

Research on Gendered Consumption Behavior among Idol Group Fans: Social Driving Forces and Emotional Differences

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Abstract: The global expansion of K-pop idol culture reveals distinct gender differences in fan consumption behaviors. K-pop, as a global cultural phenomenon, has not only driven transformations in music, fashion, and consumption behavior but also established a distinct fan economic model. The consumption patterns of K-pop fan groups exhibit pronounced gender characteristics on a global scale. However, the current literature has yet to explore in depth the social, emotional, and psychological mechanisms behind these gender differences. As K-pop idol culture spreads globally, fan consumption demonstrates apparent gender differences. This study focuses on Chinese fans of K-pop idol groups. It employs in-depth interviews with two male and two female fans to explore the gendered differences in idol-related consumption and their underlying social, emotional, and psychological factors. Findings reveal that female fans prioritize emotional investment and a sense of belonging, leading to higher consumption frequency and expenditure. In contrast, male fans display a more rational consumption pattern, using their spending to showcase social capital and personal taste, emphasizing a balance between economic rationality and aesthetic value. These results may contribute to the academic discourse on idol culture and fan economics, providing a more comprehensive understanding of gendered consumption characteristics among fans.

Keywords: K-pop fan culture, gender differences, consumption behavior, social identity, emotional labor

1. Introduction

K-pop, as a global cultural phenomenon, has significantly impacted music, fashion, and consumer behavior [1]. Its success not only stems from musical innovation and diverse performances, but also promotes changes in cultural consumption through the fan economy. With the internationalization of K-pop, fan culture has become a hot topic, with studies highlighting that female fans consume more idol-related products, while male fans focus on practicality and collectibility. However, despite the revelation of the influence of gender on fans' consumption behavior, there is still a lack of research on the socio-cultural roots behind these differences, especially on sociological factors such as emotional labor and social identity. This study aims to explore the influence of gender on K-pop idol consumption behaviors, focusing on differences in consumption motivations, emotional investment,

and behavioral strategies between female and male fans. Specifically, it examines the motivations for female fans to invest more time and money in idol consumption, the unique factors shaping male fans' decision-making processes, and the differences between the two. Additionally, it analyzes the roles of social identity and emotional labor in these gendered behaviors. These issues are approached from the perspectives of social structures, cultural norms, and gender roles. To this end, the study adopts a qualitative research method, conducting in-depth interviews with four Chinese K-pop fans to analyze their experiences and perceptions. The findings may help fans better understand and rationalize gender differences in idol consumption while offering new insights into the reproduction of gender inequality in cultural consumption.

2. Literature Review

2.1. K-pop Idol Culture and Fan Economics

K-pop, as the core of the South Korean popular music industry, has formed a unique fan culture and fan economy system globally, especially in Asia. The success of K-pop is attributable not only to the cultural hybridity of the music itself, but to the influence of social media and the fan economy model [2]. The fan economy is an economic model that generates profit by fostering fan loyalty and emotional investment, with affective bonding playing a crucial role in sustaining fan engagement and driving growth [3]. In the streaming era, transnational media breaks down cultural barriers like language. While K-pop is deeply rooted in Korean culture, global fans form emotional connections through translation, interpretation, and learning the language [4,5]. Personalized recommendations, fan rankings, and virtual gifts on digital platforms stimulate fans' emotional consumption, boosting their engagement and loyalty [6]. Through social media interaction, fans not only amplify their idols' influence but also shape their image through hashtags, promotional activities, and support projects. This emotional investment becomes an important driving force of the idol economy [7]. A feedback loop is created between emotional and economic capital: the accumulation of emotional capital drives economic investment, while this investment further strengthens emotional bonds [3]. Thus, fan consumption is not only a commercial transaction but also involves social interaction, emotional expression, and identity construction.

2.2. Gender Differences and Consumption Behavior

Female consumers are generally affected by emotional and experiential factors in their consumption behaviors, prioritizing personal expression and social engagement [8]. In contrast, male consumers tend to focus on functionality and goal-oriented objectives, emphasizing efficiency and results [9]. In the fan economy context, female fans generally prefer products with personalized or emotional value, such as customized merchandise, while male fans place greater emphasis on the functionality and collectible value of products [10]. This gender discrepancy is particularly pronounced within the K-pop fan community. And studies show that female fans' idol consumption behavior is more emotionally driven, often displaying high levels of engagement, including emotional labor, such as supporting, and chart voting [10]. In contrast, male consumers prioritize the rational and functional aspects of consumption, often opting for products with long-term value. These differences influence fans' consumption patterns but pose distinct demands and challenges for marketing strategies within the K-pop industry. This phenomenon reflects the reproduction of gender inequality in cultural consumption. The emotional labor and investment of female fans are often underestimated and not compensated with economic returns that match their emotional consumption, while male fans' rational consumption may gain more social recognition. This gender difference exacerbates societal expectations and the varying consumption evaluations of different gender groups, thus creating a potential unfair cycle.

2.3. Social Identity and Emotional Labor Theory in K-pop Fan Research

Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasizes that individuals gain self-identity and self-esteem through belonging to a group [11]. In idol culture, fan groups provide their members with cultural capital and identity markers, and the interactions and resonance among fans make them more willing to invest time and money in the fan economy [6]. This behavior, driven by social identity, strengthens the sense of belonging within the fan group, and enhances the individual's sense of self-worth, thus becoming one of the key factors behind high-investment fan behaviors. Affective Labor Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the process of individuals expressing or suppressing emotions in specific roles [12]. In K-pop fan culture, emotional labor is manifested via fans' "role-playing" or emotional investment to express their affection and support for idols, such as optimizing idol performance metrics through activities like data voting and participating in promotional campaigns [13]. This affective labor directly drives the development of the idol economy, further strengthening the sense of belonging and identity within the fan group. By integrating Social Identity Theory and Affective Labor Theory, a more comprehensive explanation of the role of gender in K-pop fan consumption behavior can be provided. The profound emotional investment and labor exhibited by female fans can be conceptualized as a means of reinforcing their social identity. In contrast, male fans tend to prioritize rational consumption, reflecting a distinct need for group affiliation. This gender disparity shapes the operational model of the fan economy and offers crucial insights for marketing strategies in the K-pop industry, while revealing how gender inequality is reproduced in cultural consumption, further influencing the industry's strategic layout.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample Selection and Characteristics

This study recruited participants via relevant activities on social media and K-pop fan communities, ultimately selecting four K-pop fans. The sample included two males, Adios (24 years old) and Leon (22 years old), and two females, Liangren (23 years old) and Wang Huiru (18 years old). The participants are either undergraduate students or have obtained at least a bachelor's degree or higher. Their family annual income is approximately between 400,000 and 600,000 RMB, and they have recently engaged in idol-related activities or consumption. Despite the small sample size, the study uses qualitative methods, mainly in-depth interviews, to explore participants' emotional needs and consumption motivations. As a result, the sample size has little impact on the depth and quality of the data. Also, the study aims to examine the gender differences in consumption behavior among K-pop fans, rather than conduct extensive quantitative analysis. To enhance the representativeness of the sample and the diversity of the research findings, participants were selected from different cultural backgrounds, geographical locations, and life stages. The participants were from Beijing, Hangzhou, and Melbourne, representing both local and international students at different life stages. This diversity helps understand gender differences and consumption behavior in the fan group from multiple perspectives.

3.2. Data Collection and Interview Design

This study used semi-structured interviews, with interview questions designed around core themes such as consumption motivation, social influence, emotional involvement, and gender roles. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour to ensure both depth and breadth of content. While the interview process allowed for some flexibility, it ensured that all participants answered a series of the same core questions to maintain consistency and comparability of the data. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of participants' consumption motivations, social identity, emotional

needs, etc., the interview design included more open-ended questions, encouraging participants to express their views and feelings from multiple perspectives. For instance, in the interview with Adios, the motivations behind his purchase of concert tickets and limited-edition merchandise were explored in depth, along with an analysis of the social capital involved. In the interview with Wang Huiru, the focus was on the emotional fulfillment she gained from fandom and the influence of social interactions on her consumption decisions. As such, the study seeks to flexibly adjust the content while ensuring a comprehensive exploration of each participant's perspectives, providing multi-dimensional, in-depth insights.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

Following in-depth interviews with four participants, all audio recordings were recorded in detail and the recorded data was analyzed thematically. In particular, the process involved reading via the transcripts, identifying key words and phrases related to the research topic, and conducting initial coding, which was designed to capture initial patterns in the data and identify key elements that reflected participants' perspectives. The initial coding was then categorized and integrated to distill the main themes and sub-themes, ensuring that each theme adequately represented the participants' viewpoints and experiences, while also considering the diversity and complexity within the data to avoid over-simplifying conclusions. Particular attention was paid to potential differences among the participants, exploring their differing understandings of the same phenomenon and the complex motivations behind gender differences. Building on the theme extraction, further comparisons were made between male and female fans regarding consumption motives, social influences, emotional investment, etc., identifying the unique patterns and influences of gender on K-pop fan consumption behavior. The entire analysis process utilized thematic analysis to identify and summarize the major themes within the data, combined with comparative analysis to contrast the consumption behaviors of different gendered fans, thereby clearly presenting the impact of gender differences on K-pop fan consumption behavior.

4. Results

4.1. Consumption Motives and Behavioral Characteristics of Male Fans

The consumption motivations of male fans reveal their need for social identity construction and self-expression within idol culture. By purchasing idol-related products, such as concert tickets and limited edition items, they express emotional attachment and boost their social status. For example, Adios stated that attending concerts and posting photos on social media not only feeds his vanity but also highlights his connection with idols and his distinctiveness within the group. This reflects how male fans use the consumption of idol culture to gain group recognition and self-validation. Besides, the consumption motivations of male fans are often closely linked to a desire for collecting, reflecting a more rational and functional approach to consumption. Leon noted that his purchase of limited-edition vinyl records was driven mainly by his passion for collecting, with a specific focus on the rarity and quality of the items. This indicates that male fans are drawn to items with lasting value, such as limited editions or memorabilia, which align with their sense of personal taste and identity, and enable them to showcase their unique aesthetics and status within their social circles. It is found that the consumption behavior of male fans enhances self-identity and self-esteem through their connection with specific groups [14]. By participating in idol culture consumption, male fans not only satisfy personal interests but convey their sense of belonging and social status within the group by showing idol products and experiences. Moreover, male fans' consumption of high-priced items tends to be more rational, avoiding blindly following trends or chasing fads. For example, Adios explicitly stated that he would no longer purchase tickets if the price was too high, indicating that male fans pay

more attention to economic benefits and practicality when making consumption decisions. This highlights their focus on return and utility during the consumption process.

4.2. Consumption Motives and Behavioral Characteristics of Female Fans

The consumption motives and behavior patterns of female fans are primarily driven by emotional needs and group identity. They express emotional commitment and loyalty to their idols through frequent purchases of merchandise, attending concerts, and participating in autograph sessions. For instance, Liangren mentioned that she is willing to cut back on other expenses to save money for attending an idol performance, reflecting how she meets her spiritual needs through interactions with idols, seeking self-satisfaction and emotional comfort. This consumption behavior is not just a material purchase but more a reflection of emotional recognition and attachment to the idol. Female fans strengthen their loyalty and dependence on idols via this approach. Also, the consumption behavior of female fans also shows a strong sense of group identity. For example, Wang Huiru stated that she demonstrates her loyalty by purchasing merchandise, albums, and participating in offline events within the fan community, deepening her emotional connection with other fans. She also mentioned that she would accompany her friends to performances even if she did not want to attend them at times, reflecting how female fans not only support idols through group activities but seek recognition and a sense of belonging through interactions with others. This group interaction further drives their consumption behavior and strengthens their identity within the fan community. The consumption behavior of female fans also reflects characteristics of emotional labor. Affective labor theory suggests that individuals need to express or suppress certain emotions in specific roles, and female fans convert emotional labor and emotional investment into emotional connections with idols and other fans by actively participating in support activities, data ranking, and other actions [15]. Through affective labor, female fans satisfy personal needs and strengthen their collective identity, driving consumption, which reflects loyalty to the idol and fosters deep bonds within the fan community.

4.3. Impact of Gender Differences on Consumer Behavior

Gender differences have a huge impact on consumption motivations and behavioral characteristics. Male fans are mainly driven by interests and social needs, while female fans focus on emotional labor and collective identity. And these gender differences reflect different emotional needs and social identities, as well as the reproduction of gender roles and inequalities. In addition, the atmosphere of K-pop fan culture and Asian pop culture encourages women to participate more actively in sensual and emotional expression. Society's tolerance and encouragement of women's emotional labor and its expectation of men's rational consumption of images combine to form gender differences in idol consumption. The social construction of gender roles profoundly influences both male and female consumption behavior. Women prefer sensual and socially oriented consumption, while men tend to prefer functional and restrained consumption to avoid conflict with the "rational" image of traditional gender roles [16]. In addition, social media has strengthened fan interaction and comparative psychology, with female fans more likely to be encouraged by the community atmosphere, while male fans place more emphasis on personal judgment and self-worth. Although this differentiated product design and marketing strategy cater to the consumption needs of different genders, it may also exacerbate gender-based consumption inequality, especially in terms of emotional labor and product pricing. Gender differences not only manifest in consumption behavior and motives but also reflect, to some extent, gender inequality within the social structure. These differences offer new perspectives for the K-pop industry's marketing strategies and product design while also raising important issues of gender equality within the fan economy.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals gender differences in the consumption of K-pop idols, primarily reflected in emotional investment and consumption strategies. Female fans tend to fulfill their emotional needs through frequent high-value consumption, seek group identity, and demonstrate strong emotional engagement. In contrast, male fans are more inclined towards rational and strategic consumption, purchasing items with collectible value to showcase personal aesthetics and social capital. Social identity and emotional labor theories provide strong support for understanding the mechanisms behind these gender differences. Emotional labor and group identity are the core driving forces behind female fans' consumption behaviors, while male fans focus more on the functionality and long-term value of the items. However, this study also has certain limitations, such as a small sample size and a relatively homogeneous socio-economic background among the respondents. In response to these limitations, future studies could expand the sample to include fans from more regions, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic classes to obtain more representative and generalizable results. In addition, future research could use quantitative methods to verify the prevalence and importance of gender differences in fan consumption behavior.

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