Why Spend Time Chasing Stars?: Identity Construction in K-Pop Fan Communities

Yuqi Chen*

School of University of Jinan, Jinan 250022, Shandong Province, China

***Corresponding author:** Yuqi Chen, ykichen27@gmail.com

Abstract: With the gradual expansion of the influence of Korean pop culture (K-pop), more and more K-pop idols have started to gain international recognition and attract a growing number of fans worldwide. Based on theories related to fan group research and identity research, this paper explains the identity construction process and outcomes of fan group members. This paper also offers insights into understanding the conflicts between fan culture and mainstream culture and elucidates the interaction between fan groups and mainstream society. The paper provides a reference for understanding the friction between fan culture and mainstream culture and clarifying the interaction between fan groups and mainstream society. Through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews, a qualitative approach was adopted to understand the experiences, values, and lifestyles of K-pop fans. The results of the study show that K-pop fans are not only following their favorite idols but also seeking a sense of belonging and identity in their pursuit of these idols. Driven by a variety of social factors, the process and outcome of this type of identity formation, characterized by being low-cost, easy to reproduce, and high in emotional intensity, consistently infiltrate different aspects of socio-economic, cultural, and political spheres, giving rise to the "fan effect." However, fan identity is one of the symbols associated with individuals, but it does not necessarily indicate complete support and belonging. Instead of stating that the frantic pursuit of stars is a result of social issues caused by the fan base, it is more crucial to acknowledge that the cultural phenomenon of being a fan is a cultural manifestation of certain social symptoms. The practice of fan culture is more of a cultural symptom of certain social disorders than a series of social problems caused by fans.

Keywords: Social identity; Fan circles; Personal identity; Individual behavior; Motivational research

1. Introduction

In 2012, one of the most famous K-Pop idols, PSY, released "Gangnam Style," a music video that broke the Guinness World Record for the number of views on YouTube, which is now more than 3 billion. "Gangnam Style" stayed on the US music charts for 122 weeks. In 2023, the male group Seventeen's album "FML" became the first album in K-pop history to sell more than 6 million copies, making it the best-selling album in K-pop history. Fan worship is not only accompanied by the purchase of fan merchandise but also extravagant

celebrations such as chartering a plane and buying advertising space on the Times Square screen. There are also instances of defending the idol's image by shouting insults and engaging in arguments with people on video platforms. This series of behaviors seems to validate the public's assertion that fans are fanatical, uninformed, and trippy. The diversity of fan cultural practices makes them a double-edged sword, showcasing positive energy through their frequent interactions with mainstream society. Donating schools in the name of idols and raising funds to support cities struck by natural disasters are some of the most unexpected examples. Surprisingly, they have shown a strong sense of social responsibility and a high level of political participation, which leads us to acknowledge the significant role played by fan groups in the model of collaborative social governance. So, how should this cultural sphere with distinct subcultural nuances be approached? Against this background, this study aims to elucidate the process of identity construction and outcomes among fans through the lens of fan culture research and identity research [1]. To achieve the purpose of this study, the methodological procedures were systematically analyzed. This paper utilizes a qualitative research method, commonly employed in the field of social sciences, specifically participant observation. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted at Seventeen concert sites. A total of seven participants were selected for the interviews to comprehend the motivation of K-pop fans in following their stars and to observe fan behaviors.

2. Research significance

In terms of theoretical value, this study expands and enriches the research theory of fan culture in the new media environment. The classical theoretical paradigm of media studies originated during the industrial society stage, with the development of mass culture and traditional media as its backdrop. The study aims to explain the phenomenon of mass fan cultures, such as enthusiasts of film and television dramas, and followers of pop music, who emerged during the era of traditional media. However, in the information society, a new type of fan base known as fan has emerged. This is based on the advancements in new media technology and the evolution of network society, leading to a distinct cultural practice and organizational structure compared to the traditional mass culture fan base. Therefore, the study of fans can be considered a complement and enhancement to the study of fan culture in the digital media era. In terms of practical significance, studying the identity of fans as one of the newest forms of audience organization can not only help us examine and address the friction between fan culture and mainstream culture but also aid in understanding the underlying logic of the integration of fan culture practices into various aspects of social life.

The study of the identity of fans can not only help examine and address the friction between fan culture and mainstream culture but also understand the deeper logic of the integration of fan-cultural practices into various aspects of social life. Additionally, it can assist in exploring the impacts of fan culture on the values and social character of the contemporary generation. As the younger generation increasingly adopts fan-like behaviors, they are becoming the backbone of society as generational shifts occur. It is also beneficial to investigate the potential influence of fan culture on the values and social characteristics of modern individuals, especially as the younger generation with prominent fan attributes becomes the predominant group due to generational shifts. This exploration should also consider the potential effects on mainstream culture and society as a whole. Therefore, the process and results of identity construction of fan members must be explored through their actions at the cultural level.

3. From individuals to fans

With the development of new media, individual values and consciousness are constantly being influenced. In

the era of traditional media, celebrity artists primarily generated profits by releasing records, acting in films and television, and participating in commercial performances. The exposure channels of stars cannot be separated from traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting. Therefore, traditional media serves as the main window for audiences to learn about celebrities, playing a key role in shaping public perception. In the era of traditional media, fans could only see those stars who were recognized by their agencies and traditional media, and they were limited to seeing the carefully curated images of these stars. The development of mobile network technology, the popularization of smart terminal devices, and the rise of social media platforms have provided individuals with the opportunity to express themselves and showcase their personalities to a significant degree. As a result, "idols" have now reached the audience directly, bypassing the scrutiny and filtering of traditional media.

Moreover, the careers of idols are entirely determined by their fans. Factors such as the number of followers on their social media accounts, the number of shares, comments, and likes, the views on their videos, and the album sales all serve as direct evidence of their popularity. The idol industry utilizes new media to establish an emotional connection between fans and idols, fostering a sense of responsibility and mission. Whether an idol possesses commercial value, whether they are a high-quality idol, and whether they will have a long artistic career, which was previously determined by the idol's abilities, now appear to be the fans' responsibility. Such a sense of responsibility and mission often empowers fans with courage. They willingly invest their time, energy, and money in collecting charts and data for their idols, organizing various support activities, and purchasing a wide array of endorsed merchandise. This emotional bond through new media has evolved into a potent tool in the marketing strategies of the idol industry.

Among fans, there are generally passionate supporters with significant influence and appeal. These avid fans have a stronger voice primarily because they possess the capacity or means to acquire more information about the idol, either before their debut or at the onset of their rise to fame among the followers of the idol. The older fans have higher prestige, richer experience, and more outstanding contributions compared to the younger generation of fans. These avid fans will establish fan clubs and frequently share the latest news about them. The operation of these fan clubs and stations does not rely solely on one or a few big fans. For the orderly functioning of the fan organization, fan members will be assigned tasks based on their strengths and specialties. The division of labor typically includes a planning group, data group, anti-hacking group, control and evaluation group, art group, and more.

4. Self-identity construction in fan practices

Identity, as a form of self-consciousness, the individual identity of fan members mainly focuses on the uniqueness that defines oneself, such as self-image, personality, and other self-concepts formed through internalization. On the other hand, according to Goffman, the self emphasizes its social and contextual nature, and therefore, the self is also inherent in social interaction. On the other hand, according to Goffman, the self emphasizes social and situational aspects [2]. Therefore, the self is also a product of the nature and process of social interaction. As a cultural circle formed by the association of interests, the cultural practices of its members do not aim at obtaining direct economic benefits. This study found that psychological mechanisms such as projection and social learning contribute to the formation of a more complete self in the process of attracting fans, generating a pleasurable and valuable emotional experience for the individual. Obtaining fan membership not only sublimates this emotion but also compensates for the intimacy that is difficult to obtain in real life.

"His moments on stage are especially like his ideal self, glowing in the crowd." "He's very talented and has many merits, but I'm not at that level, just like the version of me in my dreams." From subject A's expression, it can be inferred that it is not only the idol himself who supports subject A's persistence in chasing after the idol,

but more importantly, it is actually the psychological projection mechanism that exists within herself during the pursuit of the idol. Jung then explained psychological projection as subconsciously attributing a quality or attitude that exists in oneself to another person.

"He was a light to us, and when things got tough, I would think what he would do if it was him."

In subject B's mind, the idol is also a projection of her ideal self, and the qualities of the idol are manifested in her own life. In the pursuit of her dreams, she transfers her unattainable thoughts, desires, and impulses onto the idol, thus experiencing emotions that are out of reach in real life. In this study, non-participatory observation of online activity communities with high levels of engagement from fan followers, such as Twitter and Instagram, revealed that the psychological projection mechanism was not only evident in the two interviewees but also widely present among various fans. In fact, from the perspective of ego-centered personality development, the prevalence of psychological projection mechanisms among fans is not only a driving force for fans to follow their stars but also contributes to the further formation and development of ego identity [3].

5. Social identity construction of fans

According to Driver Teufel and Turner, social identity is a self-description derived from all members of a social category, that is to say, "the individual recognizes that he (or she) belongs to a particular social group, and at the same time recognizes the significance of the emotions and values that being a member of the group brings to the individual." The basic process of its establishment is social classification, social comparison, and positive distinction [4]. From the perspective of previous studies, the cultural practices carried out by fan groups are usually regarded as part of the youth subculture in contrast to the mainstream culture. However, with the continuous development of modern society, the members of these groups no longer take the resistance to mainstream culture and commercial culture as the starting point of previous subcultural groups but rather become vivid individuals escaping from real life in the context of interest linkage and new media empowerment. They prefer to be alone in a heterotopia world with clear boundaries or to communicate with like-minded friends. Nowadays, the much-talked-about and controversial fans also expect to be able to entertain themselves in the new media field, but in reality, fans are already in the most easily perceived zone in the multicultural circle. The reason for this is due to the "excessiveness" of fan culture, which can be seen in the practice of fan culture and can be easily spread. Both online and offline support fulfills the relevant elements of interactive rituals, generates high emotional energy for the fans, and manifests itself in a "frenzy" that is easily perceived by the outside world.

6. Results and criticisms of fan identity construction

Based on the social and cultural field, from the perspective of the individual's dynamic psychological process from cognitive process to emotional process to volitional process, this study defines identity as the individual's confirmation of their own identity in interpersonal communication and cultural practice, as well as the cognition of the group to which the individual belongs. Their accompanying emotional experience and behavioral pattern consist of two aspects: one is the internal group belonging, such as self-identity; the other is the external social classification established by drawing boundaries with other groups, such as social identity, which can also be called group identity. In the in-depth interviews conducted for this study, the respondents generally agreed that for most members of fans, no matter how they are driven by psychological effects when participating in the cultural practice of star chasing, to what extent they are emotionally involved, and how much they contribute to the culture in their actions of solidarity, they are not aware that they have been involved in the cultural practice

of star chasing, but rather that they have been involved in the cultural practice of star chasing. To what extent they are emotionally involved, and how much traffic and money they contribute to their fans in their support actions, most of them do not confuse the cultural practices of their fans with their own real lives, but rather, they are very conscious of the fact that they keep the cultural practices of their fans as well as the emotional experiences and behavioral patterns they bring about sealed in their fans' memories. On the contrary, they are very conscious of the fact that the cultural practices of fans and the emotional experiences and behavioral patterns they bring are sealed within the fan community and the new media field. In their minds, fans are essentially just an interest group. Fans coalesce around a common fan, participate in digital labor, or engage in cultural consumption, and no matter how fervent they seem to be, in the final analysis, the idolatry of the fan is no longer equivalent to the spiritual beliefs of the past but is instead an exchange of conditions with an explicit price, in which the fan has a relationship with the other fans. In the end, idolatry of idols is no longer the same as spiritual beliefs, but an exchange of conditions with a clear price tag, in which the fans support the idols in the principle of fair trade, exchange of online traffic, money, and persona. In this cultural consumption, no matter how much genuine feeling the fans give, the essence is to please themselves.

The reason why mainstream society is afraid of fan culture is not only because fan members show their obsession and fanaticism towards their favorite idols, but also because fan groups have demonstrated strong mobilization, organization, and action capabilities in their support actions. This huge energy of rapid mobilization, close organization, and effective action will bring about profound and lasting effects no matter which aspect of social life it is applied to. The strong mobilizing power of fan members in cultural practice is due to a unique mode of behavior that is common to fans, that is, a voluntary mode of behavior under a flat management system. This mode of behavior has activated the enthusiasm and mobility of the members of the fans to the greatest extent possible, making the contemporary young people, who are full of resistance to the traditional hierarchical system, willing to fight for the fan groups. Although in the course of their actions, they still inevitably move towards the intertwining of hierarchical and flat operation modes, the fans have become more active and motivated.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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