

Strata as a Fangirl: How K-Pop Influencers Create a New Culture in Fangirling

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Abstract

This article addresses the limited research connecting fangirling with power relations in digital fandom and aims to analyze the role of K-Pop influencers in shaping collective opinion. The study focuses on how audiences, as active fans, perceive the symbolic influence of these figures. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research involved participatory observation on Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, in-depth interviews with eight informants, and an exploratory survey of 20 K-Pop fans. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with Gramscian hegemony as the analytical lens. The findings indicate that most audiences (75%) tend to follow influencers' directions without questioning, reflecting hegemonic practices sustained by affection, loyalty, and cultural consent. On the other hand, resistance also emerged, with some fans perceiving influencer dominance as limiting the space for open discussion. The study concludes that fangirling is a paradoxical cultural practice: while it fosters collective solidarity, it may also generate exclusivity and conflict. This research contributes novelty by framing hegemony as a fluid and negotiated practice, embedded in affective relations and digital interactions within fandom communities.

Keywords: *fangirling; K-Pop Influencers, Digital Fandom; Hegemony; Cultural Communication*

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INTRODUCTION

Fangirling is an expression of intense enthusiasm for a particular figure or cultural work, involving emotional, social, and financial engagement. This phenomenon goes beyond passive consumption, with female fans playing an active role in supporting idols, promoting works, and building community spaces. Yet, mainstream discourses have often stigmatized fangirls as hysterical, irrational, or mere objects of the market. Such reductive portrayals obscure the productivity of fangirls, who consistently challenge the logic-emotion dichotomy by creating derivative works, choreographies, and digital archives of concerts (Seggie, 2024).

In the K-Pop ecosystem, fangirling plays a significant role not only in the entertainment sphere, but also in marketing strategies and content production. Activities such as digital streaming, merchandise purchases, and the organization of social campaigns show that fangirl enthusiasm can have both an economic and social impact (Setiani, 2025). Research further shows that fandom operates as a structured social system, with rituals, hierarchies, and symbolic capital that resemble quasi-organizational forms (Abd-Rahim, 2019; Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). Such dynamics are reinforced by the authority of fanbase administrators and senior members, who regulate participation and negotiate group norms (Dan et al., 2023; Hanisa et al., 2024).

Digital transformation then gave rise to a new figure, namely K-Pop influencers, who are fans who gain visibility and symbolic authority through their closeness to idols and intense activity on social media. Unlike ordinary fans, influencers have the ability to shape opinions, set community behavior standards, and play a role in official promotional strategies (Akrouit & Nagy, 2018; Kang et al., 2022). This position makes them opinion leaders in the fandom ecosystem, where followers not only receive information but also internalize the narratives constructed by influencers. However, their dominant role also creates a paradox: on the one hand, it strengthens community solidarity, but on the other hand, it has the potential to cause conflict, opinion manipulation, and exclusivity.

Recent scholarship underscores that these power relations are deeply embedded in parasocial processes. Parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial intimacy describe the one-sided yet affectively charged relationships between audiences and mediated figures. In K-Pop contexts, PSI is evident in how fans articulate authenticity, social attraction, and a sense of belonging through everyday interactions on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter (Flinchum et al., 2024). Studies of Indonesian fandom reveal how fans experience parasocial intimacy with idols, perceiving closeness to both personal and professional spheres of the artists despite the mediated and asymmetrical nature of the relationship (Syawal, 2023). A systematic review (Schramm et al., 2024) shows a significant rise in PSI/PSR research in the social media era, but also notes the absence of culturally grounded perspectives and limited attention to power asymmetries in fandom communities. Furthermore, recent work demonstrates that parasocial relationships not only shape cultural participation but also correlate with perceptions of social support and individual well-being (Ravi & Patki, 2025), suggesting that these dynamics carry consequences beyond entertainment consumption.

Taken together, these insights highlight that fangirling is both a cultural and affective practice negotiated within digital environments, where authority is neither fully top-down nor purely grassroots but mediated by figures who blend fandom identity with symbolic leadership. Despite growing attention to parasocial dynamics, few studies explicitly link the hegemonic processes theorized by Gramsci with the affective economies of K-Pop fandom. This study addresses that gap by examining how influencers mobilize collective consent through emotional closeness, digital visibility, and symbolic credibility.

Accordingly, this research aims to analyze how K-Pop influencers shape fangirling dynamics, with particular focus on opinion formation and power relations in digital communities. It contributes novelty by reframing hegemony as a fluid, affectively negotiated practice within fandoms, while simultaneously situating fangirling as a paradoxical arena, both a source of solidarity and a potential space of domination.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, focusing on the audience's experience in interpreting the symbolic influence of influencers in the K-Pop fandom community. The focus on the audience's perspective was chosen to capture the meaning formed internally by the community, rather than from the perspective of formal institutions. As stated (Mishra & Dey, 2022), the main contribution of qualitative studies lies in the development of a deeper understanding and new meanings of a phenomenon. Furthermore, this approach is in line with the view that audience experiences can represent broader social experiences (Richardson et al., 2025), making it relevant for understanding the dynamics of power in today's digital fandom. The main objective of this approach is to capture in depth how fans as an audience interpret power relations, social norms, and the dynamics of affection formed by influential figures in the digital space.

Participatory observation on social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram allows researchers to engage directly in the digital environment naturally used by research subjects, enabling the understanding of interactions between fans and influencers in an authentic and everyday context (Seim, 2024). This observation was conducted over a period of three months, focusing on audience responses to posts, comments, and narratives created by fandom influencers, particularly related to themes such as digital campaigns, forms of support for idols, and internal community conflicts. This duration was chosen to capture recurring dynamics and identify consistent patterns of interaction in the daily practices of digital fandom.

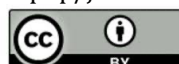
To explore the direct perceptions of fans, in-depth interviews were also conducted with eight informants who were active members of the fandom community from various age groups, experiences, and roles within the fandom. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria that they (1) had active involvement in K-Pop fandom activities, (2) regularly engaged with content from fandom influencers, and (3) represented diverse backgrounds in terms of age, years of fandom experience, and roles (e.g., ordinary fans, fanbase members, campaign participants). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative case studies to ensure that selected participants are information-rich and directly relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The decision to include eight informants is methodologically justified. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is not measured by statistical generalization, but by the richness of information and the point at which data begin to show redundancy. Previous methodological studies suggest that 6–12 participants are often sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in focused case studies (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2020). Thus, eight participants were considered adequate to capture recurring themes and variations in how fans interpret the symbolic influence of influencers. To further strengthen validity, the in-depth interviews were complemented by an exploratory survey involving 20 K-Pop fans, providing broader preliminary data and triangulation.

All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, emphasizing the dominant narratives that emerged from the experiences of the audience as recipients, followers, or even questioners of the existence and role of influencers, as this approach provides theoretical flexibility to explore the perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making processes of participants (Naeem et al., 2023). Gramsci's theory of hegemony was used as the main analytical tool to understand how power works through consent, affection, and norms that are collectively formed but not always recognized by the fan community itself, as it is explained that hegemony occurs through social practices and ideologies that seem natural and normal to the dominated party (Farahmand & Malja, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Three months of participatory observation on Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram revealed that fandom influencers play a central role in orchestrating collective participation. Posts calling for streaming, fundraising, or organizing campaigns generated not just individual responses but waves of synchronized action. This suggests that influencer activity has become ritualized in the



digital environment, turning ordinary posts into symbolic cues for collective duty. Fans did not perceive these directives as trivial reminders, but as markers of identity that distinguished committed fans from passive observers.

Interviews further showed how this symbolic authority is legitimized. One informant (F, 21) remarked, *"Sometimes I'm jealous of Kak G... she often video calls her idol J... when she gives directions, many people immediately obey."* This illustrates how symbolic proximity to idols is converted into moral credibility, echoing Gramsci's concept of moral-intellectual leadership. Influencers embody an "ideal fan" identity, not through formal appointment, but by visibly aligning themselves with idols in ways ordinary fans cannot. As Jones et al., (2025) argue that personal visibility can be leveraged into collective legitimacy within participatory cultures, where follower compliance is often normalized as part of the cultural logic rather than imposed authority.

Survey results complement this perspective. The exploratory survey of 20 respondents showed that 75% admitted to following influencers' directions without questioning. Although limited in scope, this finding provides a preliminary indication of the strong tendency toward compliance in fandom communities. Rather than functioning as numerical proof, the data serve as exploratory evidence that supports the broader pattern of consent-building. As Ravi & Patki (2025) highlights, parasocial relationships can enhance perceptions of social support and belonging, which explains why compliance is often experienced not as external demand but as part of fans' identity.

Table 1. Summary of Survey Results on the K-Pop Fandom Audience

Response Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Always follow influencer's instructions without question	15	75%
Follow most of the instructions	3	15%
Often questions or refuses instructions	2	10%

Source: Exploratory survey data, 2025

Interview data offer richer insight into this pattern. As one participant (S, 20) explained, *"It feels like you just automatically follow along so you don't get left behind."* This statement highlights how compliance is lived as common sense: participation feels natural because social belonging depends on it. In line with Kim et al., (2023), online community interactions strengthen inclusion precisely by encouraging conformity. Thus, while the survey captured a broad tendency, the interviews reveal the affective logic behind it: following is not passive, but a way to preserve solidarity.

Table 2. Themes of Hegemonic Practices in Digital Fandom (In-depth Interviews)

Theme	Description of Findings	Representative Quotes
Symbolic closeness as authority	Influencers are seen as more credible because of their exclusive interaction with idols.	"Sometimes I envy Kak G... when she gives instructions, many people immediately obey." (F, 21)
Normalization of fangirling practices	Influencers' opinions are often accepted without question by the community.	"It feels like you just automatically follow along so you don't get left behind." (S, 20)
Resistance and conflict	Some fans feel that the space for discussion has become limited due to the dominance of certain figures.	"The community is not free to express their opinions... they can be attacked immediately." (A, 22)
Hierarchy based on visibility	Credibility is also determined by the number of followers and activity on social media.	"If a large fanbase admin speaks, they're definitely heard more." (R, 23)

Source: In-depth interviews, 2025

Resistance, however, was present. One informant (A, 22) noted, "Sometimes the community is not free to express their opinions. If you disagree with a certain influencer, you can be attacked immediately." This highlights how dissent is disciplined and reabsorbed within the hegemonic



structure. Fans who question directives risk being shamed, excluded, or accused of betraying the group. Such mechanisms reflect Gramsci's notion of transformism: opposition is reframed and contained so that unity remains intact. As Bollmer & Tillerson (2025) observes in platform fandom, community norms often pressure conformity, making dissent feel illegitimate even when tolerated at the margins.

Visibility emerged as another layer of authority. One respondent (R, 23) observed, "If a large fanbase admin speaks, they're definitely heard more." Credibility here is not only social but infrastructural: platform algorithms amplify certain voices, making them appear more legitimate. From a Gramsci perspective, algorithms can be seen as private apparatuses of hegemony, structures that silently shape which ideas dominate. (James, 2025) confirm that algorithms and monetization systems privilege some influencers over others, reinforcing symbolic hierarchies that feel organic but are technologically produced.

Taken together, these dynamics, symbolic closeness, normalization, managed resistance, and visibility, reveal that influencers function as organic intellectuals of fandom. They translate complex strategies (such as streaming methods or voting rules) into simple instructions, guiding collective practice. By doing so, they perform a pedagogical role, teaching fans what counts as proper devotion. Gramsci argued that intellectuals organize practice and meaning within civil society, and in digital fandom, influencers perform exactly this role: embedded leaders shaping affect, norms, and everyday actions.

Affective dynamics are crucial to this structure. Campaigns thrive not because they are rationally persuasive but because they mobilize pride, joy, and fear of missing out. Emotional attachment to idols is harnessed to secure voluntary alignment, demonstrating how affective publics stabilize hegemonic consent. In fandom, affect becomes infrastructure: each like, share, or retweet is not just communication but an act of solidarity that deepens belonging. The paradox, however, is that the same emotions that unify also exclude, drawing sharp boundaries around what counts as loyalty.

This analysis reframes fangirling not as trivial entertainment but as a cultural arena where hegemony is lived and felt. Power is exercised not by coercion but by organizing affect, identity, and visibility so that consent appears natural and inevitable. Influencers consolidate authority through parasocial intimacy, translate it into normative scripts of good fandom, and rely on algorithmic infrastructures that amplify their reach. In this sense, digital fandom embodies Gramsci's theory: hegemony as a dynamic negotiation, both empowering and constraining, both solidaristic and exclusionary.

Table 3. Triadic Mechanism of Hegemony in Digital Fandom

Mechanism	Description	Evidence in Study	Supporting Literature
Affective Consent	Emotional attachment and parasocial relationships foster voluntary alignment	Informants describe "automatically" following to avoid exclusion (S, 20)	(Kim et al., 2023; Ravi & Patki, 2025)
Normative Regulation	Influencers act as organic intellectuals, codifying "good fandom" practices	Directives from visible fans become unquestioned common sense (F, 21)	(Jones et al., 2025)
Algorithmic Visibility	Platform governance amplifies some voices, making authority appear natural	"If a large fanbase admin speaks, they're definitely heard more" (R, 23)	(Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025; James, 2025)

Source: Field data (in-depth interviews, 2025) and literature synthesis (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025; James, 2025; Jones et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2023; Ravi & Patki, 2025).

This table conceptualizes how affective consent, normative regulation, and algorithmic visibility interlock to reproduce hegemonic authority in digital fandom. Emotional ties generate



openness to guidance, influencers codify these ties into normative practices, and platform infrastructures amplify authority. This framework bridges empirical findings with Gramsci's theory and provides a basis for the concluding discussion.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the authority of K-Pop influencers in digital fandom is not confined to mediating information but extends to shaping collective practices and power relations. Through symbolic proximity to idols, influencers acquire credibility that translates into moral-intellectual leadership, enabling them to normalize certain behaviors as common sense. The exploratory survey highlighted a strong tendency among fans to follow influencers' directions, while interviews revealed the affective logic behind this compliance: participation is experienced as belonging, not obligation. At the same time, instances of resistance, fans feeling silenced or excluded show that hegemony remains a negotiated process, maintained by boundary-policing and platform infrastructures that privilege certain voices. These findings confirm that fangirling is a paradoxical arena, fostering solidarity yet reproducing exclusivity.

The academic implication of this research is the refinement of Gramsci's theory of hegemony in the context of digital culture. The study shows that hegemony today is not only discursive but also affective and infrastructural: consent is stabilized through parasocial intimacy, codified by organic intellectuals within fandom, and reinforced by platform algorithms. This advances cultural communication scholarship by conceptualizing affective publics and algorithmic visibility as extensions of hegemonic practice, offering a framework to analyze power in contemporary participatory cultures beyond traditional state or institutional settings.

For fandom management, these findings highlight the importance of recognizing influencers as informal leaders whose authority can both strengthen and fragment community life. Fan organizers need to balance influencer authority with inclusive dialogue, ensuring that participation does not silence dissenting voices. Structured moderation, transparent communication, and shared decision-making mechanisms can help mitigate exclusivity while maintaining solidarity.

For the entertainment industry, the results indicate that influencers should not be treated merely as promotional tools but as cultural brokers who actively shape norms of fan behavior. Industries can engage influencers strategically to mobilize campaigns, but must also be aware of the risks of over-centralization, which may trigger conflicts and exclusion. Developing collaborative partnerships that respect fans' agency while channeling enthusiasm into sustainable support will create healthier, more resilient fandom ecosystems.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of fangirling as a lived site of cultural hegemony where affect, norms, and infrastructures converge. By showing how influencers operate as symbolic agents within fandom, the research underscores both the power and the vulnerability of contemporary participatory cultures. Future studies can further explore how these dynamics unfold across different platforms and transnational fandoms, where the interplay of intimacy, visibility, and consent continues to redefine the boundaries of cultural communication.

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