

A Transnational Comparison of Fan Participation Practices and Experiential Differentiation in the Cross-Cultural Dissemination of K-pop: A Theoretical Study of Cultural Capital Based on the Case of Chinese Fans

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Abstract: Amidst the globalization of K-pop, the participatory experiences of fans from different regions exhibit structural differences. Existing research applying Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in the field of cross-cultural communication has predominantly focused on macro-level cultural export. There is a lack of targeted investigation into how cultural capital influences the participatory practices and experiential differentiation of micro-level individuals (i.e., fans) within the context of popular culture's transnational dissemination. To address this research gap, this paper primarily adopts the perspective of Chinese fans within the K-pop fandom. Against the backdrop of cross-cultural communication, it attempts to analyze the experiential differences in the participation of contemporary K-pop fans from different regions through the three dimensions of cultural capital theory.

Keywords: K-pop; Cultural Capital Theory; Cross-Cultural Communication; Fan Culture; Transnational Comparison

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background, Objectives, and Significance

1.1.1 Research background

In the context of cross-cultural communication, K-pop has achieved tremendous success, establishing itself as a global cultural phenomenon. Its industry has successfully transcended cultural boundaries through mature idol training systems, social media strategies, and a fan-driven economy. However, beneath this seemingly "borderless" prosperity, a significant contradiction is increasingly prominent: fans located in different countries and regions experience systematic and structural

inequalities in accessing cultural resources, participating in official events, and even receiving emotional rewards. For instance, fans in core markets (such as Korea, Japan, and the United States) can easily participate in offline concerts and purchase limited merchandise, whereas fans in peripheral markets (such as China, among others) often face barriers like channel blockades, information delays, and political restrictions. This disconnect between the rhetoric of "global homogenization" and the reality of "localized heterogeneous" experiences constitutes the practical starting point of this research.

Regarding the aforementioned phenomenon, some studies and explanations exist within the fields of communication and cultural studies. Among them, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has been widely applied to the cross-cultural dissemination of various cultural products and phenomena. However, existing applications mostly remain at the macro level or are used to explore the symbolic value of cultural products. At the micro level, there is a lack of focused attention on how cultural capital influences the participatory practices and experiential differentiation of individual fans within the context of cross-cultural dissemination.

1.1.2 Research objectives and significance

Therefore, this study aims to bridge the theoretical gap between this macro-structure and micro-experiences by examining the Chinese K-pop fandom as a key case within a "transnational comparative" perspective. This case possesses dual typicality: on the one hand, China is one of the most important markets for global K-pop consumption, with a highly mature and creative fan culture. On the other hand, due to factors such as industrial policies, Chinese fans are typically positioned on the periphery of the "core-periphery" market structure, yet not at

its extreme edge. The limitations they face in this "awkward" situation and the coping strategies they adopt are highly representative. This not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the intrinsic dynamics of Chinese fan culture but also provides a micro-empirical foundation for reflecting on issues of equality and empowerment within cultural globalization.[3]

2. Overview of Existing Research Status

To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, the fields of communication and cultural studies have accumulated a wealth of research findings. Existing studies have generally moved beyond viewing fans as passive recipients, instead emphasizing their dual role as active producers and consumers, meticulously depicting the cultural significance of diverse practices such as translation, creation, consumption, and data labor (Zhang Yongjun, 2024)[2]. Concurrently, research has increasingly focused on the complex identity negotiations fans undergo in transnational fandom, the resulting "love-hate" emotional structures, and critical examinations of their role as "digital laborers" (Yan Qing & Song Bao'er, 2023)[1]. Studies with a more global perspective, employing theoretical frameworks like "postcolonial globalization," have revealed the cultural power hierarchies and unequal structures embedded within the K-pop industry's expansion (Lopes et al., 2023)[4].

However, existing research still has room for deeper theoretical integration and perspective. Some studies focus on describing practices, while others critique structures; there is a lack of a meso-level analytical framework that can organically connect "global inequality structures-individual cultural capital-local participatory practices-micro-emotional experiences." Furthermore, case analyses of China, a quintessential "restricted peripheral market," often lack a systematic transnational comparative perspective, failing to fully reveal the structural roots of its unique characteristics. Therefore, this study aims to introduce Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as its core framework, seeking to answer: Under the structure of the unequal global distribution of cultural capital, how do the differences in cultural capital among individual Chinese fans mediate their participatory practices, and ultimately, how do these differences

systematically shape their stratified and contradictory emotional experiences?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Definition of Core Concepts

3.1.1 Cultural capital and its three dimensions

The theory of cultural capital, proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is one of the core concepts in his reflexive sociology. Bourdieu posits that capital exists not only in an economic form but also in a covert cultural form. Cultural capital refers to the aggregate of cultural knowledge, skills, tastes, and material objects owned by an individual or group that are deemed valuable. It functions as a key resource for competition, class distinction, and social reproduction within various social fields. Bourdieu specifically delineated cultural capital into three fundamental states: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. These three states are interconnected and can be partially converted into one another, jointly determining an agent's position and power within a specific field.

(1) The Embodied State of Cultural Capital

The theoretical definition of the objectified state of cultural capital refers to cultural items that exist in a material form, such as books, musical instruments, and works of art. It is the material manifestation of the embodied state of capital. In this study, the objectified state of cultural capital primarily refers to the idol-related material goods and digital resources owned by Chinese K-pop fans.

(2) The Institutionalized State of Cultural Capital

The theoretical definition of the institutionalized state of cultural capital refers to cultural qualifications or certificates issued by authoritative institutions that grant institutional recognition, such as academic degrees, professional titles, and awards. It legitimizes and standardizes the cultural capital possessed by an individual, transforming it into an institutional identity that can be clearly compared. In this study, the institutionalized state of cultural capital primarily refers to the identities, roles, and prestige that have gained institutional recognition within Chinese K-pop fan communities or on related platforms.

3.1.2 Fan participation practices

"Fan participation practices" broadly refer to all proactive activities carried out by fans centered around their idols. Existing research, often based

on the theory of "participatory culture," typically describes these as activities such as text reproduction and community interaction. Building upon this foundation, this study introduces Bourdieu's theory of practice, conceptualizing "fan participation practices" as: the strategic actions taken by fans, based on their possessed cultural capital, within the specific field of transnational fandom, aimed at accumulating more capital, enhancing their community status, and obtaining emotional rewards. These practices are not merely expressions of emotion but are also processes of capital investment, conversion, and competition. According to the dominant logic of capital conversion within these practices, this study categorizes them into the following three main types.

(1) Labor-oriented practices: centered on the conversion of time and technical capital

Labor-oriented practices refer to activities where fans invest significant time and skills in a collectivized and disciplined manner, directly aimed at influencing the commercial data of idols or groups.

(2) Consumption-oriented practices: centered on the conversion of economic capital

Consumption-oriented practices refer to activities where fans engage in monetary expenditure to directly or indirectly purchase goods and services related to their idols.

(3) Creative-oriented practices: centered on the conversion of symbolic and knowledge capital

Creative-oriented practices refer to activities where fans engage in creative interpretation, reproduction, and dissemination based on original content.

3.1.3 Experiential differentiation

"Experiential differentiation" in this study does not refer to random differences in individual subjective emotions, but is a structural sociological concept. It specifically denotes the stratified phenomenon of feelings, cognitions, and sense of belonging, systematically formed among Chinese fans with varying structural positions and individual cultural capital endowments during their participation in fan practices. This phenomenon emerges under the combined influence of the "core-periphery" market structure shaped by K-pop globalization and the local communication ecology in China. Such differentiation is a direct manifestation of the unequal "emotional returns" on fans' capital investments, arising from their complex

interactions with the industry, communities, and transnational cultural resources.

(1) Perceptual Dimension: The Gradient of Perceived Fairness

This dimension refers to fans' subjective judgments regarding the fairness of the treatment, resources, and opportunities they receive within the transnational fan field, leading to the emergence of "relative deprivation" and "privilege satisfaction."

"Relative deprivation" is commonly experienced by fans who, despite making significant investments (of time, money, and emotion), find it difficult to access core resources (such as official events or direct interaction with idols). These fans are prone to a strong sense of injustice, perceiving a severe mismatch between their efforts and the rewards they receive, especially when compared to fans in Korea or Western countries.

"Privilege satisfaction" is more often experienced by fans who can overcome structural barriers through special channels (such as overseas purchasing agents or transnational travel for fandom activities) or who gain a comparative advantage due to their specific capital (such as language skills or community authority). These fans are more accepting of the existing rules and may even derive a sense of superiority from them.

(2) Emotional dimension: the "love-hate" emotional structure

This dimension refers to the complex of contradictory emotions fans simultaneously experience during their fandom activities, representing the most vivid psychological manifestation of "experiential differentiation." Fans with different capital endowments exhibit different dominant orientations within this emotional structure, resulting in emotional responses predominantly characterized by either "love" or "hate." However, the vast majority of fans exist in a state of "love-hate ambivalence," dynamically oscillating between these two poles.

(3) Identity dimension: belonging and alienation in community identity

This dimension refers to the degree and manner of fans' identification with the collective identity of "Chinese K-pop fans" and with smaller internal circles within this community. Primarily based on their position within the community's capital competition, fans form different identities, such as core identifiers, peripheral identifiers, and external observers.

3.1.4 Transnational comparison (perspective)

"Transnational comparison" in this study is primarily a structured analytical perspective and a mode of problematization, rather than simply referring to an empirical method of mechanically juxtaposing data on Chinese fans with data on fans from overseas. It stems from a critical understanding of "asymmetric flows" (Foule, 2024) and "hierarchical structures" within theories of cultural globalization. The core premise underpinning this study's adoption of this perspective is that no local fan culture phenomenon (such as the practices and experiences of Chinese K-pop fans) occurs in isolation. Its specific forms, internal logic, and emotional structures are profoundly shaped at a deep level by the structural position it occupies within the global system of cultural production and consumption. Therefore, to deeply

understand the uniqueness of Chinese fans, their experiences must be situated within a systematic frame of reference in relation to "others" (especially Korean fans, as the source of the culture, and fans in Western countries, as another key core market). This approach aims to reveal the structural roots and generative mechanisms of their distinctiveness. The "transnational comparison" perspective in this study is not an independent research method, but an overarching analytical framework that permeates the entire process of research question formulation, data analysis, and theoretical interpretation.

3.2 Framework Construction

Figure 1 is a logical diagram of the framework construction.

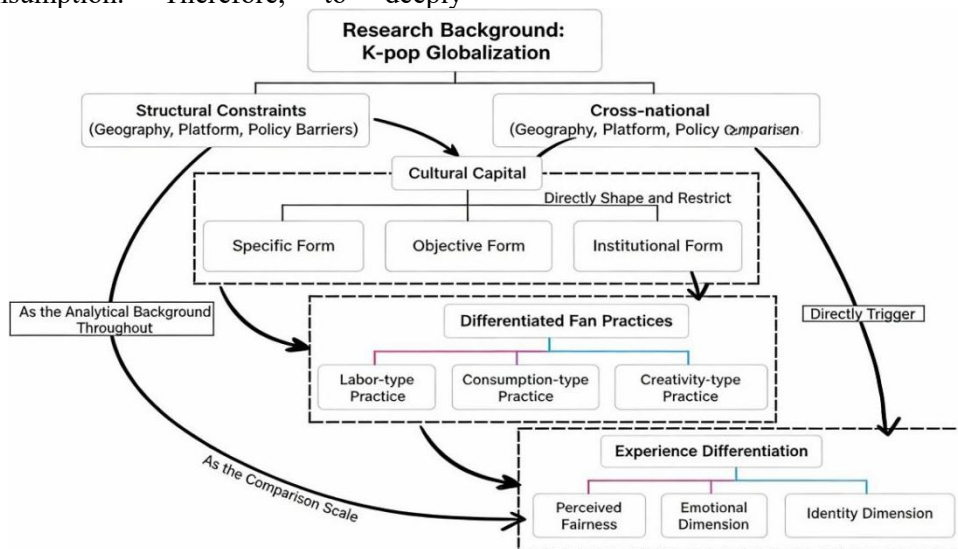


Figure 1. Framework Construction

4. Research Methods

4.1 Questionnaire Survey Method

4.1.1 Basic sample information

This study employed a questionnaire survey method, distributing questionnaires via social media and collecting 310 valid responses (valid response rate: 99.04%). The sample is predominantly female (65.81%) and aged between 18 and 30 years (79.36%), with a wide distribution of fandom tenure, making it representative (Table 1).

The questionnaire included scales measuring the three dimensions of cultural capital, perception of structural barriers, frequency of practices, and emotional experiences. Reliability and validity tests showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of

0.907 and a KMO value of 0.966, indicating good quality of the scales.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Sample

| Characteristics | Category | Number of People | Percentage |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------|
| Gender | Female | 204 | 65.81% |
| | Male | 106 | 34.19% |
| Age | Under 18 | 15 | 4.84% |
| | 18~25 | 130 | 41.94% |
| | 26~30 | 116 | 37.42% |
| | Over 30 | 49 | 15.81% |
| Duration as a K-pop Fan | 7 years and above | 71 | 22.9% |
| | 4~6 years | 76 | 24.52% |
| | 1~3 years | 105 | 33.87% |
| | Less than one year | 58 | 18.71% |

4.1.2 Distribution Characteristics of Cultural Capital

(1) Embodied State Capital: Centered on Practical Language Proficiency and Cross-Platform Media Literacy

Data shows that 82.58% of fans possess basic Korean language skills; 68.06% rely on domestic platforms for information reposting, while 64.84% are able to directly access official Korean platforms, indicating a "mixed information acquisition strategy."

(2) Objectified State Capital: Based on Moderate Consumption, Exhibiting Characteristics of Mass Participation

The distribution of objectified state cultural

capital reveals that 76.45% of fans have an annual consumption below 5,000 yuan, exhibiting characteristics of mass participation; 23.54% have an annual consumption exceeding 5,000 yuan, forming a consumption-based stratification.

(3) Institutional Morphological Capital: Roles are highly differentiated, forming a polycentric "participatory network".

Fan roles are highly diverse, with 67.10% identifying as "data fans," 64.19% as "creative fans," and 61.61% as "consumer fans." Nearly half (49.68%) undertake management responsibilities, forming a polycentric "participatory network." (Table 2)

Table 2. Distribution of Core Indicators Across the Three Dimensions of Cultural Capital (N=310)

| Dimension | Core Indicator | Main Category | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---|----------------------|
| Embodied State | Korean Language Proficiency | Has a basic vocabulary and can communicate in daily situations. | 82.58% |
| Objectified State | Information Channels | Relies on domestic platforms for content reposting | 68.06%/64.84% |
| | | cross-platform access. | |
| | | Annual Consumption Amount | |
| | | Below 5,000 yuan | 76.45% |
| | | Above 5,000 yuan | 23.54% |
| Institutionalized State | Community Role | Data fans/Output fans/Consumption fans | 67.10%/64.19%/61.61% |
| | | Organizational managers / Planners | 49.68%/35.16% |

4.1.3 Overall characteristics of perceived structural barriers

An analysis of Chinese fans' perceived structural barriers shows that various obstacles to transnational fan activities are widespread and have formed a systematic "constraining context". Although their absolute intensity varies, no single barrier is considered "unobstructive" by the majority of fans. Data reveal a clear divergence in fans' experiences when dealing with these barriers: a considerable number have internalized them as manageable daily costs,

while others experience significant distress and constraints. Among these, geographical barriers are the most rigid and universal; internet, payment, and language barriers constitute a technical threshold, whose impact varies drastically depending on individual capital and adaptive strategies. Together, these barriers shape the "possibility frontier" of fan participation and serve as an important structural source of their sense of injustice and creative practices (Table 3).

Table 3. Analysis of Perceived Structural Barriers (N=310)

| Type of Barrier | Mean Score | Percentage of "Slight Obstacle" and Below | Percentage of "Severe Obstacle" and Above |
|------------------------------------|------------|---|---|
| Geographic and Logistical Barriers | 2.89 | 47.10% | 39.68% |
| Network and Platform Barriers | 2.84 | 48.71% | 36.46% |
| Payment and Currency Barriers | 2.77 | 52.58% | 37.10% |
| Language Barrier | 2.70 | 52.91% | 32.58% |

Note: "Slight obstacle or below" combines "no obstacle" and "slight obstacle"; "Severe obstacle or above" combines "severe obstacle" and "extreme obstacle".

4.1.4 Frequency distribution characteristics of fan participation practices

An analysis of the frequency of fan participation practices strongly confirms the overall characteristic of Chinese K-pop fans being

highly active and deeply engaged. The data show that the vast majority of fans are not passive recipients, but active participants in various practices.

Among the three types of practices, the combined proportion of fans who participate "often" and "always" is much higher than those who participate "never" and "occasionally", indicating that participation has become a

normalized part of their fan identity (Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Fan Participation Practices (N=310)

| Type of Practice | Sample Question Items | "Often + Always" Total |
|----------------------|--|------------------------|
| Labor-oriented | Participate in charting, streaming or voting | 68.07% |
| Consumption-oriented | Purchase albums, merchandise, tickets | 68.07% |
| Creative-oriented | Translate, produce or create fan works | 64.84% |
| Interactive-oriented | Actively post and comment in communities | 67.10% |
| Information-oriented | Follow and obtain latest information | 67.74% |
| Intimacy-oriented | Subscribe to private messaging services | 68.38% |

Table 5. Contradictory Dimensions of Fairness Perception (N=310)

| Perceptual Dimension | Representative Question Items | "Agree" + "Strongly Agree" Total |
|----------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Systematicity | Existence of hierarchy in resource allocation | 62.26% |
| | Fans in Western countries hold a higher status | 59.04% |
| | Need to overcome more barriers | 60.65% |
| Individualization | Can access resources equally | 59.67% |
| | Effort is proportional to reward | 55.49% |

4.1.5 Contradictory dimensions of fairness perception

Data analysis of fairness perception reveals a highly tense contradictory mentality among Chinese K-pop fans. On the one hand, they clearly perceive the systemic hierarchy in the global market and the structural disadvantages they face at the rational cognitive level; on the other hand, at the individual practice level, quite a few of them achieve relatively fair or even satisfying personal experiences. The coexistence of macro criticism and micro acceptance forms the deep psychological structure of their

"experience differentiation" (Table 5).

4.1.6 Differentiation in individual emotional experience

Data analysis of individual emotional experiences further confirms the complexity and resilience of fans' emotional structures. "Relative deprivation" and "firm sense of pleasure/belonging," as two dominant emotions, do not replace each other but coexist at a high frequency, jointly depicting the "love-hate ambivalence" within fans' inner worlds (Table 6).

Table 6. Differentiation in Individual Emotional Experience (N=310)

| Dimension | Representative Question Items | "Often" + "Always" Total |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Negative Emotions | Feel disappointed/unfair when seeing fans from other countries have easier access | 61.61% |
| Positive Emotions | Happiness and belonging far outweigh anxiety | 60.32% |
| | Love and support have never wavered | 61.29% |

4.7 Questionnaire Reliability and Validity Analysis

4.7.1 Reliability analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted on the questionnaire items, excluding demographic variables. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient between 0.7 and 0.8 indicates acceptable reliability, between 0.8 and 0.9 indicates good reliability, and above 0.9 indicates excellent reliability. The results are shown in the table below. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.907, which is greater than 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire reliability is acceptable (Table 7).

Table 7. Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | Number of Items |
|------------------|--|-----------------|
| .907 | .918 | 20 |

4.7.2 Validity analysis

Measuring the validity of a scale is done to determine whether the measurement variables for each latent variable possess stable consistency and structure, and it is the most commonly used indicator for evaluating scale validity. When conducting validity analysis, it is first necessary to determine whether the conditions are met. Generally, two conditions need to be satisfied: first, the KMO value needs to be greater than 0.7; second, the significance of Bartlett's test of sphericity needs to be less than 0.05. Meeting these two conditions indicates a strong correlation between the observed variables (Table 8).

The test results show that the KMO measure of sampling adequacy is 0.966, which is greater than 0.70. Bartlett's test of sphericity shows an approximate chi-square value of 4838.837 and a significance level of 0.000 ($P < 0.01$). Therefore,

the validity structure is good (Table 9).

Table 8. KMO and Bartlett's Test

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------|
| KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | .966 | |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 4838.837 |
| | df | 190 |
| | | .000 |

Table 9. Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | Number of Items |
|------------------|--|-----------------|
| .907 | .918 | 20 |

5. Research Findings

Based on the analysis of questionnaire data from 310 Chinese K-pop fans, this study finds that within the cross-cultural dissemination field of K-pop, the Chinese fandom exhibits significant internal differentiation in practices and emotional contradictions. This phenomenon is not randomly distributed but is mediated by the individual cultural capital possessed by fans (especially linguistic and economic capital) in the process of navigating structural barriers through different participatory practices, ultimately leading to differentiated experiential perceptions.

The research identifies a coherent logical chain moving from "structural constraints" to "capital competition" and finally to "experiential outcomes":

(1) Structural Barriers as the Objective Premise for Differentiation: Systemic barriers, represented by geographical distance and digital firewalls, position Chinese fans structurally as "restricted peripheral participants." This makes their fandom activities significantly more costly than those of fans in core markets, laying the objective foundation for unequal experiences.

(2) Cultural Capital as the Core Mediator of Differentiation: Differences in fans' individual linguistic, economic, and skill-based capital (embodied/objectified states) directly determine their efficiency and methods for overcoming barriers, creating a clear stratification of resources and capabilities within the group. The amount and type of capital predefine their strategic choices and potential returns in practice.

(3) Strategic Practice as the Field for Capital Conversion: Fans invest their capital into practice through two main strategies: "platform dependency" (using social networks to obtain information) and "labor compensation" (compensating for the lack of offline experiences through intensive digital labor and creative

production). This process is not only about supporting idols but also involves reinvesting and reconvertng capital within the fan community to compete for prestige, status, and influence (institutionalized state capital).

(4) Contradictory Experience as the Micro-Psychological Manifestation of Structure: Ultimately, the experience of Chinese fans presents itself as a profound contradictory unity. They develop "systemic critiques" and a "sense of relative deprivation" due to their clear awareness of global inequities. Simultaneously, they gain "individual satisfaction," a "sense of community belonging," and "lasting pleasure" from the effective operation of their own capital in micro-practices. This emotional structure of "love-hate ambivalence" is the concentrated psychological reflection of their dual identity as structurally constrained "peripheral participants" and agentic "capital practitioners."

6. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

6.1 Research Limitations

1) Methodological Limitations: This study primarily relies on questionnaire survey data. Although the sample size is adequate and the analysis is in-depth, it is difficult to capture the dynamic nature of fan practices, subtle emotional changes, and the complete process of interactions within the community through this method alone. The survey sample may also suffer from self-selection bias, tending to attract deeply involved fans with a strong desire to express themselves.

2) Scope Limitations: Although this study adopts a "transnational comparison" perspective, the empirical data is mainly concentrated on the Chinese fan side. The experiences of "core Korean fans" or "Western fans" are primarily understood through the perceptions and statements of Chinese fans, rather than through parallel empirical investigations. This imposes certain limitations on conducting rigorous comparative analysis.

3) Theoretical Perspective Limitations: This study primarily proceeds from the perspective of cultural capital theory. While this framework effectively explains differentiation and strategies, the analysis of the inherent complexity, fluidity, and bodily dimensions of fans' emotional experiences could be further deepened by integrating perspectives from affect theory or psychoanalysis.

6.2 Future Prospects

Based on the limitations outlined above, future research can be advanced in the following directions. Methodologically, studies could adopt mixed methods, such as combining in-depth interviews and digital ethnography, to longitudinally track the practice trajectories of individual fans and communities, thereby obtaining richer, multi-dimensional, and processual data. Future research could also design parallel questionnaires and interviews to simultaneously investigate fan groups positioned in different markets, such as Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Western countries. This would allow for a systematic comparison of cultural capital composition, barrier perception, and practice models, enabling a more precise mapping of the global fan field and achieving genuine transnational comparison. Regarding theoretical integration and expansion, future studies could more closely integrate cultural capital theory with political economy critique, affect labor theory, and platform studies. This would facilitate further analysis of how entertainment industry capital and platform

algorithms collude with fans' capital practices to jointly shape this unequal experiential structure.

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