

Identity Construction in Fan Community: An Analysis of Online Discourse among (G)I-DLE Fans in the Chinese Mainland on Sina Weibo

LIU Jian*

Faculty of Literature and Communication, Xi'an Fanyi University, Xi'an, China
liujian@xafy.edu.cn

GU Beiwei

Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

Abstract: Fandom has become a social and cultural phenomenon reflecting practical activities in the fan community. The prevalence of social media and online fan communities has facilitated the transnational industries of Korean popular culture (K-pop) in mainland China. Fans are enthusiastic about creating posts dedicated to their idol(s) or music bands to broaden the influence of the celebrities and establish personal connections with them. The unique interaction patterns in the K-pop fan community reflect the process of fans' identity identification and construction. This article explores how mainland fans employ discursive strategies to construct their identity and legitimize their behaviors on social media. A total of 80 posts in (G)I-DLE Super Topic made by mainland China netizens have been collected from Sina Weibo. The findings illustrate the construction of both individual and collective identities among fans, which are shaped by various contexts and different communicative purposes. Further analysis explores the potential impact of fans' identities within online communities on the K-pop market in mainland China.

Keywords: Identity; Sina Weibo; Fan Community; K-pop; Super Topic

1. Introduction

Korean popular culture, known as K-pop, has gained worldwide popularity for over a decade. Korean music, Korean drama, and idol groups are typical representatives of K-pop. K-pop fans are renowned for their unwavering loyalty toward their idols, demonstrated through various actions such as purchasing albums, streaming music videos, and attending fan meetings.¹ In addition to consuming products related to their idols, K-pop followers actively participate in tight-knit communities, both online and offline. The fan community is a crucial notion that has developed in the idol industry, serving as an exclusive space accessible only to dedicated fans.² Several fans indicate that the offline fan community provides a platform for them to explore connections to culture.³ Moreover, global fans exhibit a spontaneous behavior of seeking K-Pop news coverage through online communities and subscribing to fan pages on social media platforms.² For example, the South Korean telecom operator launches a meta-universe virtual fan community called "K-pop Hotel" for interaction between K-pop artists and fans around the world.⁴ Idols can share their personal feelings within the fan community, while fans write special messages to show support for them. These collective activities foster a sense of belonging for K-pop fans and reinforce their shared identity. Therefore, numerous Korean idol groups have opened their online fan communities for the purpose of engaging intimately with their fans and expanding their influence. For example, YG Entertainment's girl group BABYMONSTER developed their fan community to expand their interaction with fans after the release of their album in April.⁵

One of the popular girl bands under CUBE Entertainment Company, (G)I-DLE, debuted in 2018 and garnered adoration from fans overseas.⁶ Recently, the (G)I-DLE official account has gained around 13 million fans on Instagram and around 10 million fans on Sina Weibo. Fan clubs and fan communities on social media serve as the primary channels for their interactions with fans. After their debut, (G)I-DLE has also announced the name of their fan club as Neverland and revealed their official fan club colors as neon red and chic on their Twitter page. On May 2, 2024, (G)I-DLE has celebrated their sixth debut anniversary. All five members commemorated the occasion and expressed their gratitude towards their fans on social media. In addition to their individual message, the group also organized a livestream to interact with their

* Corresponding Author

fans.⁷ However, part of the fans expressed their dissatisfaction with the group's perceived inactivity on fan communication platforms such as Weverse or Bubble. More specifically, fans who join in Bubble with a paid subscription, are experiencing a higher level of disappointment.⁴ This phenomenon is interesting because fans' feelings about the community may implicitly influence the impression of an idol group and even the commercial value of their products. The fan community is a part of fandom, which is perceived as "imagined communities",⁸ constructing a world that is different from the real world.⁹ Members in this imagined community can have different motivations and diverse identities, such as listeners of the band, followers of idol member(s), and consumers of entertainment products. In this context, as a follower as well as consumer, the discrepancy between fans' expectations and perceived reality may lead to feeling of frustration.

This study aims to explore how K-pop fans construct their identities by analyzing their online discourse within the (G)I-DLE fan community. By collecting posts from Weibo, the analysis demonstrates how these communities shape and reflect the identities and aspirations of K-pop fans. Moreover, the findings display the processes and dynamics involved in fan identity formation, as well as the potential factors that lead to conflicts in constructing fan identities. Further discussion contributes to the broader understanding of fan cultures and their influence on K-pop marketing. In this context, the behaviors and discourses influenced by diverse identities can provide implications for Korean culture and commercial products in mainland China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Identity Theory

Social identities are constructed through the process of three key phases, that is, social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.¹⁰ Social identity theory explores the concept of collective identity, which involves individuals categorizing themselves into distinct ingroups and outgroups.¹¹ Tajfel and Turner conceptualize a group as a gathering of individuals who identify themselves as part of the same social category and experience a shared emotional connection.¹¹ Individuals who associate with these groups aim to achieve their personal and social goals.¹² In social identity theory, identities are understood relatively, as divergent identities are structured within a hierarchy of inclusiveness.¹² External factors and interaction within social contexts are the predominant factors of identity construction.^{13, 14} Therefore, individuals can belong to multiple ingroups according to various factors. Self-categorization into groups can be a guide to individuals' behavior and a criterion for classifying ingroups and outgroups.¹⁵ Abrams and Hogg indicate that the consequence of self-categorization is emphasizing similarities with in-group members and differences with out-group members, while social comparison leads to positive in-group evaluation and negative out-group evaluation.¹⁶ Social identity theory suggests that when an individual's group identity is activated, they tend to engage in behaviors that promote a favorable evaluation of their group compared to other groups.¹⁷ Individuals are more likely to perceive their social group positively and tend to experience self-esteem needs and self-improvement through the social identity process.^{18, 19} Tajfel and Turner also indicate in-group bias as a salient feature in intergroup relationships.¹¹ Moreover, Stets and Burke propose the concepts of social identity and role identity.¹² According to their research, social identities emerge from the shared perceptions and actions exhibited by group members, while role identities arise from the disparities in perceptions and actions between a specific role and its corresponding counterpart. Burke and Tully propose that the core of identity is the process of categorizing oneself into a particular role and internalizing the associated meanings and expectations linked to that role.²⁰ This involves incorporating the language, attitudes, behaviors, and norms that are considered appropriate for fulfilling that role.

2.2 K-pop and Idol Industry

The influence of Korean pop culture (K-pop) now extends beyond the borders of Korea, making K-pop a transcultural phenomenon.^{21, 22} Through carefully crafted music videos, fashion styles, and overall aesthetics, K-pop creates a distinct identity that captivates audiences. It has become a powerful force in shaping worldwide popular culture and consumer trends. The broader influence of K-pop extends beyond the music industry and significantly impacts the commercial world by contextualizing and visualizing itself as an export-oriented industry with global appeal.^{23, 24} The spread of Korean popular culture in other Asian countries is defined as the Korean wave, also known as Hallyu.^{24, 25} The K-pop industry has emerged in China for over two decades and spread prominently in 2010.^{24, 26} Korean pop culture, including films, dramas, and music videos, is spread in real time, mainly through Chinese video-sharing sites and social media.²⁷ K-pop has been a key factor in the expansion of the Korean Wave in China, influencing

the aesthetics and lifestyle of China's teenage audience.²⁷ In addition, K-pop extends further into modern consumer cultures such as fashion and technology.²¹ The global popularity of K-pop indicates that it has the capacity to impact the demand for related products.^{24, 28} The commercial world recognizes the potential of associating with K-pop to enhance its image, reach new markets, and engage with a highly passionate and dedicated fan base. The expansion of Korean cultural products into Chinese and other international markets commenced during the late 1990s, especially for films and dramas.²⁷ In the recent decade, the idol trainee system has gained significant recognition within Korea's entertainment industry.²⁹ Korean idol groups have successfully penetrated international markets, particularly in regions like North America, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.^{21-22, 24} The global demand for K-pop has prompted Korean groups to prioritize and actively target these markets to further expand their fan base and increase their international presence. As a result, the Korean music industry continues to thrive and increase its global popularity through the development of idol groups.

2.3 Fandom

K-pop has cultivated an intensely devoted fandom culture that spans age groups.²⁴ Fandom refers to the voluntary gathering of people with shared interests in specific areas of media.³⁰ By immersing themselves in these "imagined communities",⁸ fans actively engage in the consumption, sharing, and content creation for their idol.³¹ The impact of popular culture not only reflects on the entertainment realm but also on the commercial world. The transnational fandom of K-pop has been facilitated by the increased mobility of media and cultural products.²¹ Devoted fans serve as a significant driving force within the idol industry in the international market.³² Fans' self-identification of subculture fosters their activism, which utilizes digital technology to disseminate K-pop and establish its recognition as a viable subculture. Fandom encompasses distinct forms of cultural capital and plays a role in bonding, bridging, and maintaining social networks through online media platforms.^{2, 33-34} In addition to customs influenced by K-pop, Chinese fandom exhibits unique patterns of supporting idols, and dedicated fans contribute significantly to the international idol industry, generating substantial online data and traffic, particularly within the realm of social media.³² The behavior of Chinese fandom has led to the concept of data fandom, which refers to the use of production metrics to measure a performer's popularity.³⁵ Data fandom was closely associated with K-pop idols after the Korean Wave peaked in China in 2016.³⁶⁻³⁷ The number of albums purchased, the number of songs played, and the ranking position are examples of quantified variables. These metrics are utilized to evaluate the popularity, influence, as well as commercial success or failure of idol(s) or band.³⁸ As part of everyday activities, data presentation and creation are important because they not only show fans' devotion but also maintain connections between artists and fans. A specific term on social media, "chart beating (打榜)" exemplifies the strategic visualization and utilization of data, which describes fans' active engagement in achieving chart success for their favorite artists.³⁵ Chart beating serves as visual records to showcase fans' support and dedication. Followers strategically organize and coordinate their efforts to influence chart rankings, utilizing various tactics such as streaming, purchasing albums, and promoting songs. Another term "data fangirl" also acknowledges the role of fans as active participants who contribute their time, efforts, and resources to generate and manipulate data related to their idols.³² By describing themselves with these terms, most data fans are aware that they are being utilized as tools for supporting their idol(s) and unconsciously experience exploitation in the capital-driven market.³⁹

2.4 Fan Community and Super Topic

K-pop and fandom have constantly relied on the internet and social media to achieve international prominence and mutual mobilization.²⁴ Zhang and Negus suggest that the emergence of the pop culture industry and data fandom reflects the important role of social media in fan integration.³⁵ The emergence of digital technology has facilitated active fan participation in diverse online discussions that align with their interests.⁴⁰ Consequently, fans establish groups targeted at specific areas, including music, artists, and films. These consistent engagements over time exemplify the concept of an Internet-based "community".⁴¹ Online fan communities provide a platform for fans to establish connections with other members based on shared goals, interests, or needs.^{42, 43} In contrast to social media that are accessible to a wide range of netizens (i.e. fans and anti-fans), online fan communities typically attract and consist of dedicated fans. Fans engage in communication with fellow members of the community by sharing videos, and public images, and leaving comments, ranging from K-pop idols' stage performances to official schedules and personal events.^{8, 41-45} Consequently, the presence of shared topics facilitates tight communication among fans, fostering social bonds within the community.

Sina Weibo is one of China's largest social media platforms and the most popular microblogging site, with about 256 million of daily active users in June 2024,⁴⁶ but also because it operates in a typical model based on the celebrity/fan economy.⁴⁷ In addition to almost all Chinese celebrities, an increasing number of foreign artists have created accounts on Weibo. Digital media provides a platform for dispersed individuals to engage in collective actions focused on a specific issue.⁴⁸ "Super Topics" (超话) on Weibo have gained popularity on the platform as online spaces for dispersed fans to connect and exchange information. According to the Weibo team,⁴⁹ the "Super Topic" function allows fans to create and join interest-based content community pages with multiple sections that are separate from the main Weibo space. For example, the "essential content" section, only shows opinion pieces, articles, official news, photos, and other content that are manually selected by the host(s). These sections foster a sense of community, where members can be ranked based on their contributions or daily check-ins and engage in commenting on each other's posts. Super Topics are ranked on Weibo based on their popularity, motivating fans to remain active and strive for top rankings within specific categories. One distinguishing feature of Super Topics is the option for users to decide whether their comments or posts are shared on their own Weibo page or only visible within the Super Topic, creating a more private setting compared to the common Weibo area.⁴⁹ Therefore, the Super Topic function on Weibo is regarded as an online fan community, serving as a gathering place for netizens with shared interests, while also enabling leaders to facilitate the growth and development of the community. The explicit hierarchical structure in fan communities of idols on Weibo, enables "upper-class" fans to retain their status, and ensure effective data generation and activity management.³²

2.5 Previous Research

Previous studies have provided evidence of the supportive role that fandom plays in the development of identity and self-reflection.^{40, 50-51} Lacasa et al. examine the formation of collective and individual identities within fan communities targeted at celebrities.⁵¹ In their study, multiple factors that contribute to identity construction have been discussed. Specifically, fans perceive artists as vehicles for intimacy, as artists create music that resonates with similar experiences and values. According to Abd-Rahim, the process of constructing online identities facilitates connections and shared interests among fans.⁴⁰ However, conflicts also emerge in online spaces when fans contend for dominance by showcasing specific knowledge and skills that contribute to the formation of their identities. Fans accumulate various capital and gain a favorable position by identity identification. Abd-Rahim suggests that the identity and status of K-pop fans within the social hierarchy are the foundation for validating their presence within the fan community.⁴⁰ Zhai and Wang highlight the hierarchical system and asymmetrical power structure within an online community, where the fan leaders can refine rules to organize and manage fan labor.³² Sun suggests that fan labor plays a transformative role in the K-pop industry, to distinguish fans from non-fans and establish boundaries within the fan community.⁵² It enables the identification of deeply dedicated fans who actively contribute to fandom and the success of their idols while contrasting them with self-proclaimed fans who exhibit less involvement. Groene and Hettinger explore the impact of affirming or threatening a fan's identity.⁵³ Their research revealed that affirming feedback provides fans with a sense of self-esteem and belonging while threatening feedback demotivates them and decreases their participation willingness. In addition, numerous studies have highlighted the relationship between fans and the K-pop industry.^{1, 21, 52} Ardhiansyah et al. find that fanatical consuming behavior can foster a sense of devotion among fans.¹ The marketing strategies employed by South Korean entertainment agencies play a significant role in driving fan consumption. The finding highlights the integral role of marketing strategies in shaping fan consumption patterns and the development of fan devotion within the K-pop fandom.¹ Fans' engagement in the simultaneous consumption of multiple transcultural fandoms leads to the development of transcultural identification with K-pop.²¹

However, a paucity of research has discussed the relationship between self-identification in fan communities and the commercial value of K-pop products. It is crucial to emphasize the inherent flexibility of identity, as individuals can adopt multiple social identities instead of being limited to a singular social group. Therefore, this article aims to address the following research questions:

RQ: How do the mainland (G)I-DLE fans construct their identity through online discourse on Weibo Super Topic? How do their social identities influence the K-pop market in mainland China?

3. Method

A case study on Sina Weibo is applied in this research, and thematic analysis is used to investigate posts and other fans' responses in (G)I-DLE fan communities.⁵⁴ This method assists in capturing common

expressions with symbolic meanings.⁵⁵ To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the fan community, the posts from the (G)I-DLE Super Topic were selected. As a Korean idol group comprising members from China, it is feasible to investigate both the fan identity and the advancement of the Korean Wave within mainland China. The selected Super Topic consists of over 18.7 billion reads and a membership base of 930,000 individuals.

3.1 Data Collection

This study aims to evaluate mainland fans' online discourse about (G)I-DLE. The data is gathered from the Super Topic of (G)I-DLE on Weibo, which is considered a virtual fan community. To ensure a diverse and non-repetitive dataset, eight random days between May 1st and June 17th, 2024, were selected for data collection. The random selection of dates was necessary due to the frequent updates and changes in popular posts. The layout of the Weibo system is designed with a high volume of content and the continuous updating of the bulletin board. By utilizing the "hot" filter of the "posts" section in (G)I-DLE Super Topic, posts were sorted based on metrics such as views, likes, comments, and forwards. On each of the selected days, the top 10 posts were collected for further analysis. In total, 80 unique posts have been gathered through this short-period virtual ethnography. This random data-selecting method allowed for a relatively comprehensive overview of (G)I-DLE fans in mainland China, providing insights into their online activities and engagement within the virtual fan community on Weibo.

3.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is adopted to analyze fans' online discourse in a systematical way.⁵⁶ Thematic analysis is a qualitative research approach that enables the identification, organization, and interpretation of a dataset. By employing this method, researchers can gain a deeper insight into the data and explore common patterns and themes to answer the research questions. By following the six phases suggested by Braun and Clarke, the codes are generated at the beginning.⁵⁶ Following the identification of themes, the repeated themes are defined and reviewed based on the content of the posts. This process involves examining the common elements and terms within the data to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the identified themes. In this study, the posts within the (G)I-DLE Super Topic are categorized into eight distinct themes, as the following Table 1 shows. To further understand the motivations and purposes of fan engagement in Super Topic, the data is classified with a broader criterion. Consequently, the above eight themes are divided into three categories, that is, collective activities (Themes 1, 3, 4), self-expression (Themes 2, 6, 7), and interpersonal connection (Themes 5, 8). The most representative posts and patterns of each theme are examined. The categorization enables a comprehensive examination of the various topics and discussions taking place within the online fan community.

Table 1 Themes of Posts in (G)I-DLE Super Topic

Theme	Proportion	Example Quote
Theme 1: Promotion for Group	29/80 (36.25%)	Congrats to FATE for reaching 3rd on the real-time yearly list!
Theme 2: Promotion for Group Member(s)	19/80 (23.75%)	#GidleWillMakeASummerComeback# I only look forward to the facial attractiveness queen, Yeh Shuhua.
Theme 3: Show Contributions	4/80 (5%)	I've started boosting the airplay again... (with a screenshot of music app)
Theme 4: Call to Action	8/80 (10%)	Please all the capable fans come to Melon to increase the airplay. Do you guys want to go through the pain of TOMBOY's last few days of missing out on the title all over again. The situation with FATE is already an emergency.
Theme 5: Inquiry	9/80 (11.25%)	There's still no link for priority tickets on cityline, am I missing the right one? Looking for your answers.
Theme 6: Complaints to the Company	8/80 (10%)	@CUBE_G-I-DLE, is your company trying to get away with it again this time? We could let it slide the previous few times, but this time it seems more serious than before. Releasing a statement could cost your company dearly.
Theme 7: Show Concerns	4/80 (5%)	What a sudden comeback. There's no preview at all, how's Soyeon's condition? I hope this comeback will take care of the members. Don't get sick like last time.
Theme 8: Build Connection with Other Fans	1/80 (1.25%)	Looking for a male mate to share a room together for the concert from 8.2-8.7, for both concerts, and other times we can hang out together for a bit around the area, from Fujian.

4. Findings

4.1 Positive Image Establishment

Theme 1 constituting the largest proportion of all posts, focuses on promoting the group with a collective identity. Followers are enthusiastic to associate their idols with positive images, which is one of the primary objectives of the Super Topic. Lacasa et al. indicate that collective representations emerge when fans share common values and goals, often gathering around celebrities to a certain extent.⁵¹ In a certain fan community, fans aim to shape the public perception of their idols and create a narrative that aligns with their admiration and support. They engage in various activities such as sharing group photos and dance videos, updating their latest schedule, and highlighting their achievements. Numerous posts are related to their perceived “high-quality work” of idols, including performances, songs, and albums. Some posts reflect their personal feelings and emotional connection to the group, showcasing their unique interpretations toward related issues. For example, “Looking forward to the performance of the (G)I-DLE members, I hope that both of the double hit tracks for comeback will get awards this time.” At the same time, fans would relay news and information that promote their idols more objectively. “(G)I-DLE will be the first K-pop 5th generation girl group to hold a concert at KSPO DOME, the Olympic Gymnasium in Seoul, Korea (15,000 capacity). (G)I-DLE will be the 9th K-pop girl group in history to reach this point.” This quote emphasizes the achievement of the idol group, supported by an official report, which enhances the credibility and persuasiveness of this news.

4.2 Personal Preference

In addition to boosting the group as a collective entity, a significant portion of the posts within the fan community are dedicated to promoting individual team members. The posts in Theme 2 predominantly focus on endorsing members’ individual events, shows, and albums. For example, a fan of Yeh Shuhua made a post: “(G)I-DLE Super Topic #GidleWillMakeASummerComeback# I only look forward to the facial attractiveness queen, Yeh Shuhua.” The identity of the posters in a fandom can be learned by observing their profile, name, and the communities they have joined. Notably, despite the existence of separate fan communities for each member, it is acceptable to mention individual members within the larger team community. It allows both existing and potential members to receive a more comprehensive understating of this band and each member, which may attract a wider audience for the group. By evolving both the band name and the member’s name in their posts, some fans try to convey the notion that loving the member(s) is equal to favoring the group. Therefore, they can consciously reinforce the positive image of their favored member with acceptable rationale. This phenomenon suggests that fans may express their personal preferences through identity construction while adhering to the rules and requirements of the fan community. It fosters a sense of inclusivity and personal connection, as fans can actively support their favorite member while still being part of the larger group community. However, focusing on individual members may create an imbalance within the group dynamic. The quantity of posts and the frequency of discussions play a role in data presentation, as they are closely linked to the capital available to the individual members. Consequently, separate promotions of individual members may lead to disparities in attention, resources, and opportunities within the group. For example, adequate exposure can lead to opportunities for solo projects, collaborations, and personal achievements. Therefore, this can potentially create tensions or competition among members, as well as fans from different fan communities.

4.3 Self-expression

Except for personal preference, self-expression is more obviously conveyed in Theme 6 and Theme 7. Within these themes, fans show their concern for this idol group and express complaints to the entertainment company. In this context, an identity of the consumer becomes more pronounced as they make requests to care for their idols and interrogate the inappropriate actions of the company. Their identity definition has switched from socializing community to individual consumers. Fans no longer occupy a subordinate position but are perceived as equal to or even surpassing the idol in certain instances. For example, “Let the children take a break and rest. Their mental state is not as good as last week, or even as good as yesterday. Tomorrow they have to take a flight, so please arrange their daily routines properly. I only have five children, so please don’t exhaust them.” This quote involves both Theme 6 and Theme 7, asking the entertainment company to plan a reasonable schedule for the group. Another post involves a more direct and confrontational demand for the company to take immediate action against fans who misbehaved during the offline event. The predominant objective of the demand is to ensure that the company will address the issue promptly and make a public apology to Yeh Shuhua, a member of the group. Fans primarily hold the

entertainment company responsible for any issues and propose the assertion that their demands should be met to maintain a harmonious fan environment. These quotes illustrate that fans possess a stronger voice and influence in shaping the narrative around idols since they actively contribute to the success or failure of idols. The entertainment company needs to recognize the changing dynamics with fans to maintain their support and loyalty. Neglecting or dismissing fan concerns can lead to negative results on an idol's reputation and popularity. The increased prominence of fan identity and consumer activism can impact marketing strategies and business decisions. This identity transition implies the importance of fans' support, in other words, the data they generated. Meanwhile, fans have come to recognize their right to provide suggestions and feedback, considering the effort and financial resources they invest in supporting their idols. In this context, fans are no longer seen unconsciously exploited by capital but are aware of their significant role within fandom.

4.4 Contribution and Responsibility

In Theme 3, fans actively display their contribution to their idol and community. This is primarily demonstrated through screenshots of song plays, album and concert ticket purchases, and rankings of popularity. When fans express their contributions to their idols, they often emphasize their involvement by utilizing the first-person pronoun "I", which reflects their sense of ownership in the success of their idols. For instance, phrases like "I'm supporting (G)I-DLE again" or "I'm listening to the song again!" are commonly employed in posting content. At the same time, posters also attach screenshots that include personal characteristics as watermarks, such as their ID or username. In this context, fans assert their active role and contribution to the achievements of their idols. The frequent use of "I" and personal watermarks can serve as their identifier, signifying their identity as "contributing fans." Members of online fan communities adhere to aspirations based on their roles and conform to an internalized norm when they engage in interactions with in-group members.^{19, 57} Due to the invisible expectation of contributing output within the Super Topic, posters make conscious efforts to demonstrate their adherence to the rules and norms of the fandom. By establishing credit for the posts and asserting their presence, fans showcase their autonomy rather than being a data labor merely.

In contrast, posts in Theme 4 adopt the first-person pronoun "we" and the second-person pronoun "you" to call to action. For example, "If you guys don't have time or money, you can play the song mainly on Saturday at 5pm, FATE (a song of the group) usually plummets during this time." In this quote, the poster attempts to behave as a fan leader, guiding other dispersed fans. This direct advice asks members of the community to engage in streaming at the most effective times, thus maximizing their efforts of fans and preventing a decline in data. Although fan leaders seem to have more communication power,³² dispersive fans are also a part of digital labor. Therefore, members in Super Topic will combine various tactics to motivate and even push fellow fans to increase their engagement and data contribution. Posters may use rhetoric that highlights the potential consequences to encourage others. "Join us on Melon (a music app) and stream the audio of FATE to contribute towards its success. Don't we all desire a moment of respite whenever (G)I-DLE faces extensive criticism for their songs' controversial themes and underwhelming performance?" In this quote, fans highlight the ingroup identity and ownership with "us" and "we". The use of inclusive "we" implies that members in this Super Topic consider themselves an integral part of their idols' success or failure. They imply the importance of boosting data by recalling a sense of frustration when their idols face criticism or unsatisfactory results. By invoking the potential risk, fans appeal to the common desire and shared responsibility to protect and support their idols. In this context, fans perceive themselves as active participants rather than passive consumers. They indicate a sense of personal connection and psychological investment in their idols, as data generation is a criterion for defending their idols' reputations and ensuring their success. As individuals become part of an online community, they endeavor to adjust their behaviors as well as influence the behaviors of others to align with their interpretation of the social norms that govern the online community.⁵⁸ By using these inclusive pronouns, fans create a sense of unity in this community and demonstrate their enthusiasm for participating in data accumulation. This is essential for appealing to collective efforts because it reinforces the notion that fans are not merely individual supporters but belong to a larger community that actively works for their idols.

5. Discussion

The above analysis displays that fan build connections in fan community in terms of eight marketable themes. The broader categories (i.e., collective activities, self-expression, interpersonal connection) in Super Topic reveal that (G)I-DLE fans have specific social identities and role identities. The majority of fans

typically identify themselves as supporters or followers of the idol group and individual members, aligning the collective perspectives of the fan group. They exhibit behaviors consistent with this social identity, such as purchasing albums and concert tickets, to expand their influence on behalf of the idol group. These actions indicate that being a fan of (G)I-DLE is their main collective identity within the (G)I-DLE Super Topic. Identification with a specific group cultivates a sense of belonging and attachment among individuals, thereby reinforcing group unity and collaboration.⁵⁹ However, several fans also seize the opportunity to showcase their individual identity as a fan of a specific member in (G)I-DLE. According to Lacasa et al., the collective identity of fans is cultivated through ongoing interactions with fellow fans, without erasing their individual identities.⁵¹ Therefore, fans can express their unique preferences, connections, and admiration for that idol, which allows them to establish their individual identity within a larger fan community. To legitimize this behavior, fans equate supporting an individual member with supporting the entire group, thereby avoiding potential tensions or criticism from other fans. By doing so, they can align their individual fan identity with the collective fan identity. In an identity-oriented role, many meaningful activities revolve around the management of resources.⁶⁰ Personal promotion is important because fans aim to gain external capital for their favored idol while they still being part of a broader fandom.

On the other hand, a subset of fans adopts alternative role identities as consumers or fan leaders. When identifying themselves as specific roles, fans actively engage in coordinating with other fans and entertainment companies, as well as manipulating the environment to control the resources associated with their respective roles. Participating in a fan community can enhance self-reflection and identity construction in teenagers, particularly for individuals who face challenges in face-to-face socializing.^{33, 61} In this Super Topic, connecting with fellow fans in a virtual community and guiding other fans to contribute provide them with a sense of fulfillment and belonging. Moreover, when they identify themselves as consumers, fans not only discuss the availability, quality, and value of albums or tickets, but also express their dissatisfaction toward the management or arrangement of their entertainment company CUBE. These dissatisfactions can stem from various factors such as unfair treatment of artists, lack of transparency in decision-making, or perceived neglect of fan concerns. The findings suggest that fans generally direct their dissatisfaction towards the entertainment company or staff rather than their idols. Their complaints to the staff highlight that fans perceive themselves and their idols as in-group members, leading to positive evaluations, while viewing the company as an out-group with negative evaluations. This phenomenon is interesting because fans generally attribute issues to external factors and find excuses for their idol(s), which can be considered as discrimination favoring the ingroup.¹⁰ In addition, fan leaders play a crucial role in organizing activities within the community, taking the initiative to create content, and mobilizing other fans. By shaping the community's direction, leadership roles may create hierarchies and power dynamics within the fan community. However, this role identity may lead to conflicts and tensions when different opinions and goals emerge. Therefore, maintaining a balance in resource allocation and power dynamics among K-pop fans becomes crucial.

Moreover, data visualization in chart beating allows fans to monitor their progress, compare their achievements with other fandoms, and celebrate their collective impact on the charts. Fiedler and Sarstedt indicate that members display a commitment to the collective purpose of the community, indicating an identity-based attachment.⁴⁴ Theme 3 and Theme 4 imply that fans actively align themselves with a particular identity as data labor. Data fandom is considered a “self-concept” that reflects how fans consciously embrace a specific identity to guide their behaviors.³⁵ Over 90% of posts in Theme 3 and Theme 4 mention the music app “Melon”, which is currently the largest music subscription platform in Korea. Fans have repeatedly referred to “cut melon” as a way of supporting a Korean artist's new song by streaming the audio source on the Korean platform. The amount of airplay a song is regarded as the tangible representation of fans' effort and investment in support of their idols' careers. Fans acknowledge their significance as generators of data that benefit the idols they passionately follow.³⁵ Fans will emphasize their contributions to data with first-person pronouns as well as other recognizable identity signifiers. However, the data contribution in the fan community primarily focuses on Korean music software, rather than platforms dominated by mainland audiences. This phenomenon is interesting because Korean idol groups prioritize their music industry on domestic markets, even though a substantial portion of their fan base is derived from China. Considering the emergence of the anti-Hallyu movement in China, Korean idol groups may face cultural challenges or restrictions when promoting their music directly in the Chinese market.²⁶⁻²⁷ Furthermore, (G)I-DLE may consider its domestic market as a foundation to reach a wider global audience.

6. Limitation and Conclusion

This study contains several limitations. First, the duration of observation and data collection for the Super Topic may be insufficient, as specific activities and events can significantly influence fans' sentiments and statements. Therefore, a longer period may provide a more comprehensive and diverse range of data, with a deeper understanding of fan dynamics and their responses over time. Second, the social identities and role identities of posters are distinguished mainly by analyzing the linguistic strategies and content of the posts. Without inquiring members of this fan community, the original communicative purpose of the posters cannot be confirmed. What's more, future studies may investigate the impact of the Korean idol industry on Chinese fandom culture, especially in the online fan community.

In summary, this study examined how mainland K-pop fans construct their identities within the online fan community, providing essential implications for K-pop marketing in mainland China. The popular posts on (G)I-DLE Super Topic are randomly collected over eight days during a two-month period. By adopting thematic analysis, the data is categorized into eight themes with three broader topics. The findings illustrate that mainland K-pop fans of (G)I-DLE possess different identities within Super Topic on Weibo, according to diverse communicative goals and contexts. The majority of fans align themselves with social identities as supporters and followers of (G)I-DLE. Specifically, the most salient feature is being a data labor for their favored idol. By actively promoting idols' performances and songs, fans gain a sense of achievement and belonging to the fan community. Conversely, role identities are constructed by part of the members of Super Topic. While members of an online community position themselves as fan leaders, they provide encouragement, guidance, and even a sense of oppression to other fans. This role identity not only assists fans in gaining recognition and establishing connections within the community but can also serve as a trigger for conflicts. The discussion section highlights the complex dynamics of individual and collective identities within fan communities. Furthermore, when fans define themselves as privileged consumers, they complain about the company in response to their dissatisfaction. In this process, they perceive themselves and their idols as ingroup members with a positive image and the company as the outgroup with a negative evaluation. From the commercial aspect, the impact of Korean popular culture is obvious on the idol industry, music industry, fashion, and technology, making it a significant cultural force on a global scale. However, mainland netizens continue to prioritize Korean platforms for streaming their idols' songs, which indicates the potential marketing strategies of the idol group. The self-identification of K-pop fans displays significant implications for the K-pop industry in both domestic and overseas marketing, providing valuable insights into fan practices in the globalized context.

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