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Branding Belonging: Platformzing Fan Affect and Community in K-pop Culture

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how intimacy is platformized and monetized in contemporary K-pop fandom in the case of SM Entertainment's DearU Bubble and related fan communities on Weibo. Drawing on platform capitalism, affect theory, and fan studies, it argues that platformized fan economies are sustained through the interaction of platform mechanisms, fandom discourse, and fan subjectivity. Using the qualitative case study that combines platform analysis of Bubble with discourse analysis of Weibo-based fan communities, this work shows how Bubble's subscription-based logic constructs pseudo-intimacy, how fandom discourse normalizes paid subscription as a moral obligation, and how fans are positioned as both governed subjects and active agents. Intimacy is not simply expressed but structurally organized: platform design shapes affective circulation, while fan practices both negotiate and reinforce these conditions. By conceptualizing "platformized intimacy" as a mechanism of value extraction, this paper shows that fan engagement is socially and structurally produced. It further identifies a constitutive tension: while emotional authenticity sustains value, its commercial extraction must remain partially obscured to blur the boundary between affective connection and economic exchange.

KEYWORDS
Platformized intimacy; Platform capitalism; K-pop fandom; Fan subjectivity; Affective economies

1 Introduction

In contemporary K-pop fandom, paid subscription platforms such as SM Entertainment's DearU Bubble (hereinafter referred to as Bubble) have emerged as the new central site for fan-idol interaction. This reflects the broader trend of cultural platformization, where digital platforms increasingly dominate the creation, circulation, and consumption of cultural content[1].

In this transition, intimacy is no longer a by-product of fan culture, but rather a core resource actively designed, controlled, and monetized by platforms. Fan service platforms like Bubble enhance fans' perceived intimacy by creating an illusion of private interaction through subscription-based "stimulated one-to-one" communication interfaces. Simultaneously, this intimacy is embedded within the subscription system, transforming emotional investments — such as attachment, loyalty, and belonging — into economic value. Therefore, intimacy itself is both a product of monetization and a mechanism for monetization.

This paper argues that the platformized fan economy is sustained through the dynamic interaction between platform mechanisms, fan discourse, and fan subjectivity. These elements collectively transform emotions into monetizable capital, while also generating tension surrounding authenticity and potential exploitation. To substantiate this argument, the paper analyses three interrelated research questions.

First, how does Bubble's subscription-based "pseudo-one-to-one" interface operate intimacy, turning fan emotions into sustained monetizable value? Second, how does fan discourse normalize this consumption as a moral obligation and a marker of "authentic" belonging? Third, within this structure, how do fans occupy a dual position as both structurally constrained subjects and actively meaning-makers?

By combining relevant literature on platformization, affect, and fan culture with qualitative research on platform mechanisms and fan behaviour, this paper aims to critically analyse the complex relationship between intimacy and commercialization within contemporary K-pop fan culture.

2 Literature Review and Methodological Approach

To situate this argument within existing scholarship, this section reviews key debates on platform capitalism, affect, and fan culture to explain how paid fan platforms organize intimacy as a monetizable relation. Scholars of platform capitalism have shown how digital infrastructures transform social interaction into extractable value[2]. However, these accounts often focus on economic structures while paying less attention to how affective relations themselves are actively produced, managed, and circulated through platform design.

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This paper addresses this gap by examining how Bubble structures fan-idol intimacy through subscription systems, interface affordances, and continuous emotional engagement.

Ahmed's concept of affective economies[3] is particularly useful for explaining how emotional attachment is organized within platformized fandom. Rather than treating affect as spontaneous or personal, Ahmed shows how emotions circulate between signs, objects, and subjects, gradually attaching value to certain interactions. Under digital capitalism, however, this circulation is algorithmically mediated through platform infrastructures. Platforms like Bubble do not merely host pre-existing emotions; they actively design the UI affordances (e. g., personalized notifications and AI-assisted translations) that format mass-produced interactions into highly individualized 'intimacy.' Thus, affect is captured, coded, and converted into measurable data.

Hochschild's concept of feeling rules[4] further explains how fans learn to regulate emotional expression according to communal and platform expectations. On Bubble, emotional participation is not entirely spontaneous but shaped through norms surrounding loyalty, subscription continuity, and visible engagement. Fans are encouraged to demonstrate care and commitment through repeated consumption practices, transforming emotional attachment into a form of affective labor that is experienced as voluntary and meaningful.

While fan studies have emphasized participatory culture and meaning-making[5], these approaches often underplay the role of platform infrastructures in structuring fan engagement. In subscription-based environments such as Bubble, access to intimacy itself is directly commodified and mediated, requiring a shift from understanding fandom as participation to analyzing it as a structured and monetized system of affect.

Taken together, existing scholarship provides important insights into digital economies, affective circulation, and fan participation. However, these approaches often remain separated. Within the context of East Asian entertainment industries, where corporate-owned platforms directly monetize fan-idol intimacy rather than relying primarily on advertising models, relatively few studies have examined how intimacy itself becomes infrastructurally organized as a sustainable profit-generating mechanism.

To address this gap, this paper adopts a qualitative case study approach, combining platform analysis and discourse analysis. The platform analysis focuses on Bubble's subscription mechanisms, stimulated one-to-one interface, personalized notifications and reminders to examine how intimacy is structured and monetized. The discourse analysis examines Weibo-based fan communities, focusing on how subscription duration, screenshots, and consumption records are mobilized to construct the notion of "true fans" and normalize paid participation as moral obligation. Drawing on existing literature on Republic of Korea's cultural industries, this study situates Bubble within the broader commercial framework of SM Entertainment. As a closed, subscription-based fan service platform stimulating one-to-one communication, Bubble provides a case study illustrating how the extractive logic of platform capitalism, emotional attachment, and moralized consumption are integrated into an operational system, thereby revealing how platformized intimacy is constructed and maintained.

3 Platform Mechanisms

Building on this theoretical framework, the following section examines how these dynamics are operationalized through platform mechanisms. They play an important role in transforming the intimate relationship between fans and idols into a structured and monetizable form of interaction. Platforms like Bubble not only enhance communication but also actively design conditions for fans experiencing intimacy, shaping the form and economic functions of this relationship.

A key characteristic of Bubble is its creation of "pseudo-intimacy" through a simulated one-to-one interface. Users can personalize chat settings, including nicknames and profile pictures, while idol messages are formatted to appear as though they are sent directly to individual subscribers. Although communication remains structurally broadcast-based, these interface affordances transform mass-produced content into the experience of personalized interaction. Simultaneously, interaction remains controlled by both the platform and idols themselves. Idols determine the timing and frequency of messages, while Bubble regulates how communication can occur and circulate. Fans cannot directly interact with one another within the system. Although idols may selectively reply to fan messages, the responses are redistributed to all subscribers rather than individually delivered, maintaining the illusion of reciprocity while limiting actual interaction.

This reflects "internal interactivity," where the users' mode of participation is narrowly scripted by the system [6] (p. 11). On Bubble, fans experience intimacy and interaction as individualized; yet, the conditions under which these emotions are produced and expressed are predetermined by the platform's design. Rather than simply facilitating communication, the interface organizes how fans understand emotional proximity, participation, and connection within the platformized fandom.

The subscription mechanism further reinforces this design by transforming emotional attachment into sustained

revenue. Intimacy is contingent on continuous payment, while features such as subscription anniversary reminders (e.g., "Happy Bubble Anniversary D+365") frame long-term subscription as an achievement and visible marker of loyalty. As Stanfill[7] argues, media industries operate less through direct control than through constructing the conditions under which participation occurs. Bubble, therefore, establishes a normalized model of fandom in which continuous engagement and consumption are understood as natural expressions of emotional commitment. Fans are encouraged not only to maintain subscriptions but to interpret such continuity as evidence of care, devotion, and proper participation. In this sense, fan-idol attachment functions as a value-generating relation: emotional investment is captured and converted into profit, allowing intimacy to serve as an extractable "ethical surplus," or affective value embedded in social relations[8].

While fan meet-and-greet lottery systems tied to album purchases are not operated directly through Bubble itself, they form part of SM Entertainment's broader commercial system. Within this system, Bubble helps sustain ongoing emotional attachment between idols and fans. Although participation is presented as open and equally accessible to all fans, fans widely recognize that purchasing more albums significantly increases the probability of selection, rendering the system structurally unequal. Rather than discouraging fan engagements, this inequality is sustained through the continuous production of intimacy on platforms such as Bubble. Through repetitive interactions, personalized messages, and push notifications that create a sense of immediacy and continuous presence, the platform cultivates an ongoing affective engagement with idols.

These notifications structure attention over time by repeatedly interrupting users' daily routines, thereby sustaining a continuous anticipation of potential interaction with idols. Through this ongoing exposure, affect becomes attached, or "sticks," not only to idols themselves but also to the platform's participation and consumption mechanisms[3]. Album purchases and repeated participation increasingly come to signify care, loyalty, and emotional commitment, transforming economic consumption into an emotionally meaningful practice connected to the possibility of reciprocal recognition from the idol. In this sense, platformized intimacy both accompanies monetization and actively legitimizes it. Bubble thus converts affect into economic value by encouraging fans to continuously invest financially in pursuit of emotionally charged yet unevenly distributed forms of access.

Emotional intimacy, therefore, functions not outside capitalist exchange, but as the very mechanism through which unequal commercial structures are normalized.

4 Fandom Discourse

While platform mechanisms structure the conditions of interaction, they alone cannot sustain monetization; this process also depends on fandom discourse, which normalizes consumption as a moral obligation. Within fan communities, some behaviours become markers of "true" belonging, while others bring moral judgment and exclusion. These norms reflect how acceptable fan behaviour is constructed and aligned with dominant capitalist expectations [5]. In this context, expressions like "true fan" function as normative frameworks through which platform-based consumption is redefined as a normative expectation rather than a personal choice.

A key mechanism for moralizing consumption is the quantification of loyalty. Platform features, such as purchase history and subscription duration, make emotional investment measurable, allowing fans to be evaluated based on these visible metrics.

For example, within the Weibo-based NCT fandom, to participate in certain fan-led activities, fans must provide a screenshot showing over 500 days of Bubble subscription to prove their fan credentials. This practice illustrates how platform-generated data is mobilized within fan discourse to construct a hierarchical system in the community. In this system, the more you spend, the greater the fan's authority to speak, evaluate, and define "correct" fan behaviour. Fans who do not consume, however, may be marginalized or even subjected to moral criticism. Within these fan spaces, fan identity is often framed as something that must be earned through visible financial contribution and participatory labor.

Fans who fail to spend money or actively contribute to fandom activities may therefore be regarded as lacking legitimacy or commitment. From this perspective, fan discourse not only exists alongside platform mechanisms but also actively replicates and reinforces them. This indicates that the platformized profit mode relies on both top-down design and bottom-up, spontaneous maintenance and participation.

Consumption is actively legitimized within the fan discourse as well. Bubble defends its profit model by building emotional exclusivity: content shared on the platform is framed as intimate and inaccessible elsewhere, transforming exclusivity itself into a source of affective value. This uniqueness enhances the value derived from the interactions. As Jin [1] points out, compared to other social media platforms, fans' interactions with idols on entertainment companies' exclusive fan service platforms are often more direct and personal. Hence, subscriptions are increasingly understood not merely as economic transactions, but as fair exchanges through which fans gain opportunities to build emotional relations with idols.

This perceived fairness extends beyond the subscription model itself and helps sustain broader commercial practices, such as fan meet-and-greets. In this exchange, money is used to obtain intimacy that is unavailable through other means. This discursive legitimacy stems from a deeper theoretical mechanism. As Ahmed[3] suggests, subjects are constituted through affective alignment with collectivities, and within fan communities, consumption functions as a visible practice through which such alignment is performed and recognized. Subscription, album purchases, and event participation become markers of "true fandom," through which fans demonstrate loyalty, collective belonging, and emotional commitment. Economic participation, therefore, becomes moralized, as consumption is reframed not simply as spending money but as an ethical expression of care and devotion.

Fan communities create norms that define appropriate behaviour, transforming consumption into moralized practices linked to belonging. The notion of "true fan" is powerful because belonging is not only claimed but achieved through visible practices that resonate with the collective affect. Hochschild's concept of feeling rules[4] helps explain how fans internalize expectations about what they should feel and do, aligning their emotional expression with platform logic that sustains subscription-based participation. In this sense, emotional expression is not simply personal but structured, as fans learn to perform attachment in ways that align with both platform design and community expectations, sustaining monetized participation. Through these communal expectations and moralized participation practices, fandom discourse not only regulates behaviour but also shapes how fans understand themselves as subjects within platformized fandom.

5 Fan Subjectivity

As these platform mechanisms and fan discourse interact, they also shape how fans understand and position themselves within the platformized fan economies. In this context, fans occupy a dual position: they are both subjects who are shaped by platform logics and active agents who create meaning and communities. This contradiction is particularly important for understanding how platformized intimacy operates.

On one hand, fans are governed by the platform's infrastructure, with emotional experiences shaped by design. On Bubble, intimacy is not simply monetized but infrastructurally organized through subscription-based access. Receiving idols' messages and maintaining ongoing interactions depend on continuous payment; once the subscription ends, access to these forms of intimacy disappears as well. The platform, therefore, constructs emotional connection as conditional and financially sustained, rather than spontaneous. Rather than capturing pre-existing affect, Bubble actively designs the conditions under which affective relations emerge and circulate. Following Ahemd[3], affect is produced through relational contact, yet on Bubble, such contact is structured through mechanisms including timed notifications, repetitive updates, and exclusive access to idol communication. These features encourage repeated participation and sustain a sense of emotional proximity between fans and idols. At the same time, interactions are transformed into measurable forms of engagement through subscription duration, renewal rates, and user activity, allowing emotional attachment to be converted into recurring economic value.

As Stanfill[7] argues, digital labor is often experienced as voluntary and pleasurable. On Bubble, this logic intensifies, as fans not only perform affective labor through continuous emotional investment, but also pay to maintain the relational structures through which such labor is produced.

On the other hand, fans actively negotiate, reinterpret, and at times resist platform logics. They create external discussion spaces, such as on Weibo, where idol messages are collectively circulated, translated, and evaluated. Within these spaces, fans develop norms around screenshot sharing and critiques of moralized subscription, showing reflective engagement rather than passive consumption.

These practices show that fan subjectivity is not entirely determined by platform infrastructures, but continuously shaped through communal interpretation and participation. However, such an agency remains deeply entangled with platform structures. Practices such as reposting and translating Bubble content may appear to challenge the exclusivity of paid intimacy by making restricted messages publicly accessible. In this sense, they not only extend the visibility of platformized affect across digital networks but also partially disrupt the platform's logic of scarcity, in which intimacy is valued through restricted access.

Once previously exclusive interactions become widely circulated, their distinction as paid, private communication is weakened, even as their emotional resonance is amplified. Emotional interactions are therefore not only socially shared but continuously reproduced as both circulation and devaluation. As Hills[5] suggests, fan productivity may shift cultural content toward use-value, but within platformized environments, these practices are still entangled with exchange-value, as circulation simultaneously generates visibility, attention, and renewed interest in the original platform. Screenshot sharing and translation thus operate ambivalently: they can function as community-building practices while also reducing the exclusivity that maintains platformized intimacy, revealing a structural tension between user-driven dissemination and preservation of monetized scarcity.

Fan subjectivity thus emerges through the ongoing negotiation between platform governance and fan practices

rather than being pre-given. Fans learn to recognize "true" fandom through visible forms of participation, including subscription, sharing, and emotional engagement, gradually internalizing these communal norms as personal preference and self-expression. What appears as individualized attachment is therefore collectively shaped through platformized circulation and affective participation. Autonomy consequently operates within infrastructural and communal conditions that pre-structure how intimacy, loyalty, and participation are understood. The dual position of fans, as both governed subjects and active agents, is therefore not contradictory but constitutive of platformized fandom itself.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues that the operation of platformized fandom depends on the infrastructural organization of intimacy. Rather than simply facilitating communication between fans and idols, Bubble structures the conditions under which emotional attachment is experienced, circulated, and monetized. Through subscription systems, personalized interface, repetitive notifications, and participatory norms, intimacy is turned into a continuous and measurable form of engagement. Therefore, fan participation emerges not as purely spontaneous emotional behaviour, but as a structured form of affective participation embedded within platform capitalism.

By examining Bubble and NCT fandom under SM Entertainment, this paper further shows that affective attachment is not merely extracted from pre-existing fan emotions but actively produced through the interaction between platform mechanisms, fan discourse, and fan practices. Emotional proximity is continuously reinforced through interface design, subscription continuity, and communal expectations surrounding "true" fandom. In this process, emotional investment is closely linked to visible forms of participation, including subscription, album purchases, and event engagement, through which fans demonstrate as loyalty and belonging.

These participatory practices not only generate economic value for the platform but also reproduce communal norms and affective expectations that sustain continued engagement. Fan subjectivity is therefore shaped through the ongoing negotiation among platform governance, communal norms, and fans' participatory practices, creating a self-reinforcing circulation in which intimacy, participation, and monetization continuously reproduce one another.

More broadly, this analysis highlights a central paradox within platformized intimacy. Fan service platforms depend on presenting intimacy as authentic, personal, and emotionally meaningful, while simultaneously organizing it as a repeatable and extractable commercial relation. Under platform capitalism, emotional attachment increasingly operates through quantified participation, subscription infrastructures, and algorithmically mediated interaction, blurring the boundary between affective connection and economic exchange. Platformized fandom, therefore, relies on a managed tension: intimacy needs to be felt authentic and voluntary even as it is systematically structured for monetization. Recognizing this paradox is important for understanding how contemporary digital platforms transform emotional relations into sustainable systems of value production.

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