

Beyond Music Consumption: K-pop Fandom as a Generative Mechanism of Youth Identity Construction

Leiyuan Chen

*Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China
sokono0831@gmail.com*

Abstract. This study takes K-pop fan culture as the object of study and explores how it can transform from simple music consumption to an important mechanism for youth identity construction. For young fans, fandom participation is not just listening to songs, buying albums or watching concerts, but also the process of expressing themselves, gaining a sense of belonging and imagining their ideal self through consumption, emotional projection and community interaction. This study combines existing literature and personal reflective observations. It examines K-pop fandom from three aspects: cultural consumption, emotional belonging, and rational fandom practices. The study argues that K-pop fandom has a double impact: on the one hand, it can stimulate young people's yearning for self-discipline, independence and self-expression; on the other hand, it may also bring consumption pressure, body image anxiety and emotional pressure within fandom communities. Therefore, the key to rational fandom participation is not to deny love, but to establish a boundary between emotion, consumption and real life.

Keywords: K-pop fandom, youth identity, cultural consumption, emotional belonging, parasocial relations

1. Introduction

In recent years, K-pop is no longer just a genre of Korean pop music but has gradually developed into a global youth cultural phenomenon. For many young people, the process of contact with K-pop often does not occur through formal music education or systematic cultural learning, but through peer relationships, campus environment, social media and daily entertainment. For example, many students may initially come into contact with BLACKPINK, BTS and other groups in class discussions, school literary and artistic activities, Bilibili videos, Weibo topics or short video platforms. At first, what attracts them may be only melody, performances, appearance or pop atmosphere, but as the contact deepens, K-pop will gradually enter their consumption style, social relationships and self-imagination.

Therefore, K-pop fandom cannot be simply understood as "like music" or "blind idol worship". Fans' behaviors include listening to songs, watching performances, buying albums and merchandise, paying attention to the comeback, participating in social media discussions, communicating with fellow fans, etc. Together, these behaviors constitute cultural practice. Fans not only consume

cultural products, but also express their aesthetic interests, group identity and emotional needs through these products and practices.

The purpose of this study is to explore how K-pop fandom can participate in the construction of youth identity as a generative mechanism. The so-called identity construction does not only refer to fans labeling themselves as "a group of fans", but also means that young people gradually think about what they like, where they belong to and what kind of person they want to be in the process of fandom participation. This study pays special attention to an important phenomenon: for some young fans, idols are not only the object of emotional companionship, but also a projection of the "ideal self". The state of brilliance, independence, self-discipline, being seen and loved by idols may become a reference for young people to imagine themselves, shape themselves and compare themselves. For some young fans, the meaning of fandom may lie in the way it connects admiration with self-expectation. Idols can be seen as visible references through which fans reflect on their own desires, values, and possible ways of becoming.

This study mainly adopts the method of combining literature analysis and reflective observation. The study first discusses K-pop fandom as an expression of cultural consumption; secondly, it analyzes the parasocial relationship, emotional belonging and ideal-self projection between fans and idols; finally, it discusses how young fans can achieve more rational fandom practice through boundary awareness in the process of identity construction.

2. K-pop fandom as cultural consumption

2.1. Definition of cultural consumption

Cultural consumption is not just about buying goods. It also includes people's expression of taste, values and social identity through consumption behavior. Bourdieu's theoretical explanation of the distinction between cultural capital and taste is that consumption choices are often related to identity and social distinction [1]. In other words, what a person likes, buys and shows is not only a personal preference, but also a part of their self-expression.

In the K-pop context, the objects of fan consumption include not only music itself, but also derivative products of music such as albums, photocards, merchandise, concert tickets, etc., as well as personal derivatives of idols such as paid messaging platform Bubble and social media content. These consumption behaviors constitute a kind of cultural participation. Fans do not passively accept the products provided by the idol industry, but constantly give these products new meanings through purchase, display, discussion and dissemination. Even in some scenarios, fans voluntarily participate in the production of idol-related cultural products.

2.2. Diverse forms of K-pop fan consumption

K-pop fandom involves various forms of material consumption. Common examples include albums, concert tickets, fan meetings, fansign events, and official merchandise, all of which are closely tied to music releases and offline performances. For many fans, purchasing these items or attending events is not only a way to support idols but also a way to engage in a shared cultural experience.

Beyond these familiar forms, fandom culture also includes more specialized consumption, such as photocards, light sticks, membership services, idol dolls, bag charms, and limited-edition merchandise. These items often carry symbolic meanings of identity. For instance, a photocard may appear to be a simple printed card with little practical value, but its rarity, portability, and connection to a specific idol make it meaningful to fans. When albums, photocards, dolls, concert photos, or

other merchandise are collected, displayed, or shared on social media, they become visible expressions of fan identity.

Secondly, K-pop fandom also includes digital consumption. Fans listen to songs through streaming platforms, watch performances, interviews and short videos through YouTube, Bilibili, Weibo, TikTok and other platforms, and may also obtain idol content through membership platforms. Digital platforms make fandom participation fragmented and within reach. In the past, fans may only participate in album releases or concerts; but in a platform environment, fans can stay connected with idols almost every day through push, live broadcasts, short videos and social media updates.

In addition, K-pop fandom also includes time consumption. Waiting for the comeback, chart-boosting, voting, coordinated commenting, forwarding, editing videos, sharing fan materials, and chatting with fellow fans are all ways for fans to invest time and attention. Compared with money consumption, time consumption can better reflect the deep participation of fans in idol culture. This shows that fans are never simple consumers, but participants and collaborators in the idol communication network [2, 3].

2.3. Capital transformation in cultural consumption

K-pop fan consumption will also be transformed into different forms of capital. The first is cultural capital. If a fan is familiar with the group's history, member characteristics, performance style, album concept, company operation and fandom language, it is easier to gain recognition in the fan community, become a "big fan", and gain the right to speak in a large number of fan groups. Therefore, the degree of understanding of idol groups is a way to make a distinction among fans.

Next is social capital. Fans establish connections with fellow fans through social platforms to form loose or close community relationships. Even if some fans do not deeply participate in the fandom community, they invest a lot of time in organized activities, such as data ranking, coordinated commenting, anti-defamation activities, support and fundraising, and other group actions. But they will still get a sense of belonging by communicating with fellow peers, sharing emotions and paying attention to common topics. Fans share information, emotions and language, making K-pop fandom a social space [3, 4].

2.4. Cultural consumption and identity labels

K-pop fan consumption will eventually be associated with identity tags. Identifying oneself as a fan of a group not only indicates a person's musical preferences, but also largely represents their aesthetic style, social circle and emotional belonging. Especially for young fans, displaying albums, photocards, concert photos or merchandise on WeChat Moments or social platforms often means publicly expressing an identity [5].

K-pop consumption in the student group is sometimes not entirely based on collection value or economic support. On the contrary, consumption is more often understood as a way to demonstrate fan identity. Fans buy and display goods not necessarily because idols really need this financial support, but because these behaviors can bring emotional value and a sense of group belonging. It can be seen that K-pop consumption has a strong symbolic meaning. It allows fans to transform their inner love into an expression of externally visible identity construction.

3. Emotional belonging in K-pop fandom

3.1. Theoretical foundations of emotional belonging

Emotional belonging refers to the psychological experience of feeling accepted, understood, and meaningfully connected within a relationship, group, or cultural community. Existing studies regard the need to belong as a basic human motivation, while self-determination theory also views "relatedness" as an important foundation of psychological growth and well-being [6, 7].

In K-pop fandom, emotional belonging comes not only from idols themselves, but also from the cultural space in which fans participate. Discussing performances, sharing fan materials, buying albums, participating in social media interactions and communicating with peers will make fans feel that they are part of a community. For young people, this sense of belonging is especially important, because the youth stage itself is a period when individuals constantly seek their own position, group identity and value recognition. K-pop fan culture provides young people with a space to express their love, identify themselves and imagine themselves through music, visual image, platform interaction and community language.

3.2. Parasocial relationships between fans and idols

Parasocial interaction is usually understood as a "long-distance intimacy" between the media audience and the characters on the screen. Although this relationship is not a real two-way private relationship, the audience will feel that they are maintaining some kind of connection with media figures in continuous viewing and imagination [8].

In K-pop culture, this parasocial relationship is further strengthened. Idols not only appear in public places such as MVs and performances, but also through live broadcasts, short videos, social media and frequent updates into the daily life of fans. Fans can see the more private side of idols: by showing practice, eating, chatting, taking selfies, and sharing daily life, they can also get an imagination of "1v1" and "being responded to" through paid chat platforms. Even if this interaction is structurally unequal, fans may still experience a sense of closeness [9, 10].

4. The dual effects of emotional belonging on youth mental health

The impact of K-pop fandom on the mental health of young people is obviously dual. It may not only provide supportive emotional resources, but also create new psychological pressure. The key reason is that the connection between fans and idols, fans and the community is not a simple entertainment relationship, but will gradually enter young people's understanding of self-worth, group position and ideal self. Therefore, emotional belonging may not only become a kind of psychological support, but also turn into emotional dependence, group pressure and self-anxiety when overinvested.

4.1. Positive effects: belonging, self-efficacy, and psychological resilience

First of all, K-pop fandom can provide a sense of belonging for young people. The youth stage itself is a period when individuals are constantly looking for their own position and group identity, and the fan community provides a relatively low-threshold community for young people. Fans can feel that they share a certain language, emotion and cultural experience with others by waiting for the comeback, discussing performances, sharing fan materials, buying albums, and participating in online interactions. This common experience can alleviate the individual's sense of isolation. Studies

have regarded the need for belonging as one of the basic motivations of human beings, and also pointed out that stable and positive interpersonal connections can provide individuals with a sense of psychological security and self-confirmation [6].

Secondly, K-pop fandom may also improve the sense of self-efficacy of young fans. Self-efficacy refers to the psychological belief that individuals believe that they have the ability to accomplish certain goals or cope with certain tasks. K-pop idols often appear with high training, self-discipline, stage expression and professional images, which are easily understood by fans as symbols of "hard work can be seen" and "persistence can bring about change". For some young fans, idols are not only objects of worship, but also a reference template for growth. Fans may have the motivation to learn, exercise, improve aesthetics, practice language or improve self-management because of the idol's training experience, stage performance or professional attitude. The theory of self-efficacy emphasizes that an individual's belief in one's own ability will affect their choice of action, degree of effort and persistence in the face of difficulties [11]. From this perspective, the positive role of K-pop fandom is that it may turn fans' appreciation of idols into motivation for self-improvement.

Thirdly, K-pop fandom may also enhance psychological resilience. Psychological resilience refers to the individual's ability to adapt and recover in stressful, frustrated or uncertain environments. For young fans, the expectation, waiting, collective celebration and emotional sharing in fandom participation can form a daily emotional adjustment method. More importantly, fans experience common expectations, common disappointments and common recovery in the community, which also helps to learn the management of emotional fluctuations. Psychological resilience research emphasizes that resilience is often not the special ability of a few people, but an adaptation process gradually formed in ordinary life relationships and support systems [12]. Therefore, the positive meaning of K-pop fandom is not just "making people happy", but it may provide a psychological buffer for young people in daily life through community support and emotional regulation.

4.2. Negative effects: emotional dependence, group polarization, and the risk of online violence

However, the emotional belonging of K-pop fandom may also have a negative impact. The first is the risk of emotional dependence. When fans rely too much on idols to provide emotional value, the idol's achievements, controversy, comeback performance or external evaluation may directly affect fans' emotions. At this time, idols are no longer just the object of aesthetics and entertainment but are overly incorporated into the self-worth system of fans. For example, fans will be proud when idols win awards, sales increase or become famous because of performances; but when idols encounter negative public opinion, poor performance or are criticized by others, fans may also have strong anxiety, anger and defensiveness.

Secondly, the sense of belonging of the fan community may also be transformed into group pressure. The community can allow fans to gain identity, but at the same time, it will form an implicit standard of "how to be a qualified fan". For example, whether to buy the album, whether to participate in chart-boosting, whether to participate in coordinated commenting, whether to forward it in time, and whether to take the side in the controversy may all be the basis for the evaluation of the fan's identity. When these standards are constantly strengthened, fans may shift from voluntary participation to forced participation. Especially in a data-based and platform-based environment, love is easy to be transformed into calculable indicators, such as sales, plays, votes, retweets and comments. If fans fail to meet these indicators, they may feel guilty and even be questioned by the community as "not loving enough". This mechanism will transform emotional belonging into emotional labor, so that fans can gain group recognition and bear discipline from within the group.

Thirdly, there may also be a risk of group polarization and cyber violence in the fan community. Group polarization means that people with similar views may become more extreme after continuous interaction. Online fan communities often have highly homogeneous characteristics, and members share similar positions, emotions and language, which helps to form cohesion, but may also amplify the distinction between enemy and self. When idols are criticized, compete with other artists, or have conflicts between fan groups, the original sense of group belonging may quickly turn into aggressive emotions. Coordinated commenting, fan wars, anti-defamation activities, doxxing-style attacks and rejection of dissent are all manifestations of this risk. Cyberbullying research also points out that aggressive behavior in the digital environment has the characteristics of fast transmission, large number of onlookers and wide range of injuries, which may have a significant negative impact on the mental health of adolescents [13]. Therefore, the fan community is not naturally a safe space. It can not only provide support but also create pressure and harm when the group's emotions are out of control.

Finally, K-pop fandom may also increase young people's anxiety about body image and self-worth. The idol industry is highly dependent on visual presentation. The figure, appearance, stage charm and state of "being seen" of idols are often packaged as idealized images. Especially when fans regard idols as the projected object of the ideal self, the brilliance and success of idols are not only desirable but also may deepen the dissatisfaction with the real self. That is to say, fans like not only the idol itself, but also the "more recognized self" represented by the idol. When the gap between the ideal self and the real self is too big, fandom participation may change from motivation to a source of anxiety.

5. Identity construction through fan practices

In the context of identity construction, rational fandom participation does not mean stopping liking idols, but means that fans need to establish a boundary between emotional investment, consumption behavior and real life. The reason why K-pop fandom is easy to affect young people's self-identity is that it is easy to penetrate into fans' understanding of self, aesthetics, social and value.

First of all, young fans need to establish clear emotional boundaries. Idols can provide aesthetic pleasure, emotional resonance and self-motivation, which can be transformed into motivation for learning, self-management or personal growth. A healthy emotional connection can be seen, for example, when a fan feels encouraged by an idol's disciplined practice and then becomes more willing to manage their own study or daily routine. In this case, idol functions as a source of inspiration rather than a substitute for the fan's real life. However, if fans overly idealize idols and completely bind the success, failure or external evaluation of idols to their own emotions, fandom participation may change from motivation to burden. Therefore, fans can get inspiration from idols, but they should not regard them as a perfect life template. Instead, they should maintain independent judgment and take fandom participation as the driving force for self-growth, not the only source of defining self-worth.

Secondly, fans need to establish consumption boundaries. The K-pop industry has a strong commercial mechanism. Album versions, photocards, random mechanisms, membership services, concert tickets and merchandise may stimulate fans to continue to consume. Rational consumption does not mean buying at all, but fans should realize that buying is not the only way to prove love. Fans should not feel guilty for not buying a certain product, nor should they be kidnapped by the logic of the idea that fans who do not consume are not qualified fans

Thirdly, fans need to establish community boundaries. Fan communities can provide a sense of belonging, but it may also bring group pressure. Fans can choose to only enjoy the work, pay

attention to the performances, make moderate purchases and communicate with a small number of friends to get pleasure. There is no need to deeply participate in fandom activities such as coordinated commenting, fan wars, data competition or policing fan identity. Healthy fan status should not be measured by the degree of participation in fandom conflicts.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that K-pop fandom is not just music consumption or entertainment preferences, but also a cultural mechanism to participate in the construction of youth identity. Through albums, photocards, merchandise, digital platforms and time investment, fans turn their love for idols into visible identity expressions; through peer communication, community interaction and common emotions, fans gain a sense of belonging and group identity; through the appreciation and projection of idol images, young people also imagine their ideal self in the process of fandom participation, think about what kind of person they want to be. However, this process is not completely positive. It may not only bring self-motivation, psychological support and growth motivation, but also trigger pressure of consumption, emotional dependence, body image anxiety and fandom community pressure. Therefore, the significance of K-pop fandom is not only that fans support idols, but also that it shows how contemporary youth express themselves in popular culture, find belonging, and learn to establish emotional, consumption and community boundaries.

The limitation of this study is that the research is mainly based on literature analysis and personal reflective observation, and lacks large-scale questionnaires, in-depth interviews or cross-group comparisons. Therefore, this study cannot represent the experience of all K-pop fans, nor can it fully present the differences between different genders, ages, regions and the degree of fan participation. At the same time, this study focuses more on the identity construction and psychological experience of young fans, and the discussion on how entertainment companies, platform algorithms and business mechanisms can specifically shape the behavior of fans is still limited.

Future studies can further adopt methods such as interviews, questionnaires or social media text analysis to compare the fandom experiences of different types of fans. For example, future studies can examine the differences between deep fans and light fans in terms of consumption boundaries, community participation and emotional investment. Future studies can also discuss the body image ideals and "ideal self" in the idol industry in more depth, and analyze how young fans deal with self-comparison, appearance anxiety and subjectivity reconstruction while appreciating idol images. Through these directions, K-pop fandom research can better explain how contemporary youth negotiate self-identity between global popular culture, digital platforms and personal growth.

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