

"Hai...It's Me, I Am Your Fanboy" : Self-Representation Fanboy K-Pop on Instagram

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Abstract: This study aimed to explore the self-representation of K-Pop fanboys on Instagram by using a qualitative approach with digital ethnography and content analysis methods. Data was collected by investigating the self-representation of K-Pop fanboy Instagram accounts. The results showed that their self-representation involved a complex set of strategies, both visual and collaborative. By examining via the photos, videos and collaborations with some various parties, K-Pop fanboys creatively presented their identity as K-Pop fans. This representation is consciously constructed as an authentic expression of identity, reflecting a unique self-image rather than a mere imitation. Moreover, their creative activities demonstrated an active role in producing new meanings, these were not only as consumers of popular culture but also as contributors in the fandom community. This research provided an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of self-representation in the digital age as well as the role of social media in fan identity construction.

Keywords: Digital Identity; Fanboy K-Pop; Instagram; K-Pop; Self-Representation

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology and social media has created new spaces for individuals to express their identities and interests, including in the context of fandom. One of prominent phenomenons is the rise of K-pop fanboys, who actively built representations of themselves on platforms such as Instagram. Despite of the majority of K-pop fans were traditionally associated with women (Lee dkk., 2020), the presence of K-pop fanboys was increasingly visible, challenging the gender stereotypes attached to this fandom.

Furthermore, the existence of fanboys in K-Pop fandom provided a new perspective in understanding gender dynamics in fan culture. This was due to K-Pop fanboys often faced challenges which related to the stigma of masculinity, where their interest in Korean music and pop culture was often considered incompatible with traditional gender norms. By considering the help of Instagram, K-Pop fanboys constructed alternative narratives by openly presenting themselves as fans, whether through posts featuring album collections, dance covers, or content appreciating idols. This practice did not only challenges rigid gender constructions, but also showed how social media allowed individuals to negotiate their identities amidst the social pressures.

The self-representation of K-pop fanboys on Instagram is often the subject of negative stereotypes from the general public. The term fanboy itself is often used pejoratively to describe male fans who were considered overly obsessive, emotional, or even less masculine because of their interest in popular culture (McAvoy-James & Fletcher, 2015). Their activities

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on social media, such as posting content related to their favorite idols or expressing emotions towards K-pop songs, they are often seen as irrational or even reflective of cultural consumerism. The kind of the stereotypes did not only affect society's perception of K-pop fanboys but also could be affected by the way of they constructed on their identities in the digital space.

Moreover, the development of K-Pop in recent years has become one of the most influential global cultural forces, these are not only in the music industry but also in shaping the identity and behavior of its fans. In addition, social pressures and gender-related stigmas might be also influence the way K-pop fanboys presented themselves. Several studies had shown that men involved in female-dominated fandoms often faced challenges such as feminine stigma or non-conformity to traditional expectations of masculinity. This could impact to the way K-pop fanboys which managed online identities properly. Therefore, this study aimed to further explore how K-Pop fanboys utilize Instagram as a medium of self-representation, as well as the social and cultural implications of such practices.

The self-representation of K-Pop fanboys on Instagram is interesting to study further because it illustrates how gender, popular culture, and social media interact with each other. Unlike the stereotypes often attached to male fans, K-Pop fanboys actively presented themselves through diverse content, ranging from dance covers, merchandise collections, to posts expressing emotional attachment to idols. This represented a shift in gender norms while challenging traditional views of masculinity and pop culture consumption. Instagram was chosen as the main medium in this study was not only because of them which had reshaped visual culture by emphasizing image aesthetics, but it provided a space for reflexivity and community building, helping users navigate cultural tensions and construct their identities (Takhar dkk., 2023). In addition, the visual interactions on Instagram reduced barriers to participation, encouraging deeper social exchanges and commitment to community (Kusuma dkk., 2024). Thus, the structure of Instagram encouraged the creation of new relationships with images, forming visual habits and social relations (MacDowall & Budge, 2021).

Basically, there have been many studies on K-Pop fans or fandoms. However, previous studies on K-pop fans tended to focus on some aspects of cultural consumption, collective behavior, or the psychological impact of the craze. However, research that specifically examined the self-representation of K-pop fanboys on social media is still limited. Therefore, this phenomenon required further exploration to understand how K-pop fanboys utilize Instagram as a medium of self-representation, including the motives, strategies, and meanings they constructed which was through these activities. The results of this study were expected to contribute to the literature on digital fandom, gender identity construction in social media, and minority group self-representation in fan communities. By understanding these dynamics,

we could further investigate how social media became a space of identity negotiation for groups that were often underrepresented in popular discussions about K-pop and fandom.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fanboy K-Pop As Digital Fandom

In the digital era, the role of fans had changed significantly. Fans, who were highly dedicated audiences of actors, celebrities, television programs or other media products (Lewis, 1992), those were now more active, interactive and productive. They were no longer passive, but participated in the production of texts as cultural products on their own initiative, a phenomenon called fan culture. This culture was at the center of the production and consumption of media texts (Jenkins dkk., 2009), with fans playing more than just consumers as they were active in making in-depth interpretations of their favorite objects (Fuschillo, 2018).

The emergence of social media had had a significant impact on fan practices, increasing the vocalization and visibility of fandom communities (Guo, 2021). The digital fandom did not only provide a space for fans to build and express their identities through platforms such as Tumblr or Weibo, but also blurred the boundaries between producers and consumers, making fan culture more dynamic and powerful (Daros, 2023). However, the amidst of great opportunities for engagement and creativity, such as participation in crowdfunding campaigns for films or cyber-activism, challenged such as exploitation of emotional labor and unfairness in contributions were being leveraged for promotional purposes also arise (Booth, 2015)

The presence of fans in the digital era was known as “digital fandom”, which was a community that used the internet and social media to interact and share their interests (Booth, 2015). Moreover, the further explanation of Booth explained that digital fandom included forums, blogs, wikis, and social networking sites where fans could discuss, exchange information, and form a collective identity. Booth (Booth, 2015) had explained that was in this digital era, the fans had more power and voice in the media ecosystem, which was previously dominated by large corporations and traditional media. In addition, fan-to-fan collaboration on digital platforms often results in unique creative innovations, creating works that might not have appeared in a traditional media context, and this could be done globally without being hindered by the boundaries of space and time.

Digital fandom involved a high level of emotional engagement, where fans interacted with virtual fandom objects and contributed to the datafication of their emotional labor (Yin, 2021). Digital fandom provided a space for fans to construct and expressed their identities through creative practices (Misailidou, 2017). There was something happened to K-pop fandoms, which operated the across multiple social networks and media platforms, they showed how digital fandoms could be decentralized yet still highly efficient. These communities often engaged in creative practices and identity formation (Keith, 2023). Moreover, digital fandom

involved the formation and enactment of fan identities in cyberspace, with social media platforms serving as venues for identity performance as well as personal and fan identity construction (Pan & Hassan, 2024).

Fan participation in fan culture, especially in the digital era, ultimately created what is called gift culture. That means, when fans created various texts and other works sharing with the community or other fans as a form of their contribution and solidarity as fellow fans. In addition, As a culture of sharing gifts, Booth (2017) explained that fans in the digital era created a form of economy where digital content was produced, disseminated, and consumed for free by fans in the digital era or referred to as the Digi-Gratis economy. This economy referred to fan participation in providing and consuming digital content for free.

2.2 Self-Representation On Social Media

In the digital era, self-representation involved one, some or all things in the digital media landscape. In this process of self-representation, people commonly used an approach of their own stories and experiences as the main material, thus it was providing an individual perspective and expression of their inner world (Kidd, 2016). This was because the prefix “self” in this term referred to its main subject, the individual (who could also represent a group), while emphasizing the claim that the individual or group actively represented itself, rather than being represented by others (Thumim, 2006). Therefore, the self-representation allowed “ordinary people” to “speak for themselves,” claiming agency over media production and the representational strategies they employ (Enli & Thumim, 2012).

The term “ordinary” here was used in a celebratory sense, representing voices from below or the margins (Thumim, 2006). In this context, the self-representation involved not only the technical production of symbolic media texts, but also included curatorial agency, including how individuals chose to represent themselves, what was shared, and what was excluded (Burgess dkk., t.t.). Furthermore, Thumim (Thumim, 2012) highlighted that, while self-representation offered personal expression and recognition, there were also social and political challenges associated with how individuals presented themselves on an ongoing basis.

Kidd (Kidd, 2016) revealed that the online of self-representation came in a variety of formats, from personal websites and blogs to social media, videos and selfies. Despite its diverse forms, the online of self-representation brought challenges, such as the difficulty of deciding which version of oneself to present on different platforms were due to different characteristics and audiences. In addition, the boundaries of privacy were increasingly blurred, by personal data often were not fully under control as it was used for commercial purposes.

Regarding to the self-representation especially in online social media, Rettberg (Rettberg, 2018) provided three modes of self-representation namely written, visual and quantitative modes. The written mode of representation related to various written texts were shared on social media such as statuses written on social media, captions on photos or videos, text in

photos or instastories and comments (Rettberg, 2018). The self-representation with this writing method was made not only to inform daily activities or just tell the mood but also were used to form an online identity, and to make personal messages that seemed intimate, sometimes even involving emoticons to design empathetic communication with followers on their social media to strengthen the bond between the two (Rettberg, 2018).

3. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative approach with digital ethnography (Pink dkk., 2015) and content analysis (Van Leeuwen dkk., t.t.) methods to uncover the self-representation of K-pop fanboys on Instagram. This approach was chosen because it was able to explore the meanings, motivations, and strategies behind identity representation in depth (W. Lawrence Neuman, 2014). Data was obtained by observation of K-pop fanboy Instagram accounts that met the criteria: public accounts, at least 100,000 followers, and actively posting K-pop content. The analysis focused on visual (dressing style, photo editing), textual (caption, hashtag), and interaction (comment, collaboration) aspects. Data was obtained by observations, and then those were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of self-representation as K-Pop fanboys on Instagram.

4. Result and Discussions

4.1 Self-Representation Through Visual Strategies

K-Pop fanboys constructed their self-representation on Instagram through a series of complex and planned visual strategies. As Buckingham (Buckingham, 2007) argued, social media had become an “experimental space” where teenagers constructed identities through visual curation practices. As part of the digital generation, they creatively utilized Instagram's visual features such as photos, videos, Stories, Reels, and grid layouts to express their identity as K-Pop fans. It was because of the multimodal that used of Instagram features allowed users to perform more dynamic “self-branding” (Dhir dkk., 2016). The result of observations revealed that K-Pop fanboys used various techniques, such as posting photos, videos, idol content and reposting official content, thus those could be creating a collective identity as part of a global fan community.

One of the visual strategies used by K-Pop fanboys to represent themselves as fans was through photos and videos. The photos uploaded were not just selfies or photos of K-Pop idols but were often, the photos they uploaded were the result of homemade edits. In the process of self-representation, the practice of image editing was a form of agency and freedom that everyone had because self-representation in the digital era provided opportunities for everyone to show themselves in their own way (Thumim, 2012). By editing content inde-

pendently, K-Pop fanboys did not only express fandom but also highlighted personal technical and aesthetic abilities. The editing process included selecting filters, adjusting colors, and adding graphic elements that matched the idol group's theme.

The process of visual representation of K-Pop fanboys involved a significant investment of time and resources in creating carefully edited content. Booth (Booth, 2015) conceptualized this phenomenon as the “Digi-Gratis Economy”, where fans voluntarily produced and distributed digital content without financial reward. K-Pop fanboys did this anyway because as a digital fandom, K-Pop fanboys were already engaged and had a high level of emotional involvement. In addition, as fans and fanboys wanted to show their appreciation for K-Pop as a favorite culture.

The editing process on photos as a medium for the self-representation as a K-Pop fanboy visually was basically the process of adding various ornaments as a visual affirmation of identity. Ornaments such as text, stickers and filters were added to K-Pop fanboy photos as digital ornaments that function as “multimodal resources” that enriched the meaning of the content (Van Leeuwen, 2005). By using consistent filters, fanboys created a unique and recognizable visual aesthetic. As Highfield & Leaver (Highfield & Leaver, 2016) pointed out, stickers and GIFs in Instagram Stories function as “cultural tokens” that reinforced communal identity.

Apart from using photos, K-Pop fanboy's self-representation was done by videos, which also involved a long creative process. Jenkins et al. (JENKINS dkk., 2013) in their concept of “spreadable media” showed how fans transform commercial content into participatory works that expressed identity. The types of videos created vary from dance covers to reaction videos, showing the depth of their appreciation. It reflected that K-Pop fanboys in their self-representation did not only act as consumers but also produced culturally valuable content. Ultimately, K-Pop fanboy's self-representation on Instagram did not only express their love for their idols, but also highlighted their personal technical and aesthetic abilities.

Ultimately, Instagram by its visuals became a platform where K-Pop fanboys could express a dual identity: as loyal fans and as creative individuals in a digital community. By conducting the visual strategies through well-planned started from reposting, photo editing, used of ornaments, to video creation, they did not only strengthen tie with idols and fandoms, but also built a unique and recognizable self-image online. The self-representation on Instagram for K-Pop fanboys was not a passive activity, but it was a dynamic process involving creativity, participation, and negotiation of identity in digital space. Thus, this research showed Instagram to be an important platform for fans to express themselves while building a solid community.

4.1 Collaboration as a Strategy for The Self-Representation as a K-Pop Fanboy

Based on the results of observations on K-Pop fanboy accounted on Instagram, apart from visual displays, K-Pop fanboys also used collaboration strategies to show their identity as K-Pop fans. This collaboration process was not only done by fellow fanboys, but also were viewed by K-Pop fangirls and non-fans. Mostly, By reviewing in various photos, videos and other media texts were created through this collaborative action. All texts were shared for free on their respective Instagram handled so that they could be accessed by anyone at any time.

This collaboration act was done by anyone, but the collaboration between K-Pop fanboys and fangirls on Instagram was something that needed to be underlined, especially in building identity while facing the challenges of gender norms. As a research was argued by Marwick and boyd (Marwick & boyd, 2010), social media allowed the users to perform carefully curated “identity performances”, including in the context of fandom. By reviewing the digital surfing activities such as co-posting content, dance cover duets, or shared viral challenges, fanboys reinforced a sense of belonging within the fandom community. However, research showed that some fanboys limit co-collaborations that involved excessive emotional expression or “cute” aesthetics to avoid stereotypes of femininity. This restriction reflected the complex negotiation between participation in popular culture and the pressures of traditional masculinity norms. Thus, the cross-gender collaborations were not only about creativity, but also was a battleground for identity.

As a form of negotiation, many fanboys chose collaborations that focused on content considered “masculine” such as technical music analysis, concert reviews, or video editing tutorials. According to Jenkins (Jenkins, 2013), fans often utilized digital media to create content that reinforced their collective identity while differentiating themselves from other groups. This strategy allowed them to maintain a socially accepted image of masculinity while remaining active in the fandom. Collaboration with fangirls in neutral domains such as lyric analysis projects or concert documentation was a safe option to avoid stigma.

The functions of Instagram as a complex medium of the self-representation for K-Pop fanboys, where they actively engaged in impression management through multidimensional content curation strategies. According to Rettberg (Rettberg, 2018), the self-representation in digital spaces did not only include the technical production of visual content, but it was rather a practice of curatorial agency that involved a conscious process of selection, presentation and audience management. K-Pop fanboys expressed their identities through a series of the strategic decisions: it selected the type of content that matched the desired image of masculinity, regulating the visibility of certain elements, as well as customizing communication styles for different audience segments within the fandom community. This practice demonstrated

how visual platforms like Instagram actually operated as dynamic spaces of identity negotiation, where fanboys must constantly balance between authentic the self-expression and adherence to prevailing social norms in global K-Pop culture.

The creative collaboration of K-Pop fanboys eventually became a form of agency in reconstructing the identity of contemporary masculinity. This was because digital communities such as K-Pop fanboys on Instagram made it possible to negotiate their identities outside the confined of mainstream culture. Besides, the collaborations were considered to solidify their “masculine fan” identity by technical and analytical content. In the other hand, cross-gender collaborations challenged norms which opened up new discourses on gender expression within the fandom. The trend showed the potential of the K-Pop fanboy community as an agent of change in global popular culture. In the future, the collaborations might become more diverse as the gender stigma in entertainment loosens. As such, K-Pop fanboy self-representation would continue to evolve between negotiating and dismantling traditional norms.

5. Conclusions

The process of self-representation of K-Pop fanboy on Instagram is a complex form of digital cultural practices, where they actively invested their personal time, skills and resources to create carefully edited content. In the process of self-representation, K-pop fanboys did not only express their love for idols but also negotiated masculinity identity in digital space. By Introducing their visual and collaborative strategies, K-pop fanboys do not merely consume content, but act as creative-producers who: (1) master various visual editing techniques, (2) develop specific skills such as the special effects creation or music analysis, (3) build the distribution networks through social media platforms, and (4) create cultural values that enrich the fandom ecosystem. These practices reflected a paradigm shift in contemporary fan culture, where fandom activities had evolved into an independent and networked form of cultural production. In addition, Instagram has become a dynamic platform where they engaged in impression management, strengthening community ties, as well as confronting the challenges of gender norms. Thus, self-representation of K-Pop fanboys were not just a passive activity, but an active processed that reflected agency, creativity and identity negotiation in global popular culture.

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