**Fandom as Dynamic Social Solidarity: Negotiating Identity and Boundaries in Indonesian Online Fan Communities**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the construction of collective identity in online fandoms as a negotiation of belonging and boundary-making within digital culture. External boundaries and internal cohesion shape the relationship between digital interaction, collective solidarity, and community building. Moving beyond entertainment, fandom is framed as a social arena where individual attachment to idols represents a dynamic process of negotiation between personal preferences, collective belonging, and digital participation. A multi-sited ethnographic approach was employed by combining online observation of 10 fan communities with interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) involving members and administrators of Cypher Army Malang (offline). Thematic analysis was applied to identify social identities and community dynamics based on patterns of interaction, modes of participation, and fan cultural practices. Findings reveal that social media facilitates a collective identity that is continuously redefined through interaction with external communities, internal role differentiation, and members’ strategic responses to cultural and technological shifts. Fandom functions as a marker of identity with positive distinctiveness, while the social identities constructed within it open pathways for care, solidarity, creativity, and collective social action. Engagement practices thus generate mechanisms of solidarity and participation that extend fandom’s cultural influence into broader social domains.

**Keywords:** fandom dynamics; social identity; online communities; solidarity; fan culture

**Introduction**

Digital fandom has evolved from a marginal subculture into a central actor within the global media ecosystem, exerting significant cultural, economic, and social influence. Among its various manifestations, ARMY—the global fandom of the K-pop group BTS—serves as a paradigmatic case study due to its well-organized internal structures and its ability to navigate cross-cultural dialogues (Hamai, 2024). In Indonesia, the presence of ARMY not only reflects the global trajectory of BTS fandom but also intersects with local cultural traditions of music fandom, making it a compelling site for examining the intersections of identity construction and collective agency in the digital era (Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020).

Fandom studies have long emphasized the active role of audiences, from Jenkins' (1992) foundational concept of “textual poachers” to contemporary understandings of fans as productive agents embedded within “socially networked publics” (Baym, 2018; Boyd, 2010). Within this evolving framework, fandom is conceptualized as a participatory culture that negotiates meanings, produces cultural texts, and constructs new forms of social belonging (Jenkins, 2018; Yuk-ming, 2023). Studies of K-pop fandoms highlight their capacities for linguistic innovation, philanthropic activism, and the cultivation of parasocial intimacy (Jin, 2023; Low, 2017; Xu et al., 2023). However, although scholars have addressed BTS fandom as a global phenomenon, there remains a tendency to view it primarily through the lens of internal practices such as streaming, translation, or fanfiction production. This perspective risks overlooking the dynamics that shape identity formation through ARMY’s external engagements with other fandoms in response to shifting cultural and industrial contexts.

This study addresses two key concerns. First, while prior research has catalogued ARMY’s practices, there has been limited exploration of inter-fandom dynamics as a crucial mechanism for constructing collective identity. By examining ARMY’s relationships with other fandoms—ranging from collaborative solidarity in cultural activism to contentious “fanwars”—this study demonstrates that external engagement is critical for defining community boundaries and strengthening in-group cohesion (Nam et al., 2024; Stanfill, 2013). Second, academic narratives often portray fanbase growth as linear. This research complicates that perspective by historicizing ARMY as a series of adaptive shifts, including its expansion from niche audience to mainstream, the formation of informal-collaborative communities, and its organizational responses to transformations in philanthropic action. These shifts position ARMY not as a static collective but as a dynamic community that continuously negotiates its place within the digital sphere (Huang & Xie, 2021).

This study argues that ARMY functions as a “digital nation-state,” whose collective identity and agency are continuously constructed through a dialectical engagement with external fandom entities and sustained internal cohesion in response to both global and industry-specific stimuli (Stein et al., 2024). By examining ARMY within the Indonesian context, this study positions fandom as both a cultural actor and an epistemic community that fluidly navigates the intersections of popular culture, digital media, and social identity.

Accordingly, this study frames ARMY not merely as a fandom but as a dynamic cultural formation that persistently negotiates its identity through external contestations and internal adaptations. By foregrounding ARMY’s inter-fandom relations and evolving organizational strategies, the research seeks to demonstrate how digital fandom operates as a site of collective identity formation and cultural agency in the contemporary media landscape (Duffett, 2013; Yong Jin, 2018). This encompasses the ways digital publics build community, sustain solidarity, and reconfigure the boundaries of belonging within an interconnected world.

The growth of fandom within creative community spaces also illustrates a shift away from a purely entertainment-oriented orientation. This study focuses on a local fan community, Cypher Army Malang (CAM). Emerging within the arena of social solidarity, this community provides a compelling lens through which to ask: How does the local fan community negotiate collective identity within the dynamics of fandom, moving from digital entertainment spaces toward solidarity-based social action? This research question is designed to trace the processes of collective identity formation, community interaction dynamics, and the reorientation of fandom practices beyond entertainment.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The emergence of online communities has reshaped the ways in which individuals construct social groups (Boyd, 2010), where membership is increasingly defined by shared interests rather than physical proximity. Digital media platforms facilitate the convergence of individuals from diverse geographical and social backgrounds around common passions such as music, hobbies, or advocacy (Bury, 2017; M. S. Kim et al., 2023). Thus, online communities should be conceptualized not merely as extensions of traditional associations but as adaptive and flexible social formations that respond dynamically to the cultural logics of digital environments (Addeo et al., 2019; Booth, 2016). This study adopts the perspective that fandom-based online communities represent a new form of social structure—decentralized, self-organizing, and capable of sustaining long-term cohesion even in the absence of continuous idol activity.

A useful theoretical framework for analyzing these communities is social identity theory (SIT), as developed by Tajfel and Turner (2004). SIT posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, seeking to maintain a positive identity through ingroup solidarity and outgroup differentiation. In the case of BTS ARMY, identification extends beyond admiration for BTS as charismatic performers to encompass a collective affiliation with the fandom itself (Mitchell & Hall, 2016; Tertiano & Salehudin, 2023). Identification with the ARMY community thus serves as a durable source of cohesion, enabling groups such as the local fan community to remain active even during BTS’s hiatus. By applying SIT, this study examines how shared identity fosters affective solidarity, nurtures ingroup favoritism, and sustains emotional attachment within fandom structures.

To further contextualize social identity theory (SIT) within digital fandom, this study also employs Jenkins’ paradigm of participatory culture (Bury, 2017; Picone, 2022). Participatory culture underscores how fans are not passive consumers of media but rather active co-creators who produce, circulate, and organize cultural practices. Online fandom communities epitomize this paradigm by mobilizing members for collective activities ranging from fundraising and streaming parties to localized charitable campaigns. While participatory culture highlights empowerment and creativity, scholars caution against the commodification of fan labor, wherein industries appropriate participatory practices for commercial gain (Gotham & Krier, 2008; Sun, 2020). Accordingly, this framework not only illuminates organizational dynamics but also provides prescriptive insights for educators and cultural practitioners seeking to encourage creative participation without exploitation.

The framework is further enriched by Oldenburg's (1989) notion of the “third place,” which refers to informal public spaces where individuals cultivate social ties through casual interaction. In the context of the local fan community, online platforms such as WhatsApp groups and Instagram pages function as virtual “third places,” blending digital interactions with offline gatherings. This hybridity demonstrates that digital communities are not detached from physical realities; rather, they continually negotiate between virtual engagements and face-to-face encounters (Addeo et al., 2019). In this sense, the local fan community exemplifies the dual role of fandom communities as both identity anchors and third places that foster belonging, emotional expression, and sustained solidarity.

Additionally, theoretical frameworks on community typologies (Hagel, 1999; Rafaeli, 2000) assist in classifying the local fan community as an interest-based, relationship-driven community characterized by semi-hierarchical structures. The presence of administrators, moderators, and content creators illustrates how authority within online fandoms is negotiated through participation and contribution rather than imposed through rigid hierarchies. As such, fandom communities can be described as hybrid structures that combine grassroots self-organization with leadership roles coordinating broader engagement. This observation underscores the practical implication that educators and cultural facilitators should acknowledge the organizational sophistication of fandoms, treating them as valuable case studies of collective action and digital citizenship.

Taken together, this study’s theoretical and conceptual framework synthesizes social identity theory, participatory culture, third place theory, and community typologies to analyze the local fan community. Integrating these perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of how online fandoms foster identity formation, emotional solidarity, and collaborative practices that transcend mere entertainment consumption. More importantly, these frameworks highlight practical implications: online fandoms can serve as pedagogical resources for cultivating creativity, collaboration, and civic engagement.

**Method and Procedures**

**Criteria of Participants**

Research informants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby recommendations from initial participants led to the inclusion of other relevant individuals or communities (Patton, 2015). The primary unit of analysis in this study is Cypher Army Malang (CAM), a BTS fanbase that actively operates across both online and offline settings.

Participants from CAM were recruited using five strategies: (1) contacting the official fanbase account, (2) attending events organized by the fanbase, (3) approaching the community informally, (4) joining the WhatsApp group, and (5) confirming participation and information as required by the study.

The criteria for selecting informants included: (a) being between 20 and 32 years old, (b) identifying as female fans (fangirls), and (c) active engagement on major social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp) as well as supporting platforms such as X, YouTube, and Weverse. Primary data were collected through interviews with CAM members, while secondary data were drawn from relevant online documentation.

**Profiles of Research Participants.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Initials** | **Age (yrs)** | **Occupation** | **Favorite Idol** | **Role in Community** | **Years of Membership** | **Engagement Platforms** |
| RNW | 22 | Student | OT7 | Active member, new generation | 6 | Instagram, WhatsApp |
| BS | 31 | Entrepreneur | OT7 | Event coordinator | 8 | WhatsApp, Instagram |
| MJ | 29 | Entrepreneur | OT7 | Senior member, admin, debater | 8 | Instagram, WhatsApp, Weverse |
| FP | 32 | Freelance (Events) | OT7 | Organizer of offline activities | 6 | WhatsApp, Instagram |
| NS | 31 | Homemaker | Min Yoongi | Fanart creator, discussion group | 7 | WhatsApp |
| ACM | 21 | Student | Kim Seokjin | Fanart creator | 6 | Instagram |
| AAF | 30 | Homemaker | OT7 | Volunteer for social programs | 6 | WhatsApp, Instagram |

Table. 1.Profiles of Research Participants

*Note: OT7 refers to fans who support all members of BTS.*

**Procedures**

Data collection was conducted through a combination of observation and interviews, both online and offline.

Online observation included monitoring fanbase content on Instagram, interactions within WhatsApp groups, and activities on Weverse among CAM members. To broaden the contextual understanding, online observation was also extended to ten other BTS fan communities active on Instagram and Twitter (X).

Offline observation involved attending CAM events such as concert watch parties, idol birthday celebrations, and charity activities. These observations sought to capture patterns of participation, communication dynamics, and creative expressions within the community (Given, 2008; Pink et al., 2016).

Interviews were conducted in two formats. Online interviews were held via WhatsApp with CAM administrators to explore the history of the community and its digital interaction strategies. Offline interviews were carried out through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with active CAM members, focusing on their lived experiences, participation in offline activities, and reflections on fan identity. A semi-structured approach allowed participants to narrate their stories in detail and provide reflective insights (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

**Observation and Interview Activities**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **Form & Description** | **Data Collection Purpose** |
| Online Observation | Monitoring Instagram fanbase, WhatsApp groups, and online events (Q&A, fan art, voting, charity, merchandise). | Identifying digital interaction patterns |
| Offline Observation | Attending fanbase events (watch parties, idol birthday celebrations, donation drives); documenting social interactions and fanart displays. | Understanding offline interaction dynamics |
| Online Interviews | WhatsApp conversations with administrators; exploring community history and digital strategies. | Obtaining structural information about the community |
| Offline Interviews | Focus Group Discussion with active members; exploring experiences, solidarity, and creativity. | Gaining in-depth insights into personal and collective experiences |

Table. 2. Summary of Observation and Interview Activities

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was carried out systematically through six stages (Given, 2008; Hine, 2000; Neuman, 2014):

1. Data Collection: Gathering data through observation, interviews, and both digital and physical documentation.
2. Transcription: Converting all audio and video recordings into textual form for analysis.
3. Coding: Assigning codes to data according to emerging thematic categories.
4. Thematic Analysis: Identifying patterns of interaction, modes of participation, and cultural practices within the fandom.
5. Narrative Analysis: Tracing the personal experiences and stories shared by participants to understand individual and collective perspectives.
6. Data Validation: Ensuring credibility through triangulation of primary data, secondary sources, and relevant theoretical frameworks (Domínguez et al., 2007).

**Findings**

**Community Practices and Collective Identity**

Cypher Army Malang (CAM), an unofficial BTS ARMY fanbase in Indonesia, illustrates the dynamics of community formation in which collective identity is shaped not only through the consumption of global popular culture but also through complementary digital and physical interactions. Social media—particularly Instagram and WhatsApp—functions as a space for coordination, information dissemination, and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. In contrast, platforms such as Twitter (X), YouTube, and Weverse are primarily used for content and updates related directly to the idols. However, these online practices extend beyond symbolic communication; they cross into the offline realm through concert watch parties (a concert film such as BTS: Yet To Come in Cinemas for the big screen), donation campaigns, and fandom-based creative activities. This hybridity allows members to perceive CAM as a “home,” a space of safety that emphasizes solidarity, belonging, and mutual support.

Hagel (1999) classifies online communities into categories of interest, relationship, fantasy, and transaction. Rafaeli (2000) further expands this by emphasizing social structures and technological bases. CAM occupies a unique position; while rooted in fandom interests, it swiftly transforms into a community of relationships and social action. In this sense, the fanbase is relatively fluid, functioning as an instrument that channels collective fan identity into broader societal arenas.

The tension between material limitations and emotional solidarity was evident during the *Yet to Come* (YTC) concert screening at CGV Malang in February 2023. Participation extended beyond simply purchasing cinema tickets. Community administrators organized logistical needs such as distributing freebies, setting up idol-themed photo booths, selecting the cinema venue, and negotiating ticket prices to accommodate ARMY’s diverse financial circumstances. The decision to set affordable ticket prices enabled, for example, a middle school student who had been saving small coins from her daily allowance to participate. Negotiations over reducing costs became a matter of mutual support among administrators, reflecting a commitment to inclusive participation. The shared presence in the cinema—immersed as part of ARMY—offered a space of inclusivity, embodying solidarity in practice.

Solidarity also manifested organically through differentiated yet complementary roles. During registration, members spontaneously assisted one another. Administrators wore uniforms emblazoned with the slogan *“teamwork makes the dream work,”* a performative symbol that community bonds were grounded not only in personal intimacy but also in functional interdependence. Role differentiation did not fragment the group; instead, it strengthened networks of trust and reinforced the collective fabric of the community.

Solidarity within CAM is not confined to entertainment activities. Documented on the community’s Instagram in August 2018, June 2019, October 2019, April 2021, November–December 2021, and November 2023, the community organized donation drives for natural disaster relief and orphanages, adapting the group’s *Love Myself* initiative into local contexts. This adaptation reflects the glocalization of fandom, translated into social action rooted in community needs. Moreover, CAM actively fosters collaboration with other fandoms such as NCTzen (fans of the boy band NCT) and XSOel (fans of the boy band XSO). The administrators’ emphasis on the phrase *“friendship, not rivalry”* seeks to challenge the stereotype of fandoms as toxic, competitive spaces or covert sites of multi-fandom affiliations. Through such collaborative practices, CAM positions itself as a cultural mediator within the K-pop fandom landscape, which is often marked by rivalries and idol-centered competition.

Collective fan identity is deliberately nurtured through symbolic mechanisms. Expressions such as *Borahae* (*I Purple You*) and *Apobangpo* (*ARMY Forever, Bangtan Forever*) serve as internal codes distinguishing members from outsiders through processes of social comparison. Additionally, the local term *“Mamy”* (Malang ARMY) anchors the community’s identity within a regional context, especially given the presence of similar fan communities across the area. Such in-group and out-group distinctions produce what may be described as a dual identity of transcultural fandom (Booth, 2018). From Chin and Morimoto (2015) perspective, fandom language is performative; it not only names identity but also creates and reinforces it through ritual repetition.

The digital dimension inevitably reveals further dynamics of fandom. Mass voting (artists' K-pop awards), fan wars (concert tickets), hashtag mobilization (#btsarmy, #bts, #army), and creative content production (fanart and fanmade design, fanbase account, fan update, charity project announcement, merchandise fanmade) highlight the participatory nature of fan communities. Members are driven by a sense of belonging in which they act as meaning producers, organizers of collective action, and cultural mediators. These interwoven fan agendas illustrate the parasocial interactions that bind individuals to idols while simultaneously reinforcing ties among fellow fans (Blady, 2021; M. S. Kim et al., 2023).

As part of their engagement with fandom, the most prominent form of parasocial interaction appears in the ways members participate in celebrating idols’ birthdays (Jin, 2023). Frequently, this participation is materialized by organizing and facilitating social actions, which are interpreted as prayers manifested through charitable acts. Viewed historically, these social actions constitute an imitation of BTS’s attitudes and behaviors (global anti-violence initiative), creatively reinterpreted by fans.

The motivation for donations is fundamentally rooted in celebratory moments intertwined with global campaigns initiated by the idols’ agency (*Love Myself*). However, in practice, these initiatives extend to responses to natural disasters and emergencies, grounded in the principle that “true love begins with loving oneself.” This representation of care, instilled by the idols, simultaneously legitimizes the fans’ social identity by affirming its societal significance. Humanitarian concerns, originating from micro-social interactions, are transformed into arenas for organizing collective action imbued with moral dimensions (Mitchell & Hall, 2016).

Fandom, therefore, is connected through a legitimized social system. Everything associated with ARMY (the fans) and BTS (the idols) is infused with the ethos of *Love Myself*. Their involvement during natural disasters such as the eruption of Mount Semeru and flooding illustrates the presence of a legitimized community (*ARMY exists because BTS, and BTS thrives because ARMY*). The internalization of these values is perceived as a “moral obligation” that expands the function of fandom. Fan identity thus becomes both a source of legitimacy for action and a symbol of loyalty.

Drawing on Agnew (2013), these fan activities can be understood as expressions of social concern grounded in moral intuition and collective norms. One manifestation of this concern is preparedness for material assistance and the mitigation of vulnerability, such as distributing food, clothing, and trauma healing. Ultimately, fandom is not symbolically confined to the consumption of popular culture; rather, through community creativity, it cultivates moral intuition that develops into affective solidarity oriented toward humanitarian values (Chung & Oh, 2022).

Fandom identity does not end with entertainment expression; rather, it extends into the realm of social action. Initiatives such as donations, trauma healing, and the distribution of basic necessities demonstrate that fandom is increasingly recognized within the arena of fan activism (Jeffreys & Jian, 2017). Much of this activism draws inspiration from BTS’s *Love Myself* campaign with UNICEF, which is interpreted simultaneously as an inward practice of self-love and an outward expression of care for others. However, these social actions do not always originate from formal organizations but often emerge from spontaneous solidarity networks facilitated by social media. At this juncture, fandom positions itself as a participatory community governed by humanitarian-oriented moral community control.

Social identity within digital fandom is not singular; rather, it emerges through specific roles that regulate member participation, such as content creators, update accounts, and music producers. These roles not only differentiate individuals but also shape internal networks that strengthen community cohesion. As Jenkins (2006) emphasizes, fan participation extends the function of fandom through the cultural productions they generate. Role-based identities thus reinforce communal cohesion while simultaneously establishing an informal internal social structure.

Beyond roles, identity is also shaped by personal preferences toward idols, such as biases (favorite idols), album eras, or particular line positions. These identity preferences give rise to sub-communities within the fandom, marked by tighter social bonds and emphasizing in-group favoritism (Tajfel, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). However, such internal differentiation introduces the potential for fragmentation due to symbolic boundaries between subgroups. As a result, fandom cohesion remains dynamic, constantly negotiated between collective solidarity and exclusive affiliations.

Within the community, fandom activities appear as an organized entity composed of various actors who play different roles and contribute to one another. Rooted in social bonds and collective belonging, these actors influence each other and form a dynamic social network. Administrators rely on input from content creators to determine appropriate materials for community events, while activity coordinators depend on moderators to maintain order during gatherings. Social relations among these actors are often reciprocal, as no single role can function optimally without the support of others.

The online character of the CAM community reflects ambivalence. On one hand, members rely heavily on virtual interactions through WhatsApp groups (covering topics such as idols, music, fan projects, charity, and daily interactions), Instagram sharing (information, appreciation, philanthropy, and participation), and Weverse streaming (likes and comments). While Booth (2016) observe that online communities adopt many features of traditional communities by transcending spatial and temporal boundaries, digital participation in CAM sustains a sense of collective ownership over fandom identity.

The economic dimension reveals another facet of fandom identity. The collection of merchandise, streaming activities, and the resale market illustrate how fandom also operates within the logic of the market. For fans, collections carry affective value but simultaneously function as exchangeable commodities. The tension between emotional and economic value reflects the ambivalence of fan participation: while it reinforces solidarity, it also risks perpetuating the commodification of fan engagement (Fuschillo, 2020; Jenkins, 2006). Thus, fandom identity is situated between two poles, participatory creativity and consumerist practices.

Fandom is not merely a gathering of submissive admirers; it evolves as a local community with its own distinct characteristics. The identities constructed within it are not merely products of cultural consumption but the result of multilayered negotiations between individuals, groups, and virtual spaces. Each member defines themselves as ARMY while simultaneously identifying as “Mamy,” a locally rooted identity. In this way, fandom identity serves a dual function, strengthening internal cohesion and positioning itself as a representation of a broader community.

The definition of an online community itself is not singular. Roy (2010) frames it as a relatively stable closed system, while Rheingold (1993) emphasizes the openness of virtual networks. CAM navigates between these two perspectives. On one hand, it operates exclusively, with internal codes and symbolic language distinguishing members from outsiders. On the other hand, it opens space for inter-fandom collaborations and broader social engagement. This ambivalence indicates that a fanbase cannot be understood merely as an “interest-based community” but as a social entity continuously negotiating its boundaries, identities, and social functions.

Online interactions via social media expand into offline activities that reinforce community solidarity. Platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp are actively used for gatherings, concert-viewing coordination, and donation drives. Cho (2023) emphasize how digital platforms transform fan relations with K-pop content. However, in the case of the CAM community, fan engagement goes beyond content production and extends toward the formation of collective identity. Technology, in this sense, is not a neutral medium but an arena of intensive negotiation over values, symbols, and communal practices (Booth & Williams, 2021).

The participatory nature of the community creates a subcultural space beyond mainstream culture. Through genres, interests, identities, and collective solidarity, fandom practices cultivate mutual care among fans. The identity constructed through everyday practices, both in active participation within virtual spaces and in offline activities, is supported by creative expression. These practices provide members with opportunities for identity exploration and expression, thereby opening new cultural trends within fandom that extend beyond the idol-centered focus (Duffett, 2013).

**Discussion of Findings**

Social identity emerges as a defining feature of the sustainability of fan communities (Smaldino, 2019). Rather than merely sharing an admiration for idols, members actively position themselves as part of the fandom in tangible ways. This is demonstrated through collective action and mobilization, such as joint practices of streaming, voting, trending projects, and fundraising during comebacks. Community building is also reinforced through the establishment of infrastructures, including online forums, group chats, local fanbases, and offline meetups. Within the framework of social identity theory Tajfel and Turner (2004) these processes of categorization and identification do not remain at a symbolic level; they evolve into emotional bonds that strengthen group cohesion. The experience of “being ARMY” thus legitimizes members’ sense of belonging to a larger family-like collective.

This sense of togetherness is further consolidated in relation to outsiders. Consistent with the concept of in-group favoritism, community members express loyalty by defending both their idols and the fandom itself in the face of external criticism (Bury, 2017). The boundaries of “us” versus “them” operate as a social shield, reinforcing internal solidarity. This affirms Tajfel's (2020) argument that solidarity often arises through comparison with outsiders. The drawing of such boundaries functions both as a mechanism to preserve community integrity and as a strategy to enhance visibility in public spaces, online and offline.

Beyond emotional ties, fandom identity also evolves through creativity. After repeatedly consuming BTS music and videos, members engage in creative productions such as fan art, videos, documentation, and social media posts. In line with Jenkins' (1992) concept of fans as *textual poachers*, these practices involve reinterpreting idol-related works to produce new meanings that deepen communal bonds. Creativity not only serves as a form of personal enjoyment but also acts as a mechanism for sustaining solidarity. Each shared creation in digital spaces seeks engagement, which not only signals the vitality of the group but also affirms its position as part of a global fandom network (Min et al., 2019).

In a noteworthy development, these creative practices frequently extend into social action. The community strategically utilizes significant moments (such as an idol’s birthday or natural disaster events) to organize donation drives and social service initiatives. In this sense, fandom activity is transformed into a space for social mobilization, resonating with Kim and Hutt (2021) notion of *fan activism*. For the community, participation in humanitarian causes embodies the slogan *love myself* by cultivating care and solidarity, thereby reaffirming their presence as a “positive fandom.”

The experience of being part of the community also blurs the boundary between virtual interactions and tangible action. While social media functions as a site for the capitalization of meaning production and emotional attachment, the community’s physical presence reinforces solidarity and mutual care among members (Denegri-Knott et al., 2024). Put differently, this fandom bridges online and offline spheres in a seamless continuum, consolidating itself as a *third place* (Oldenburg, 1989) that facilitates emotional, social, and cultural encounters simultaneously.



**Fig. 1**. Social Identity in Fandom Dynamics

The collective identity of the fandom is rooted in the mechanisms of in-group formation and *positive distinctiveness* as articulated in social identity theory. This identity then serves as the foundation for both collective mobilization and creative cultural production, both of which center on BTS as a shared symbolic reference point. The dialectical process between identity cohesion and community participation illustrates how fandom has transcended its entertainment function, evolving toward philanthropy as a form of collective social action (Dale et al., 2018; Jeffreys & Jian, 2017; Yang et al., 2024). In this trajectory, collective identity fosters participation, participation reinforces identity, and together they generate capacities that extend beyond the entertainment sphere.

Conventional assumptions that portray fandom as exclusively inward-looking are challenged by the dynamics observed here. The interplay of collaborative action, mobilization, community building, and social action demonstrates that *positive distinctiveness* and collective identity are not confined to symbolic affirmation but actively translate into practices of care, solidarity, creativity, and social engagement (Chen & Xu, 2021; Thomas et al., 2018). In doing so, the fandom negotiates social comparison not only within its internal community but also across fandoms and other social groups, thereby redefining the public image of what a fan community can represent.

**Conclusion**

Fan culture operates as a multilayered process in the construction of social identity. Individual attachment to idols emerges as a dynamic negotiation between personal preferences, collective belonging, and digital participation. At the same time, subgroup affiliations and differentiated roles within communities extend the boundaries of collective identity. Social media platforms provide the infrastructure through which these identities evolve dynamically, facilitating both everyday interaction and large-scale mobilization. In this regard, digital platforms are not merely containers of fan activity but active agents in shaping solidarity, participation, and identity formation.

Furthermore, online fandoms thrive through a balance of symbolic attachment and organized cooperation. The structure of digital platforms transforms everyday practices such as streaming, voting, and content creation into mechanisms of solidarity and collective agency. These organized practices are sustained through the complementary roles of administrators, moderators, and content creators, whose cooperative interactions contribute to the resilience of the community. This dynamic reaffirms the function of digital fandom as a negotiated social system.

Ultimately, fandom communities endure because they combine symbolic cohesion with practical coordination. Identity is continuously reinforced through participatory rituals, yet its resilience depends on the distribution of responsibilities and authority across the group. Fandom thus operates as a marker of identity with *positive distinctiveness*. The intersections of creativity, identity, and activism reaffirm social bonds and enable collective action, underscoring the role of fandom as both a cultural and social force in contemporary digital society.

**Recommendations**

Future research should extend the analysis of fan communities by comparing different fandoms across cultural and regional contexts to capture variations in identity formation and solidarity practices. It is also important to examine the long-term sustainability of digital fan collectives by focusing on leadership dynamics, role differentiation, and the mechanisms that enable cooperation under shifting technological and cultural trends. Scholars may further explore how fandom-based solidarity evolves into civic or humanitarian engagement, offering insights into the potential of popular culture as a catalyst for social action beyond entertainment.

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