



The Construction of Female Self-Identity in Subcultures under Post-subcultural View: A Study of Social Media-Based K-pop Fandoms

Jiayu Liang

University of California, Irvine, USA

jliang49@uci.edu

Abstract. This study employs a post-subcultural lens (Bennett, 1999 [2]; Thornton, 2018 [14]) to investigate how female K-pop fans on social media negotiate fluid identities through emotional engagement, transnational fandom practices, and resistance to gendered norms. By integrating.

Jenkins' (2008) [9] participatory culture framework, the findings reveal that fans actively hybridize global and local influences, challenging static subcultural boundaries while navigating industry-driven commodification. The study advances post-subcultural discourse by foregrounding gender as a critical axis of identity negotiation in digital fan ecologies. The discussion provides a concise examination of gender differences, pointing out that male fans tend to concentrate more on the artistic performances of idols, whereas female fans tend to place a greater emphasis on their own experiences. The purpose of this investigation is to investigate the fan practices of eleven participants, nine of whom are female and two of whom are male, in both virtual and physical settings. The investigation makes use of ethnographic techniques, such as comprehensive qualitative interviews and participatory observation. According to the findings, female fans of K-pop idols develop their own distinct identities, which are formed by the emotional bonds they form, the social engagements they participate in, and themselves. In addition to being influenced by broader social norms and gender frameworks, the process of identity formation provides insight into the complex characteristics that are associated with post-subculture. This process demonstrates a profound engagement with fan culture. Fans are women who actively explore their self-identity in both mainstream and subcultural environments. They use their passion for fandom as a means to challenge or redefine traditional social and gender roles. Fans are women who are fans. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of K-pop fandom as a contemporary cultural landscape. It highlights the independence and diversity, among female fans in the process of constructing their identities.

Keywords: post-subculture, female fandom, self-identity, K-pop, social media

1 Introduction

K-pop has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon in recent years, changing popular music and fostering international fan communities with a high level of engagement. Female fans play a significant role in these communities, actively engaging in offline and online activities that extend beyond simple entertainment consumption. They mobilize around common ideals and aesthetics, create identities, and cultivate social ties. Despite their popularity, little is known about the gendered dynamics of identity formation in these settings, especially when it comes to fan interaction fueled by social media.

This study explores how emotional investment, community involvement, and defiance of conventional gender norms help female K-pop fans on social media create their sense of self.

Through the lens of post-subculture, it examines fandom as a fluid and hybrid cultural space where local and global influences meet (Bennett, 1999; Thornton, 2018) [2;14]. The research investigates how these fans navigate power, agency, and visibility in platform economies and the larger K-pop industry, building on Jenkins' (2008) [9] participatory culture framework.

The goal of this research is to better understand how gendered identity is expressed and contested in digital fandom cultures by focusing on the experiences of female fans. Additionally, it adds to current discussions in media studies and sociology about how culture, gender, and globalization intersect in the era of algorithmic media.

2 Literature Review

This literature review examines K-pop fandom through post-subcultural and participatory culture lenses, emphasizing gendered identity negotiation within globalized digital contexts.

Post-subcultural theory (Bennett, 1999) [2] reframes K-pop fandom as fluid identity construction, where fans blend local norms with global idol personas through Appadurai's (1996) [1] cultural flows—evident in behaviors like Participant E's cultural appropriation boycotts. While Jenkins's (2008) [9] participatory culture explains fan-driven content creation (memes, translations), platform algorithms commodify these practices, as seen in TikTok feminist edits versus Instagram's market-driven beauty tutorials (Hesmondhalgh, 2002) [11].

This tension reflects digital biopolitics (Foucault, 1977) [7], where fans like Participant G curate "perfect" online personas for visibility, undermining participatory egalitarianism. Global resistance emerges through acts like Participant E's ethical boycotts, aligning with Mouffe's (2005) [12] agonistic pluralism to challenge industry power structures. Butler's (2011) [4] gender performativity reveals fans' duality: adopting idols' androgynous styles subverts binary norms (Participant C), yet the industry's "flower boy" trope reinforces patriarchal aesthetics—a non-confrontational resistance (Bennett, 1999) [2] further elaborated by Zhang et al. (2022) [15] and Oh et al. (2023) [13] in analyses of gender-depressive performances. Recent studies (Luo, 2023; Choi,

2020) [10, 5] highlight K-pop's role in fostering gender inclusivity and psychosocial benefits, though correlations between fandom engagement and self-esteem remain contested.

Thornton (2018) [14], Jenkins (2008) [9], and Hesmondhalgh (2002) [8] collectively frame fandom as hybrid identity work shaped by market logics and mediated participation, while Duffett (2013) [6] and Lee et al. (2019) [11] emphasize its negotiated agency within cultural boundaries. This synthesis critiques optimistic participatory narratives, positioning K-pop fandom as a contested space where identity hybridization coexists with neoliberal platform constraints.

3 Method

This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews and participant observation to investigate self-identity construction among female K-pop fans. A purposively sampled group of 11 participants (9 female, 2 male; aged 18–29), representing diverse cultural backgrounds and fandom engagement durations, was recruited via social media platforms, fan forums, and referrals, with written informed consent secured prior to participation. Semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes), guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) [3] thematic analysis framework, were conducted in neutral in-person or virtual environments to explore fan behavior, emotional investment, social relationships, and cultural identity. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and systematically coded. Concurrently, six months of participant observation on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok documented real-time fan interactions, trending discussions, and emotional expressions through targeted hashtags and community analyses, with anonymized data to protect privacy. The qualitative approach prioritized contextual depth in identity formation, leveraging semi-structured interviews for focused yet flexible dialogue and observations to capture dynamic online cultural exchanges. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [3] iteratively organized coded interview transcripts and observational notes into identity-related themes, with cross-verification of patterns to ensure analytical reliability and alignment with the study's focus.

4 Results

The study reveals that female K-pop fans construct self-identity through dynamic interactions with idols and fan communities, marked by four interconnected processes. First, self-projection emerges as fans mirror their identities in idol personas, exemplified by Participant C's intentional emulation of shared traits ("we are alike"), aligning with Bennett's (1999) [2]. neo-tribal belonging through affective resonance. Second, social media platforms enable gendered identity curation: TikTok edits highlighting idols' "authentic" moments reflect Butler's (2011) [4] performative identity rehearsal, while Instagram's market-driven beauty tutorials exemplify Hesmondhalgh's (2002) [8] affective commodification. Gender hierarchies persist, with female fans valorizing emotional vulnerability (Participant F) versus male participants' focus on technical mastery (Participant A), reinforcing Thornton's (2018) [14] gendered subcultural capital. Third,

fan communities function as hybrid spaces of social realization— participants engaged in hashtag campaigns and meetups blending East Asian beauty standards with global aesthetics (Appadurai, 1996) [1] yet faced structural constraints. Male fans encountered homophobic stereotyping (Participant A's "presumed gay" experience), while female participants navigated caregiving roles through unpaid translation projects, mirroring cultural industries' gendered precarity. Fourth, cultural hybridization manifests through global resistance, as seen in Participant E's boycott of cultural appropriation and East Asian fans' linguistic gatekeeping, challenging Jenkins' (2008) [9] frictionless exchange. Paradoxically, fans' Seoul pilgrimages (Participant E's transformative concert experience) and critiques of industry exploitation reflect agonistic negotiations (Mouffe, 2005) [12] between cultural appreciation and ethical consumption. These processes underscore K-pop fandom as a site of non-confrontational resistance (Bennett, 1999) [2], where fans simultaneously subvert gender binaries through androgynous styling (Participant F) yet internalize patriarchal "flower boy" aesthetics, revealing identity construction as both aspirational and disciplinarian under platform capitalism.

5 Discussion

This study reconceptualizes K-pop fandom as a post-subcultural space, synthesizing Bennett's (1999) [2] neo-tribalism with Appadurai's (1996) [1] global cultural flows. Fans' identities emerge through transient, emotionally charged affiliations, exemplified by practices like multilingual campaigns and transnational travel. Participant E's concert trip to Seoul reflects Appadurai's (1996) [1] *ethnos capes*—were mobility and digital engagement forge hybrid identities. Yet, access to such experiences remains stratified: privileged fans travel, while others rely on virtual events. This tension underscores Hesmondhalgh's (2002) [8] critique of cultural exclusivity and highlightshow post-subcultural spaces simultaneously democratize and reproduce inequality.

Gendered dynamics deepen this paradox. Female fans may challenge binaries through androgynous fashion (Butler, 2011) [4], but their expression is still shaped by the industry's commodified ideals, such as the "flower boy" aesthetic. Participant D's ambivalence toward idol gentleness reflects Bennett's (1999) [2] notion of non-confrontational resistance—where critique and consumption coexist. Meanwhile, male fans face exclusionary norms and affective discipline (e.g., Participant A's experience with homophobic labeling), revealing how Thornton's (2018) [14] subcultural capital operates as a gendered currency. These findings connect post-subcultural theory with feminist critiques, portraying fandom as a space where identity is both expressed and constrained.

A key implication is the emotional and social support fandoms offer. Fans describe these communities as affirming spaces for self-expression, where shared interests foster confidence and belonging. Many credit fan activities, like group discussions and events, with boosting interpersonal skills and emotional resilience. Globally, K-pop fandom enables rich cultural exchange. Fans participate in collaborative projects, attend international events, and even travel abroad—often for the first time—because of their devotion. These experiences deepen emotional connections and expand fans'

engagement with Korean culture, making fandom a meaningful driver of cross-cultural understanding. Still, challenges persist. Female fans often face patronizing remarks about their interests, while male fans confront rigid stereotypes that restrict their visibility. Confronting these biases requires broader recognition of cultural engagement's legitimacy and a commitment to inclusive fandom environments.

The study underscores how K-pop fandom serves as a complex site for negotiating identity and belonging in the globalized world. Female fans, in particular, engage in intricate identity work—both online and offline—while navigating gendered expectations and cultural scripts. The role of social media is crucial here, as platforms facilitate curated self-expression and community interaction. Through these spaces, fans actively shape how they perform and understand themselves within a post-subcultural framework.

Yet, the duality of gender dynamics remains. Women fans sometimes resist traditional roles through critical discourse and community solidarity, but they also confront industry-driven stereotypes. The idolization of idealized masculinity, while comforting, can also contribute to unrealistic standards, impacting self-esteem. Participant reflections show how fans are both influenced by and critically aware of these contradictions, prompting deeper conversations around representation. Although the study offers valuable insights, it has limitations. The small sample size, though suitable for qualitative research, limits generalizability. Future studies should include broader demographics—especially non-Asian and older fans—to expand understanding. Additionally, the study's focus on female participants leaves male experiences underexplored. More balanced representation would illuminate how gender shapes fan engagement differently. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias; supplementing interviews with ethnographic or digital methods would strengthen validity.

Finally, while this study centers on K-pop, future research could explore whether similar identity negotiations occur in other globalized fan cultures, such as Western music or gaming.

Doing so could reveal cross-cultural patterns or unique dynamics in how fans around the world construct identity through media.

6 Conclusion

This research demonstrates that K-pop fandom functions as a multifaceted cultural environment in which fans navigate their identities, articulate their self-expressions, and cultivate social relationships. This study theorizes K-pop fandom as a post-subcultural laboratory where fluid identities emerge through localized practices (Appadurai, 1996) [1], participatory agency (Jenkins, 2008) [9], and gendered performativity (Butler, 2011) [4]. While fans transcend geographic and cultural borders (e.g., Seoul concert pilgrimages), they remain ensnared in neoliberal commodification (e.g., beauty standards). Future research must further interrogate how digital platforms amplify identity liquidity while perpetuating structural inequalities—a paradox central to 21st-century post-subcultures. The results illustrate the ways in which fan activities promote personal development and intercultural interaction, emphasizing the complex relationship between

individual initiative and broader cultural influences. Nonetheless, the obstacles presented by societal gender norms and implicit biases within idol culture suggest that fandom is not completely liberated from structural limitations.

The study advances post-subcultural theory by demonstrating how digital fan ecologies (Jenkins, 2008) [9] enable transnational identity hybridization, yet remain tethered to neoliberal logics (Hesmondhalgh, 2002).[8] Future research must interrogate how platforms like TikTok— as affective infrastructures—mediate between individual agency and algorithmic control, potentially reconfiguring post-subcultural boundaries. By centering gender as a critical axis of analysis, this work bridges post-subcultural studies with feminist media theory, offering a framework to examine identity negotiation in other globalized fandoms. This research highlights the inherent flexibility and tension within these dynamics, emphasizing the importance of fandom as a space for both empowerment and negotiation. In the future, promoting inclusive and equitable fan environments will be essential for enhancing the beneficial effects of global fan cultures.

References

1. Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
2. Bennett, A. (1999). Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste. *Sociology*, 33(3), 599–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/s0038038599000371>.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
4. Butler, J. (2011). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
5. Choi, S. J. (2020). *Gender, labor, and the commodification of intimacy ink-pop*. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5xj1r230>.
6. Duffett, M. (2013). Understanding fandom: an introduction to the study of media fan culture. *Choice Reviews Online*, 51(05), 51–2487. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-2487>.
7. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
8. Hesmondhalgh, D. (2002). *The cultural industries*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA81661680>
9. Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press.
10. Luo, W. (2023). Gender construction in the Chinese fandom of Korean pop culture: A case study of BTS and BLACKPINK fans. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 180, 03004. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202318003004>.
11. Lee, S. H., Tak, J., Kwak, E., & Lim, T. Y. (2019). Fandom, social media, and identity work: The emergence of virtual community through the pronoun “we”. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 9(4), 436–446. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000259>.
12. Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Routledge.
13. Oh, I., & Kim, K. J. (2023). Gendered melancholia as cultural branding: fandom participation in the K-pop community. *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 29(5), 1300–1323.

14. Thornton, S. (2018). *Club cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. John Wiley & Sons.
15. Zhang, Y., Chen, L., Chen, J., Mi, X., & Zhu, S. (2022). Redefining Womanhood in Generation Z: An analysis of gender representation and awareness in K-pop culture. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research/Advances in social science, education and humanities research* (pp. 2868–2877). https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-89-3_329.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

