productivity, whether in music or paintings. Luo Tianyi's backstory can be said to have been completely created by fans. The intention to advocate a subculture of innovation, pioneering, and freedom seems obvious. All of those styles and traits can be

credited to Luo Tianyi's fans, or what they aspire to be, and so fans create music for Luo Tianyi by Vocaloid, draw her portraits, buy her works and merchandise, and watch her holographic concerts. Those behaviours and activities all embody distinctive rebellious qualities, thus completing the construction of self-identity.

'As a fan, "Poker" from Shanghai always wants to do something for his idol. The most direct way is to write songs for her. Poker completes the lyrics, melody, and tuning of a song all by himself. He writes sweet love stories as well as stories about heartbreak. Poker writes down the emotions that come out of everyday life. On Christmas Day, Poker went to Shanghai Disneyland for two hours alone. Under the neon lights, he was surrounded by couples, creating an intimate atmosphere from which he was excluded. Expressing Poker's feelings, Luo Tianyi sang: "I disrupted the air of intimacy." On Bilibili, another fan said, "I heard the song four times and cried four times." The empathy made Poker find a real friend. Poker said that for him, Luo Tianyi was once an idol, but now she is like a friend. "If you have anything in your heart that you want to express, she will speak for you. She can shout it out, sing songs, and express emotions on your behalf."

Poker considers Luo Tianyi a kind of medicine to overcome the frustration of failing the exam. In making music for Luo Tianyi, he expresses emotions and thoughts without any filters, and gets reactions from other fans online, giving him a sense of accomplishment and confidence. Poker is only one of thousands of Luo Tianyi fans, but his feelings are representative of those held by many fans. This illustrates that commerce or commercial logic is able to stimulate the emergence of a new subculture.

On the other hand, the rapid advance of new media technology has greatly changed the relationship between subcultures and commercial culture. The new media technology controlled by enterprises provides a convenient and inexpensive place for marginalised groups and individuals to speak out. With various video platforms such as Tiktok and YouTube, as well as social network platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, as long as youth own a computer or a mobile phone, they can create media texts and spread their own culture. At the same time, many companies regard young people as their ideal consumers, so they subdivide young people overall in terms of demographics, psychological characteristics, lifestyle, and so on in order to pre-emptively cultivate specific consumption habits and values of youth, thereby establishing a huge consumer market.[25] The result is that nowadays, more and more young people discover their own identity and values through consumption and the market rather than traditional channels such as families and schools.[26]

Bilibili is a well-known video website in China. When it was first launched, it was deeply loved by young people because of its focus on ACG culture and UGC content. The content in Bilibili has been divided into 15 major channels according to the themes and the current preferences of young users; these channels include animation, fashion, music, dance, TV series, and entertainment. The music channel is again divided into 10 sub-channels according to the type of music, including original music creation, covers, rap, electronic music, MV and Vocaloid & Utau. Through the classification, it can be seen that the website has made a very detailed and comprehensive classification of both the preferences and current trends of young people. For example, rock music is also a major category of music, but there is no rock channel as there is for rap and electronic music, which seem to have fewer fans than rock and roll. Luo Tianyi's related content belongs to the Vocaloid & Utau category, which demonstrates the popularity of Chinese virtual singers among Chinese young people. Although Luo Tianyi fans do organise offline activities, one of their main meeting places is still Bilibili, because this online place allows them to transcend time and geography and to establish and maintain contact with other fans in every corner of the world. Almost all the information and media texts about Luo Tianyi are gathered here. If you step into this sphere, you are likely to become a fan of this virtual girl if you yearn for uniqueness and freedom, as all the Luo Tianyi fans do. It can be said that

the intervention of commerce has become the initiator of some subcultures that include virtual singers represented by Luo Tianyi.

To conclude, the relationship between subcultures and commerce can no longer be viewed as resistance through style or 'inclusion means death'; it is now a field of interdependence, which is a diverse, complex and dynamic system. A certain subculture may weaken its resistance or even disappear as a result of commercial intervention. Another subculture may be widely disseminated and recognised by the commercial incorporation of its style. Or some other subcultures may be born and shaped by business logic from the very beginning. A certain kind of subculture can even boast that its distinctiveness actually comes from the fact that it is rooted in commercial culture. These situations can all exist simultaneously in the context of globalisation and new media. The relationship between Luo Tianyi's fandom and commerce is likewise complicated. From its very beginnings to the consumption and production of fans, and to the dissemination of its symbols as a subculture, it has been inextricably related to commerce. Moreover, there would be no Luo Tianyi or Luo Tianyi fandom without commercial logic and commodity consumption.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This research, based on the subculture theory, analyses the relationship between the virtual singer Luo Tianyi's fandom and commerce. The study on subculture originated in a social and historical era in which the main contradiction was between the bourgeoisie and the working class. Therefore, subculture has had natural resistance since its birth. The youth build their own styles through clothing, slang, and behaviour that are completely different from those of their parents or the dominant culture, implementing their imaginative resolution to the contradictions and problems they face in reality.

However, the theories of the Chicago School and the Birmingham School are not sufficient to explain subculture phenomenon as the global economy develops rapidly, along with the new media and other network technologies. Thus the study on subcultures has entered the post-subculture stage, forming the current parallel situation of Birmingham School and post-subculture theory. In the post-subculture era, the resistance of subcultures has been greatly weakened, to the point that young people's subculture activities aim mainly at building their own identities. There are no big differences from the elder generation in terms of everyday fashion choices or slangs, like the mods and skinheads, because their styles have begun to look inward and subcultures have become ways to pursue self-satisfaction and abreaction.

The relationship between subcultures and commerce has also recently undergone tremendous changes. It has changed from mutual opposition to interdependence. Indeed, commerce may even serve as a booster or shaper of subcultures. Commodity consumption has become a way for young people to express their subcultural styles and construct a self-identity. Moreover, the formation of styles has been embedded in the processes of commercial production, circulation, and communication. Most importantly, commerce can also influence subcultures from the very beginning and even create them.

In China, Vocaloid-based virtual singers date back to the year 2012, which saw the debut of the first virtual singer, Luo Tianyi. Since then, Luo Tianyi's fandom, as a kind of subculture, has been closely linked to commerce. To put it another way, the subculture of Luo Tianyi's fandom can be thought of as an outcome of the commercial culture. Luo Tianyi's company left room for the styles of Luo Tianyi fandom, that is, fans' active textual productivity. Having grasped the current characteristics of young people's media text consumption, the company made only minimal character traits for the virtual girl and thereby offered fans the largest creative space, thus activating fans' enthusiasm for fan creation, which is one of the main styles of this subculture. Meanwhile, the company expands Luo Tianyi's popularity and cultivates a fan base

through media promotion, participation in variety shows, and cooperation with well-known brands. Then the cultivated fans (potential consumers) would be transferred to advertisers, and various types of Luo Tianyi merchandise would be issued in order to convert fans' emotional capital into consumption capital and thus generate bigger profits. And fans can express their love and admiration for Luo Tianyi by buying such merchandise and use this merchandise as symbols to flaunt their unique and pioneering identity.

This research on the relationship between subcultures and commerce using the case of Luo Tianyi's fandom is still in its early stages. For a deeper understanding of the virtual singer fandom subculture, comparison with the fandom of 'real' celebrities is necessary; this will be carried out in future research. It is hoped that this research can be used as reference material for the study of virtual singers and the subculture of fandom and can contribute to the development of virtual singers.[27]

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund.

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