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by User User

Aesthetic Hierarchies and Cultural Disdain: Identity Construction in Rock and

K-Pop Fandoms

I. Research Background

In the context of accelerating global media convergence and cultural globalization, music has transcended its traditional role as mere "auditory enjoyment." It now operates as a powerful symbolic system through which individuals and communities express social affiliations, articulate cultural identities, and maintain class-based distinctions (Hall, 1997). This transformation is especially visible in the evolution of fan culture, which—propelled by the rise of social media platforms such as Weibo, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu—has moved from the cultural periphery to the center of public discourse.

As fan communities grow increasingly embedded in digital culture, music genre preferences and their associated labels have become key sites for identity construction and symbolic differentiation. Online discourses, such as Bilibili's trending tags "#RockNeverDies" and "#RejectKpop," are not simply expressions of taste. Rather, they signify deeper aesthetic divisions and illustrate how fans use digital vernaculars to construct and enforce symbolic boundaries within and across communities.

This shift reflects a broader cultural process in which musical preferences are no longer confined to individual expressions of taste. Instead, they become part of a collective negotiation of what can be termed "cultural coordinates." As Jenkins (1992) argues, fans are not passive consumers but active producers of meaning who participate in shaping, resisting, and reconfiguring dominant aesthetic norms. In this sense, musical taste operates as a strategic tool for identity performance and negotiation, situated

within intersecting social tensions—particularly along generational, gendered, and class-based lines.

Compounding these dynamics are the algorithmic structures of digital platforms, which play an increasingly influential role in shaping aesthetic hierarchies. Mechanisms such as popularity-based recommendation systems, tag aggregation, and pinned comment functions contribute to the privileging of specific aesthetic judgments. For instance, descriptors like "high-quality music" and "not kitschy" are frequently associated with rock music, while genres like K-pop and broader fan culture are often relegated to lower tiers, characterized by pejorative associations with "commercialization" and "feminization." As Gillespie (2014) points out, such platform logics do not merely reflect user preferences but actively participate in institutionalizing cultural hierarchies that appear organic yet are structurally embedded.

Given these intertwined cultural and algorithmic forces, this research seeks to explore how aesthetic choices, community norms, and platform mechanisms coalesce in the everyday online practices of music fandoms. Specifically, the study will investigate how aesthetic hierarchies are produced, normalized, and contested within digital platforms, and how these hierarchies function as vehicles for identity politics and social differentiation.

II. Literature Review and Research Gap

Negotiated Relationships Between Fans and the Mainstream

Early scholarship often characterized fans as oppositional figures resisting dominant cultural forms. However, Jenkins (1992), in *Textual Poachers*,

reconceptualizes fandom as a participatory site where fans are "co-producers of meaning." Rather than simply rejecting mainstream texts, fans actively rework and reinterpret them through creative practices and community discourse, positioning fan culture as a "negotiated space" that bridges the mainstream and the margins.

Expanding upon this framework, Hills (2017) introduces the notion of the "fan world," conceptualizing fandom not merely as an emotional attachment to texts but as a structured cognitive and identity system. This framework suggests that fan communities function as stable cultural infrastructures in which meaning is continually (re)produced. However, while these studies illuminate the cultural dynamics of fan participation, they predominantly center on film and television fandoms. Consequently, the role of musical genres as differentiated aesthetic systems—and how they serve as symbolic resources for identity construction—remains underexplored.

Cultural Capital, Aesthetic Stratification, and Social Mechanisms

To understand how aesthetic preferences relate to social identity, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *distinction* is foundational. He argues that aesthetic judgment is not neutral or innate; rather, it is socially conditioned, shaped by education, upbringing, and access to cultural capital. Within musical contexts, genre affiliations often carry implicit class connotations. For example, indie rock is frequently linked with notions of authenticity, intellectualism, and anti-mainstream resistance, while idol pop—particularly K-pop— is often dismissed as commercialized or superficial.

Such aesthetic labeling is amplified in digital spaces, where social platforms act as arenas for aesthetic evaluation and symbolic stratification. Grossberg (2002)

emphasizes that fans' emotional investments are not isolated expressions of taste but are instead embedded in broader structures of power and meaning-making. Despite these insights, current literature falls short in delineating the *specific mechanisms* by which these aesthetic hierarchies are formed and institutionalized within fandom interactions. This limitation is especially pronounced in studies focusing on the Chinese digital landscape, where empirical research remains sparse.

Symbolic Hierarchies in Genre-Based Fan Cultures

Recent scholarship has begun to probe how fans use emotional and symbolic practices to mark aesthetic boundaries. Lamerichs (2014), for instance, highlights how fans deploy "emotion-visual recognition methods" in participatory cultures to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. These symbolic distinctions are often structured through binary oppositions—such as "authentic rock vs. fabricated pop," "underground vs. mainstream," and "cool vs. kitsch"—that serve to reproduce aesthetic hierarchies and moral evaluations within and across fan communities.

Nevertheless, much of this research has been genre-specific, focusing narrowly on K-pop, hip-hop, or other individual music styles. Few studies address how *different genres* interact, mutually disparage, or compete for cultural legitimacy. Moreover, the gendered, class-based, and regional underpinnings of these aesthetic judgments are often treated as peripheral rather than central analytic concerns. These limitations suggest a critical gap in our understanding of how aesthetic disdain is structured, reproduced, and normalized within digital fan cultures.

Summary of Research Gaps

Although existing literature offers valuable insights into the interplay between fan agency, aesthetic judgment, and cultural capital, several key research gaps remain:

1. **Lack of Comparative Analysis Between Genres**: There is a notable absence of comparative studies examining how fan discourses around rock and K-pop embody and reproduce symbolic power structures in contrasting ways.

2. **Institutionalization of Cultural Reproduction Mechanisms**: While fan creativity and resistance are well acknowledged, there is limited empirical exploration into how fans themselves become agents of cultural reproduction, reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies and ideological divides.

3. **Neglect of Gender and Regional Dimensions**: Current scholarship has not adequately accounted for how feminized aesthetics and East Asian cultural styles intersect with broader gender regimes and regional hierarchies, thereby forming structural foundations for cultural exclusion within the aesthetic hierarchy of disdain.

These research gaps underscore the necessity of a more integrated and comparative approach to understanding how genre-based fandoms—particularly those surrounding rock and K-pop—construct, contest, and institutionalize aesthetic hierarchies within digitally mediated cultural spaces.

III. Research Objectives and Research Questions

Building on the preceding literature review and identified gaps, this study centers on the concept of the *"cultural hierarchy of disdain"* to investigate how musical aesthetics operate as a mode of identity politics within digital fan communities.

Specifically, it will examine how these hierarchies are constructed, institutionalized, and reproduced on social media platforms, with attention to the embedded structural inequalities related to gender, class, and regional cultures. Key research objectives include:

To uncover the exclusionary functions of musical aesthetics in processes of cultural positioning

This study seeks to analyze how musical taste operates as a boundary-making device in fan communities, facilitating collective identity formation while simultaneously excluding the "other." In particular, rock music is often coded as "authentic" and "highbrow," while K-pop is frequently dismissed as "commercialized" and "feminized." Through an examination of labeling practices, emotional mobilization, and identity performance, this objective aims to clarify how aesthetic preferences become vehicles for social categorization and identity work (Hall, 1997; Grossberg, 2002).

To examine how social media platforms institutionalize aesthetic hierarchies

Digital platforms are not neutral carriers of content but participate in structuring cultural hierarchies through algorithmic governance, tag aggregation, and content filtration. These mechanisms influence the visibility, legitimacy, and circulation of particular aesthetic forms. This objective will investigate how platform logic interacts with fan community norms to institutionalize the *cultural hierarchy of disdain*, thus reinforcing aesthetic exclusions in ways that appear organic yet are structurally embedded (Gillespie, 2014).

To analyze the mechanisms through which symbolic power operates in fan interactions

Musical taste judgments within fan communities function as symbolic acts, enabling the redistribution of cultural capital and the drawing of aesthetic boundaries. This study will examine how fans construct symbolic distinctions—such as "us vs. them"—through language, emojis, comment culture, and visual codes. These practices not only reflect individual preferences but also enact broader ideological structures (Bourdieu, 1984; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008).

To develop a cross-cultural analytical framework for theorizing aesthetic hierarchies

By synthesizing theoretical contributions from Bourdieu, Hall, Jenkins, and Hofstadter with empirical data drawn from Chinese social media platforms, this research aims to build an original analytical framework for understanding the *cultural hierarchy of disdain*. This framework will offer theoretical tools to interpret how emotional investment, aesthetic ideology, and identity politics are co-constructed within fan cultures (Rigney, 1991).

To guide this investigation, the research will be structured around one core research question:

RQ1: How is the musical hierarchy of disdain, as a cultural ideology, institutionalized through platform algorithms and community norms?

Guided by Gillespie's (2014) framework on platform governance, this question explores how algorithmic structures, content-tagging systems, and community practices

collectively render aesthetic judgments structural. It seeks to identify how such mechanisms establish genre-based boundaries between what is considered mainstream and what is marginalized.

RQ2: In what ways do fan interactions and discursive practices contribute to the cultural reproduction of symbolic hierarchies?

Using Jenkins's (1992) theory of participatory culture, this question examines how fan communities reproduce cultural distinctions and reinforce aesthetic hierarchies through evaluation, emotional expressions, visual representations, and discursive exclusions. It considers how these micro-interactions cumulatively function as mechanisms of symbolic power.

RQ3: To what extent do aesthetic divisions reflect structural inequalities across gender, class, and regional dimensions?

Drawing from Hall's (1997) theory of cultural identity and Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of cultural capital, this question investigates how "feminized" and "East Asian" musical styles are situated within hierarchies of taste. It further interrogates how these aesthetic judgments intersect with gender norms, class ideologies, and regional cultural hierarchies to reinforce broader patterns of social stratification.

These research questions are formulated to guide the empirical investigation and theoretical development of the study. Each question aligns with a core analytical focus, ensuring conceptual coherence between the study's aims and its methodological direction.

IV. Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively analyze the formation and operation of the *"cultural hierarchy of disdain"* in fan communities, this study draws upon four theoretical frameworks. Each contributes a distinct analytical lens—symbolic power, identity construction, fan practices, and hierarchical logic—applied respectively to textual discourse, visual language, platform governance, and fan identity strategies. Together, these theories form an integrated framework for examining how musical aesthetics intersect with social structures in digital spaces.

Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1984)

Bourdieu argues that cultural taste is not innately developed but shaped by one's access to symbolic capital, itself conditioned by education, class, and social structures. Musical genres function as cultural filters within stratified taste hierarchies: rock, for instance, is imbued with middle-class markers such as "depth" and "rebellion," while K-pop is frequently dismissed as "kitschy" and "feminized," symbolizing a deficit in cultural capital.

This study will analyze digital discourse including hashtags like **#OnlyTrueFansListenToRock** and **#RejectKpop**, as well as phrases commonly used on platforms such as Bilibili, e.g., *"This is real music"* or *"Only kids chase Korean groups."* These expressions reflect hierarchical class perceptions and the performative use of cultural capital to construct symbolic boundaries.

Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity and Discourse (Hall, 1997)

Hall posits that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but is constructed and negotiated through discourse. The discursive act of naming defines social affiliations—

distinguishing "who we are" from "who they are"—and thus plays a central role in identity politics.

Fan-generated terms such as *"fan circle b*tch," "true rock youth," and *"industrial sugar"*—circulated via super topics, comment sections, and group chats—are not merely aesthetic judgments but discursive tools for delineating group identity and symbolic superiority. These expressions demonstrate the discursive formation of cultural identity within online fandoms (Hall, 1997).

Jenkins's Theory of Participatory Culture and Fandom (Jenkins, 2006)

Jenkins reframes fans as active cultural participants who co-produce meaning through remixing, parody, and circulation. Fan culture thus mediates between mainstream and subcultural domains, creating new modes of aesthetic expression and legitimacy.

On Bilibili, K-pop fans engage in participatory practices such as uploading fan edits, creating memes (e.g., *"Oppa filter activated"*), and using barrage comments to defend idols. These activities exemplify the performative negotiation of aesthetic legitimacy and group cohesion through participatory media (Jenkins, 2006).

Hofstadter's "Hierarchy of Disgust" and Rigney's Classification (Rigney, 1991)

Originally conceptualized by Hofstadter, the *"hierarchy of disgust"* refers to the social logic of hierarchical contempt. Rigney (1991) expands this into three patterns: cultural discrimination, intellectual exclusion, and emotional stigmatization—mechanisms central to the reproduction of symbolic inequality.

Platform comments such as *"Only elementary school kids listen to K-pop"* or *"K-*

pop groups = effeminate culture" reflect how fans stigmatize certain genres through feminization, infantilization, or regional stereotyping. These discursive patterns mirror Rigney's (1991) "cultural stigma cycle" and help trace how aesthetic disdain is normalized and stratified across gendered and regional lines.

V. Proposed Methodology

This study will employ a triangulated methodology combining platform content analysis, in-depth interviews, and case studies. By analyzing fans' expressions, interactions, and controversy-driven behaviors, the research will examine how digital practices reinforce aesthetic hierarchies and symbolic distinctions at textual, behavioral, and event-specific levels.

Platform Content Analysis

To investigate the discursive construction of aesthetic hierarchies, the study will collect data from major Chinese social platforms—Bilibili, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douban—focusing on keywords and tags such as "rock," "K-pop," "#RockNeverDies," and "#RejectKpop." The collection period spans July 2023 to May 2024, with no fewer than 1,000 user comments extracted using tools such as Octoparse and Weibo search engines.

The dataset will undergo preliminary content classification, keyword frequency analysis, sentiment coding (positive/negative/emotive disdain), and manual semantic annotation. This method will capture how fans articulate cultural positioning, aesthetic exclusion, and identity performances. The analysis draws on Jenkins's participatory culture theory and Gillespie's critique of algorithmic content governance (Jenkins,

2006; Gillespie, 2014).

In-Depth Interviews

To complement textual analysis, the study will conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture fans' subjective interpretations and experiential narratives. At least 20 participants—including rock fans, K-pop fans, crossover fans, and anti-K-pop users—will be recruited through screening questionnaires posted in Douban groups, Weibo fan pages, and Xiaohongshu comment threads.

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or voice call, each lasting 40–60 minutes in Chinese, and subsequently transcribed for coding. Key themes include: formation of musical preferences, perceptions of rival fan communities, experiences with conflict, and identity self-positioning. As Hutchins and Tindall (2016) argue, fan communities operate as participatory publics engaged in discursive governance—a perspective that informs this phase of the research.

Case Study Method

To understand how aesthetic hierarchies are enacted in real-time cultural controversies, the study will analyze two representative cases of online disputes:

Case One: Douban "Midi Festival Performance Controversy" (May 2023)

When K-pop elements appeared in a rock festival performance, veteran rock fans on Douban criticized the act as "kitsch" and "compromised," igniting a heated *"rock vs. idol"* debate. This case will be used to examine high-engagement comments, user-tag practices, and reply logic, revealing how genre-based orthodoxy and symbolic stigmatization are constructed discursively.

Case Two: Xiaohongshu "Cover Visual Controversy" (January 2024)

A graphic account juxtaposed a female in K-pop attire with a "rock-style" woman, labeling the former as a *"low-aesthetic representative."* The post triggered debates over *"gendered temperament"* and *"taste hierarchy."* This study will analyze visual representations, emojis, and comment interactions to reveal how aesthetic and gender-based hierarchies co-produce chains of disdain, resonating with Bury (2017) and Rigney's (1991) models of cultural stigmatization.

VI. Potential Contributions

This study will offer theoretical and methodological innovations that bridge fan culture, platform infrastructures, and aesthetic politics in the context of digital media. At the theoretical level, the project will center on the concept of the *"cultural hierarchy of disdain,"* integrating Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, Hall's (1997) discourse theory of cultural identity, Jenkins's (2006) theory of participatory culture, and Hofstadter's logic of hierarchical contempt—further developed by Rigney (1991). This integrated framework will facilitate a novel analytical lens for understanding how symbolic hierarchies and identity exclusions are constructed, maintained, and negotiated within digital fan communities.

At the methodological level, the research will employ a triadic approach combining platform content analysis, in-depth interviews, and event-centered case studies. This mixed-methods design directly responds to Hills's (2017) assertion that fan practices function both as cultural expressions and as mechanisms of social coding. By embedding these methods within a comparative East Asian media context, the study

could offer a replicable interdisciplinary model for analyzing digital fan politics across cultural boundaries.

Moreover, the study carries broader social significance by addressing how contemporary Chinese youth engage in identity construction, symbolic negotiation, and class positioning through musical taste. As platforms like Bilibili and Xiaohongshu become key arenas for youth discourse, aesthetic judgments have evolved into a kind of *"digital class language."* The way users articulate preferences—what they listen to and how they talk about others' tastes—reflects deeper structures of gender, regional hierarchy, educational stratification, and symbolic power redistribution.

By dissecting fan aesthetic conflicts and mechanisms of disdain, this research would offer empirical grounding for understanding the emotional politics, symbolic exclusion, and cultural belonging processes of a new generation of media users. Ultimately, it seeks to inform strategies for mitigating the reproduction of hierarchical contempt within digital cultural ecosystems and proposes a more inclusive framework for recognizing aesthetic diversity in online fan communities.

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