

The Rat Race Among Fans: Tracing The Token of Love

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Key words: fanaticism; k-pop; merchandise; idol goods; symbolism	<p>The K-pop industry has grown even larger since merchandising came into the picture and has become an indispensable part of the industry. Across the board, fans came to a consensus about showing love and support for their idols through streaming music and purchasing merchandise. Thus, K-pop industries successfully monetize their fans through various merchandise worldwide. Despite the fact that merchandising might just be another marketing tool to alleviate the business, it has different significance for fans. By tracing fans' roots of affection, this study tried to explore factors that predominantly drive the fans to buy and use idol goods (merchandise). Using a quantitative method with a snowballing approach as its sample, questionnaires were disseminated through various local Indonesian fandoms. The results showed that despite having limited monthly personal spending, fans still managed to collect a handful number of merchandise regardless of the cost. The study also revealed that fans were driven to use and/or buy merchandise as (1) a tool to socialize as well as self-representation within society; (2) a close representation of their idol; and (3) a way to show their affection toward their idols, which in return creating a sense of closeness toward their idol.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity or idol worship is often defined as exceptional adulation or an all-consuming preoccupation over a person or person-like figure (Brooks, 2021; Cheung & Yue, 2012). This person-like figure is closely associated with famous media figures and in the case of K-Pop (Korean Pop) context, idols. These intense attachments of fans to their idols form fanship, a reflection of one's identity due to his/her interest in their subject of adoration (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; He & Sun, 2022).

Through a theoretical lens, this strong sense of fanship or idolatry is well reflected in the compensation model. In the compensation model, previous studies have shown that a strong sense of idolatry could be driven by fans' need to compensate for a lack of social relationships and inadequate psychosocial and cognitive development (Cheung & Yue, 2012; Giles, 2017). It creates a powerful parasocial interaction, a psychological bond between fans and their idol in their mediated interaction as in mass media, television or online platforms. This further builds more intense and intimate dynamics such as fantasized companionship or imaginary kinship with their idols (Chung and Cho, 2017; Cheung & Yue 2012; Baym, 2018). Parasocial interactions forge a strong bond between fans and their subject of adoration, creating fandom culture. Fandom culture itself is a community group built based on sharing fascination toward idols as well as an aspect of popular culture, staying connected among fans (Team T, 2022; He

& Sun, 2022). In this sense, fandom culture also serves the purpose of providing a sense of belonging for fans, completing fans fundamental needs based on the compensation model itself.

Aside from the fact that fandom culture is built on the basis of fans' devotion toward their idols, it also develops a collective identity, whereas fans prefer to be referred to as part of certain fandom (e.g. BTS fans preferred to be called ARMY and BlackPink fans as Blink). Additionally, one of the most important ways for fans to demonstrate loyalty to their newfound collective identity is by sharing moments of intimacy/empathy with other fans and cross-cultural objects (Cicchelli and Octobre, 2021). Cicchelli and Octobre (2021) further explained that these activities are almost ritualistic, showcasing their loyalty and not their social position. This enactment of ritual activities is signified by collecting collectables or memorabilia, or some might call it idol goods or merchandise. It creates a niche yet lucrative market well-known as the fans economy.

This shows that idol goods play an important role as fans identifiers. It has become a fundamental symbol of fans' adoration. This is also the main driver that really pushed up the Indonesian K-pop fans economy in the last decade. In Indonesia itself, the K-Pop merchandising market has grown tremendously with fans spending cash on merchandise from IDR 100,000 to IDR 500,000 (\approx USD 6.37 to USD 31.86) per shopping trip (Koran Sindo, 2019; Santosa, 2019). It was heightened with some e-commerce that jumping into offering various types of merchandise, whether official or not, creating an even more conducive environment for fans to be extra consumptive. This hedonism tendency was well known even among non-fans, taking into example the case of a BTS meal that was blown out of proportion (Laveda & Aminah, 2021). This phenomenon is just the beginning of similar consumption chaos that happened to fans in South Korea, where underage fans demanded expensive merchandise from their parents, creating a new set imbalance in the familial relationship (Pamela, 2023).

So, what actually drives fans to be more consumptive and create a hedonistic lifestyle? Previous studies in other countries have shown that there might be a few factors playing into fans using merchandise as a symbol of their identity as fans (Hwang & Park, 2021; Jin & Minyoung, 2018; Chadborn et al, 2017). For one, a few have pointed out that the desire to make a social connection is a major factor in using merchandise/memorabilia as part of fans' way to show their identity as a fan (Chadborn et al, 2017; Chan et al, 2012; Levine, 2005). According to the researchers, using idol goods helps them to mingle and make connections with fellow fans, creating community, and fulfilling their social needs. On the other hand, other research showed that idol's persona drives fans to buy even more idol goods (Hwang & Park, 2021; Jin & Minyoung, 2018; Kim & Park, 2004; Morgenroth et al, 2015; Zhang et al, 2020). The need to have a role model, as also shown in the compensation model, compels fans to mimic their idols on the surface level, such as fashion sense, overall looks, or even possessing any items that are endorsed by their idols. However, there was almost none of the research conducted in Indonesia actually discusses this. The NCTzen phenomenon increasingly shows that the movement of the Korean entertainment industry is mushrooming in Indonesian society. This study aims to find out the motives, experiences, and meanings of fanaticism for NCTzen Bandung in liking NCT (Nuha et al, 2023).

Thus, a question arises which is among these factors, which factor that has predominantly driven the fans to use idol goods (merchandise/memorabilia) as symbolism to their identity and/or representative of this new uprising pop culture, the K-pop culture in Indonesia? Taking into account these problems, this paper aims to seek the predominant factors affecting the use of idol goods as fans' symbolism to represent their identity as fans among Indonesian K-popers as well as its categorization.

METHODS

In order to answer the big question of which factor that indeed measure the underlying factors affecting the use of idol goods as fans' symbolism to represent their identity as Indonesian K-Pop fans, this research curated a few good bases of factors affecting the use of idol goods as fans' symbolism from previous researches. Combining few theoretical frameworks from

previous studies in other countries, this study tried to explore the factor predominantly affecting fans in buying and using merchandise using relevant factors ranging from the idol human brand's characteristics, the consumer psychology characteristics of the idol human brand, to the desire to imitate the idol human brand. (Hwang & Park, 2021; Jin & Minyoung, 2018; Kim & Park, 2004). Each factor was then further elaborated into 5 to 6 different statements randomly arranged in the questionnaire. All these factors were then compiled into questionnaires completed with few questions on demographics and fans' behavior. Each statement was asked using 7.0 Likert scales in varying degrees from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The questionnaire was then asked of the respondents through an online survey tool (Google Form).

In terms of the data mining method, this study was using snowball sampling, whereas questionnaires were distributed through referrals within a few K-pop communities. By using initial contact with 5 fans group, this study managed to capture 205 respondents. However, through selective screening, only 200 samples that deemed to have legitimate answers.

Afterwards, answers were further processed using two steps of data processing based on the data type. Firstly, demographics and behavioural data were processed to see the general overview of Indonesian K-Pop fans in relation to their merchandise ownership. This data included gender, age, domicile, occupation, merchandise ownership (official and non-official), point of purchase of their owned merchandise, as well as monthly personal spending. The latter was chosen based on the consideration that merchandising was leaning toward personal expense. The monthly personal spending included respondent's personal needs (e.g., clothing, food, transportation) that they have spent alone; yet, it excluded household-level expenditures that bore by the parents or the family, such as renting, family meals, utility expenses, and education expense (for students).

Secondly, for the main data or factorial data, all captured responses were processed using the oblique rotation method in order to see all eligible and related factors. Considering the importance of screening low loadings and cross-loadings, a few filtering procedures were established: (1) all factors with eigenvalue lower than 1.0 should be removed; (2) all factors should represent at least 4% of the total variants since factors lower than that were likely to load two or more factors.

RESULTS

Demographic and Behavioral Pattern

Looking at the demographic data distribution, it can be seen that female fans still dominate the K-Popers domain (90%) with Generation Z as their spearhead with more than 60% of the total sample. This data aligned with a few previous studies on Indonesian K-Popers, whereas the target of the K-Pop market was mostly youngsters aged under 30 years old (Cha & Kim, 2011; Jae-Hun, 2023). Most of them lived in big cities where K-Pop culture has become a constant reminder on almost every corner of the city. Studies have shown that big cities in Indonesia like Greater Jakarta and Surabaya are the biggest base for K-Pop fans, creating an enormous stronghold of idola try for K-Pop (BTSArmy Census, 2020; KOFICE, 2021).

Table 1: Demographic Data (N=200)

	Total	Percentage
Gender		
Male	19	9.5
Female	181	90.5
Age		
Less than 18 years old	6	3
18-24 years old	124	62
25-29 years old	41	20.5
30-39 years old	26	13
Domicile – city		
Greater Jakarta	159	79.5
West Java	5	2.5

	Total	Percentage
East Java	15	7.5
Central Java	13	6.5
Outside Java	8	4
Occupation		
Students	90	45
Students but have own income	34	17
Self employed	15	7.5
Private sector staff	54	27
Civil servant	3	1.5
Professional (consultant, lawyer, etc)	4	2
Monthly personal spending		
IDR 0 – 500,000	77	38.5
IDR 500,001 – 1,000,000	47	23.5
IDR 1,000,001 – 2,000,000	42	21
IDR 2,000,001 – 3,000,000	17	8.5
IDR 3,000,001 – 4,000,000	3	1.5
IDR 4,000,001 – 5,000,001	6	3
More than IDR 5,000,000	8	4

It was interesting to see that the majority of respondents (91%) owned merchandise whether it is official or not as well as the fact that almost half of them (45%) were non-working students. It meant that despite the fact that these non-working students were still very much dependent on their parents or family in terms of financial resources, they were still able to splurge portions of their pocket money into idols' merchandise. About 44% of the total respondents claimed that they were still able to personally spend around IDR 500,001 to IDR 2,000,000 (≈USD 31.86 to USD 127.44) monthly. This monthly spending excluded renting and monthly meals costs, since most of the respondents were students not to mention that in most Indonesian household, this typical living cost was bore by the head of the household. This amount of monthly spending was to be expected. However, this also meant that they have enough fund to buy merchandise.

Table 2: Demographic Data (N=200)

	Total	Percentage
Being a fan for		
Less than 1 year	6	3
1 year	9	4.5
2 years	27	13.5
3 years	24	12
4 years	24	12
5 years	15	7.5
More than 5 years	95	47.5
Merchandise ownership		
No	18	9
Yes	182	91
Number of merchandises owned (official and not official)		
None	9	4.5
1-10 pieces	71	35.5
11-20 pieces	35	17.5
21-30 pieces	22	11.0
31-40 pieces	13	6.5
41-50 pieces	16	8
More than 51	34	17.0
Point of purchase		

	Total	Percentage
Official idol website	29	14.5
Physical store in my area	1	0.5
Official pop-up event	6	3
Fandom group order	55	27.5
E-commerce (<i>Shopee, Tokopedia</i>)	59	29.5
(Group) personal shopper – <i>jasa titip</i>	16	8
Got it from gift	25	12.5
Didn't own any	9	4.5

With the majority of fans being the second and third generation of the Hallyu wave (being a fan for more than 5 years), they have amassed a total amount of fewer than 30 pieces of merchandise; this statement came with a notion that the fans with less than 10 pieces of merchandise (35.5%) might have been the one that ended up categorized as newbie fans, less than 3 years (33%). This was quite a number since almost half of the respondents have monthly spending of less than IDR 2,000,000 (\approx USD 127.44), meanwhile, the average price for official merchandise could be starting from IDR 100,000 (\approx USD 6.37) (for photocards and keychains). The price hiked even more when it came to T-shirts, hoodies, and packaged albums; starting at just shy of IDR 300,000 (\approx USD 19.12). Those official merchandise's prices were pale in comparison with the unofficial one. For counterfeit merchandise, photocards and/or keychains might be priced starting from IDR 20,000 (\approx USD 1.27), while hoodies, T-shirts, and packaged album started from IDR 200,000 (\approx USD 12.7).

This pattern of data could very well be reflecting what happened in the actual Indonesian K-Pop idol merchandising market. The ease of purchase and large distribution of non-official (counterfeit) merchandise might be the biggest factor in this phenomenon. Indonesian market, especially e-commerce, still had too much leeway for non-official merchandise distribution. For years, this has been an ever-growing battle between official brands/products and the market itself. The e-commerce, which was expected to have stricter procedures and policies for this issue, failed to create a safer environment to sell official products; although there was an increasing effort by increasing engagement with patent/rights holders to vet and verify sellers for certain products (Firdaus, 2022; [Septiani, 2023](#)). With e-commerce as the main point of purchase (29.5%), unofficial Indonesian K-Pop merchandise could be easily ordered and delivered straight to the convenience of their home. In this sense, it was no wonder why most of the respondents were able to collect K-Pop merchandise for more than 10 collectable items.

Using Merchandise (Idol Goods) as Fans

The calculated Kaiser Mayer Olkin value was 0.872, which is higher than the rule of thumb of 0.6 threshold value, with significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p<0.001$). Out of all statements asked, there were 4 statements that spread to 3 predominant factors affecting the use of idol goods as symbolism to represent Indonesian K-Pop fans' identity. These three factors explained a total of 67.96% of the variance in data. Those three factors were (1) the social factors, (2) idol pesona factors, and (3) support factors.

Table 3: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Promax Rotated 3 Factor Solution (N=200)

Factors	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Communalities
Social Factor				
1. I actively participate in this idol fandom community	0,888	-0,102	0,040	0,725
2. Other fandom community members and I share the same objectives	0,885	0,068	-0,173	0,743
3. I am very attached to the fandom	0,877	0,066	-0,044	0,806

Factors		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Communalities
community					
4. The friendships I have with other fandom community members means a lot for me	0,859	-0,059	0,082	0,749	
5. I contact idols through this idol fandom community	0,777	-0,003	0,070	0,655	
Idol Persona Factor					
1. I am being criticized when Idol is being criticized	-0,204	0,894	-0,085	0,595	
2. I try to resemble this idol's words, actions, and thoughts	-0,002	0,782	0,029	0,628	
3. I think the success of this idol is my success	0,042	0,766	-0,056	0,593	
4. I follow this idol's fashion styles when I want to express fashion	0,139	0,536	0,178	0,519	
5. I want to be as smart as this idol	0,157	0,499	-0,049	0,341	
6. I want to use a product related to this idol	0,169	0,485	0,199	0,501	
Support Factor					
1. To go to the fan signing event	-0,044	-0,047	0,949	0,836	
2. I always go to concerts and performances of my favourite idol, no matter what	-0,030	-0,040	0,901	0,764	
3. When I purchase item, idol-related goods will be considered first.	0,072	0,104	0,433	0,274	

Factor 1, labelled as a social factor, had the highest eigenvalue of 5.98 with percentage variants of 42.37%. This particular factor showed how fans' close relationship with their group had driven them to use merchandise to strengthen the bond. Attributes under this factor were more skewed toward fans' attachment to the fans' community (fandom) and the value they share with the fandom. It consisted of being part of a fandom community, sharing the same objectives, and how being part of the community defined them.

Factor 1 showed a classic pattern of the social identity approach. Most of the attributes showed a similar social identification dimension, such as solidarity, individual self-stereotyping, and in-group homogeneity (Leach et al, 2008). The solidarity dimension was represented through the strong commitment of the fans toward their group activities by actively participating in community events. While individual stereotyping and in-group homogeneity showed through the feelings of objectives or goals-sharing between the member.

The social identity proposition cited that the community provided a shared identity among their members, which was expressed through normative behavior. This normative behavior dictated conformity of the in-group members based on profound agreement; helping the in group (member of the group) to internalize the community/group value (Hogg, 2006; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The in-group were sensitive and engrossed themselves to appropriate group norms, which more often than not consisted of identity-consistent behavior. This sensitiveness, in return, drove the in-group to wear or own more merchandise since it was one of apparent identity-consistent behavior; the one on a surface layer and easier to imitate.

Moreover, as the behavioral data suggested, most respondents were under 25 years old; the age generation that was commonly known as Generation Z or the digital native's generation. This digital-native generation could be defined as a generation who grew up with high exposure to technology and was fluent in its use (Kim, 2023). This particular generation tended to create a strong bond with their online community, as they spent more time making online presence instead of making offline social networks.

Previous studies showed that online communities, in this case, fans within a fandom, were formed based on common interests and like-minded members due to their attachment to the fandom (Jenol and Pazil 2020; Preece, 2000; Ren et al, 2012). The attachment itself was established based on commitment and identification. In line with the social identity approach, the commitment dimension could be defined as the physiological state of the fans toward their fandom, which signifies their feelings of affective attachment, the perceived cost linked with leaving the fandom, and the sense of comradery to stay within the online fandom (Ren et al, 2012; King-O'Riain, 2021). On the other hand, identification was defined as cognitive awareness and commitment of members toward their fandom (Ren et al, 2012; Preece 2000). This high sense of attachment toward their fandom prompted members to be loyalists, ultimately driving the high usage of idol goods or merchandise. Using idol goods was not only showing active participation and identities as part of the fandom but also a unique identifier, showing them that they belong to a particular fandom.

Factor 2 with an eigen value of 1.43 with percentage variants of 10.18% can be classified as the effect of “idol persona”. Attributes under this factor showed how the strong attachment and bond between fans and idols drove fans to use merchandise/idol goods more often. These particular grouping factors showed that fans were greatly invested in the idol persona and the attributes that follow. The latter manifested through the need to echo their idol, whether it is in the form of actions and thoughts or the idol’s fashion sense.

Aligning with factor 1, where the social identity approach played a great role in fans-idols interaction, factor 2 also showed personal’s attitudes not only cognitively affected by individuals, but also by the group/communities normative. These norms were embedded closely in broad representation and ideological systems that were closely attached to the community core (Hogg & Smith, 2010; Hogg, 2006). These norms dictated members of the community to act in a certain way as a symbol of their membership. These synchronized acts were mostly manifested in the surface layer through the use of a similar sense of fashion, gestures or even way of talking. This included but was not limited to the tendency to mimic idols’ fashion styles and fashion items, and buying merchandise/items endorsed by their idols. This phenomenon was further enhanced by the need for fans to stand out amongst the general public as true fans, creating unique identifiers as a fan; making them wear merchandise and similar fashion items even more so than before.

It did not hurt that K-pop idols were well-known as fashion trendsetters, and early adopters of the fashion world. They were the spearhead of fashion trends, which make some household brands and even luxurious brands flock together to endorse them (Teh, 2023; Narula, 2023). The latter created a bigger ripple effect that pushed fans to be even more eager to imitate their idol’s fashion sense and use their idol’s goods. Not only that, but most fans also appraise their idols as role models worthy. Most of them have a good persona or good image portrayed in the public eye (Kim, 2017; Kanozia & Gangharia, 2021). This was deeply rooted in their public-portrayed personality where they were not only talented in performing arts but also humble and kind-hearted outside the entertainment world.

Factor 3, or the factor group labelled as the support factor, had the lowest eigenvalue of 1.32 and total percentage variants of 9.44. This factor was ranging from going to signing events to going to concerts and/or performing events that involved their idols. This last grouping was more emphasizing their loyalty and love for their idols. Starting from their admiration toward their idols, seeing more of their idols could only lead to deeper affection, which led to the need to feel closer to their idol. Wearing and buying merchandise or any fashion item that resemble their idols were just ways to show it.

Being a part of the fandom, either as active participants or passive ones, created a reminder system for fans, where they kept up-to-date with the idol’s recent events. A sense of companionship and togetherness from fandom also motivated them to go to even more idol-related events. Other than that, fan-meeting events most likely sell unique collectable merchandise (Arifin, 2019). Some fans even thought that collectable merchandise sold during idol-related events was offering more attractive and worth-their-penny goods compared to the

ordinary official channel of merchandise sales. This marketing strategy not only created a hook for fans to keep attending these events, in fear of missing out but also kept a strong engagement between fans and their idol through offline meetings and memorabilia as a keep sake.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to seek the predominant factors affecting the use of idol goods as fans' symbolism to represent their identity as K-pop fans, this paper reveals three different main factors: social factors, idol persona factors, and support factors. The social factors, the strongest factor amongst the three, were more into how fans' strong attachment to the fans community (fandom) actually affected the merchandise usage. The more intensively fans interacted with the fandom, the more they felt "pressured" to own merchandise, which was partially factored by a sense of comradeship. It was their way to make a firm gesture of their loyalty toward the fandom (Kuo and Hou, 2017).

On the other hand, idol persona factors were more about how strong idol persona affected fans' sense of fanaticism and later on affected their behavior of buying and/or wearing merchandise. Most fans considered their relationship with their idol as sacred, close, and intimate. Thus, the idol's personality held great value in fans' eyes. As they felt that their idol not only has artistic talent but also a great personality, the more they felt that idols bore fans' ideal self-concept. These advocated for fans to imitate and wear everything that idols use, wear and advertise. In short, merchandise had become not only a physical symbol of fans dedication toward their idol but also an expression of invaluable psychological support. Lastly, the support factor signified the level of involvement of fans toward their idols activity. This included going to signing events and events or going to concerts or events held by their idols.

Considering the importance of seeing merchandise as the symbol of fans identity, it was suggested that further research on other elements that signify fanaticism should be explored. There was still a lack of studies that explore the effect of fandom on fans or the effect of fandom on fans and idol relationships. Another research suggestion is to explore the K-Pop merchandise market as well as how it affected the overall landscape of K-pop industries in Indonesia.

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