

Who is Your Bias?: The Symbolic Interactions and Social Solidarity of the International K-pop Fan Community

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Abstract

- This study explores the online experience of k-pop (Korean Pop Music) and its international fan base. Through ethnographic participation and observation on *Allkpop* a k-pop gossip website and the *6Theory* fan forums, I examine the rituals of devotion and allegiance to k-pop music idols. These rituals are central to forming bonds of social solidarity and community in the absence of face-to-face interaction. Due to their significant role in online k-pop interaction, fans refer to their favorite idols by using the term “bias”, indicating forms of judgment about cultural life. As a form of cultural capital, fans use these biases to differentiate and distinguish themselves as competent and experienced members of the scene.

Theoretical Framework

- In their studies of religion, Geertz (2000) and Durkheim (1965) examine a cultural system, where common goals and rituals bring people of similar interest together. I extend their ideas to explain how Internet fan forums constitute a similar cultural system that unites its members into a global fan community.

- Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Goffman's (1959) presentation of self illustrate the significance of rituals as they define a person's identity and place within the community.
- I use Carey's (1989) model of communication as ritual to demonstrate how the shared experience of online music discussion constitutes a virtual fan community.

Methods

Setting: the 6Theory Internet Forums:

- 6Theory is geared towards English-speaking international k-pop fans whose main interaction with the scene is online.

Ethnographic Method:

- Visited, monitored, and contributed frequently to the forums for five months.
- Qualitatively analyzed site content (fan comments and forums).

Community

Search

Forums

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Community News & Announcements

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Topics **6** Posts **653**

No Topics

The Lounge

General discussion

Topics **408** Posts **6306**

22 mins

Korean Entertainment

Topics **1,622** Posts **115761**

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Results

Distinguishing the Idol from the Artist:

- An idol is a singer who is also involved in other aspects of the entertainment media such as acting, modeling, and MC-ing.
- This difference of idol and artist is of significant importance because it distinguishes between those celebrities who are “worth” idolizing and not.
- The versatility of idols is key to marketing as it provides fans with enough familiarity so they can imitate the idol, discuss about them, and create “shrines” for them, and in doing so be a true fan.

Emulating the Idol:

- Fans share their song/dance/music video covers in “The Studio” Forum and claim their style/personality are influenced by k-pop.
- On a thread titled “Copying Idols,” One fan expressed, **“Yes [I copy] Taeyeon from Girls’ Generation. My hair is short, and I dip-dyed it blonde like in ‘Mr. Taxi.’”**
- A fan explained: **“[I puff my cheeks, like some idols do]. After being 4 years into K-pop it became a habit and most of the time don’t realize that I do it.”**
- A cycle forms where the fan imitates the idol to express their adoration to the idol, to strengthen their identity and devotion as a fan.

The “Failed” Community Idol “Shrine”:

- Fans create “official” threads dedicated to an idol/group that consists of photographs, a biography, and a timeline of their k-pop career. The purpose is to display/educate others on the success of the idol (s) and interact with fans with the same favorite idols.
- It is not until there are a sufficient number of members who hold a high degree of capital that that intimate bonds can be made, especially in virtual communities with a lack of face-to-face interaction.
- It appears there was high degree of solidarity among the Blackjacks at one point. The 6Theory forums changed its layout and format in January 2012 and many members became distressed about this.

The Official 2ne1 () Thread

[Home](#) › [Forums](#) › [Korean Entertainment](#) › [Artists](#) › The Official 2ne1 (투 애니원) Thread

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MzKyu SAID



2NE1 is a four member, South Korean girl group under YG Entertainment consisting of Lee Chaerin (CL), Park Bom, Sandara Park (Dara), and Gong Minji (Minzy). Rocking their unique style since 2009; from fierce Electronic Hip-hop to R&B, and even to a light pop-styled music, 2ne1 has captured the interest of the Korean Music industry and has also gained immense popularity internationally.



Analysis

K-pop as a Cultural System

- Through online discussions of dance, idol worship, and idol performances, fans evoke shared emotions and motivations, to share and expand the idol's fan club and popularize k-pop.
- The symbols and ritual exchange on the online community of k-pop reinforces the beliefs of the fan that the idol(s) should be adored and be the most popular idol.

Rituals of Community

- The collective k-pop experience symbolically unites idol and fan to be one and the same because the materials fans focus on are those that have content pertaining to their biases. This ritual of adoring the idol reinforces their devotion to the fan group.
- Fan comments provide tangible markers of fan identity, demonstrating their devotion to particular idols and exhibiting their subcultural capital through sharing.
- Interactions between k-pop fans are symbolic rituals that allow create, transform, and change the meaning and the fans' understanding and reality of k-pop.

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Acknowledgements/Contact

- I would like to thank Rob Gardner for the support and insight he has provided as an advisor, the SOAN department for their encouragement, and my parents for everything they have done and continue to do for me.
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