

# *Utilization Of New Media As Digital Fandom Among Korean Pop (K-POP) Fan Groups On The Social Media Platform Twitter*

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**Abstract** – The popularity of Korean Pop (K-pop) has been continuously thriving in various parts of the world and has permeated different aspects of people's lives across diverse demographics. This phenomenon is also attributed to the advancements in technology, which have significantly eased the accessibility of K-pop content for the general public. This research employs a qualitative method with a virtual ethnography approach, utilizing data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews with seven informants, participant observation, literature review, and collecting digital documents in the form of screenshots. The results of this research depict fandom culture based on Lucy Bennett's perspective, which can be observed through four aspects: communication, creativity, knowledge, and organization and civil power, utilizing Twitter as a new media platform. Through the accounts created on Twitter, the researcher discovered that fan groups (fandoms) construct and produce their own culture in the digital realm. Twitter is used as a platform for interacting among fellow fans and with idols, serving as a source of information and a means of sharing information. Fans communicate through created virtual identities, fan speak, and fan jokes that can be observed on fan accounts, fanbases, and other platforms. Knowledge is obtained from official accounts as well as fanbases, where fans also produce works in various forms (audio, images, photos, and written works) that are shared through fan accounts. Fan groups also engage in fan projects through fanbase accounts, such as voting, celebrating idols' birthdays, and making donations for their idols in various forms.

**Keywords** – Digital Fandom, K-Pop, Social Media, Twitter.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Korean Pop*, commonly known as K-Pop, encompasses various genres that disseminate South Korean culture to both domestic and international audiences, with a broad market share (Fachrosi et al., 2020). This is achieved through various forms of products comprising of television dramas, movies, and songs, gained wide fame from the East to the Southeast Asian region at the end of the 1990s (Briandana & Ibrahim, 2015). However, so far, the largest *fandom* with a massive fan base of K-Pop products is found in the music industry.

The debut of the Korean cultural industry, namely drama and music, began around the 20th century, with Japan as the first consuming country to broadcast Korean dramas and music (Simbar, 2016). Building on the fame achieved through dramas and music, South Korea began marketing and introducing their culture and tourism through the dramas produced, and the wave of globalization of South Korea's entertainment industry started to dominate (Valentina & Istriyani, 2017).

The massive wave of globalization promoted by South Korea through its cultural and entertainment industry is closely related to the term "popular culture." Korean Wave as a symptom of world popular culture has been consumed by a wide audience (Ridaryanthi, 2014). According to (2009) popular culture is closely associated with everyday things that we encounter, including music, drama, films, and more. From a sociological perspective, the placement of popular culture is

temporary and can change rapidly according to existing trends. (Ri'aeni, 2019).

The popularity of *Korean Pop* culture is evident from the massive growth of the fan base, which knows no age boundaries. In the music entertainment industry, the largest fan base is found, and the term "K-Pop fans" more commonly refers to fans of K-Pop music (K-Poppers) who belong to a specific Fandom. *fandom* itself is a term used to describe a group of fans who idolize the same idol group (Tionardus, 2022). As an example, there is an idol group named NCT, and their *fandom* is referred to as NCTzen. Another idol group, EXO, has their *fandom* known as EXO-L. The official naming of these fandoms is determined by the agency or management company that oversees the idol groups.

The enthusiasm of Indonesian K-Pop fans is evident from their active engagement in creating *tweets* on Twitter, such as showing support for idols through hashtags (#) to make them trend in various countries, especially in Indonesia. K-Pop fans use their Twitter accounts to boost hashtags related to their idols, whether it's for *fandom* projects, supporting K-Pop artists' activities, expressing protests against agencies, and more. Fans create numerous *tweets* using these hashtags to achieve *trending topics*. Based on the data obtained from the Twitter help center, this social media platform also imposes limitations on its users, such as the *following* restrictions: sending *Direct Messages* (DM) is limited to 1,000 per day, *following* 400 accounts per day, which is a technical limitation. If aggressive *following* behavior is detected, additional rules may apply to the user's account. Changes to the email account are limited to 4 per hour, and *tweeting* is limited to 2,400 per day, which will be further divided into smaller limits for semi-hourly intervals, and this includes *retweets* within the *tweet* count..

The current technological advancements have driven fans to join *online fandom* communities. K-Pop fan groups create their own communities within online networks, where they can share anything related to their idols. The present technology provides a vast space where face-to-face interaction is not necessary, and individuals can freely access anything within the fandom, whether they are international or domestic fans.

McLuhan's exposition on the expanding technology of media explains the transition from oral communication to *print communications*, followed by the shift to broadcasting, and the subsequent emergence of the internet, media convergence, and digital media. These developments have given rise to a global village, where people can communicate and engage in activities beyond the capabilities of previous technologies and media (Sugihartati, 2017). With the advancement of more sophisticated technology, utilizing social media platforms such as Twitter, which has a substantial number of users and a high level of interest from the public regarding K-Pop, the researcher undertakes a research on Digital *fandom* and New Media through the approach of Virtual Ethnography within the *Korean Pop* (K-Pop) fan community on the social media platform Twitter..

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### New Media

According to (Flew, 2007) new media is often referred to as digital new media. It is described as media that is characterized by a context formed from a combination of data, sound, text, and various types of images stored in digital formats, which are then shared through networks based on optic broadband cables, microwave systems, and satellites.

Ardianto's (2017) view on new media is that it refers to the current and evolving media that will continue to develop in accordance with the times. Media undergoes advancements in communication, technology, and information. Carey (dalam McQuail, 2010) suggests that new media is characterized by its basis in the internet, utilizing computers and advanced mobile phones. Its main strength lies in the utilization of computers and the presence of satellite communication. The process of digitalization facilitates efficient information exchange, and the integration of diverse information is the key feature of computers as communication machines.

### Popular Culture

Popular culture, consisting of two words with distinct meanings, "culture" and "popular," has its own interpretations. The notion of culture, as explained by (dalam Lloyd & Thomas, 1992) encompasses a developmental process that involves intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects, which collectively form the worldview of a particular society during a specific period, resulting in practices of intellectual and artistic activities. The term "popular" denotes four meanings: being liked by many people, pertaining to lowbrow work, producing content for entertainment purposes, and generating culture for its own sake (Storey, 2021).

Gramsci, in the book "Researching Popular Culture" by (2014) argues that there is a relationship between popular culture and the concept of hegemony that he was developing at that time. According to his viewpoint, popular culture can be interpreted as a form of struggle by groups to resist the hegemony prevailing within civil society institutions. In this context, Gramsci views hegemony as a result of intellectual work, where producers, distributors, and interpreters of popular culture play the role of intellectuals or what is referred to as the "intellectual class." They strive to establish and challenge existing hegemony within civil society institutions. The use of the term "intellectual class" does not solely refer to prominent artists, but includes all parties involved in the creation and dissemination of ideas and knowledge that are of a general nature.

### **Korean Populer (K-Pop)**

According to Emilie (dalam Pramita & Harto, 2019) K-Pop is short for *Korean Pop*, which refers to pop music originating from Korea. It is a form of popular music that has gained fame in South Korea. This music genre emerged from talented producers and songwriters who studied global music and incorporated their creative ideas and elements of Korean culture into it. K-Pop places more emphasis on idol groups (teenage groups) that enjoy high popularity rather than solo singers.

Yuanita argues that K-Pop or *Korean Pop* is a type or genre of music originating from South Korea. K-Pop songs typically have distinctive characteristics such as a fast and cheerful tempo, a combination of Korean and some English lyrics, and are performed with *modern dance*. Each member of K-Pop groups is carefully selected from both South Korea and other countries, possessing beautiful and handsome visuals, a fashionable appearance, and exceptional performances. This has led to many young people in other countries imitating K-Pop idols (Yuanita, 2012).

### **Fandom Studies**

The research of *fandom* becomes significant to examine in media sociology and cultural studies as it is considered to represent an active and dedicated audience, namely consumers who often also engage in media production (Jenkins, 1992). Fans can be analyzed as an integral part of contemporary consumer culture. *fandom* is typically associated with popular culture rather than high culture. Individuals who appreciate high culture often become participants in popular culture, portrayed as "enthusiasts" or "fans," rather than being referred to as fans (Jenson, 1992). While enthusiasts are typically culturally accepted, *fandom* has been analyzed as more problematic: the stereotype of "fans" being seen as obsessive, excessive, and unhealthy with (supposedly) trivial cultural objects like TV shows. Henry Jenkins has highlighted and challenged these negative fan stereotypes, arguing that such depictions of *fandom* should be critiqued and that fans should be viewed more positively as creators of their own culture from media products and as engaged in selective "hunt" and interpretation of preferred media texts.

In Lucy Bennett's perspective (2014), the analysis of *fandom* is based on four concepts: (1) communication, (2) creativity, (3) knowledge, and (4) organization and civil empowerment. In the first concept, communication, Lucy Bennett highlights the emergence of the internet and social media, which has a significant impact on online forums. Social media platforms are used as a means to connect members and facilitate instant communication. This concept focuses on communication between fans as well as between fans and celebrities. Originally, public figures had to go through stages, but now they can directly communicate with their fan base as if there were no filters. The second concept is about creativity, according to Bennett's perspective, which highlights the relationship between fans and celebrities that creates a "reciprocal illusion." This entails a creative process demonstrated by fans through existing media platforms, resulting in a wealth of works.

The third concept in Bennett's perspective on knowledge is that fans are knowledge seekers. However, in the present time, media serves as a presenter of knowledge and information that can act as "spoilers," even going beyond that. Lastly, the concept of organization and civil empowerment is explained by Bennett, stating that fan groups are capable of taking the initiative and mobilizing fans to unite and participate in organized civil activities, leading to the emergence of fan activities.

## **III. METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This research employs a qualitative method with a virtual ethnography strategy. Qualitative research is used to provide in-depth explanations about the phenomena being studied. The selection of the Virtual Ethnography strategy is due to the

research location being on Twitter, which is a virtual area. According to Nasrullah (Nasrullah, 2018) Virtual Ethnography is a new approach or method used to research culture and cultural artifacts in cyberspace. The Virtual Ethnography method or approach reveals how cyberculture is produced, what meanings emerge, the relationships and patterns involved, and how they function through internet media. Several procedures used by researchers employing virtual ethnography include immersing themselves in the cultural field, conducting analyses of entities, and ensuring that data interpretations align with the facts on the ground (Nasrullah, 2018).

**Data and Data Sources**

According to Creswell, qualitative data sources are divided into two categories (2017) namely:

1. Data Primer

The primary data was collected through direct observations on Twitter, including mentions of K-Pop topics and accounts related to K-Pop on the platform. Additionally, interviews were conducted with several informants from diverse backgrounds.

2. Secondary data

The secondary data collection in this research was conducted through a literature review, gathering several journals, books, and relevant readings related to the chosen topic, as well as several Twitter posts. This was done to support and strengthen the findings obtained from the primary data.

**The Data Collection Technique**

The interviews conducted by the researcher involved question-and-answer sessions via WhatsApp, utilizing the VN (voice note) feature and *chatting* with the informant's personal contact, which facilitated data collection. The criteria for selecting informants were K-Pop (music) fans who had access to a Twitter account. The obtained informants were categorized into several groups, such as:

- 1. Long-time and new fans.
- 2. Regular fans and active fans (serving as *fanbase* admins).
- 3. Active and passive Twitter users.

No	The informant's name.	Description
1	Desas Noel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Address: Wonogiri, Central Java</li><li>· Age: 20 years old</li><li>· Gender: Female</li><li>· Occupation/Status: Student</li></ul> <p>The owner of multiple Twitter accounts is an active user, considered a new fan, and is part of the K-Pop <i>fandom</i> (ARMY).</p>
2	Selena Dian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Address: Boyolali, Central Java</li><li>· Age: 21 years old</li><li>· Gender: Female</li><li>· Occupation/Status: Student</li></ul>

		The account owner has more than two accounts, is an active Twitter user, a long-time fan, and is part of the NCTzen fandom.
3	Almazya Ayesha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address: Yogyakarta, DIY (Special Region of Yogyakarta)</li> <li>• Age: 20 years old</li> <li>• Gender: Female</li> <li>• Occupation/Status: Student</li> </ul> <p>Having multiple accounts, she is considered a passive Twitter user, a long-time fan, and is part of the ARMY fandom.</p>
4	Berliana Putri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address: Surakarta, Central Java</li> <li>• Age: 19 years old</li> <li>• Gender: Female</li> <li>• Occupation/Status: Employed</li> </ul> <p>The owners of multiple accounts are considered active Twitter users, long-time fans, and part of multiple fandoms.</p>

**Data triangulation**

This research involves four informants, each of whom is a fan and part of a specific fandom. They are also active users of the social media platform Twitter, comprising both students and working individuals.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

Korean Popular culture (K-Pop) is a popular culture that is currently spreading to various parts of the world. K-Pop has proliferated to different countries through its popular music, and this phenomenon is undoubtedly influenced by the advancement of technology. The continuous and advanced development of technology has led to changes in *real society*, transforming it into a *cyber society*, as evidenced by the emergence of virtual communities (Demartoto, 2013). The availability of various mass media platforms has facilitated access to K-Pop content, particularly on the social media platform Twitter, which is utilized by fans to access, obtain, and share information related to K-Pop and their idols. It is evident how topics related to K-Pop are extensively discussed by Twitter users, proving that K-Pop is highly popular among both fans and non-fans. Discussing K-Pop inevitably involves the active participation of fans and fandoms. *fandom (Fan Kingdom)* constitutes a gathering of individuals who share the same interest (fans) and engage in mutual interactions and information exchange with one another.

Twitter, as a new media platform, serves as a means for fandoms in the *virtual community* to produce culture in the digital realm. *fandom* in the *virtual community* showcases users (netizens) or fans in a virtual and indirect manner, displaying their identity solely through the writings presented on mobile devices and computers through posts uploaded on Twitter accounts. As a community built in the virtual realm, *fandom* serves as a space where fans construct a sense of belonging and defense. In the *virtual community* of Twitter, *fandom* utilizes symbols that hold individual meanings and are used as their identities. These visible identities serve as a tool to categorize fandoms based on the K-Pop idols they support, as observed in the Twitter accounts utilized by K-Pop fans. *fandom* identities are evident through the use of *fandom* names or K-Pop idol group names as account identities, featuring specific K-Pop idol photos, and adding additional information in the bio section. Each *fandom* generates a distinct physical identity that can be found through the uploaded or published posts, leaving a lasting digital

footprint on the Twitter social media platform.

As outlined by Jenkins, the intention is to challenge the negative perception of *fandom* by examining it from a different perspective, highlighting that *fandom* can be viewed more positively. It is evident that *fandom* not only functions as active consumers but also has the ability to construct its own culture. This *fandom* culture is evident in the Twitter accounts created by K-Pop fans and various fandoms. The emergence of accounts like *Fanbase*, *Autobase*, Fangirl accounts (FA), and others serve as platforms for fans to produce, share, and seek information and media products. These accounts are utilized as means to produce *fandom* culture.

Lucy Bennett elaborated on *fandom* culture from four perspectives. Firstly, she examined how *fandom* culture is viewed through communication, as evident in the virtual identities displayed on *fandom* accounts such as official accounts, *Fanbase*, *Autobase*, Fansite, and FA. Identity in virtual communities is a crucial element in how users are recognized through newly created identities in the online realm. Fan and *fandom* identities are manifested through the incorporation of K-Pop elements in the identities they create, such as names, *profile pictures*, ID names, and bios. The adoption of these new identities creates bias among K-Pop fans because they do not directly use their real identities and appear anonymous. Communication is also observed in the interactions between fans who utilize *fan speak* and *fan jokes*. Each *fandom* has its own unique *fan speak* and *fan jokes*, understood only by members of the respective fandom. This phenomenon can be found on FA accounts as well as on *fanbase* and *Autobase* forums, frequently used by fans.

*Fan speak* found on *fandom* accounts is evident through the use of symbols, colors, numbers, and specific writing styles, becoming distinctive features for each K-Pop fandom. On the other hand, *fan jokes* are found in posts on *fanbase* forums and *Autobase*, taking the form of humorous statements understood by fans belonging to a particular fandom. In the aspect of communication, it also highlights the interaction between fans and idols through officially created accounts, either by the idol's agency or their personal accounts. The communication that occurs between fans and their idols appears to be barrier-free and limitless, especially in the present time when digital technology has seamlessly integrated and become a primary necessity for society. Fans can freely send messages and express their love for idols through their idol's accounts, seemingly erasing the barriers of distance, space, and time. Similarly, K-Pop idols easily share moments of their activities and news through their existing accounts, unlike in the past when idols couldn't directly interact with their fans and had to go through several stages, often involving sending letters.

Secondly, fans' creativity demonstrates that they are not merely consumers of K-Pop culture but also capable of producing their own cultural products. This is evident through the existence of fan accounts, specifically Fangirl accounts (FA), created by K-Pop fans. Such creativity takes the form of various *fan productions*, encompassing a wide array of creations, including artwork, photos, fictional writings, audio content, and projects organized through K-Pop hashtags. Fans channel their appreciation through various works, which they then share on their personal accounts. Among fans, there is a mutual appreciation for each other's creativity. Moreover, a noteworthy finding from this research is that fans even create special accounts dedicated to publishing their creative works, potentially leading to K-Pop fans having multiple accounts or more. Another distinct form of creativity is the existence of fansite accounts, where they share documentation of idols' activities. By utilizing their own personal documentation, they produce *merchandise* that is later sold to other fans.

Thirdly, from a knowledge perspective, fans are not merely information seekers but also sources of information themselves. This is evident through the creation of Fangirl accounts by fans, wherein they typically seek mutual connections who share similar interests in a particular K-Pop idol group. By doing so, they establish extensive networks among fellow *fandom* members, facilitating the easy exchange of information related to their idols through these mutual connections. Fundamentally, Twitter utilizes a network of mutual connections, allowing information to quickly spread among fans through *tweets* made on their accounts. Additionally, fans use intermediaries like *Autobase* to share information on a broader network, depending on the number of *followers* of the *Autobase* account itself. Accounts, *fanbases*, and *Autobase* all play a role in channeling information to fans through posts and *tweets*. To disseminate information globally, official accounts usually share posts in multiple languages, such as using Korean and English to cater to international fans. On the other hand, fan-created *fanbases* will distribute the same information in accordance with the country of origin of the *fanbase* account. *Fanbases* serve the purpose of relaying information acquired from official accounts to fans who do not *follow* the official accounts, and this information continues to spread through the networks of fandoms and fans until it reaches a wide audience.

Lastly, the *fandom* culture, viewed from the perspective of organization and civil empowerment, showcases how negative stereotypes that perceive *fandom* as obsessive, excessive, and unhealthy (Jenkins) actually reveal a different facet. Fandoms have the ability to gather fans and unite them to demonstrate their strength through various *fan projects* frequently undertaken by fans, either through *fanbase* forums or on a personal level. This *fan project* serves as a form of support from fans to their idols, encompassing activities like *voting*, *voting*, celebrating birthdays, and other events, as well as donations both for the idols themselves and the general public. These fan-driven initiatives are predominantly directed towards positive actions, as fans perceive themselves as reflections of their idols. Fans build a positive image both within society and among fellow fans, thus avoiding being labeled as a toxic fandom. Through direct support, such as *voting*, *voting*, and sending gifts for their idol's birthday celebrations, fans also engage in donations on behalf of their idols and fandoms to assist those in need. This allows the public to recognize them as fans with a positive reputation.

## V. CONCLUSION

The existence of these accounts serves as a platform for fandoms and fans to create digital culture on the social media platform Twitter, observed from four perspectives: communication, creativity, knowledge, and organization and civil empowerment. Communication is evident through the virtual identities crafted by fandoms and fans in the online sphere, as seen in the utilization of K-pop-related attributes on accounts such as *fanbase* accounts, FA accounts, and *Autobase* accounts. These attributes are evident through the use of names, *profile pictures*, ID names, banner images (headers), and bios on profiles. Fans also employ *fan speak* (symbols, colors, writing styles) and *fan jokes* (humorous references) that can only be understood by specific fandoms and certain fans. Additionally, fans interact with their idols through the idols' personal accounts, creating a sense of blurring distance and time in their communication. Fans not only function as consumers but also producers in the digital *fandom* culture, as seen through their creativity expressed in *fan productions*.

Knowledge is acquired from official accounts and *fanbases*, encompassing various aspects such as song/MV releases, advertisements, *merchandise*, achievements, idol schedules, and other related information. Finally, fandoms and fans function as organized civil entities, evident through *fan projects* typically initiated by *fanbase* accounts or fan accounts (FA). These projects include activities like *voting*, *voting*, donations, and birthday projects. This dismisses the notion that K-pop fandoms are typically characterized by excessive, over-the-top, and unhealthy obsessions. On the contrary, fandoms and fans can demonstrate that such views may not necessarily be accurate. They organize not only events for their idols but also for the general public.

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