

Ethnography Research on Reddit Moderators' Gatekeeper Role Within the Online Transcultural K-pop Fandom Community in Anglophone Countries

Tao Cui^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne 3010, Australia*
a. cutc@student.unimelb.edu.au

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The remarkable development of digital and mobile devices accelerates the prevalence of both popular cultures worldwide. In this digital era, the emergence of social media enables individuals to access to a variety of information and experience innovative behaviours, such as participating in an online transcultural fandom community. As South Korea continues to export its popular culture, Hallyu, from Korean drama to Korean popular music (K-pop), the audience of the Korean Wave has expanded from Asia to other continents. Especially in those anglophone countries, the fan base has reached a noticeable scale with the help of the online fandom community. Notably, on hierarchical social media platforms, the gatekeeping effect exists in the online K-pop fandom community, and all community members perform in an established manner. In order to identify the causes of this phenomenon, this paper applies the ethnographic approach to observe and analyse the speech of all participants within an online transcultural fandom community called /r/bangtan on Reddit. Moderators' gatekeeping power is contributed by the hierarchical relationship within the community, all community members' awareness and acknowledgment of their schema, their unlimited social capital resulting from their unbiasedness to the community and interpersonal skills, superior accumulated knowledge about the object of fandom, as well as linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries in the transcultural context. Finally, some possible recommendations are provided for moderators to manage their online fandom communities on hierarchical social media platforms, including knowledge accumulation about celebrities and related languages, interpersonal capability development, and unbiased treatments.

Keywords: ethnography, online fandom community, transcultural fandom, K-pop, Reddit

1. Introduction

The popularity of information communication technology promotes the dissemination of popular culture in the worldwide context. Harry Potter, Marvel superheroes, and Sherlock are widely prevalent all over the world. At the same time, the consumption of East Asian popular cultures in anglophone countries increases, such as K-pop, Hong Kong movies, and Japanese anime [1]. For instance, numerous online user-generated content regarding K-pop in English can prove its prevalence in the Anglophone world [2]. Also, the number of K-pop band tour concerts held in

anglophone countries, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, is on a rising tendency. Hence, it can be argued that the K-pop fan base has reached an apparent scale in those countries, especially the US [3].

K-pop is short for Korean popular music, a popular music genre originating in South Korea. It is famous for the boy or girl idol groups with distinctive vocals and dances and signature music videos [2]. K-pop is a remarkable representative of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, which can be defined as the prevalence and export of Korean popular culture on a global scale. Except for K-pop, Hallyu also covers Korean cuisine, dramas, beauty and cosmetic products, and e-sports [4]. Since the 1990s, the Korean Wave has started to popularize in China, achieved by a variety of Korean dramas, but this popularity was confined to East and Southeast Asian countries.

With the increasing popularization of social media platforms, K-pop has witnessed significant popularity among the younger generation, and it was the first time Hallyu was broadly disseminated beyond Asia in 2008. This phenomenon has been called Hallyu 2.0 by communication scholars [4]. Notably, BTS, a K-pop idol group, has continued to win the “Top Social Artist” at the Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs) since the first nomination in 2017 and other well-known American show awards, demonstrating that BTS has an appreciable scale of proactive and engaged fans on social media. Significantly, the cultural background of those fans is not limited to Korean and even Asian. The transcultural success of K-pop astounds the anglophone media public, as the audience has been used to being exposed to the win of anglophone media [2].

As social media technology continues to advance in anglophone countries, online fandom communities on social media accelerate the global reach of K-pop and Hallyu. Even though those English speakers may face available, linguist, and geographic boundaries, social media offer more access for them to the object of fandom [2]. The diversity of social media platforms expands the reach of popular culture and influences fans’ interactions [4,5]. Indeed, the inner characteristics of social media platforms can shape the manner of online fandom, and social media can be divided into hierarchical and rhizomatic platforms. The former refers to Reddit, where moderators can establish community rules to guide content and comments. On rhizomatic social media, the algorithms have indirect control over content users access, such as Facebook and Twitter. In both categories of social media, the gatekeeping effect, the filter of information flows before dissemination, can be found, but it is more apparent on hierarchical platforms due to moderators’ unlimited social capital [2].

K-pop consumption and transcultural fandom in English-speaking countries are emerging, but there is limited theoretical or empirical research conducted by cultural, linguistic or media scholars. In addition, most of the published global fandom research in English briefly mentions non-western fan instances rather than investigating them from the transcultural perspective in detail [3]. In order to fill this research gap, the paper applies ethnographic approaches to explore the gatekeeping power of moderators by analysing the speech of moderators and other fans within the online transcultural fandom community of BTS on Reddit called /r/ bangtan in anglophone countries.

2. Methodology

2.1. Ethnography

Ethnography can be defined as a qualitative research method requiring researchers to be participants or insiders of the targeted speech community that they intend to observe, so ethnographers are called participant-observers [6]. Researchers are expected to identify the manner of speaking within a community and explore how meanings are generated and negotiated within a particular context of interaction [7]. In other words, the ethnographic approach has the capability to investigate how culture is created and even recreated through participants’ communications within a community.

The ethnography approach can also be used to learn how and why stereotyping, prejudice, misunderstanding, or miscommunication happen in transcultural communication. While implementing ethnographic research, researchers should observe community members' speech and collect data to conduct a "thick description" of communication in a real-life environment, and they cannot manipulate or interfere with participants' ways of speaking and interactions [7].

Regarding the "communication thick description" in ethnography, researchers can analyse the target community participants' speech events, speech acts, schema, indexicality, and contextualisation cues. In detail, speech events refer to activities that are talked about by society, such as online fandom speeches, job interviews, ceremonies, ritual performances, storytelling, jokes, greetings and leave-taking. Those activities could be a part of the broader speaking situation and are impacted by space, time, and conventions. Hence, ethnographers focus on communicative events instead of cultural meanings or norms. In contrast, speech acts ask ethnographers to clarify the inherent meaning of speaking [7]. In order to appropriately interpret information as intended, schema, indexicality, and contextualisation cues should be taken into consideration. The definition of schema is the accumulation of background knowledge, beliefs, and experience about objects, events, individuals, and situations. Researchers are expected to learn about a particular community member's diverse roles, responsibilities, and behaviours, as well as relationships among them. Then, participant observers can identify what is relevant, typical, and predominant within a community [8]. Indexicality refers to signs that have an influence on the basic semantic meaning of the message, such as words, slang, phrases, and the manner of speaking. For instance, individuals may use modal questions to demonstrate politeness to listeners. Finally, as contextualisation also affects community participants' interpretation of information and understanding between each other, it means how utterances are able to be interpreted within a specific context of interaction [7].

Within the BTS' online anglophone transcultural fandom community, /r/bangtan, a Reddit subreddit, those participants become fans of this boy band because of the identified affinity between K-pop idols and themselves instead of the similarities of national cultures of those transcultural objects [1]. This claim can also be supported by Piller's cultural difference framework, which means that transcultural community members should not be overgeneralised [9]. The ethnographic approach could be a suitable tool to investigate the discourse of Reddit moderators and other fans within this transcultural fandom community and identify how the online K-pop fandom community culture is produced and negotiated within the transcultural context of interaction in the anglophone world. In this paper, speech events and schema of /r/bangtan participants' speech have been analysed to understand the gatekeeping phenomenon in the community.

The /r/bangtan, an online anglophone fandom community related to BTS, is one of the subreddits on Reddit. Subreddits are separate online communities focused on different themes. Regarding the /r/bangtan, 70.7% of the online community participants are from English-speaking countries, and the majority are Generation Z [10]. Even if some community members may use English as a second or third language, such as me, those statistics are able to prove that the /r/bangtan is dominantly reasonably consisted of native English speakers. Therefore, the /r/bangtan can be considered an anglophone transcultural fandom community.

2.2. Procedure

Since 2018, the author has started to follow BTS and has purchased digital albums. During the author's two-year oversea study in Australia, via friends' recommendations, the author joined an online BTS fandom community on Reddit, a subreddit named /r/bangtan, to obtain news regarding BTS. The writer browses content published by moderators and other community members on a daily basis, votes up, publishes content, as well as leaves or replies to comments to communicate and interact with other fans. Since the author has been a community participant of the /r/bangtan for

over two years and has continued to observe and interact with other community members, the author could be qualified to utilise the ethnographic approach to analyse the discourse of moderators and others within this online fandom transcultural community [6, 9].

3. Findings

3.1. Inherent Characteristics of Hierarchical Social Media

The /r/bangtan, a subreddit on Reddit, has moderators who have the capability of establishing and enforcing community rules to guide other participants' online behaviours, including their speech and interactions. Under some circumstances, moderators might organise "executive fiat" in order to govern subreddits. For example, they might delete posts and comments that are against the established community rules and even ban community members' discourse. Hence, it can be argued that the barriers to acceptable speech are established, and moderators can control information flows within the community [11]. In other words, in the /r/bangtan, moderators play the role of gatekeepers to control when and what messages can expose to the rest community members. Also, fans' thoughts and perceptions towards BTS can be shaped by those gatekeepers.

As a representative of hierarchical social media, Reddit is a news gathering and discussion platform, and there are many subreddits in which users gain and interact with interested information. Notably, the hierarchical social media platform empowers moderators of the /r/bangtan to position themselves as expert fans, while other community members' positions are attributed to lower than moderators. Based on the position theory, moderators' power is required to reach a particular location in a social network, which allows moderators to allocate their positions and other participants' positions depending on the characteristics of all participants within a community. Also, community members' roles, rights, and responsibilities are assigned [12].

In detail, the /r/bangtan moderators are aware of their schema, including role and obligation, of managing the message flow within the community, and other community members' schema of gaining messages about the object of fandom and obeying the established rules. For instance, moderators continue to accumulate comprehensive knowledge related to BTS to distinguish vital contents from unconfirmed rumours, and their filter of news assists other community participants in accessing more accurate knowledge regarding BTS and guiding them on how to discourse and interact with others. At the same time, ordinary fans are also acknowledged of the schema of themselves and expert fans. Therefore, in order to fit in the /r/bangtan, ordinary fans, including the author, voluntarily learn about the community rules set up by moderators. We proactively learn about what speech events and ways of interacting are appropriate. As a result, the speech events of all participants within the /r/bangtan can be unfairly and strictly controlled. Those regulations also can effectively refrain from the occurrence of online bullying, so the /r/bangtan has been perceived as a safe, well-organised, and trustworthy online space by community members. Even if moderators have more power than other participants, ordinary fans hold positive perceptions and attitudes toward the hierarchical relationship within the online fandom community. If fans disagree with moderators' schema or established rules, they will choose to leave the community and go to other platforms [11].

3.2. Moderators' Expertise about BTS and Unlimited Social Capital

As the established community rules of the /r/bangtan are fairly organised and strictly enforced by moderators, this community members' speech events and acts are organised in a unified manner. Even though participants may have limited freedom to express their personal opinions or feeling, they can have access to reliable moderated messages related to BTS. Except for the hierarchy within Reddit that empowers moderators to play the role of gatekeeper in the /r/bangtan, their power also

comes from their unlimited social capital, which is contributed by their unbiased management within the online fandom community and interpersonal ability to establish rapport with others. Previous research proposes that moderators' credibility and the future development of the community can be damaged when community members suspect or experience bias in the community [2].

On the other hand, there are limited channels for anglophone K-pop fans to have access to information regarding K-pop bands or celebrities. Indeed, K-pop, Hallyu, and other relevant issues are rarely mentioned by news outlets in anglophone countries, so social media could be the only medium for English-speaking fans to obtain importation. Even if those fans can be exposed to the official news release about BTS, the majority of them may misunderstand the contents in Korean due to cultural, linguistic, and geographic barriers. As ordinary fans may have limited knowledge of Korean and diverse cultural norms of K-pop, we prefer to gather reliable and accurate messages about BTS from the /r/bangtan. Hence, in the transcultural fandom community, the gatekeeping effect could be doubled.

4. Discussion

Gatekeeping effects have been identified in an online fandom community themed on BTS, the /r/bangtan, on Reddit. This subreddit's moderators' gatekeeping power is driven by the hierarchical relationship within online moderated fandom space, as well as their unbiasedness toward the community and interpersonal skills. As both moderators and ordinary fans are aware of their schema each other, they have a clear image of their roles and responsibilities within this online fandom community. Expert fans are in charge of establishing community rules, fairly filtering posted content and comments, and proactively building rapport with others. Other fandom members voluntarily learn about the community rules to obtain information and interact with other fans in appropriate manners. Also, transcultural fans may face boundaries of language, culture, and geography, so they have limited access to information about K-pop in English. As a result, for anglophone K-pop fans, social media could be the singular channel for them to gather information, and the gatekeeping effect within the transcultural fandom can be doubled.

However, some scholars point out that the traditional role of gatekeepers has disappeared due to the emergence of digital communication technology, especially social media. Furthermore, the gatekeeping phenomenon is sporadic as the official built-in central controller rarely appears on rhizomatic social media [2]. In fact, the acknowledgement of fandom objects on rhizomatic platforms, for example, a like, a share, or a reply, can help fans also possess social capital, and then those acknowledged fans will play the role of gatekeeper to filter online messages by their own volition. Although fans have a variety of media channels to have access to their interested messages, most demonstrate the dominant tendency to choose a singular trustworthy gatekeeper on social media. In other words, transcultural K-pop fans' viewpoints and perceptions toward the object of the fandom can be significantly shaped. Therefore, if moderators or expert fans want to control the news flow within an online transcultural community, except for their superior knowledge regarding the object of the fandom, they should pay more attention to accumulating their social capital by developing interpersonal capabilities and conducting unbiased management within the online transcultural fandom community in the Anglophone world. The fandom community development and moderators' reputation and credibility can gain benefits.

5. Conclusion

The prevalence of the Korean Wave and the increasing number of fans without Asian cultural background is contributed by the online fandom community on social media, and the successful

dissemination of K-pop has the ability to overturn the traditional centre-periphery of fandom research in the anglophone world. On a representative hierarchical social media platform in English-speaking countries, Reddit, moderators' gatekeeper role is investigated by conducting an ethnographic study in a subreddit called /r/bangtan, themed on BTS. Expert fans' power in controlling the news flow is caused by their expertise toward BTS, unbiasedness in managing the community, and interpersonal skills in building rapport. Under the transcultural communication context, the linguist, cultural, and geographic boundaries may double the gatekeeping effect within the online fandom community. Hence, transcultural subreddit moderators should take action to accumulate more knowledge about the object of fandom and relevant languages, manage their community without bias, and improve interpersonal skills in establishing long-term relationships with other fans.

Even if this ethnography study has provided in-depth insights into explaining the gatekeeping effect within the online anglophone transcultural fandom community and practical suggestions for moderators, there are still some areas that need improvements or further research. First, this ethnography merely observes and analyses the discourse of members from a K-pop boy band fandom community, so other K-pop bands' online fandom communities should be analysed to verify this research's findings. Also, further research can test the gatekeeping effect on other social media platforms, especially rhizomatic ones. Finally, as the prevalence of K-pop is not limited to the anglophone world, other countries or transcultural communication contexts should be taken into account to generate more comprehensive and meaningful insights.

References

- [1] Chin, B., & Morimoto, L. H. (2013). *Towards a theory of transcultural fandom. Participations: International Journal of Audience Research*, 10(1), 92-108.
- [2] Lynch, K. S. (2022). *Fans as transcultural gatekeepers: The hierarchy of BTS' Anglophone Reddit fandom and the digital East-West media flow. New Media and Society*, 24(1), 105-121.
- [3] Yoon, K. (2019). *Transnational fandom in the making: K-Pop fans in Vancouver. The International Communication Gazette*, 81(2), 176-192.
- [4] Jin, D. Y. (2016). *New Korean wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media. University of Illinois Press*.
- [5] Jin, D. Y. (2018). *An analysis of the Korean wave as transnational popular culture: North American youth engage through social media as TV becomes obsolete. International Journal of Communication*, 12, 404-422.
- [6] Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations of Sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach. University of Pennsylvania Press* Kirilova.
- [7] Gumperz, J. J., & Cook-Gumperz, J. (2007). *Discourse, cultural diversity and communication: A linguistics anthropological perspective. In: Handbook of intercultural communication, pp. 13-29. Mouton de Gruyter*.
- [8] Roberts, C. & Sayers, P. (1998). *Keeping the gate: How judgements are made in interethnic interviews. In: The Sociolinguistics Reader, pp. 25-43. Edward Arnold*.
- [9] Piller, I. (2017). *Intercultural communication: A critical introduction. Edinburgh University Press*.
- [10] BTS Projects Team. (2018). *Boy meet r/bangtan. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f2xZYOZUIR86YpmOc5GUf-JZtaMhHtaF/view>*
- [11] Squirrell, T. (2019). *Platform dialectics: The relationships between volunteer moderators and end users on Reddit. New Media & Society* 21(9), 1910-1927.
- [12] Harré, R. (2012). *Positioning theory: Moral dimensions of social-cultural psychology. In: The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology, pp.192-205. Oxford University Press*.