

An Exploration of Fan Identity Solidification and Irrational Consumption Behavior in the Korean Entertainment Industry from an Idol Marketing Perspective: A Case Study of the SEVENTEEN Fandom

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the Korean entertainment industry, the influence of idol culture and fan culture on the consumption behavior of fan groups has become increasingly prominent. Taking the SEVENTEEN fan community as a case study, this paper analyzes how idol marketing strategies drive the solidification of fan identity, drawing upon theories of identity formation and symbolic consumption. Furthermore, it explores the subsequent impact of this identity solidification on irrational consumption behavior. The study finds that emotional marketing, scarcity marketing, and community management are critical factors in reinforcing fan identity. Through sustained engagement in fandom activities, fans increasingly perceive their "fan identity" as an integral component of their self-concept. Driven by the community's normative evaluation system and internal group dynamics, consumption evolves from discretionary entertainment spending into a symbolic act used to affirm identity and gain social recognition. This transition leads to various forms of irrational consumption, such as repetitive stockpiling, peer-pressure-driven purchasing, and excessive expenditure. The paper argues that irrational consumption within fan communities is shaped not only by commercial marketing tactics but also by internal community appraisal mechanisms. Consequently, a multi-level approach—involving individual fans, fan communities, and the industry—is essential to foster a more rational environment for fandom and consumption.

Keywords: Idol marketing, K-pop fandom, Identity solidification, Irrational consumption, Symbolic consumption

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the globalization of the Korean entertainment industry, standardized and systematic idol management models have profoundly influenced the behaviors and perceptions of fan communities. Korean idol groups, such as SEVENTEEN, have established long-term, stable connections with their fans through mature content production (including variety shows, live streams, and social media interactions), precise marketing strategies, and highly organized

community management. They serve as prime examples of fan identity construction and community cohesion. Over the course of long-term engagement, fans are continuously shaped by the atmosphere and norms of their communities, gradually forming a stable and exclusive "fan identity." To support their idols, many fans consistently engage in activities such as purchasing albums, crowdfunding for support projects, and inflating streaming numbers. Some of these consumption behaviors exceed practical needs and exhibit clear tendencies toward irrationality. In recent years, this phenomenon has increasingly drawn societal attention to fan culture and youth consumption issues.

Existing research has explored these topics from perspectives such as consumerism, the "fan economy", and online communities, providing relatively comprehensive accounts of fan phenomena, identity formation, and symbolic consumption. However, while previous studies have primarily focused on individual fan psychology or community interactions, discussions on how the idol industry reinforces fan identity through marketing strategies—and the subsequent impact on consumer behavior—remain limited. In particular, there is a lack of research that analyzes these dynamics through specific case studies of fandoms.

To address this gap, this paper selects the SEVENTEEN fan community as its primary research subject. By integrating theories of idol marketing, identity formation, and symbolic consumption, this paper analyzes how K-pop idol marketing drives the solidification of fan identity and explores the impact of this solidification on irrational consumption. Through a specific case study, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms underlying fan consumption and offer insights into promoting rational fandom and improving the governance of fan communities.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Identity formation and identity solidification

Identity formation is a psychological process through which individuals confirm their group membership, develop a sense of belonging, and internalize group values based on shared interests, emotional connections, and value consensus [1]. In the context of fan culture, this is primarily manifested as the acceptance of one's "fan status"; fans not only recognize their idols but also identify with the community and its subcultural norms. When this identity is continuously shaped by the group's atmosphere through sustained community interaction, it evolves from a dynamic, fluid state into a stable and defined one, leading to the "solidification" of fan identity [2].

The solidification of fan identity is sustained by ongoing discursive guidance, behavioral norms, and symbolic reinforcement within the community. These mechanisms delineate the boundaries between "us" and "them," fostering a strong sense of group belonging and boundary consciousness [3]. Throughout this process, fans' self-perception is reinforced, significantly increasing their dependence on and loyalty to the fan community. This leads to the formation of an exclusive identity, compelling fans to utilize consumption and participatory activities as vehicles to maintain their status within the community [1].

2.2. Symbolic consumption and consumerism

The theory of symbolic consumption posits that modern consumption behavior has transcended the satisfaction of basic material needs, shifting toward the consumption of symbolic meanings, status symbols, and group affiliations embodied by commodities [4]. In this review, the use-value of commodities is increasingly eclipsed by their symbolic value; consumption is no longer merely a

purchasing act but an essential means for individuals to express the self, affirm belonging, and construct social identity.

Fan consumption serves as a quintessential form of symbolic consumption. Items such as albums, photocards, and merchandise have limited utility in themselves but are imbued with identity-marking significance due to their deep association with the idol and the fandom [5]. Fans express their identities through the acquisition, collection, and display of these products; the more sustained and intensive their consumption, the greater the social recognition they gain within the community [6].

As fan identity is continuously reinforced and solidified, symbolic consumption shifts from a discretionary choice to a prerequisite for maintaining the legitimacy of one's status. This logic explains why fans engage in consumption that exceeds practical needs, offering a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of irrational consumption [4].

3. Marketing strategies reinforcing fan identity in K-pop

3.1. Emotional marketing

Emotional marketing is a cornerstone of K-pop idol management. As a strategy that utilizes idols as the primary vehicle to foster emotional connections—through personality development, content creation, and interactive mechanisms [7]—it minimizes overt utilitarian objectives and emphasizes emotional bonds. This approach cultivates stable psychological attachment through a sense of companionship and shared values. Unlike traditional entertainment, which primarily relies on artistic works to attract audiences, K-pop emphasizes long-term interaction. This is a typical expression of emotional marketing; by reducing the psychological distance between idols and fans through continuous emotional engagement, it helps fans find a sense of belonging [7].

SEVENTEEN, a South Korean boy group launched by Pledis Entertainment (now a subsidiary of HYBE) on May 26, 2015, serves as a representative case. Since their debut as a 13-member group, they have redefined industry benchmarks through a "self-producing" model—where members participate in songwriting and choreography—and a cross-border marketing strategy. As of 2024, they have set numerous records in sales, awards, and global influence (e.g., their 2023 album FML set a K-pop record with 6.4 million copies sold) and held over 100 world tour concerts.

SEVENTEEN's brand image centers on "self-sufficiency" and "collective growth." The narrative of members co-creating their music and stages fosters authenticity. Unlike personas crafted solely by agencies, this narrative of "growing together through shared effort" encourages deeper emotional investment. This image-building is central to their emotional marketing; by humanizing the idols, it strengthens fan-idol bonds and thus reinforces group identity [8].

In addition, SEVENTEEN produces a high volume of content, such as variety shows, live streams, and behind-the-scenes footage. These interactions, while not always directly related to musical output, foster a sense of companionship. Many fans habitually track these updates, integrating fandom into their daily lives. This sustained emotional interaction reinforces fans' dependence on their idols [9], transforming emotional investment into a long-term behavioral pattern. In this process, consumption becomes a means to reinforce the bond with the idol and consolidate one's identity [10].

Over time, fans' commitment transcends casual interest; supporting an idol evolves from a mere preference into a core part of one's identity. Within the K-pop ecosystem, emotional marketing permeates the entire management process, providing a basis for the consolidation of fan identity [9].

At this stage, fans become increasingly conscious of their standing within the community, which makes them more responsive to group atmosphere and social evaluation [1].

3.2. Scarcity marketing

Scarcity marketing is a critical instrument for solidifying fan identity in the K-pop industry. By creating product scarcity and competitive dynamics, it stimulates consumer motivation and strengthens the boundaries of group identity [11]. Strategies such as limited editions, multi-version releases, and random distribution (e.g., photocards) are widely employed to trigger a collector's impulse and encourage sustained engagement [12].

SEVENTEEN's merchandise strategy illustrates this. Albums are often released in multiple versions, each containing randomized photocards, posters, or limited-run special editions. Completing a collection often necessitates repetitive purchasing. Furthermore, the "fansign" (fan-signing event) system serves as a powerful stimulus: because selection for these events is often correlated with the volume of albums purchased, fans are incentivized to engage in excessive consumption to increase their chances of interacting with their idols. For many, this transcends simple consumption and becomes a pursuit of access to their idols. Thus, scarcity marketing binds consumption to identity legitimacy, pushing fans to solidify their identities through competitive participation [12].

3.3. Fan community management and identity recognition

Fan communities are the bedrock of fandom culture. Through internal rules, behavioral norms, and discursive guidance, they turn disparate individuals into a cohesive group with unified goals [13]. Within online platforms—such as Weibo "Super Topics," fan sites, and support groups—a rigorous operational system emerges, requiring participation in streaming, comment control, and data-driven promotion. This hierarchy is underpinned by a "data-first" logic, where contribution levels serve as the core metric for evaluation [14].

Fans who actively engage in these collective actions gain social status and recognition, while those who remain passive risk being labeled as "leeching" (bai piao) or "fake fans." This culture of evaluation often triggers identity anxiety among fans. Driven by the desire to be perceived as "qualified" members, they increase their investment of time, emotion, and capital. Sustained by community pressure and emotional resonance, this process continually strengthens identity, ultimately leading to a stable and highly exclusive state of fan identity solidification [2].

4. The impact of identity solidification on irrational consumption

4.1. Symbolic expression of fan identity

Once fan identity is solidified, consumption within fandoms transcends the mere satisfaction of material needs, becoming a mechanism for expressing group belonging and identity [4]. Idol-related albums, collectibles, and official merchandise, while possessing limited utility, are imbued with unique meanings through industrial packaging and community reinforcement. Consequently, they function as vital symbols that denote "fan status" and delineate the boundary between insiders and outsiders [6].

For the SEVENTEEN fanbase, purchasing albums and amassing complete sets of photocards have moved far beyond ordinary entertainment spending; they have become primary ways to

validate one's "authenticity" as a fan. Within the community, the level of financial commitment and the comprehensiveness of one's collection function as implicit benchmarks for judging a fan's sincerity. This effectively transforms symbolic consumption into a requisite path for affirming identity and securing group acceptance [4]. This logic—where consumption functions as a marker of identity—deepens the solidification of fan identity and creates a fertile ground for irrational consumption.

4.2. Patterns of irrational consumption

Under the interplay of solidified identity, intensive marketing, and community norms, SEVENTEEN fans are prone to irrational consumption that exceeds both financial capacity and practical needs. These behaviors are primarily driven by the need to maintain identity and secure a sense of belonging, rather than by rational, objective decision-making [5].

These behaviors take three typical forms: First, repetitive stockpiling: fans purchase massive quantities of albums with highly redundant content to boost sales figures or collect randomized photocards, with spending far exceeding personal collection needs or practical use [12]. Second, competitive and peer-pressure-driven consumption: compelled by a fandom culture that equates financial contribution with loyalty, fans blindly engage in crowdfunding campaigns and high-stakes auctions for rare collectibles to avoid the stigma of being labeled a "fake fan." Third, overspending and credit-based consumption: some fans, disregarding their economic reality, divert essential living expenses or even resort to debt to fund offline support activities and chart voting, ultimately falling into a cycle of financial distress [11].

These behaviors reflect the strong herd mentality and status-seeking mindset prevalent within these communities [15]. The identity anxiety and the desire for social validation resulting from solidified fan identity ensure that consumption is based less on actual need and more on the perceived obligation to uphold one's status and remain integrated within the collective. Over time, this contributes to sustained irrational spending, which poses potential risks to the financial health and consumption values of young fans.

5. Conclusion

Using the SEVENTEEN fan community as a case study, this paper integrates theories of idol marketing, identity formation, and symbolic consumption to analyze how K-pop marketing strategies drive the solidification of fan identity and its subsequent impact on irrational consumption. The study finds that this solidification is not the result of a single factor but a synergistic effect of emotional marketing, scarcity marketing, and community management. Specifically, emotional marketing establishes the foundation for psychological attachment; scarcity marketing strengthens the connection between identity and consumption; and community management completes the solidification process through hierarchical discipline [13].

In this process, consumption behavior shifts from a rational decision-making logic to a requisite act aimed at validating fan status, securing social acceptance, and alleviating identity anxiety. This results in irrational behaviors—such as repetitive stockpiling, peer-pressure-driven consumption, and financial overextension—which are driven by commercial marketing tactics from the outside and shaped by internal community evaluation systems and group dynamics from within [5].

Furthermore, this study identifies a close intrinsic correlation between identity solidification and irrational consumption: as fans' dependence on the fandom intensifies, they increasingly fall into the fallacy of equating identity with expenditure and loyalty with financial contribution. This cycle not

only fuels various forms of irrational consumption but also highlights critical challenges in contemporary youth fan culture and the development of the idol economy.

The study has certain limitations; since it relies on a single case study of SEVENTEEN, the generalizability of its findings requires further verification. Moreover, the research is primarily qualitative and theoretical, highlighting the need for future empirical support through quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews to further refine the underlying mechanisms.

Future research could broaden the scope by conducting comparative analyses across different types of fandoms. Additionally, incorporating empirical data would enhance the depth of the findings. Finally, investigating emerging factors such as the new media landscape and short-video platforms could offer a broader framework for regulating fan culture and supporting the sustainability of the idol industry ecosystem.

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