

Why Chasing Kpop? Is Fandom Truly Crazy? -- The Motivations and Behaviors of Kpop Fans

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Keywords: KPOP, Fandom, Stereotype, Behavior, Motivation.

Abstract: With the development of the KPOP industry in Korea, more and more KPOP idols are going international and gaining more global fans. The reactions and support of fans to their idols have nevertheless become a controversial topic around the world. In China, there is also a widespread belief in mass media and academia that idolizing a star is irrational. Against this backdrop, we pursue several lines of inquiry in this paper: What drives fans to worship celebrities? What are the impacts of idolizing on individuals? What is the cultural meaning of worshiping celebrities? This project is based on 8 interviews with Blinks, who are fans of the representative Korean girl group BLACKPINK, and online observations on social media. We argue that idolizing stars is not an irrational action to a certain degree. Instead, worshiping celebrities can bring some positive effects to fans.

1. Introduction

In 2012, South Korean singer PARK JAE SANG's video for Gangnam Style broke the Guinness World Record for most views on YouTube and was viewed 1.578 billion times a year later. It has overtaken Justin Bieber's Baby to become the video with the most views in YouTube history. This is undoubtedly a milestone in the history of KPOP music, marking that the popularity of KPOP in the world has skyrocketed. South Korea continues to export its popular culture not only to other parts of Asia but also to the rest of the world. Korean idols, the main exporters of KPOP music, have won many fans globally with their pretty faces, stunning singing and dancing skills and stage performances. BLACKPINK, one of the most popular KPOP groups in the world, has attracted explosive attention in recent years. For instance, BLACKPINK's 2020 single How You Like That received 82.37 million views on YouTube in its first 24 hours of release, making it the most-viewed video in 24 hours in history; It has also been listed on the iTunes in 67 countries and ranked first in these regions. On March 15, 2021, BLACKPINK reached 20 million fans on Spotify, the most of any girl group in the world. BLACKPINK's global fan base is also known by the interesting name Blink, which means that fans are glittering beings connected to BLACKPINK members.

Young people all over the world have shown an unprecedented obsession with KPOP celebrities during the past decade. However, due to the star worship behavior of some fans, idolizing is perceived to be crazy and irrational in the eyes of the public. In China, some fans of South Korean idols spend huge amounts of money to pay for private flights to certain cities to celebrate their idols' birthdays with other fans. These moves have drawn criticism on Weibo, one of China's most influential networking platforms, where people described their actions as insane. The state-owned news media, China News, claims that fans' communities are deformed: "By now, the fandom culture has gotten worse. Fans begin a war of words, inciting confrontation, insult, slander, attack. They also create malicious rumors and adopt malicious marketing. They have polluted the Internet ecosystem and even violated laws and policies." (People's Daily, August 12, 2021).

Nonetheless, from fans' perspectives, celebrity chasing is not necessarily deviant behavior. Therefore, to examine the contradiction of holding different attitudes towards stargazing behavior,

the authors raise some questions in this paper: What are the motivations for Chinese fans' KPOP idols to follow stars? Why do Chinese fans dedicate so much time, energy, and financial resources to following their idols?

What are the cultural meanings of idol worship for fans? What is the influence of idolizing on individuals?

To answer these questions, we interviewed 8 people who are fans of BLACKPINK. One-on-one interviews allow us to understand, first of all, the behaviors they have done for their idols, and, more importantly, to study their motivations underlying fans' behaviors. The disadvantage of the interview is that it cannot be carried out on a large scale. Thus, our second approach is online observations of fans' behavior on different platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and ZhiHu. Today, there are many online communities for fans on the Internet. Most of the behaviors of fans can be observed in these specific communities.

According to our findings, we argue that stargazing is not necessarily a crazy act, as opposed to what mass media and scholars previously demonstrated. Our research shows that their actions have actually brought about positive effects on fans to a certain degree. This is because stargazing is a way to learn skills. It also helps fans satisfy their artistic pursuit and enables them to build certain identities. Also, fans benefit from their actions to obtain spiritual comfort and a sense of community. Therefore, we expect that this study will help the public better understand fandom and stargazing behaviors and also the cultural implication of stargazing, in order to reduce the public's stereotype of fandom.

2. Literature review

Over time, fans of Korean culture, especially KPOP, have grown rapidly around the world. "K-pop has become a truly global phenomenon thanks to its distinctive blend of addictive melodies, slick choreography and production values, and an endless parade of attractions." (Aja Romano, Feb 26, 2018).

The influence of KPOP has become a topic of interest around the world and has been discussed by various scholars.

After their debut in 1997, the South Korean pop music boy group NRG (New Radiancy Group) gained popularity rapidly at home and in neighboring China with a burgeoning following of teenage Chinese fans. Even though they could not travel to Korea, Mainland Chinese fans remained passionate and managed to send emails as well as countless telephone calls to express their condolences [to Kim Hwan-sung of NRG] (Meicheng Sun and Kai Khiun Liew, 2019). Sun and Liew consider that KPOP has gained a larger number of followers in China through social media and entertainment magazines. KPOP's fashion style, which includes music, dance and CD cover design, has caught the attention of young Chinese. Through these factors and the online promotion process, KPOP has successfully influenced the Chinese entertainment market.

Fungdong's paper 'Fandom, youth and consumption in China' (2009) suggests young people no longer conform to the wishes of the political party and the state, but rather choose to follow the wishes of themselves and their own groups which not only challenge authority, but also show their desire to accelerate social reform.

Han Chuanxi and Huang Hui (2020) study the root of fan behavior tendency of Chinese idol Jay Chou and CAI Xukun through the Weibo competition between their fans. They argue that "the production and self-actualization of 'pleasure' is the internal drive of fan behavior. Fans take pleasure in self-identification by opposing mainstream culture and insisting on individuality. As for external factors, fans influenced by core members are being willing to pay for their idols at the call of core members of the fan base. Conflicts between different fan groups make individual fans develop deeper sense of belongings and turn them more obedient to their group.

Lin Yang (2009) takes the fan group "Corn" of Chinese female singer Li Yuchun as the research subjects and studies the fans' support for Li. From the fans' point of view, working for free is because they are driven by passion and they want to create superstars. They see Li as their own child and

focus their attention and support on Li. They do everything they can to make their children successful. In addition, they think Li is still in a weak position in the entertainment industry, so they are more supportive of Li's career development in the professional field.

A previous study shows that in Thailand, fans of KPOP love them because of their personal image and skills. As Ubonrat Siriyuvasak & Shin Hyunjoon note, "the industry has manufactured a comprehensive image of these Korean stars in many forms in order to capture the imagination of the youth." (Ubonrat Siriyuvasak & Shin Hyunjoon, 2007, P120.) KPOP artists Rain and Se7en have been established by the company as idols with their own characteristics, their excellent appearance, unique dance style and personality. The images of these artists have captured the hearts of Thai youth and made them crazy about them.

In accordance with the paper Grouping and Separating of the Cyber Communities: A Case Study of "Marvel Fans" (2020), it says people release and escape from daily pressure and stress by imagining themselves as the super hero in the movie which empowered audience and audience get mental satisfaction. Our paper is going to research if chasing stars is a kind of way to escape from pressure and a way to fulfil people's imagination of being a famous powerful star.

3. Research methods

In order to develop a more specific understanding of the motivations of Chinese KPOP girl group fans, we choose the method of interview. As the interview can provide us with more detailed information about the research subjects, including Blink's inner thoughts on their idol, Blink's psychological process of idol chasing, and some substantial or abstract changes they experienced during the process. We recruited 8 fans of The South Korean girl group BLACKPINK on Weibo and WeChat. In the interviews, we asked participants questions regarding idol chasing experiences and motivations, daily behaviors as BLACKPINK fans, personal emotions about idols, and fan group structures and organizations. In the end, we paid 20 yuan after completing the interviews.

In addition, we also observed Blinks on Weibo, Wechat and ZhiHu, observing their behavior, including their reaction about idol's real-time news and release album, and the interaction between fans. Blink's behavior on various platforms helps us understand their motivation as being a fan. We discover that on different platforms Blink's fan groups have conflicts with others'. For instance, on Weibo and ZhiHu, they argue with Chinese fans of Twice, another KPOP girl group, about who is the most popular girl group in South Korea. Also, Blinks in the Weibo fan communities are divided into different roles, including normal fan, extranet information carrier, data handler, and core leader.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Fans' behavior

Based on the questions mentioned in the study, we will focus our discussion on BLACKPINK's Chinese Blinks in this section first. Because fans' behavior of chasing stars begins when they have several kinds of needs, and their behavior is closely related to their motivations. As Blinks, they will support their idols in various ways in daily life, and produce resources by themselves. They also look for some fan groups to talk about idols.

(1) Online and offline support

First, Chinese Blinks support their idol's career in many ways because they see "how to support their idols" as an important lesson in the process of idolizing. Chinese Blinks value the sales of their idols' albums, believing that the amount of sales can directly reflect the popularity of their idols. Most of them will buy a lot of albums for their idols to boost their album marketing. Blinks buy the album on their own through Ktown4u and what, special Korean purchasing agent websites, or organize a group buying on the official fan site's Weibo. When the fan groups organize to purchase albums in a unified way, the core members of the fans will also sell their idols' peripherals together with the official albums to increase the sales of the albums.

Blinks also voted for BLACKPINK on different websites and apps, such as Instagram, Twitter and IDOLCHAMP CN. They voted for BLACKPINK on their official Instagram and Twitter accounts for the title of the year. DOLCHAMP CN voted to rank idol's song in local no.1. Sometimes the number of votes can also determine whether an idol's support advertisement can be displayed in different countries, which can increase the idol's exposure.

The BLACKPINK anti-haters account has been set up by Blinks on Weibo in order to fight back against weibo accounts that have discredited idols online. Blinks report haters and their weibo posts, and purge their malicious entries to protect their idols' online public image.

Besides, BLACKPINK has conducted a few online and offline concerts, mostly offline. Their concerts in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau sold out quickly when they hit the shelves. Enthusiastic Blinks interact directly with their idols at concerts to support them. They also hold support parties for BLACKPINK members' birthdays and anniversaries across China so that Blink from different places can get together and express opinions about their idols.

(2) Resource Production

Second, out of love for idols, Blinks always produce some idols related resources in daily life. They create their own resources, including portraits. One interviewee, Chen, said: "I often draw pictures of Jennie's performance on stage, as well as pictures of her daily life that she posts on Instagram."

Other Blinks create idol related texts, including romantic stories. They write these texts according to their imagination of idol's life. Fei noted:

"I am a fan of both BLACKPINK and Chaelisa, which is couple matching of group member Rosie and Lisa. I love Chaelisa very much so I always create imaginative stories about them and post them on LOFTER (a social writing app) and Weibo when I have free time. Sometimes I consider whether my stories should have happy or bad endings."

(3) Group communication

Third, Blinks always find online fan groups to communicate with others. The fan groups are mainly active on several social platforms, ZhiHu, Weibo and Wechat. In ZhiHu, Blinks discuss idol's ability in their professional field, analyzing BLACKPINK members' strengths and weaknesses. Blinks in Wechat and Weibo groups usually have some daily communication about idols and use some humorous language to express their infatuation with their idols."

4.2 Fan's motivations

The study found that fans invest a lot of time, money and energy in work with celebrities, and that there is a widespread social stereotype of people following celebrities, which is considered meaningless. Since stargazing is believed to be a waste of time, fans may not get the same rewards from their idols, and even idols do not know who they are. Joli Jenson (1992) argues that most of the literature at that time sees fans as pathological fanatics, and fans who go to extremes may lack a sense of self-identity. The fans' behavior is irrational and out of control. However, in order to prove whether the behavior of fans is irrational or pathological, we study the motivation of fans. We find that fans think idols can set good models for them and have a positive impact on them, so they will do some idolatrous behavior. From their point of view, worshiping idols is not irrational behavior.

(1) Learning skills

First, fans are inspired by idols' amazing skills. They find chasing stars is a good way to learn different skills and knowledge. Chen has improved her painting skills by painting for her idol. She said: "I sketch better because I often draw Jennie. I often draw my favorite Jennie stages." She added that she has improved her Korean by watching her idol's variety of shows, and now she can understand a little Korean.

Similarly, Wu improved her enthusiasm for guitar practicing. She noted:

"I want to be more active when I saw Rosie play the guitar, especially when I watch videos of her playing guitar. I was pleasantly impressed by the improvement of her skills."

Some Blinks even made a point of learning the dance to BLACKPINK's songs. Another fan went to learn Thai because of Lisa, a Thai member of the group, and now can speak a little Thai.

Also, influenced by BLACKPINK, Blinks started to gain some knowledge about Korean idol culture and several famous brands. Fei noted:

"Because of BLACKPINK, I began to learn more about the Korean idol industry, including the process of idol formation. Also, I learned information about fashion brands' history, including brand designers' TMI and different industry lines. As BLACKPINK members endorse these brands."

(2) Pursuit of different music taste

Second, pursuing different music styles is another motivation for Chinese fans to chase BLACKPINK. Young Chinese are fascinated by a new style of music with a strong feeling of special characteristics—music that is 'cool'. Before 2010, the Chinese music market was quite singular. The records of old Chinese music market show most Chinese music has a slow dreamy and soft melody, and most of them are sentimental love songs.

Based on the interviews, we find that Chinese Blinks think BLACKPINK's songs are cool and powerful because their rhythm is faster and stronger compared to most Chinese music. One interviewee Huang said: "the reason I like BLACKPINK is because their music has a strong and fast sense of rhythm, also I like cool and powerful music, the melody is brainwashing, this kind of music can make me high and feel excited." Samantha said: "There is a lot of electronic music in their songs, I like it."

(3) Self-empowerment

Through listening to BLACKPINK's music, female fans get self-empowerment. Based on our investigation of BLACKPINK fan's clubs online and searching data on the internet, we find that most blinks are female. According to one participant Chloe, BLACKPINK contests the traditional image of girls, because their works convey the idea that a girl can be powerful and cool just like a man. Their outfit sometimes is gender-neutral, their stages and songs are not soft or cute but strong and aggressive. For example, the lyrics of their song <BOOMBAYAH> "Ain't got time I go hard and slay; Imma take what's mine so get out my way" shows the strong power of girls. Their special music and stage style is called 'girl crush'. This masculine style (girl crush) helps construct the image of a modern independent and powerful woman, which girls want to become. In the interview, Chloe noted that "their girl crush style is cool and powerful, when I listen to those songs I feel powerful as well, I love it." When girls feel weak or are mistreated in society, they will think of BLACKPINK and gain power.

(4) Mental comfort

BLACKPINK is a mental comfort for blinks. Fans chase BLACKPINK because their idols make them relaxed. According to Peng, she said "Before chasing BLACKPINK my life was boring and frustrated, they lighted my life they made me expect daily life, I can watch their performances and wait for their daily media reports every day. After watching BLACKPINK's, I learn to be calm to many things, too. Also, I want to study at a Korean university in the future."

Also, BLACKPINK helps blinks release daily pressure, Chloe noted that BLACKPINK makes her feel relaxing after works, said "Listening to their songs help me to relieve stress, very comfortable, when I listen to their music and watch their stage I will jump and dance with them."

(5) Sense of belonging

The last motivation is that blinks can feel a sense of belonging through being a part of a fan's group. Fan's group activities include donation activities, online listing, and voting, raising funds to buy gifts for idols, going to concerts, holding birthday celebrations for idols, etc. According to Charlotte, "I participated in the support assistance activities organized by the BLACKPINK Shenzhen fan group. It was Lisa's birthday at that time. We raised funds to rent a shopping mall advertising screen to celebrate Lisa's birthday. We also held a small fan party, sang songs, dance together, and ate cake. Through these activities, I made a lot of like-minded friends. I feel very happy and satisfied to do things I like with my group".

The need for individuals to belong to or depend on groups is a manifestation of human sociality and is related to the sense of attachment formed in early family life. Through attending fan's group activities fans can get sense of group belonging. For example, when Charlotte saw the advertising screen her group made, she felt proud to be in the fan group so that she gets mental satisfaction.

5. Conclusions

In the end, after analyzing and discovering fan's behaviors and motivations. We find that fans cannot be defined as the symbol of an irrational and crazy group of people. Despite the cases of some irrational fans exist, our study finds that most fans get the positive effect by chasing their idols. The stereotype of fandom has to be eliminated.

Through online observation and interviews with fans, this paper reveals three kinds of fans' star chasing behavior. First, chasing stars is a kind of support for idols. Secondly, self-produced resources and behaviors include painting for idols and posting star-chasing course posts. Finally, establish fan groups and organize group activities, such as collective concert support, fund-raising, and idol publicity, etc.

We found five primary types of motivation beneath fans' star chasing actions. First of all, fans believe that star chasing can be used as a way to learn and improve skills. The second motivation is reflected in people's demand for different art and music styles. The special rhythm and melody of BLACKPINK's songs make it particularly appealing to fans. Furthermore, Chasing BLACKPINK empowers many female followers. The independent and powerful female idol group style created by BLACKPINK makes women yearn to become women like them. In the Korean idol industry, where gender inequality is prevalent between boy and girl groups, BLACKPINK stands out as a global renowned group, setting an example for women and encouraging women to find their value. In addition, chasing BLACKPINK gives fans mental comfort, so that fans can release their daily pressure by watching their performances and listening to their songs. Last but not least, fans have developed a sense of belonging in the group. They can join online chat groups to communicate with each other from the offline support association, and can also expand social networking.

There are several limitations of this paper. The first one is that this project has not covered any male fans, because all of our interviewees are female fans. Male fans may have different motivations, but we cannot corroborate that from this study. Moreover, the number of people we interviewed is relatively small, and the information and views we obtained are not comprehensive enough. Thus, in our future research, we would like to include a more diverse body of fans.

Finally, during our research, we want to raise more questions. In 2016, according to the report of Seoul Economic Daily on August 4, with the deployment of the Sade system, the Chinese governments began to restrict Korean artists and programs. From then on the political tension between China and Korea is continues growing. We can see many comments on Chinese social media convey the idea of 'anti-Korean idols' in 2016. Under this kind of circumstance, we want to know what are fans' views on chasing Korean idols due to the political position conflict between the two countries.

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