

# COVID-19 and Chinese Kpop Fan Community--Case in BTS

Xinying Huang

Goldsmiths, University of London, SE14 6NW

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**Abstract:** V(Kim Taehyung), a member of BTS, has inspired remarkable fan dedication in China. In 2021, his Chinese fan community raised 5.42 million RMB within the first hour of fundraising for his 26th birthday. Earlier, on December 30, 2020, these fans paid for a birthday ad on Dubai's Burj Khalifa. What's shocking is that all of this happened during the COVID-19. It seems that the epidemic has not affected fan behavior, but is this really the case? This article examines the intense interest and strength of Chinese Kpop fans, focusing on BTS Chinese fan community as a case study. It also explores how COVID-19 has impacted the community, particularly in terms of fan identity and group activity patterns, by discussing fan community constructs like identity and behavior.

**Keywords:** Kpop; Covid-19; Fan community; Fan Behaviors

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## 1. Kpop Development in China and Fan Community Literature Review

### 1.1 Background

Since the early 21st century, BTS has become the most popular global music group, largely due to their dedicated fanbase, ARMY (The name of fan community). ARMY's influence extends through translation, fundraising, and online activities, fostering a form of "cyber-nationalism" where fans worldwide unite under a shared online identity, embracing BTS as if they belonged to a single, imagined nation.<sup>[1]</sup> Cultural similarities between China and South Korea, along with targeted Kpop exports, have amplified impact of Kpop in Chinese cyberspace, making fan groups both significant and controversial.<sup>[2]</sup> This paper uses BTS fandom as a case study to explore the mindset and behavior of fans, particularly in China, and how the COVID-19 has influenced them.

### 1.2 Kpop and its Development in China

China has been a key market for Kpop, with the Korean Wave's development there divided into two phases: 1997-2007 and 2008-present.<sup>[3]</sup> Kpop's evolution in China is best understood through consumer reception across three periods: analog media (1992-2004), pre-mobile internet (2005-2012), and mobile internet (2013-present).<sup>[4]</sup> Despite shifts in media and government policies, Chinese Kpop fans stay connected through various online platforms, such as Weibo, where BTS has over 5 million followers.

### 1.3 Fan Identity and Fan Community

Social identity theories suggest that an individual self-concept is shaped by their group membership, which influences their social identity.<sup>[5]</sup> People need a positive view of their group to feel secure in their social identities, which is especially relevant in fan communities.<sup>[6]</sup> These communities, formed through popular culture, exhibit clear boundaries, active participation, and cultural capital. In the internet age, online fan communities have emerged, where individuals with similar interests connect via social media.<sup>[7]</sup> These virtual communities share consistent values, goals, and information, fostering a sense of belonging.<sup>[8]</sup>

Technological advancements have enhanced fans' ability to share information, collaborate, and form cohesive groups, leading to a competitive environment within fandom.<sup>[9]</sup> Social hierarchies have emerged, and fans increasingly invest in projects supported by artists or fan groups. Brands leverage celebrity endorsements to boost product awareness and sales, while fandemos have evolved into influential voices for social and political change.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 1.4 COVID-19 and Fan Behaviors

Isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to psychological distress, as fear of contracting the virus heightened loneliness.

<sup>[11]</sup> The World Health Organization emphasizes the importance of staying connected to mitigate these effects. Kpop fans have responded by supporting those affected by the pandemic, benefiting from the online connections themselves.<sup>[12]</sup> China, heavily impacted by COVID-19, saw significant disruptions in the Kpop fan community. The music industry, particularly live performances, suffered major losses due to safety measures. As concerts shifted online, fans faced altered experiences, and fan clubs implemented welfare measures to maintain community engagement and member recognition.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **2. The study on the BTS fan community and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on it**

### **2.1 Identity construction in fan communities**

#### **Image of fan account**

Interviewees reported using BTS member avatars on Weibo to express their love and attract fans. Their avatar choices reflected their desired online identities.<sup>[14]</sup> Profiles further detailed their BTS fandom, including fan club affiliations, fostering community engagement. Profiles featured relationship labels to idols, blending virtual and real-life scenarios, underlying fan community identity construction explored in the next chapter.

#### **Real life scenarios**

Celebrities fulfill fans' need for character relationships.<sup>[15]</sup> Fan communities mirror real-world roles, focusing on family and workplace identities. BTS fans include 'mom' and 'girlfriend' fans. Kpop commercial idol-agency ties inspire fan labor, with sexualized texts empowering female fans. The fan community differentiates between close and distant fans based on their idol relationships and fan labor roles. Fansite admins actively post visuals, while remote fans, or 'screen fans,' rely on their posts. Social media enables swift promotion and access to idol news.

#### **Hierarchy of fans within the community**

All interviewees note an unwritten hierarchy in Kpop fan communities, with roles divided into community managers, opinion leaders, and ordinary fans.<sup>[16]</sup> Managers lead, organize, and share resources, overcoming language barriers for global fans. Fan Stations require skilled members for translations, subtitles, etc. Opinion leaders include creative fans or station sisters. Ordinary fans, informed by media, contribute online to prove their fandom, such as charting, voting, and album purchases.

#### **The construction of a sense of participation in the fan community**

In Kpop culture, supporting idols is a distinct cultural form. Pre-COVID, fans flew to Korea for BTS concerts and merchandise. And give behavioral support at concerts. Birthday support funds cityscapes, enhancing idols' social impact. BTS fans, active since 2014, give gifts to idols for emotional involvement and identity. Consumption deepens fans' cultural participation and sense of belonging.

Kpop commercialized music culture sets rules for agencies, idols, and fans driven by data comparison. "Data" significantly influences fan behavior and cultural participation. Fans often base their promotion of idols on popular metrics like likes and views, shaping their engagement and decision-making.<sup>[17]</sup> Charts gauge popularity and fandom strength, tied to song listens and album sales on music platforms in China. BTS fans striving for their idols to top the charts due to intense competition & impact on idol careers and market stance. Geographical barriers prompt focus on album sales. Charting is strategic, costly, and vital for awards and commercial success. Fans wield power in determining idols' worthiness of honors. This data-driven approach fosters a sense of participation and belonging among fans, who find satisfaction in their idols' success.

Kpop fan communities engage in charting and control languages to assert their voice online. These activities include organizing Anti-Slander Campaigns and managing online discourse to protect their idols' image. Despite these efforts, Kpop remains a marginalized genre within online multiculturalism. Fan communities continue to employ online strategies to combat negative perceptions, ensuring their voices are heard in the broader media landscape.

### **2.2 Influence of COVID-19 on Kpop fandom**

COVID-19 significantly impacted the Kpop industry, leading to widespread cancellations of concerts and events, affecting both fans and artists. The pandemic heightened anxiety among fans, especially in China, where Kpop has a large following. This uncertainty about when idols could perform again caused unease within the community. The inability to see idols in person led to a sense of detachment, causing some to question their fan identity and even abandon it altogether, highlighting how critical in-person experiences are to fan identity formation and maintenance. Besides, increased time spent online during the pandemic led to a surge in negative reviews and rumors. However, it also led to positive outcomes for fans. It prompts fans to focus more on defending their idols in cyberspace and maintaining their presence on social media. As people sought entertainment during lockdown, interest in Kpop surged, lead-

ing to increased streaming, online interactions, and a boom in merchandise sales.

### 3. Conclusion

Chinese Kpop fans are known for their strong community bonds, creating supportive environments where they share their love for music and develop new ways to engage with one another. This extends to the commercial success of their idols. The epidemic has presented both challenges and opportunities for these fan communities. While geographic and policy restrictions have limited traditional fan activities, adapting quickly to the pandemic's challenges by using social media to express their passion. It has also promoted the development of industries related to fan communities.

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