

Indonesian K-Pop Fan Labor During Precarious Situation: Online Activities in the Pandemic Era

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Abstract. Covid-19 changes various aspects related to people's lives -- including social, economy, entertainment, and others -- which then causes many restrictions to be applied, making it difficult for Indonesian K-Pop fans to do offline fandom-related activities for supporting and promoting their idols. Using the data of Indonesian K-Pop fans from online participant observations in some fandoms' social media accounts, this research aims to analyze not only how Indonesian K-Pop fans do their fan labor in the pandemic era but also how it affects their position in society. It is done since the restrictions force K-Pop fans to shift almost all fans' activities online. The results show that mainly with the help of social media, Indonesian K-Pop fans still do fan labor both to support their idols and to promote their fandom toward the society where they live in. The fan labor done by them is what Sun (2020) categorized as specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor. Moreover, fan labor here also becomes an important factor for Indonesian K-Pop fans to negotiate their own position within their society since their activities are also beneficial for others who are affected by the pandemic itself.

Keywords: Covid 19, Fan Labor, Indonesia, K-Pop fans, Social Media

1 Introduction

Covid-19 which spreads around the world since the beginning of 2020 - changes many aspects related to people's lives, including social aspects, economy, entertainment, and many others. Many regulations and restrictions are made and should be obeyed in order to protect people, including in Indonesia. The said restriction includes not only isolation but also various 'levels' of lockdown, which later change people's concept of space, place, and surely way of life [1]. One of the affected parties is K-Pop fans, who are widely known that they do many kinds of activities related to their fandom and idols. K-Pop fans are always known as active consumers, they do not just passively consume the popular culture that they like. They actively create meanings, putting the popular culture that they consume into their own values, not leaving their own culture behind. Indonesia K-Pop fans are well-known to do many activities, both online and offline, to support their idols and also introduce their idols toward others. It is also described by Harvey [2] who stated that fans have this opportunity to be leaders in creating a new music culture especially today in this current digital environment. It means that fans have their own power, with their ability to put something local into global culture that they consume. K-Pop fans, for free, have played an important role in introducing and promoting their idols without the support from K-Pop industry itself.

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, many regulations applied in Indonesia during pandemic – to prevent more victims – also restrict their freedom in organizing offline events. There are

no more doing flash mobs in public spaces, attending and joining K-Pop dance cover competitions, having fun at Korean culture festivals, enjoying Korean food together with their fellow fans, and many other. One of the solutions for this condition is doing everything online. Online activities actually are not something new for K-Pop fans, since the majority of them are young people who are so dependent on internet – mainly social media --. K-Pop fans all over the world are able to build relationships and interact with each other to talk and discuss about their idols, all thanks to internet. However, it is also not easy to shift all of them totally into online activities, since many of things will need to be adjusted.

Related to the introduction above, the questions related to this research are: 1. How is fan labor done by the fans through fandom by mainly using social media in this pandemic era? 2. How does fan labor affect the fans' position within society?

2 Research Methods

Related with the explanation given in the previous sub chapter, this research's purposes are 1. to analyze how fan labor is done by fans through fandom by mainly using social media during pandemic era; and 2. to examine how fan labor affects fans' position within society. During pandemic era, Indonesian K-Pop fans use social media as the main tool to do fan labor, with new ideas, ways, and purposes as a form of resilience in facing this condition. There are many previous researches that talk about fan labor; not only K-Pop fans but also fans of other forms of popular culture. However, the concept of fan labor classification applied in this research is adapted from what Sun [3] detailed in her research, which are specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor.

As this research is about fan labor done by fans primarily using social media, digital ethnography is applied to gather the data. By applying digital ethnography, we are often in arbitrated contact with participants rather than in direct presence [4]. This research is done by applying digital ethnography mainly by gathering the data from online participant observations in some fandom' social media accounts in instagram. The fandom analyzed here are ELF (fandom for fans of Super Junior) and ARMY (fandom for fans of BTS), which were chosen for 2 reasons. First, both fandoms are quite active in doing their fandom activities these years, one of the reasons is because both Super Junior and BTS are fairly famous and routinely releasing new songs or albums. Second, both boy groups come from different era or generation, which will also affect their fans' ways and activities in social media. The fan accounts chosen are *elfindonesiacom* with around ten thousands followers, *elfunion.ina* with around three thousands and a half followers, *btsarmyina.project* with around 31 thousands followers, and *armyevent.id* with more than a thousand followers. All were preferred for their active and creative actions in creating events which benefit not only the fans within fandoms themselves but also the society.

The data then analyzed using circuit of culture by Stuart Hall to see the process of production and consumption within fandom to get the intended results related to the research purposes. The circuit of culture itself actually underlines the moments of production, representation, consumption, regulation and identity of products of popular culture, and surely also scrutinizes the interrelated articulations within. Here, Hall [5] stated that meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices, which is the cultural circuit.

3 Finding and Discussion

Being K-Pop fans is not only about consumption. As always known before, K-Pop fans – including the ones in Indonesia--are not passive fans who only consume the cultural products. They actively recreate and form meanings of the cultural products that they consume. As Hall [5] said, meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part, it is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’, that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into everyday practices of daily life and in this way give them value.

Related to that, K-Pop fans do fan labor actively, as a way to give their own values to the popular culture that they consume, make it parts of their everyday life. They do such kind of activities both for supporting their idols and promoting their idols to non-K-Pop fans around. Before Covid-19, it was quite easy for Indonesian K-Pop fans to do K-Pop fan labors which are in general categorized by Sun [3] as specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor. Specialized labor was mostly about creating products, managerial labor was about organizing some events to promote their idols, while unskilled labor was generally about boosting the performances of idols through voting and posting some content on social media.

Specialized labor was mostly done online, although offline activities were also done to represent their identity as K-Pop fans while promoting their fandoms and idols. Online activities were mostly done individually, especially for things like writing and uploading fanfictions and fanarts. Indonesian fans, generally university students, uploaded their fanfictions – both in Indonesian and English – partially to get some feedbacks from other fans, which then lead to more communications and exchanging information. For fans, fanfictions serve both as a space for fans – idols meeting which is impossible in real world and also as a mean to connect with other fans whose bias is the same as them [6]. On the other hand, flash mob was also seen as specialized labor which was done offline. They gathered in public places and did some signature dances from their idols together, which intentionally and unintentionally introducing their idols to larger public. Another thing that they do, categorized as specialized labor, was creating unofficial merchandises. Fans, who were parts of fandom, created their own merchandises to be sold or given freely to their fellow fans who attended special occasions that they usually held to celebrate their idols’ birthdays or other similar things. An example is what was done by *elfunion.ina*, who created freebies and prepared food support for their fellow fans who attended Super Junior’s concert in Jakarta. The funding for this project, which was called Elf Care Project, was from the profit of selling their self-produced merchandises.

Organizing events like gathering to celebrate their idols’ birthdays were also often done by several fandoms, which is categorized as managerial labor. Some of them also did good deeds for the community, for example donating things to the orphanage. They used both the idols’ names and the fandoms’ names in every activity that they did, which made people got to know them. Examples of managerial labor can be seen from figure 1 and 2, where K-Pop fans organized some events where fans could celebrate their idols’ birthdays and donate for charity in the same time. This kind of labor was mostly done offline by the fans, unlike the last type of fan labor, which is unskilled labor.



Fig. 1. Café event done by BTS’ fandom, ARMY, to celebrate their idols’ birthday (https://www.instagram.com/p/b5fprycn50r/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)



Fig. 2. Charity gathering done by Super Junior’s fandom, ELF, to celebrate their idols’ anniversary (https://www.instagram.com/p/BpvteqOgw4T/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Unskilled labor, especially in Indonesia, was usually done online. K-Pop fans tried to boost their idols’ performances by voting in some awards that their idols were nominated or watching their idols’ new MVs numerous times to get higher views. They worked hard to make their idols win some music awards, which then led into more publicity not only in South Korea but also all around the world. Unfortunately, during Covid-19, almost all the fandom related activities should be done online. Due to some restrictions, offline activities are forbidden to prevent more victims in this pandemic era. It means from producing and consuming the products related their idols, to organizing and doing events for promotions. It forces fans to think about new ways and rules to accommodate these actions online. They will not stop to represent their identity this way because Hall [5] said, meanings – that they form through fan labor – is what gives them a sense of their own identity.

As mentioned before, online activities are not a new thing for Indonesian K-Pop fans, who are mostly dependent on internet for most of their daily lives. In a research, Jung [7] stated that social media has quickly become one of the most popular platforms for consuming and distributing K-pop among fans, since it has practical attributes -- such as quick and easy setup, simple functions, immediate peer networking, and instant distribution – which makes it easy to circulate and share K-pop content between fans not only in Indonesia but also elsewhere. That way, it is not a big deal to shift fan labor into online activities with some adjustments needed. With social media, K-Pop fans gain more freedom to communicate with each other, organizing online activities with other fandoms or fanbases from other cities – even other parts of the world --. They help each other not only in establishing the ideas for the events, but also promoting other fanbases’ activities to their own followers so that those events may gain more interested participants.

In this case, online activities for specialized labor like uploading fanfictions or fanarts are still done as before Covid – 19. Nevertheless, merchandises productions have different purposes and meaning at this kind of time. Since events like gathering is forbidden, certain fandoms create limited unofficial merchandises to be sold online to their fellow fans. All the profit then donated for charity, mainly to the people around who are affected by Covid – 19.

Managerial labor – during Covid-19 -- is not about finding places for gathering and celebrating their idols’ birthdays anymore. They create online events, the ones which are not

only to celebrate their idols' special moments, but also to contribute to their society. Some fandoms choose to collaborate with some organizations to give free vaccinations to people in certain areas, which is surely impossible to be done online. The promotions themselves are done online, usually through fandom's social media account, as can be seen in figure 3. Figure 3 is taken from *elfindonesiacom* Instagram account, which gave free vaccination as a mean to celebrate Super Junior's 16th debut anniversary. Vaccination is one of many important aspects to overcome the pandemic, and K-Pop fans through their fandom want to participate in it.



Fig. 3. Free vaccination by ELF to celebrate Super Junior's debut anniversary (https://www.instagram.com/p/CUxD6bVhSBQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Furthermore, still related to some good deed toward the society, fandom accounts like *btsarmyina.project* and *elfindonesiacom* create opportunity for their fellow fans who want to donate for charity. They also collaborate with other party, for example *elfindonesiacom* with a project from *kitabisa.com* called 'Oksigen untuk Warga' and *btsarmyina.project* with a hospital in Medan to provide free food through fending machine that they put at the hospital during a BTS member's birthday. Moreover, the last one, unskilled labor, is still about boosting their idols' performances. K-Pop fans still actively show their participation by voting in some awards and watching their idols' new MVs numerous times, which has no difference between before and during the pandemic era. Fans still do this kind of labor individually, while the fandom's functions here are to remind them to watch the MV, to share the voting links, and to guide the fans on how to vote.

Additionally, Jenkins [8] stated that fan culture constructs a group identity, articulates the community's ideals, and defines its relationship to the outside world. Fan labor done by Indonesian K-Pop fans in this pandemic era somehow becomes a form of identity representation, securing a place within society that had negative stereotypes about K-Pop fans before. K-Pop fans are often seen as a group of people who are overly obsessed to their idols, Jenkins [8] described that people see fans as the ones who are emotionally and intellectually immature, and unable to separate fantasy from reality. Nevertheless, it cannot be avoided that many good deeds done by fans within fandom somehow not only serve as a mean to introduce and promote their idols to the public, but also show more of their contributions to the society which in some way contradict those negative stereotypes.

4 Conclusion

From the findings established, it is concluded that during the pandemic era Indonesian K-Pop fans still do some activities related to fan labor by applying different ways, rules, or additional purposes. Specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor are done not only for promoting their idols but also for helping the society to face difficult situation caused by the pandemic. These activities, which are mainly done online through social media, serve their purpose as a way to face precarity condition caused by Covid-19. It is also an effective way to introduce their fandom and idols to the society, since they always use both fandom's and their idols' names. Aside from that, fan labor done by Indonesian K-Pop fans in this pandemic era by some means becomes a form of identity representation, securing their place within their own society and erasing negative stereotypes that people have toward Indonesian K-Pop fans.

From this conclusion, it is recommended for the next researchers to dig more about what K-Pop fans do within their fandom by applying different theories and methods. It is also advised to analyze more about fan labor done by other fandoms aside from K-Pop fandom, since each fandom has its own ways, rules, values, and culture.

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