

# Constructing Identity Through Symbolic Capital, Taking k-Pop Merchandise Products as an Example

Yizhen Li

Beijing National Day School, Beijing, 100039, China

## ABSTRACT

This article examines K-pop merchandise, exploring how it constructs identity and social image through symbolic capital in consumption and interactive practices. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory and the concept of symbolic capital, this study employs participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and online ethnography to systematically analyze the cultural significance of merchandise from both the perspectives of capital and consumers. The study finds that capital transforms merchandise into symbolic capital that carries emotions and identity through product design, artist popularity, channel control, and field/cross-border marketing. Consumers, through purchasing, collecting, and using merchandise, not only fulfill their emotional attachment and community affiliation but also achieve identity recognition and reproduction through the construction of group boundaries and the demarcation of social status. This article aims to reveal the dynamic mechanisms of symbolic capital in the context of consumption and provide practical insights for the design and marketing of entertainment merchandise.

## KEYWORDS

Symbolic capital; Identity; Merchandise; Fan culture

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research background

K-pop (Korean Pop), a globally influential pop culture phenomenon, originated in South Korea in the 1990s. After nearly three decades of development, it has become a vital component of the global cultural industry. K-pop's success relies not only on its musical innovation and the talent of its artists, but also on the merchandise entertainment industry system behind it, including idol development, market-oriented operations, and cultural communication strategies. K-pop industry's success is particularly evident in its cross-cultural communication capabilities, breaking down traditional cultural and market boundaries and attracting fans from around the world.

At the same time, K-pop fandom exhibits unique cultural phenomena in its consumption behavior. By purchasing peripheral products (such as lightsticks, limited-edition albums, and photobooks), fans not only support their idols and artists but also construct their own identities and social profiles through these symbolic items. These merchandises are no longer simple tangible products; they carry profound emotional meaning and social symbols. Within fan culture, the accumulation and transformation of symbolic capital has become a prominent phenomenon. Fans cultivate connections with their idols through the possession of rare or limited-edition merchandise products, and through these items, they form social networks with other fans.

However, existing research has largely focused on descriptive analyses of fan behavior, such as consumption patterns and the types of fan support activities. Less in-depth research examines the dynamic role of symbolic capital in fan identity and social image management. Addressing this research gap, this article explores how K-pop merchandise, through symbolic capital, constructs identity, social image, and a sense of belonging within fan communities.

### 1.2 Research significance

Existing literature has largely focused on descriptive representations of fan behavior, such as the forms of fan support activities, forms of social interaction, and types of consumption behaviors. However, there has been limited in-depth exploration of the dynamic interplay between symbolic capital and identity construction and social image management. Furthermore, interactions within K-pop fandoms are not entirely egalitarian; rather, an implicit hierarchy exists based on the accumulation of symbolic capital. For example, fans who have rare merchandise, participate in fan activities more often, and have popular social media accounts often enjoy higher status and voice within the fandom. This symbolic capital-driven hierarchy not only influences community relationships among fans but also further shapes individuals' understanding of their own identities and sense of belonging. However, the mechanisms by which symbolic capital shapes social stratification, identity, and social image within fans have not been fully explored in existing research. Therefore, this article examines K-pop fandoms, focusing on how they construct identity and social image through symbolic capital in their consumption and interaction practices, and attempts to reveal the diverse manifestations of this

process. By introducing Bourdieu's field theory and the concept of symbolic capital, this paper aims to supplement the deficiencies of existing research in theoretical construction and promote a deeper understanding of symbolic capital structures and identities in fan culture.

This article aims to expand and refine the theoretical applicability of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital in the contemporary consumer context by deeply examining how K-pop merchandise, a form of symbolic capital, is understood, valued, and utilized from the consumer's perspective. K-pop fans' consumer behavior not only reflects their emotional investment in their idols but also embodies the cultural logic of constructing their identities and expressing their social images through symbolic objects (such as official merchandise, limited-edition merchandise).

This study not only enriches the dynamic application of the concept of symbolic capital at a theoretical level but also has practical value. By analyzing consumer behavioral differences and preferences in merchandise product consumption, it can provide targeted recommendations for the entertainment industry, idol management companies, and related brands in the design and marketing of merchandise products. For example, it offers insights into how to enhance the emotional value and identity symbolism of products through symbolic design, how to achieve differentiated customization in different cultural markets, and how to leverage social interaction mechanisms to enhance fan engagement and brand loyalty.

### 1.3 Research content

This study employed a combined qualitative and empirical research strategy, using a multi-faceted approach to systematically collect and conduct in-depth data analysis. During the data collection phase, three primary methods were employed: first, participatory observation, in which researchers immerse themselves in K-pop fan communities and online and offline venues, observing the specific behaviors and cultural practices of fans in acquiring, using, and communicating about peripheral products through long-term fieldwork. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on targeted, in-depth interviews with fans of varying levels of consumption and community engagement, to elicit firsthand accounts of their interpretations of the meaning of merchandise products, their emotional engagement, and their identity construction. Third, online ethnography was employed, tracking and documenting discussions, displays, and exchanges of merchandise products on social media platforms and fan forums, capturing the dynamic process of symbolic interaction and the generation of collective meaning.

In terms of data analysis, this study primarily employed content analysis to systematically code and extract themes from the diverse textual data. Through repeated comparison and categorization of interview transcripts, observation notes, and online discourse, the study aimed to explore the deeper meanings of K-pop merchandises as cultural symbols and their inherent connection to consumer identity.

At the technical level, this study follows a complete research path from problem formulation to theoretical interpretation: First, the core research question is clearly defined as "How are K-pop merchandise products, as symbolic capital, given significance by fans? How are these items connected to consumers' identity?"; then, data collection and analysis are systematically carried out, using semi-structured interviews and participatory observation to obtain rich empirical data, and content analysis is used to interpret qualitative data and refine concepts; finally, through in-depth interpretation of the data, a theoretical interpretation of K-pop merchandises as symbolic capital is formed, and then inferences and interpretations are made on how consumers judge, express, and construct their own identities through these cultural consumption behaviors, thereby achieving a comprehensive response to the research questions.

### 1.4 Current research status at home and abroad

#### 1.4.1 K-pop

K-pop, or Korean Pop, is a unique pop music culture that has evolved in South Korea. Currently, K-pop is primarily known for artist groups, created and marketed by major South Korean entertainment companies such as SM entertainment through a systematic training and industrialization model. K-pop's defining characteristics are its foundation in Korean songs and artists, while also incorporating diverse international elements. On the one hand, entertainment companies collaborate with mainstream European and American music production teams to achieve an international sound and production standard. On the other hand, the inclusion of multinational members not only broadens the audience base but also gives K-pop groups a transnational identity and cultural reach. Furthermore, K-pop's visual presentation places a premium on stage performance, fashion, and choreography, further strengthening its cross-cultural appeal. As a result, K-pop has gradually transcended a single musical genre, becoming a global phenomenon integrating music, dance, fashion, and fan culture.

#### 1.4.2 Consumers' purchasing behavior for merchandise products

Merchandise products are a special way of naming cultural and creative products. In the K - pop industry , merchandise is often used to refer to other idol-related products that are directly produced and sold by the entertainment company to which the idol belongs or authorized to be sold by other companies, usually including lightsticks , photobooks , photo cards, concert DVDs, key chains, calendars, etc <sup>[1]</sup>. Within the theoretical framework of consumerism, individual consumption behavior is not only about satisfying the demand for material products, but also about pursuing symbols, meanings and cultural values. The consumption behavior of K -pop fans is a vivid embodiment of this theory. They are not only buying Korean products such as Korean music, TV dramas, movies, fashion clothing, etc., but also consuming the Korean pop culture carried by these products <sup>[2]</sup>. These consumption behaviors vividly reflect the most direct support of the K-pop fan group for their favorite artists and IPs.

#### 1.4.3 Symbolic capital

The concept of symbolic capital was first proposed by Bourdieu and is an important concept in social semiotics. According to Bourdieu 's explanation, symbolic capital can be understood as a scarce resource that exists in a symbolic way, such as honor, reputation, spirit, uniqueness or sacredness, which is recognized by society and can be produced, reproduced and accumulated over a long period of time. This type of capital is not physical, but intangible and symbolic. It can enhance the influence of legitimacy, reputation and credibility <sup>[3]</sup>. In the consumption field of fan culture, peripheral products not only exist as material commodities, but also carry strong symbolic value and cultural significance. From the perspective of Bourdieu's "symbolic capital", peripheral products themselves have symbolic meanings that are widely recognized by the fan community. Their value does not lie in practicality or economic value, but in their ability to represent fans' loyalty to their idols, taste, cultural identity and sense of community belonging.

#### 1.4.4 Consumer identity

Identity is an individual's cognitive construction and social description of "who I am", involving the subject's understanding of their own position, value and belonging in a specific social and cultural context. From the perspective of cultural studies, identity is not a static and unchanging essence, but the result of being constructed and reproduced in continuous social interaction and cultural practice. Cultural institutions (such as the media, entertainment industry, education system, etc.) shape certain values, aesthetic tastes and behavioral norms through discourse power and symbolic mechanisms, thereby guiding individuals to understand and express their own identity. In this process, individuals may actively identify with mainstream cultural values to gain social recognition; they may also adopt rebellious or marginalized cultural practices to seek differential identity. Therefore, the operation of cultural power not only affects the content of identity, but also profoundly affects the path and form of identity formation. In K-pop fan culture, fans actively participate in the cultural field constructed by the entertainment industry through practical behaviors such as cheering, ranking, and participating in online and offline community interactions. These practices are both support for idols and expressions of their own identity, reflecting the individual's continuous construction of self and group belonging in a specific cultural mechanism <sup>[4]</sup>.

### 1.5 Literature review

Existing literature has largely focused on descriptive representations of fan behavior, such as the forms of fan support activities, forms of social interaction, and types of consumption. However , there has been limited in-depth exploration of the dynamic interplay between symbolic capital in identity construction and social image management, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. Furthermore, interactions within K-pop fandoms are not entirely egalitarian; rather, an implicit hierarchy exists based on the accumulation of symbolic capital. For example, fans who possess rare merchandise, participate in intensive fan support, and cultivate extensive social networks often enjoy higher status and voice within the fandom. This symbolic capital-driven hierarchy not only influences community relationships among fans but also further shapes individuals' understanding of their own identities and sense of belonging. However, the mechanisms by which symbolic capital shapes social stratification, identity, and social image within fans have not been fully explored in existing research . Therefore, this article examines K-pop fandoms, focusing on how they construct identity and social image through symbolic capital in their consumption and interaction practices, and attempts to reveal the diverse manifestations of this process across cross-cultural contexts. By introducing Bourdieu's field theory and the concept of symbolic capital, this paper aims to supplement the deficiencies of existing research in theoretical construction and promote a deeper understanding of power structures and identities in fan culture.

## 2 Capital's construction of symbolic capital

semi-structured interviews with managers at an entertainment company and related research materials, capital investors have consistently used the logic of symbolic capital to construct fan recognition and market value in the production and marketing of K-Pop merchandise products .

### 2.1 Product strength

Product strength is the primary link for capital to construct symbolic capital. In response to the question "What factors does the company pay most attention to when designing and launching merchandise products?", entertainment company leaders emphasized that merchandise designs must be intuitively "good-looking", conform to the public's aesthetics, and be able to bring emotional value and pleasure. Otherwise, even if they are tied to the artist, it will be difficult to form sustained consumption power. This is consistent with the discussion of merchandise objects as emotional sustenance and identity credentials [1]. Therefore, capital transforms merchandise products into consumer necessities for fans by strengthening aesthetic design and emotional carrying capacity.

### 2.2 Binding to popularity

Investors are accumulating symbolic capital by tying merchandise to the popularity of artists. Respondents noted that merchandise sales are almost always positively correlated with the artist's popularity; the more famous the artist, the higher the merchandise sales and exposure. This mechanism makes merchandise consumption a crucial way for fans to demonstrate their identity and loyalty, while the scarcity of merchandise (such as limited-edition photo cards and concert merchandise) further reinforces identity divisions within fan groups .

### 2.3 Controll of sales channel

Investors maintain the symbolic value of merchandise by controlling sales channels and market placement. Respondents clearly distinguished between "artist merchandise" and "co-branded products," noting that artist merchandise is typically sold only in South Korea or on the artist's own platforms. Unlike fast-moving consumer goods, it's not distributed wholesale, but rather reaches its target audience through targeted channels like official websites and album stores . This "precision placement" not only reduces marketing costs but also imbues the merchandise with an "exclusive" quality, further solidifying its symbolic capital.

### 2.4 Marketing methods

In addition, capital parties also amplify the capital effect of merchandise through field-based and cross-border marketing methods. The interviewees mentioned that companies often sell merchandises in pop-up stores in concerts or shopping malls. This field binding makes the purchase behavior itself a ritual experience, deepening the emotional stickiness between fans and idols <sup>[5]</sup>. For example, the lightsticks created by K-pop culture is the most representative merchandise . The lightstick was first designed by Korean entertainment companies for specific groups. Its shape, color and lighting effects all have unique identity . The lightstick is different from other merchandises that are only collectible. Fans can connect to the central control at the concert and light up the sea of lights with the lightstick in their hands. This field binding is particularly typical in the consumption of lightsticks. The lightstick is not only an indispensable symbolic object in concerts or offline activities, but also a symbol of fan identity because its design often has the unique identity of the group. When fans collectively wave the same lightstick at the concert, the act of purchasing and using it is given a strong ritual meaning [5]. This unified performative practice not only strengthens community cohesion but also deepens the emotional bond between fans and idols . Regarding crossover, entertainment companies are also expanding the cultural appeal and collectible value of merchandise products through crossover collaborations (such as collaborations with trendy brands and anime characters), expanding their reach beyond fan consumption into a broader cultural market.

In summary, the interviews reveal how investors, through a comprehensive chain of operations—product design, artist popularity, channel control, and localization/cross-border integration—successfully transform merchandise into symbolic capital that embodies emotions, identity, and group belonging. In this process, fans not only consume material goods but also participate in identity construction and cultural reproduction through their consumption behaviors.

## 3 Consumers' interpretation of identity through symbolic capital

This study posed the following key questions in its interview design to delve deeper into fans' motivations and

meaning-making regarding K-Pop merchandise:

"Why do you buy K-Pop merchandise?"

"What would you think if you met someone carrying idol merchandise outside?"

"What types of merchandise do you tend to buy? Why?"

"Does merchandise consumption bring pressure among the fan community?"

### 3.1 Emotional attachment, emotional satisfaction, and supportive expression

Fans generally regard purchasing behavior as an important way to emotionally support and connect with their idols. One respondent said: "I feel excited and thrilled after purchasing, as if I received a gift from my favorite idol. I feel indescribable joy." Another respondent also pointed out: "Every time I receive a new merchandise, I feel as excited as if I bought it for the first time. I have no regrets." These responses are consistent with consumer psychology research, indicating that fans' purchasing behavior is mostly driven by emotions, and aims to achieve psychological satisfaction and emotional identification through material consumption <sup>[6]</sup>.

### 3.2 Collectability, scarcity, and community symbolism

Many respondents emphasized the collectible value of merchandise, particularly limited edition or rare products, which enhance their symbolic value. Fans stated, "Buying merchandise has become a lifestyle for me. It's not just for collection, but also a way to demonstrate belonging and pride to fellow fans." Research shows that owning such scarce merchandise fosters a sense of "symbolic ownership," further strengthening one's sense of identity and belonging within the fan community.

### 3.3 Symbolic construction of group identity and community boundaries

When asked about their feelings when seeing others wearing the same idol merchandise in public, most fans expressed a strong sense of identification, viewing them as "like-minded." In this context, merchandise acts as a symbolic medium for community identification, establishing boundaries between "in-group" and "out-group." Theory suggests that this "co-ethnic identification" mechanism allows fans to convey to themselves and others, through their consumption behaviors, the message of belonging to the same group.

### 3.4 Consumption pressure and rational reflection

The interview responses to the question of "Does buying pressure exist among fans?" were quite revealing. Some fans admitted that they do feel pressure during promotions or limited-edition events. One fan commented, "I've bought multiple albums just to get a chance to attend an event—this pressure made me reflect: Is it because I want to support my idol, or because I'm afraid of missing out?" The research further suggests that FOMO (fear of missing out) and community expectations often drive fans to irrational spending behaviors, even leading to psychological fatigue and self-doubt.

### 3.5 Consumption motivations and identity expression driven by group identity

Based on identity theory, this study further raises two questions to directly explore the relationship between fan identity and merchandise consumption:

"Do you think buying and owning idol merchandise is a sign of being a 'true fan'? Could you share your thoughts?"

"At what point do you feel you 'have to' buy a piece of merch simply because you're a member of a particular fan group?"

These questions aim to directly examine how group identity shapes consumer behavior. During interviews, many fans indicated that merchandise products are a crucial medium for in-group identity verification. For example, one respondent shared, "When our fan club releases limited-edition lightsticks, almost everyone buys them—not just for the concert, but to show they're part of this group." Another respondent noted, "Especially when everyone in the community is showing off a new merchandise, if you don't have one, you'll feel a strange sense of alienation, as if you're not fully engaged."

These responses show that merchandise consumption is not only an individual behavior, but also a way to express and strengthen collective identity. Fans gain recognition and belonging within the group by consuming specific products, and at the same time, they use material symbols to define the boundaries between "in group" and "out group" <sup>[7]</sup>. This kind of identity-based consumption often goes beyond the scope of personal preferences and is embedded in larger community practices and identity politics, showing distinct social and symbolic characteristics.

## 4 Research conclusions

The above explanations, from both the capital and consumer perspectives, explain how symbolic capital is conceived, manufactured, marketed, sold, and then redefined in the K-pop merchandise industry. From the perspective of capital, entertainment companies leverage aesthetic design, scarcity creation, and site-specific marketing to shape merchandise into cultural commodities imbued with both emotional and symbolic value. From the consumer perspective, fans cultivate emotional connections, group identity, and social image through the purchase and use of merchandise. Research further demonstrates that merchandise exhibits diverse understandings and practices across cultural contexts, reflecting both fans' emotional investment in their idols and the profound role of symbolic capital in shaping community hierarchies, identity verification, and a sense of belonging. In summary, the K-pop merchandise industry is not only an extension of the fan economy but also a quintessential arena for the operation of symbolic capital.

At the practical level, this study's findings offer valuable insights for entertainment companies and related industries. Companies can enhance the emotional value and identity symbolism of peripherals to increase product value and fan loyalty. They can also explore more localized and interactive consumption scenarios to strengthen fan engagement and a sense of belonging. Looking ahead, the development of K-pop peripherals will not only contribute to the expansion of the industry economy but also fuel the continued prosperity of fan culture. Further research can also explore how to balance commercial interests with fan experience, thereby promoting the development of the fan economy in a more sustainable direction.

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