STAY FANWAR ON SOCIAL MEDIA X: VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Siti Ilmi Nurfa'idhah Yatni[1]*, Fitri Annisa Rachmah[1],
Evie Sophia[1], Affan Neskisyah Ramadhan[1]

[1]Departmet of Communication Studies; International Women University; Indonesia
email: Ilmi.20821149@iwu.ac.id

Abstract

This study analyzes the fanwar phenomenon within the K-Pop fan community, specifically the Stray Kids (Stay) fandom on social media X. The problem raised is how internal conflicts within the fandom arise due to biased favoritism, offensive inside jokes, and violations of fan ethics that stem from the phenomenon of K-Pop fan fanaticism. The purpose of this study is to identify the active and reactive interaction patterns of the Stay fandom in responding to fanwars and to understand their community culture when fanwars occur within the internal fandom community. These findings indicate that Stay fans engage in two dominant interaction patterns: active interactions, such as through hashtag sharing and timeline cleaning to deflect negative issues, and reactive interactions, such as call-outs, mass reports and blocks (RnB), and efforts to call for peace and refocus on supporting the artist. These patterns reveal that fanwars are often triggered by several factors, such as biased favoritism, offensive inside jokes, and violations of fan ethics, which clash with the shared symbolic norms of the fandom. This study strengthens the application of Symbolic Convergence Theory by showing how shared fantasies and rhetorical visions shape collective responses in digital fandom culture. Practically, these findings offer insights for fandom communities, entertainment agencies, and social media moderators to manage online conflicts and promote a healthier fan interaction environment.

Keywords: Fan Interaction; Fandom Stay; Fanwar;   Social Media X; Virtual Ethnography

Introduction

The social media X, previously known as Twitter, has now grown rapidly and is often used in everyday life for sharing information, to the point of giving rise to various virtual communities within it. One of the most active and prominent virtual communities on social media X today is the K-Pop fan community. On X, the K-Pop fandom community interacts using features on social media X, such as using hashtags, uploading posts (tweets), mentions, replies, likes, direct messages (DM), and other features. They use social media X as a platform to convey their emotions between fandom members, as well as communicate with each other using writing with certain meanings that only K-Pop fans themselves understand. The social media platform X really allow fans to express their enthusiasm, concern, and support for their idols.

K-Pop fandom communities are known for their strong bonds between fans and their idols. However, it is undeniable that cases of quarrels within K-Pop fandom communities, known as fanwars, occur, whether with other fandoms or within fandom communities, stemming from excessive or fanatical attitudes or behaviors in supporting their idols (Pohan and Gustiana 2023). This tendency towards excessive or fanatical behavior is often the beginning of quarrels that can lead to fanwar behavior. The term "fanwar" refers to conflicts or arguments that show excessive defense of their idols, leading to arguments between fans, comments, and even debates between fans. This fanwar behavior is very common among K-Pop fan communities, especially in communities on social media. Fanwars occur not only between one fandom and another but also between members within the same fandom.

This research focuses on one of the K-Pop groups, namely "Stray Kids", by highlighting the interaction of its fans, namely the "Stay" fandom, by analyzing the interaction patterns of the Stay fandom community when a fanwar occurs. Although the Stay community is still relatively new, the name of the Stay fandom community is one of the most active fan communities on social media today, especially on social media X. The Stay community uses social media X to express their enthusiasm and participation in supporting Stray Kids, such as participating in voting activities, streaming music, and other activities to increase engagement of the Stray Kids name and their industry, namely "JYP Entertainment".

Figure 1 – Fandom Stay was named the number one worst fandom based on votes from KPop fans on social media X
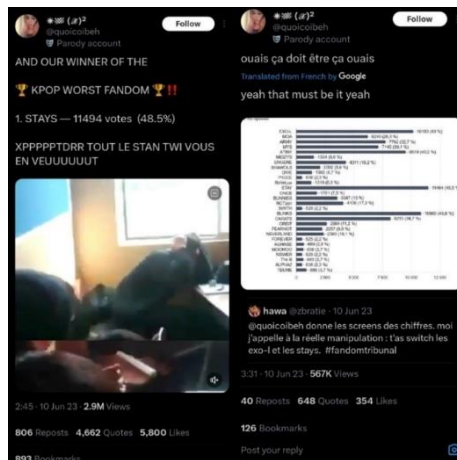
Source: Account X @quoicoibeh, 2025

The post above is the result of a vote regarding the selection of the worst fandom carried out by the X account @quoicoibeh by distributing a Google Form questionnaire to K-Pop fans on X social media. The results of the vote show that the Stay fandom is ranked number one as the worst or least liked fandom on X social media by getting 48.5% of the votes.

On X social media, K-Pop fans usually use 'anonymous' accounts. They use usernames, nicknames, and profile photos using the faces of their favorite Korean idols. Rulli Nasrullah, in his book entitled *Virtual Ethnography; Research on Communication, Culture, and Sociotechnology on the Internet*, explains that the virtual ethnography approach allows users on social media, including social media X, to be anyone and users can duplicate different identities.

Among K-Pop fans, fanwars are a phenomenon that is often seen when fans become overly enthusiastic or obsessive about their favorite idols. This excessive behavior is also often frowned upon by other K-Pop fans. Every K-Pop fandom certainly has positive fans, but there are also negative fans. These negative fans (toxic fans) often make the fandom community worry about their existence. These negative fans often make negative comments or insults that are usually intended to put them down or make comments that invite provocation to lead opinions that often escalate among fans. On social media, fans engage in fanwars by leaving malicious comments on posts related to their idols which usually contain insults towards K-Pop idols, expressing dislike for the idols. Then other

fans respond because they feel unacceptable, resulting in arguments in the comments (Pohan and Gustiana 2023).

The K-pop fan community is a unique form of interaction environment for lovers of Korean culture who share similar interests, especially in the community of Korean Pop (K-Pop) music fans which is also called fandom. According to Jeanette (2018), fans or fandoms are defined as individuals who like something enthusiastically and collectively who then create a community containing individuals who like the same thing. They seek information about their idol artists and create a forum that allows them to communicate with each other (Pohan and Gustiana 2023). Over time, this K-Pop culture has begun to dominate in various aspects, such as social media. Social media platforms such as X have become some of the platforms frequently used by the K-Pop community as their main forum for interaction related to sharing topics about their idols, exchanging information about trends, content related to their idols, and activities related to their idols in the fandom community.

Communication interaction in virtual communities on social media usually refers to the interaction of information exchange between members connected through digital social media platforms that involve community members actively interacting online in sharing information and collaborating with other individuals in creating virtual spaces for those who have the same interests. According to Prayugo (2018), virtual communication is a social gathering that occurs in cyberspace where everyone brings real-life problems to be discussed digitally for a long period of time and involves the thoughts or feelings of users with relationships created in cyberspace (Yashfilhaz 2023).

This study focuses on the communication patterns of one fandom by looking at the interactions of the Stay fandom when a fanwar occurs between internal fandoms on X using a virtual ethnography approach. This study's theoretical contribution is that this study broadens the understanding of K-Pop fans' communication patterns on social media, enriches communication theory related to identity formation in virtual communities, and strengthens the use of virtual ethnography as a framework for analyzing complex online interactions. Then, this study provides an overview of the dynamics of fanwars in the K-Pop community and their impacts, offers handling strategies such as mediation and negotiation, and helps the public understand fandom culture and internal conflicts that affect individual and group identities.

Methodology

Literature Review

<u>**Constructivism Paradigm**</u>

The paradigm used in this study is based on the constructivist paradigm. Within the constructivist paradigm, qualitative research recognizes the importance of context and the subject's experience in understanding social phenomena. According to Ardianto and Q-Anees (2009), language is no longer seen merely as a tool for understanding objective reality and is separated from the subject as a message transmitter. Constructivism considers the subject as a central factor in communication activities and social relationships. The constructivist paradigm is influenced by the symbolic interaction perspective and the structural-functional perspective. This symbolic interaction perspective explains that humans actively and creatively develop responses to stimuli in their cognitive world. In the social process, human individuals are seen as relatively free creators of social reality within the world in which they socialize.

In the context of this research, the constructivist paradigm allows researchers to analyze and understand how K-Pop fans, particularly Stray Kids fans in the Stay fandom, construct understandings and interpretations of their interaction patterns during fanwars between Stay fandoms. The constructivist paradigm views knowledge is not only derived from experience with existing facts but also from the researcher's constructed thoughts (Pohan and Gustiana 2023).

<u>**Symbolic Convergence Theory**</u>

This theory was first proposed by Ernest Bormann in his article entitled "Fantasies and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality" published in the Quarterly Journal of Speech in 1972. Symbolic convergence theory generally looks at attitudes about how cohesiveness within a group is achieved. Symbolic convergence theory is based on the idea that members in a group must exchange fantasies in order to form a cohesive group. The fantasies in question are stories or jokes that contain or express emotions. These fantasies include events in the past or events that may occur in the future, and do not focus on what is happening within the group (Suryadi 2010).

According to Griffin (1991), through convergence through symbols, individuals can build a sense of community or group consciousness. As symbolic convergence, group bonds

cohesively form a sense of togetherness. Each member begins to use the word "we" to replace "I". Members even attach to each other, and sometimes take place according to the group (Griffin, 1991). Bormann (1985) stated that his theory was built within the framework of the narrative paradigm which believes that humans are "Homo Narrans", namely creatures who exchange stories or narratives that describe their experiences and social realities. Vasquez explains that "Homo Narrans" has the basic principle that humans are "social storytellers" who share fantasies, form group consciousness, and create social reality (Zeep, 2003, Venus, 2007). Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCC) emphasizes that solidarity and group unity can be achieved through shared conversations in reading, interpreting signs, codes and cultural texts. This leads to the formation of a shared reality.

Bormann stated that SCC is a general theory that examines the phenomenon of message exchange that gives rise to group consciousness, which then has implications for the presence of shared meanings, motives, and feelings (Hirokawa and Pole, 1986). This theory attempts to explain how groups collectively build shared symbolic consciousness through the process of exchanging messages. The symbolic consciousness that is built in this process then gives rise to meaning, emotions, and motives for action for the people involved. This group can come from groups of people who already know each other or can also come from people who do not know each other and have different ways of interpreting the codes or symbols used, then communicate with each other, resulting in convergence that creates a shared symbolic reality (Suryadi 2010).

Bormann calls the method for applying his theory Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA). To understand this theory, it is necessary to understand the terms in FTA, namely:

1) Fantasy Theme

Bormann defines a fantasy theme as the content of the dramatizing message that sparks the fantasy chain, which can be in the form of jokes, analogies, word games, stories, and so on, which pump up the spirit of interaction.

2) Fantasy Chain

Literally, a fantasy chain is defined as a chain of fantasies that means when a dramatized message successfully elicits a response from communication participants, it increases the intensity and excitement of participants in sharing fantasies. As fantasies develop, a fantasy chain is formed. When a fantasy chain is created, the tempo of the

conversation increases, participants' enthusiasm rises, and empathy and feedback between them increase. Bormann (1990) describes a fantasy chain as a chain that leads participants to share stories with each other in a symbolic convergence. The fantasy chain creates a foundation of shared understanding, enabling the group to achieve empathetic communication.

3)   Fantasy Type

According to Trenholm (1986), a fantasy type is a general narrative framework related to a specific question or problem. Those who have interacted for a long time will develop a kind of symbolic cue or clue that is usually mutually understood. Symbolic cues often become inside jokes (jokes that only those involved in the previous conversation understand).

4)   Rhetorical Vision

Rhetorical vision is defined as "...sharing a fantasy theme and types across a wider community." Here, fantasy themes have developed and expanded beyond the group that developed them. Because of this development, these fantasy themes have become fantasies of a wider society and formed a kind of rhetorical community.

Bormann also explains that in every fantasy analysis, or study of rhetorical vision, there are four elements:

1)   dramatic personae atau character

2)   plotline

3)   scene

4)   sanctioning agents

The characters in the story can be heroes, villains, or other supporting characters. The plot is a series of events that are developed through action. The setting includes the location, related equipment or props, and sociocultural aspects of the setting. Finally, the sanctioning agent determines and validates the story's truth (Suryadi 2010).

In this study, Symbolic Convergence Theory is used to analyze how the Stay fandom constructs shared meaning through the exchange of messages, humor, jokes, and collective narratives that emerge during the fanwar. Convergence communication theory helps researchers identify fantasy themes, fantasy chains, and rhetorical visions that are formed when fans respond to conflict, so that the emerging communication patterns can

be understood as a process of forming a shared symbolic reality that influences the fandom's attitudes, solidarity, and collective actions.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is any form of communication that uses computer technology as a medium between individuals or groups. Theoretically, CMC is a communication process involving two or more computer technologies. CMC studies how human behavior can be shaped through the exchange of information via computers and the internet. With the internet, communication can be conducted freely, allowing people to communicate interpersonally or even en masse.

CMC pattern allows individuals to communicate using computer-based communication tools supported by the internet and applications that allow for reading online-based information. Individuals can communicate, even discuss with others wherever they are using online social networking media such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and others. CMC participation is required in carrying out communication with the communicant which involves two components, namely a computer and an internet network. In fact, not only a computer and an internet network, but the computer must also have certain applications that allow the communicator to interact with the communicant (Yasmin 2021).

In the context of this research, CMC is used to understand how social media features in X, such as replies, quote retweets, hashtags, and mass reports as interaction facilities, fast message dissemination, and special forms of dynamics in digital communication between Stay fandoms. The CMC approach allows researchers to see how technology mediates, strengthens, and changes Stay fandom interaction patterns during fanwars so that the analysis does not only focus on the content of the message but also on the role of the medium in shaping fandom communication behavior.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative methodology with a virtual ethnographic research approach. According to Lexy J. Moleong (2005), qualitative methods aim to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects, including explaining behavior, perceptions, motivations, and others as a whole, in terms of language and in certain

contexts. Meanwhile, ethnography according to M. Harris (1968), quoted from Creswell (2007: 68), is a qualitative research design in which researchers describe and interpret patterns that are exchanged and learned from cultural groups regarding values, customs, beliefs, and language (Nasrullah 2017), and virtual ethnography introduced by Christine Hine aims to provide an understanding of the significance and implications of internet use and is called "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000). The virtual ethnography approach allows researchers to identify patterns of communication, life, and social relationships in virtual life on social media in the context of interaction patterns when fanwars of Stay Kids fans in the Stay fandom. Virtual ethnography can help researchers understand interactions between fans and see the interaction patterns that are formed, as well as the dynamics of Stray Kids fans' communication when fanwars occur on social media X.

Participants & Setting/Unit of Analysis

The subjects of this study were the Stay fandom who had fan accounts and actively used the accounts on social media X and had been involved or witnessed fanwars that occurred between Stay fandoms. In this study, the researcher participated directly in the Stay fandom community on social media X to observe the interaction patterns of the Stay fandom community when fanwars between Stay fandoms occurred on social media X.

Data Collection

This research's subjects consisted of Stay fans who had fan accounts, actively used the accounts, and had been involved in or witnessed fanwars, while the research's objects focused on their interaction patterns during fanwars on social media X. In this study, researchers will collect data by observing the interaction patterns of the Stray Kids fan community which were involved in the fanwar that occurred between the Stay fandoms on social media X.

The research took place from February to August 2025. Participant observation was conducted by researchers directly engaging in the digital space of social media X to observe the interaction patterns of the Stay fandom during fanwars, including the use of language, responses, and communication strategies that emerged in online conversations. Participant observation is an observation method in which the researcher also functions actively as a participant by participating in the activities carried out by the subject being

studied. According to Sevilla (1993), observation, or simply observing, is the process by which the researcher observes the research situation (Gumilang n.d.). Then, the researchers documented, collected, and analyzed the content, texts, and comments shared by Stray Kids fans during the fanwar. Documentation is a data collection technique that utilizes written documents, photographs, video recordings, or other existing archives. According to Bowen (2009), documentation is an important data source in qualitative research to provide additional evidence to support research findings.

To ensure the credibility of the data, researchers applied validation techniques in the form of data triangulation by combining the results of observations, interviews, and content analysis to obtain a more complete perspective on the communication patterns of Stray Kids fan groups interacting during fanwars on Stay fandom on social media X, as well as expert triangulation to help improve the accuracy and credibility of this research, so that the researcher's findings in the context of Stray Kids fan interaction on social media become more valid and reliable by combining data from various sources so that researchers can identify consistent communication patterns and reduce bias.

Data Analysis
Data Reduction

This study will simplify, organize, and select relevant data for research from the results of observations, interviews, and documentation related to fanwars conducted by Stray Kids fans on social media X by explaining written messages of Stray Kids fans' interactions during fanwars so that they can identify communication patterns that appear in the Stay fandom during fanwars on social media X. Data reduction is a technique of concluding data, sorting data, and identifying patterns, certain categories, and certain themes. The results of data reduction can provide a clearer picture and make it easier for researchers to collect subsequent data. According to Sugiyono (2017), this process helps filter important information and facilitates further analysis.

Data Presentation

In this study, data is presented using a qualitative presentation that combines narrative text with visualization of field findings to facilitate the analysis process. Data presentation includes screenshots of tweets, direct quotes from comments or posts made by the Stay

fandom during the fanwar on social media X, as well as graphs depicting interaction patterns, fanwar triggers, and the dynamics of fan responses. Screenshots are used to show real forms of interaction on social media X, such as the use of hashtags, call-outs, report and block (RnB), and calls for peace. Tweet excerpts are selected to highlight the narratives, language, and symbols that shape the collective meaning of the fandom. In addition, graphs and charts show the results of the fanwar interaction analysis pattern or mapping of active and reactive interactions that are presented to visualize the flow of interactions that emerged in the Stay fandom when a fanwar occurred between internal members on social media X. Data presentation is a technique of compiling information, thus providing the possibility of drawing conclusions and taking action. This presentation helps organize data so that it is easier to understand. The form of qualitative data presentation can be in the form of narrative text, field notes, matrices, graphs, networks, or charts.

Cyber Media Analysis Techniques (AMS)

The Cyber Media Analysis Method (AMS) combines and guides the process of analyzing virtual ethnography. Each level of the AMS provides a snapshot of how virtual communities exist on the internet (Nasrullah 2017).

In principle, in analyzing internet culture, AMS requires units of analysis at both the micro and macro levels. These two units of analysis can be simplified into text and context. At the micro level, researchers describe internet devices, existing links, and the visible aspects of the text. Meanwhile, at the macro level, researchers examine the existing context and the reasons behind the text's emergence.

Table 1 – Cyber Media Analysis Levels

Level	Object
Media space	The structure of the media device and its appearance, related to the technical procedures of the device or application.
Media Archive	Content, aspects of the meaning of text or graphics as cultural artifacts.
Media object	Interactions that occur in cyber media, communication that occurs between community members.
Experiential stories	Motives, effects, benefits or realities that are connected offline or online include myths.

Source: (Nasrullah, 2017: 45)

Following are the levels in Cyber Media Analysis:

1. Media Space Level

Discusses the types of internet media where society and culture interact. From a technical perspective, the media space level shows how the internet is used (Nasrullah 2017).

2. Media Archive Level

Analyzing cultural content and how it is formed through virtual community interactions. At this level, texts are published in the form of sentences, images, audio, audiovisuals, or other visual materials (Nasrullah 2017).

3. Media Object Level

At this stage, media objects are specific units, allowing researchers to observe the actions and interactions between users on a micro and macro scale. Data at this stage can come from the textual content in cyber media or the context surrounding the text, focusing on how the text is responded to or interacted with by other cyber users (Nasrullah 2017).

4. Experiential Stories Level

The experiential level provides a broad overview of how a community or community members operate in the real world, meaning that what is presented in the virtual world relates to real life. At this level, researchers will discover the facts behind the text and see them as drivers or effects by connecting the real and virtual worlds to create a reality that occurs (Nasrullah 2017).

Trustworthiness

Data Triangulation

This research will combine various data sources and data collection methods, such as combining the results of observations, interviews, and content analysis to get a more complete perspective on the communication patterns of Stray Kids fan groups interacting during fanwars in the Stay fandom on social media X. According to Sugiyono (2015), data triangulation is a technique of combining various existing data and sources by examining data from various sources and points of view of the subjects being studied.

Expert Triangulation

In this study, expert triangulation was applied to help improve the accuracy and credibility of this study so that the researcher's findings in the context of Stray Kids fan interactions on social media become more valid and reliable by combining data from various sources so that researchers can identify consistent communication patterns and reduce bias. Expert triangulation is a data validation technique that involves the perspectives of relevant experts to review, evaluate, and provide input on the data findings or interpretation of research results. The goal is to increase the credibility, objectivity, and internal validity of the study by ensuring that the findings obtained are consistent and supported by various perspectives from individuals with in-depth knowledge.

Result

The Formation of Symbolic Reality of Stay Fandom on Social Media X

Fandom is defined as a group of people who have an interest in the same thing, such as music, with a unique scope for fans to interact, exchange information, and voice their enthusiasm about their idols (Putri et al. 2022).

"Stay" fandom is one of the most active and reactive K-Pop fan communities on social media X. Stay fandom interactions are known to be very supportive and protective of Stray Kids members, and their interactions are active 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, wherever and whenever fans are. Stay fandom is a globally spread fanbase; therefore, Stay fandom can interact in various languages, such as Korean, English, Indonesian, Japanese, Spanish, and others, showing the reach and diversity of the Stay fandom community as a whole. Stay fandom uses existing features on X social media, such as uploading tweets (writing), hashtags (#), mentions (@), retweets, quote retweets, replies, and direct messages (DM), and other features to expand the reach of their fantasies and create dynamic and unpredictable dynamics due to the speed of active fan interactions that continue to take place on social media X.

The Stay fandom, as a virtual community, collectively constructs and expresses their identity and understanding of Stray Kids. Their interactions on social media X are not merely an exchange of information but also a process of constructing a shared social reality among fans. The use of specific terms within the fandom (such as "Bias", "PC",

and "SKZ") is an example of how the Stay fandom creates meanings and symbols that are only understood within their community, thus forming a unique symbolic reality. The Stay fandom is a virtual community that has a solid and strong bond between fans and is also very protective of the group and members of Stray Kids. As defined by Bagozzi and Dholaki, a virtual community is a social space mediated in a digital environment that allows a group to form and maintain something through a continuous communication process in expressing their thoughts, ideas, emotions, and opinions (Ode and Nurhaliza 2020).

Generally, the Stay fandom discussion on X social media is about Stray Kids group activities (comebacks, and concert activities), official Stray Kids content (SKZCODE, song streaming, music videos), achievements on various music chart platforms, sharing fanart and fan fiction, buying and selling Stray Kids merchandise (photocards, albums, plushies), and discussing funny moments (memes) from Stray Kids group members. This Stay fandom interaction is part of an ongoing process where fans actively share fantasy information related to the Stray Kids group. This fantasy includes narratives or stories about the group's talents, the hard work of the group members, the success of the Stray Kids group and the emotional bond between the Stray Kids group and the Stay fandom. Through sharing this fantasy, the Stay fandom collectively builds a symbolic reality about themselves as loyal fans (pure fans), namely a group of fans who are supportive, loyal, and organized in supporting their idols. The process of continuously sharing fantasies can strengthen fandom awareness and increase cohesion or unity among fandom members.

Fandoms Trigger Fanwars on Social Media

Fanwars are a common phenomenon in K-Pop fan communities. Fanwars are defined as disputes or arguments between one or more fandoms, or between members of a single fandom, as an effort to protect their idol group in various contexts involving aggressive behavior and arguments with malicious comments on social media and can involve the entire fandom community (Ningrum 2023). Toxic and competitive fanwars are triggered by misguided fan loyalty (Tinaliga 2018). In this study, fanwars between Stay fandoms are triggered by several factors, such as biased favoritism, excessive inside jokes, and violations of fan ethics, which are interpreted negatively by the Stay fandom, thus triggering conflict and debate among fellow fandoms.

According to Symbolic Convergence Theory, fanwars can be seen as a clash of different "fantasies" or "rhetorical visions" within the fandom (Littlejohn 2016). Such as the fantasy of "fair treatment" for all members of the Stray Kids group which conflicts with the reality of "biased favoritism" that favors certain members of a group, in this context, the Stray Kids group. Then, when humor among fandoms or inside jokes have exceeded the fantasy of "healthy humor", it is threatened by the fantasy of "violation of privacy or decency". And ethical violations by *sasaeng* fans (obsessed fans), *akgae* (only liking one member in a group but putting down the others), and *shippers* (fans who match idols) can threaten the "ideal fantasy" of "a supportive and respectful fandom idol", triggering opposing reactions from other members of the Stay fandom.

Figure 2 – The trigger for the Stay fandom fanwar on social media X
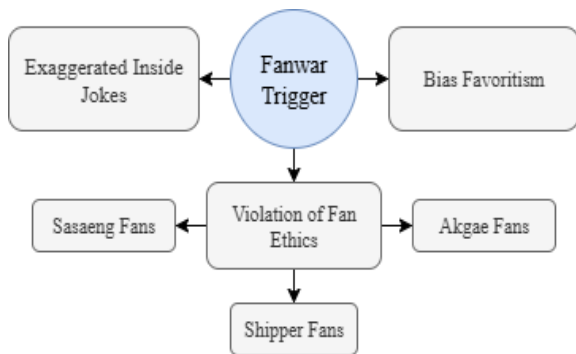
Source: Researcher Processed Data, 2025

The triggers of fanwars within the Stay fandom show that conflict stems not only from differences of opinion within the Stay fandom but also from differences in interpretation and values constructed within the fandom community. Biased favoritism, offensive inside jokes, and violations of fan ethics create a "fantasy of violation" that threatens the fandom's "ideal fantasy" of supporting Stray Kids with fairness, healthy humor, and ethical conduct. The clash of these fantasies is reinforced by the competitive nature of individual fandoms, directly triggering fanwars between fandoms on X social media.

Symbolic convergence theory focuses on how communities construct shared meaning through collectively created symbols, language, and norms. In the Stay fandom, the use of specific terms such as "bias", "PC", "SKZ", and other symbols associated with the Stray Kids group and fans serves as a clear example of how meaning and identity are formed through social construction. These symbols strengthen the unity and solidarity of

the fandom and differentiate the Stay fandom from other fandoms. However, when there are differences in interpretation, especially in the context of inside jokes or fan ethics, this construction of meaning can become a source of conflict. For example, a violation of a norm considered trivial by one party can be perceived as a serious violation by another party and trigger tension or a fanwar.

Social media X, with its features such as tweets, hashtags, mentions, and retweets, facilitates highly dynamic interactions that are not limited by time and place. It enables fast and broad global communication and shaping a new social reality called symbolic reality. However, this speed reduces context and increases the risk of misunderstandings that can exacerbate conflict. Furthermore, different symbols and norms within the community also amplify differences in interpretation, so that conflict is not only driven by disagreements but also by the construction of different meanings within the community. CMC theory helps explain how technology accelerates and amplifies these dynamics, while it also creates new challenges in managing online communication to prevent it from escalating into a large fanwar.

Discussion

Stay Fandom's Active Symbolic Convergence in Response to Fanwars

When a fanwar occurs, the Stay fandom shows their loyalty and support for the Stray Kids group as a fan community that has the same goals and interests to protect the group's image and the fandom's name by preventing the spread of conflict. The Stay fandom actively interacts in taking action to prevent, resolve, and respond to fanwars before or during conflicts to divert the fandom's attention from the negative issues being spread. The Stay fandom also builds awareness and educates fandom members, and creates positive content that highlights the achievements of the Stray Kids group and the positive values of the Stay fandom.

Figure 3 – Stay fandom's active interaction patterns in response to fanwars
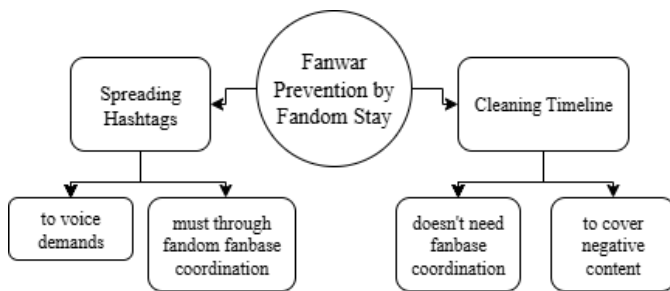
Source: Researcher Processed Data, 2025

Every collective interaction carried out by the Stay fandom is based on group communication from the large Stay fandom fanbase that can coordinate strategic actions and responses to every conflict context that occurs to demonstrate the dynamics of effective and solid interactions within the fan community group. This is relevant to the purpose of the group communication concept which plays a role as a medium for joint decision-making and problem-solving faced by the Stay fandom community group.

Spreading hashtags is an example of a "fantasy chain" that leads to Symbolic Convergence Theory. Hashtags such as #JYPEPROTECTSKZ become "fantasy symbols" that unite fans in a shared "rhetorical vision" to demand idol protection from Stray Kids' agency (JYP Entertainment). Large fanbase accounts act as "agents determining the truth of the story" or "fantasy leaders" who coordinate the spread of this fantasy and strengthen the solidarity of the fan group (Suryadi 2010). Meanwhile, cleaning the timeline is a collective effort by fans to divert the "negative fantasy chain" triggered by fanwars into a "positive fantasy chain" by flooding the timelines of each member of the Stay fandom with positive content. The Stay fandom symbolically "cleans" their interaction media space by reaffirming the desired symbolic reality and drowning out negative narratives.

Symbolic convergence theory, as explained by Littlejohn (2016), explains how fandom communities build and strengthen their collective identity through symbols, terms, and norms that are unique to their community. The Stay fandom, through the use of symbols such as special terms and norms about privacy and loyalty, demonstrates their efforts to unify perceptions and maintain an ideal symbolic reality that demands respect for privacy and loyalty to the Stray Kids group, which is a form of symbolic convergence. When fanwars occur, they also mobilize collective symbols and narratives to maintain a shared identity and uphold norms that are believed to be true, thus strengthening active

symbolic convergence. When conflicts arise in the form of excessive distribution of inside jokes or violations of fan ethics, the Stay fandom actively carries out symbolic convergence by spreading normative messages and strengthening these symbols through various collective communications, such as spreading special hashtags, cleaning timelines, or reminding other members of collective norms and values.

Meanwhile, Yasmin's (2021) theory of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) asserts that social media features like tweets, mentions, retweets, and hashtags enable rapid and widespread interaction. Stay fandom utilizes these features to actively and collectively coordinate, build positive narratives, and control their image globally and in real time. These features enable them to actively and collectively coordinate in the face of fanwars, such as spreading messages of solidarity and mitigating conflicts directly on digital platforms.

Reactive Symbolic Convergence of Fandom Stay in Response to Fanwar

The pattern of reactive interactions of the Stay fandom in responding to fanwars, such as responding to satire and negative criticism that they find when fanwars occur reflects their protective nature as fans of their idol group, namely Stray Kids. The reactive actions of the Stray fandom in responding to fanwars related to Stray Kids and their fandom name, such as directly reprimanding (calling out) accounts on social media X that spread negative content, then carrying out mass reports and blocks (RnB), and voicing peaceful calls as mediators to fans involved in the fanwar that occurred to refocus on supporting and switching to spreading positive content from Stray Kids to strengthen the identity and solidarity of the fandom.

Fandom Stay utilizes X's features, such as uploading tweets, reporting, blocking, retweeting, etc. to communicate, coordinate, and respond to fanwars quickly and appropriately. It shows that media technology can facilitate communication dynamics in online communities. This is relevant to the theory of CMC which explains that media becomes a bridge for group communication to be more measurable and easily managed through subgroups and features available in technology media (Carr 2021).

Figure 4 – Stay fandom's reactive interaction patterns in response to fanwars
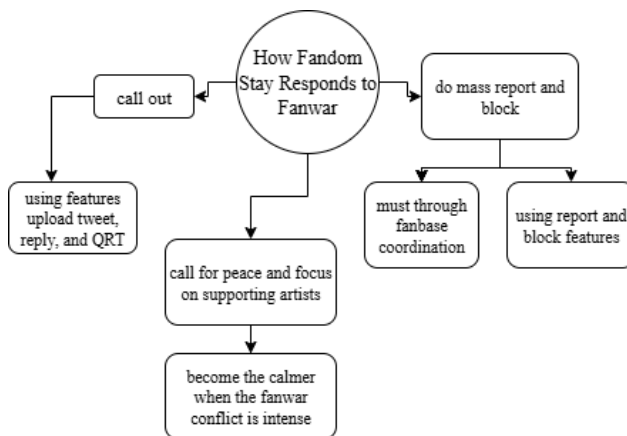
Source: Researcher Processed Data, 2025

When fanwars occur, the Stay fandom engages in intense discussions to support and defend one another, creating a dynamic of rapid and solid communication that strengthens their bonds as a fandom. This context aligns with the purpose of group communication, which serves as a means for individuals to address issues and seek support from others with similar thoughts.

The act of directly reprimanding (calling out) the Stay fandom is a form of manifestation of "collective fantasies about norms that must be maintained" by each fan. When these norms are violated by "transgression fantasies" (such as the context of excessive inside jokes or merchandise comparisons by fans), the Stay fandom carries out the call-out as an effort to correct and restore the ideal symbolic reality. This will form a "drama" that aims to "release tension" and reaffirm group values (Littlejohn 2016).

The mass report and block (RnB) culture is a process of "purifying" the symbolic reality of fans from "negative fantasies" spread by toxic accounts on X. RnB is an organized collective action by the Stay fandom to eliminate "disturbance" from the shared reality led by a "fantasy leader" (fanbase account) who gives instructions.

The Stay fandom's call for peace and focus on supporting artists is their attempt to introduce a "harmonious fantasy" and stop the "chain of conflict fantasies." The peaceful messages shared by the Stay fandom and Stray Kids members serve as a "unifying symbol" that reminds fans of their "core fantasy" to support Stray Kids and maintain the unity of the Stay fandom by attempting to redirect the group's "rhetorical vision" towards a more constructive goal (Suryadi 2010).

Stay fandom's reactive response to fanwars reflects a convergence process through how fandom members share fantasies about the norms, ethics, and ideal image that must be maintained within the fan community. Interactions such as call-outs, mass report and block (RnB), and calls for peace among fans form a "fantasy chain" that develops from dramatic messages that trigger emotion and solidarity. When fandom members perceive violations, such as inside jokes that cross the line or the actions of *akgae* and *sasaeng* fans, they will respond with a narrative suggesting that these actions threaten the ideal symbolic reality of the fandom community. This narrative triggers a "conflict fantasy chain" that encourages reactive actions to restore the system that is considered correct within the fandom community. The call-out action emerges as an expression of a collective fantasy about norms that must be maintained, where fandom members collectively reprimand behavior that deviates from these ideal values. The large fanbase of Stay fandom acts as a "fantasy leader" who coordinates and directs collective interpretations, such as providing RnB instructions or calls to stop the conflict. In this context, the Stay fandom's reactive response forms a rhetorical vision, a shared view of how the fandom should behave: maintaining harmony, protecting idol's reputations, and prioritizing community solidarity. This rhetorical vision is reinforced by the nature of virtual communication through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) theory, where X's features such as retweets, QRT, and hashtags can rapidly expand the reach of shared narratives and allow collective fantasies to spread until they become standards of behavior followed by all members of the Stay fandom.

Conclusion

Stay fandom is formed from individuals who share the same interest in the K-Pop group Stray Kids. They collectively express their enthusiasm and support by interacting and sharing activities and content about the Stray Kids group on X. The interaction of the Stay fandom on social media X can be said to be very active and reactive, taking place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week because the Stay fandom is spread globally and they can interact using various languages on X socia media.

Stay fandom effectively utilizes existing features on social media X, such as hashtags, uploading tweets, retweets, quote retweets, and other features to expand the reach of their interactions that contain the meaning of their communication using symbols

or terms that are only understood by the Stay fandom itself. Stay fandom creates dynamic and unpredictable interaction dynamics due to the speed of active fan interactions that continue to take place on X social media, especially in the context of fanwars.

A fanwar is a phenomenon that often occurs in the K-Pop fan community, which is defined as a dispute or quarrel between one or more fandoms or between fellow members of one fandom as an effort to protect their idol. A fanwar involves aggressive behavior and argument with malicious comments that can involve the fandom community as a whole.

The fanwar phenomenon that occurs within the Stay fandom is caused by several complex internal conflict factors. Firstly, it is favoritism bias which means the behavior of fans who support certain Stray Kids members and often triggers conflict when they feel there is injustice or imbalance towards each member in a group. Secondly, it is excessive inside jokes from the Stay fandom that can offend fellow fans and even Stray Kids members. Thirdly, it is violations of fan ethics, such as obsessive fan behavior to the point of prying into Stray Kids members' personal information (*sasaeng*), the actions of fans who only support one member but put down others (*akgae*), and fans who matchmake members (*shippers*) who are too imaginative to the point of ignoring privacy and creating narratives that can be considered harassment.

The Stay fandom's active interaction pattern in responding to fanwars is shown through acts of solidarity. The Stay fandom collectively spreads hashtags containing their support and demands to certain parties, also carrying out search cleaning actions or cleaning timelines to cover negative digital traces related to the Stray Kids group name, as well as the Stay fandom name on X social media.

In addition, the Stay fandom's reactive interaction pattern in responding to the fanwar that occurred reflects the Stay fandom's protective nature towards the Stray Kids group and the fandom's name from negative insinuations and criticism. The Stay fandom does not hesitate to immediately reprimand (call out) those who spread negative and toxic content. They take mass report and block (RnB) actions collectively coordinated by the Stay fandom's large fanbase account to report and remove the account that created the problem. Stay fandom also voices peace which mediates conflicts in order to refocus on supporting and switching to spreading positive content from Stray Kids and the Stay fandom to strengthen identity and solidarity between fans.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the understanding of the application of Symbolic Convergence Theory in the context of K-Pop fandom, particularly by showing that fanwars are not merely interpersonal conflicts but rather a clash of collective fantasies that form a chain of fantasies and produce a new rhetorical vision of the Stay fandom's identity as a protective and solid community. In addition, this study also expands the understanding of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) theory by showing how social media features in X, such as retweets, quote retweets, hashtags, and others facilitate the process of symbolic convergence quickly and globally in virtual communication spaces. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of virtual ethnography in capturing the dynamics of spontaneous, intense, and multi-source online interactions. This study also emphasizes the importance of using digital observation, screenshot documentation, and social media-based content analysis to uncover dynamic and unpredictable group interaction patterns. It also offers a framework that can be replicated in future online interaction research.

Declaration Of Interest

This research is expected to be a reference for further research interested in studying the dynamics of K-Pop fandom interactions in the context of fanwars on social media. Further researchers can broaden the focus by comparing fanwar interaction patterns between different K-Pop fandoms and conduct research on other social media platform locations to see the differences in communication on each social media by developing a virtual ethnographic approach. Further researchers can also expand the research object by comparing fanwar across countries, as well as using quantitative methods to enrich the study.

This research provides a reflective overview of the interaction patterns that occur in the Stay fandom, especially in the context of fanwars. Fans are expected to be more aware of internet ethics, both personally and collectively, to create a healthy, positive, and more supportive fandom community environment. Providing understanding to fellow fans is also important regarding internet ethics as a fan on social media, as well as being more selective in responding to conflicts and setting boundaries in interactions so as not to expand fanwars that can tarnish the image of the fandom and idol.

And this research can be a source of understanding for people who are still unfamiliar with the complexity of culture and the phenomenon of K-Pop fan communities on social media platforms. This suggestion is intended so that the general public does not view K-Pop fandom by generalizing or creating negative stereotypes only based on the behavior of individuals involved in fanwar conflicts but also understands that fandom communities are a representation of collective identity construction that is influenced by technology, media, and certain social values. With a more comprehensive understanding, a healthier space for tolerance will open up between the popular youth culture that is formed in virtual spaces and the wider society.

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