

PERFORMANCE AND K-POP STANS: DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN 2020

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The Internet is at present the ideal space for political and communicative action. Public discourse is largely shaped by conversations around celebrities, bloggers and digital activists that take place on the Internet. However, the spreading potential of any unfiltered message online is a reason for concern. During President Donald Trump's administration, apprehension about fake news and conspiracy theories on the Internet kept on growing. It became commonplace for any unformed online comment to turn into a core element in somebody's identity as has been the case with QAnon (see LaFrance 2020). This is partly because online behavior and interactions—mediated by the specific communication processes predominant in the digital context—are not only defining aspects in the political sphere but are also instrumental for identity creation and social relationships development. Subjective perceptions of the self are nowadays “constitutively mediated by technological uses and practices” (Lasén and Casado 2014, 11). Subjectivities, identities and opinions become intertwined in the online public personas that individuals construct. A person's online display of identity has become part of their intersubjectivity, as well as potentially defining of their social interactions.

The Internet is a channel and a locus that facilitates both participation and mobilization (Meikle 2002). There are varying levels of social activism within online communities, ranging from coordinated protests to more passive minor changes to social media profiles. Graham Meikle highlights the differences—from a legal standpoint—that separate minor acts of civil disobedience from more radical acts of hacktivism (2002). Mary Joyce, the co-founder of the Digital Activism Research Project, suggests “digital activism” as an umbrella term that encompasses all these online practices (2010). This article will favor the use of Joyce's term while keeping in mind the different levels of contention against the established status quo that Meikle points out. Hence, digital activism, in its broadest sense, has become ubiquitous in

the contemporary digital ecosystem. In this context, political opinions and politicized commentary are expected from public figures—from celebrities to YouTubers and Instagramers. Nonetheless, thanks to the communicative dynamics of the Internet, it has become much easier to show engagement and concern about social issues to satisfy audiences' expectations. Instead of marching in street protests, one can simply write a hashtag or share an image on social media to signal support for a cause.

The K-pop fan community's response to Trump's 2020 presidential campaign exemplifies how political stances and identities increasingly blend together online. This article examines fans' actions as performative activism and examines their potential success on digital platforms. The analysis begins by considering how online activism has developed throughout the last decade, moving from a predominant hope in the potential of digital environments for effective political changes toward the superficiality of performance activism. Later, it focuses on the actions that K-pop stans have undertaken throughout 2020, analyzing the nature of the community and considering the implications of activism originating in fandom. Finally, the article proposes an analysis of the political potential that this amalgam of activism, fandom and performance creates.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM

In digital activism, the medium is central to the practice and "technology *itself* has become the object of contention" (Vlavo 2018). Publicly displaying one's actions is determined by the established practices that social media has helped shape. Performative behavior permeates very different social aspects of our lives and culture, as well as philosophical interrogations—from linguistics to conceptualizations of gender within society. Janelle Reinelt proposes that the notion of performance has to include everyday practices (2002), amongst which we can find political action and activism. While the theatrical and ludic elements in activism have always been a form of empowerment and a way of fighting oppression, the idea of performing in the digital environment is dependent on sharing your identity and expecting approval from your community—which, given the nature of the medium, necessarily includes strangers.

Showing concern about current social issues functions as virtue signaling. Using these *wokeness* codes¹ to improve self-image heavily relies on marketing reasoning. The key action, in terms of social capital, is sharing the message in itself. For instance, when registering to attend a Facebook event, the motivation is often not to show up or an actual preoccupation with the issue at hand, but rather "that other people see

¹ For more information on the history of *wokeness* see: Romano 2020.



you had the seeming intention to go". What matters is to show your support for certain causes "regardless of your actual advocacy or beliefs" (Gray 2018). This brings about social capital and, in the case of businesses that also engage in showing concern for popular social issues, economic gain. "Silence online now is interpreted as silence full stop" (Adegoke 2020) and that is a central motivator for people to share hashtags and images related to social concerns. They do to simultaneously gain approval and avoid the social backlash of not engaging, which often results in Internet strangers passing moral judgments onto others. This can potentially damage the causes underlying whichever hashtag is in vogue, given that the central concern shifts away from the political action itself toward showing apparent involvement in the action. As Yomi Adegoke puts it, we need to rethink the harm behind the "pics or it didn't happen" mentality (2020). According to this reasoning, "since silence is complicity, the logic follows that loud self-flagellation is activism, even if it is in part to temporarily assuage white guilt and requires little actual action" (Adegoke 2020).

Within the online environment, even when the political and social concerns are genuine, involvement in activism is unavoidably intertwined with performative acts. Nevertheless, these performers of *wokeness* do not always have bad intentions (Gray 2018). It is evident that wearing a t-shirt with a slogan requires less effort and commitment than other traditional forms of activism but, at the same time, it can provide people with the feeling that they indeed are doing something for the cause. In recent years, online movements have been key in defining political and social milieus. In the United States, Trump's victories and failures have been defined by the creation of digital ecologies with transnational outreach. In some cases, the performative aspect—mediated through the possibilities that the digital environment grants activists—becomes part of the group's *modus operandi*.

THE CURRENT POLITICAL CONTEXT AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The consumption of news catering to specific ideologies, although it has always been a natural tendency in audiences, has become paramount in the digital era. Online transnational groups create very different digital ecosystems that can influence the political arena, ranging from Anonymous to alt-right groups. Due to this organic segmentation, the Internet has turned out to be an ideal petri dish for contemporary fascism. Right-wing news sites that create and reinforce their own epistemologies "represent a new force in the broader media environment". Furthermore, "digital technologies offer unique opportunities" to create networks of people who share a very specific view of the world (Heft *et al.* 2020, 4), which allows these radical groups to amplify their message beyond national borders.

Because of this radicalization, how Internet platforms (most notably social media sites) respond to activism is a serious issue. They have the power to potentially

impact the ability of grassroots movements to originate while, at the same, disseminating fake news and harmful bias in lieu of effective regulations. Recently, many social media platforms have reassured their users that they have closely evaluated algorithms (and continue to do so) to avoid bullying, bias and the spreading of false information. However, some of their practices continue to be questioned. For instance, an excerpt from TikTok's moderating rules got leaked in 2019. The document showed how content moderators, while not asked to explicitly delete political content, were encouraged to prevent certain videos from going viral. Most importantly, police content, which would include interactions with the police and videos that might serve to denounce police brutality, was marked as "not for feed" (Chen 2019). The impact of the algorithm continued to have politicized results throughout 2020 and, at the end of May, TikTok issued an apology for having #BlackLivesMatter related posts pushed down by other content (Harris 2020). Instagram similarly attempted to clean up the company's image when executive Adam Mosseri commented on an official blog post in June: "we're also hearing concern about whether we suppress Black voices and whether our products and policies treat everyone equally" (2020a). Three months later, amid the upcoming US elections and continued racial tensions in the country, Mosseri published another blog entry with an update on the work they had done so far regarding this issue. The text introduces the work of the "New Equity Team" that oversees the verification of content as well as "taking action" against "organizations tied to violence such as QAnon" (2020b).

The regulations of different platforms are important because the ways activism is performed are highly dependent on the medium that is used. TikTok facilitates the inclusion of audio extracts associated with a specific cause (Jaramillo 2020) while others, such as Instagram, that rely on the potential shock value of photography have displayed trends in activism that exhibit similarities with the performance of traditional protests. For example, actual performances *in situ* and, in the case of the Black Lives Matter Movement, numerous photographs of protesters lying down on the streets with tape over their mouths have been shared. In this context, the traditional form of protest overlaps with the performance on social media. Nonetheless, other *easier* trends that align with performed activism rather than performance as an activist gesture have also emerged from this platform.

The black square, accompanied by the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday, was shared *en masse* on Instagram profiles around the world at the beginning of June 2020. It generated some discussion over celebrities' legitimate involvement with the purported cause. The hashtag began as #TheShowMustBePaused and was fostered by black female music executives Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang. The underlying idea was to encourage businesses and individuals to stop their usual activities to foster discussion around racism in the United States, as well as to donate



money to different organizations that were contributing to the cause and helping victims of both systemic racism and policing during protests. The resulting trend was criticized for not doing enough and for shifting the focus from black female activists to rich white celebrities (Locker 2020). It seemed that, on most accounts, what people were seeing on their Instagram feeds was the banalization of social and political causes as a symptom of performative activism and symbolic *wokeness*.

This is, however, a double-edged sword. Abstaining from comments can also reflect badly on public figures. As previously mentioned, within the digital environment, a mentality of “pictures or it didn’t happen” is quite predominant. This translates into a necessity of voicing opinions regarding any current issue because silence is perceived as complacency. This fabricated need to acknowledge all controversies and popular emerging concerns has proven detrimental in many instances. Online commentary and engagement gradually become banal. Within the online environment, characterized by both how easy it is for social and political issues to become devoid of meaning and the velocity with which relevant discussions shift, it is expected that people will share and retweet posts without fully reading them. It has become commonplace to find uncritically shared opinions and hyperlinks posted to avoid criticism by being able to prove, through a couple of tweets and Instagram posts, that you care. People keep track of everything that others—especially celebrities, including famous actors, Instagramers and YouTube beauty gurus—do or do not do online. Inside the panopticon that the Internet has become, the purpose of activism is ultimately diluted.

Yet, not all signs are discouraging. The Internet and social media played key roles in the grassroots activism and movements that emerged following the financial crisis of 2008 such as the Arab Spring, *indignados* in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the United States. Each has had different outcomes and outreach, but all seemed to prove that the Internet was able to provide citizens with useful tools to amplify their voices against the status quo. This has persisted throughout the second decade of the century. Mixed with all the platitudes and banality that we find in the vast arena that is the Internet, the impact that digital activism has on social and political aspects in the United States is noticeable. From the MeToo hashtag to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Internet has served in recent years as a locus for the creation of counterhegemonic movements and thought.

The fruitful examples mentioned so far have the common element of equating the materiality of the action—the occupation of the public spaces, be they streets, courthouses or municipal buildings—with the success of the activist exploit. Nonetheless, it could be argued that we have come to a point in history when activism is possible through the Internet alone, leaving aside any form of materiality and moving the public sphere entirely to the digital space. The emotional labor that surrounds Internet practices and the undeniable presence of intersubjectivity and



affect in our digital lives are signs that the social impact of seemingly immaterial interactions is quite strong. If there has ever been a collective that has par excellence spread, grown and impacted people's lives—even if only online—it is fan communities. While there are many IRL (in real life) events that sustain fandom, numerous individuals limit their fan activities to the digital world. It is possible, then, that the workings of fan communities can teach us key elements about successful digital activism that limits its action to the online environment.

FANDOM COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND STANS

While there is no definitive answer to what a fan is (Kloet and Zoone 2007), it is recognizable that the term can be quite flexible and continues to expand, permeating mainstream culture. Hence, it is not uncommon to see a political figure as the object of fandom. This often materializes in the form of what we commonly associate with populist behavior on the part of political figures who become fandom objects. Donald Trump is a clear example of a president who has fostered *fanish* attitudes in his supporters. Dominant practices in online fandom communities have changed and developed significantly since the genesis of the research field. Yet, there is one key element that has remained especially important when examining these groups: fandom's impact on the creation of personal identity (Jenkins 1992). The process of identity construction within fandom tends to depend on media productions and icons along with in-group interaction as a basis to establish group acceptance and belonging. The strong connection that is often created through affect and social relationship with an object of fandom typically motivates users to engage with, and constantly search for, new information on the given topic. In this sense, close social relationships and affect can explain why the political arena is in fact a productive environment for fandom to emerge. It is precisely in fandom that Trump's administration faced opposition. In June 2020, K-pop stans brought down the police app iWatch by saturating it with fancams (Alexander 2020).² The app was created by the Dallas Police Department for people to share videos of protestors in the Black Lives Matters congregations. That same month, thousands of ticket reservations were fielded for Trump's rally in Tulsa, OK. The president's campaign announced big attendance numbers, which turned out not to be the case, since most of the reservations were made by K-pop stans organizing on Twitter and TikTok (Lorenz, Browning and Frenkel 2020). It is not yet clear, however, what it is exactly about the

² A fancam is "a video that follows a specific person performing on stage" (urban dictionary, 2020). For more see: *Urban Dictionary* 2020. "Fancam." www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fancam

nature of this community that has proven to result in reasonably successful acts of digital activism.

One noteworthy peculiarity of the K-pop community is that the public and media discourse, as well as members themselves, invariably speak of ‘stans’ and not ‘fans’. Stan, in the fandom context, has its origin in an Eminem song (featuring Dido) of the same name. The lyrics are sung from the perspective of Eminem’s “biggest fan”, Stanley ‘Stan’ Mitchell, who “talks about [him] 24/7” and ends up killing himself before Eminem responds to his letters. Using the term “stan” to refer to a fan has evolved from its original, obsessive derogatory connotation to become synonymous with super fan status.³ Nowadays, this specific fan identity is “mostly used with celebrities”, most notably within music-related fandoms. It is often associated with the kind of “celebrity fandom that is far less critical of the object of fandom” (Klink and Minkel 2020) and typically extremely active so as to show their devotion to the community. “The participatory element” is key within stan culture. Super fans are expected to continuously share fancams of their favorite artist and make a hashtag trending as a way to “prove [their] worth as a true stan” (Klink and Minkel 2020). Although the practice has now extended to other fandoms, and even become an Internet meme, it is still a defining characteristic of a big part of the K-pop community.

K-pop singers’ marketing campaigns and public images contribute greatly to the formation of such strong fan communities. While the movements, imagery and show in an artist’s performance are important in any music genre, they are especially relevant in K-pop. The dances, aesthetics and overall behavior of the singers/performers are intrinsic elements in defining the phenomenon as such. They embody a specific brand of cute aesthetics known as *aegyo* (see Puzar and Yewon 2018) and have an immense online presence. Such a premeditated and consistent portrayal of these *idols* is partly due to South Korea’s investment in their soft power. The country is betting strongly on its cultural industry. The strategy, a phenomenon known as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* (see Valieva 2018), has so far proven quite successful as the nation recently took home a Best Picture Award in the 2019 Oscars—a first-time achievement for a non-English-language movie. With this political backdrop, K-pop artists are more than singers and dancers. They have acting careers, are notoriously involved with brands, create their own lines of products, and have a backstory and identity constructed for the characters they perform in their groups—often conformed by many individuals, sometimes as many as twenty. They are *idols*: an identity that has the concept of performativity engraved in its very nature.

³ The Oxford Dictionary has recognized the origin of this word in Eminem’s song. See: Fry 2018.



Due to the traditional understanding of boy-band fans, coupled with *aegyo*, K-pop stans are often wrongly assumed to be only young teenage girls. This connection with both youth and femininity results in a negative perception of their actions and a presumed lack of interest in politics on their part. Despite such extended prejudice, K-pop songs, notably “Into the New World” by Girls’ Generation, have been used in protests not only in South Korea but also in other Asian countries and regions such as Hong Kong (see Park 2019). As the collective involvement of this fan community in recent political action has shown, their preoccupation with politics and social issues is far from negligible.

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DIGITAL (PERFORMATIVE) ACTIVISM

K-pop stans utilize all kinds of social media resources to increase the impact and visibility of their favored bands. This is evidenced through the popularity found in social media platforms, with several of the most retweeted and liked tweets in history having been shared by either BTS or one of its members—one of the most popular K-pop bands worldwide (see Voytko 2020). It is important to note here that the influence of bots needs to be accounted for and that it is not rare for popular hashtags on Twitter to be hijacked. As such, the number of shares, retweets, or likes on social media may reflect artificial or coordinated tampering as opposed to a post’s popularity.

The hijacking of hashtags demonstrates that K-pop stans’ performance of activism can prove successful—even if in said ironically—when limited to the digital realm. Via calls to action within the K-pop community, racist and alt-right hashtags are flooded with the previously mentioned fancams. In doing so, they prevent those who are looking for the content that was originally shared from finding and spreading it. Such mass digital actions can still have some negative consequences if the results and numbers are not interpreted properly. By looking at the trending topics section on Twitter, some might conclude that the content that a hashtag is promoting has greater support than it actually does. Measuring the impact of online activism is complicated and we tend to use metrics that have been developed in the analog era (Karpf 2010). Consequently, hijacked hashtags trick traditional mass media that lack critical perspectives to scrutinize online phenomena into misreporting, and ultimately misrepresenting, an issue’s popularity or widespread support.

While the actions of K-pop stans can be seen as an instance of how performative activism online can be resignified as something positive, it should not be forgotten that actual discourse cannot be replaced by sheer volume. It must be first and foremost a communicative practice interpreted with nuance. As Keidra Chaney, writer and social media manager for progressive non-profits, explains in an interview with *Fansplaining* “the downside of any online activism that isn’t based



around actual organizing principles with some strategy and thought and intentfulness behind it, it's always gonna be kind of used for self-promotion on a certain level" (Klink and Minkel 2020). In the case analyzed here, this Internet activity not only have to do with self-promotion but also with the promotion of things that individuals are very attached to and that are directly linked with their identities: their objects of fandom. What activism amongst K-pop stans shows us is that the perception of self-identity and a sense of belonging are key for the workings of online, cross-national action. Fandoms are inherently social spaces in which individuals seek out others with similar interests who find enjoyment and meaning in the same modes of cultural expression that they do (Jenkins 1992), developing a distinctive collective identity that is not only dependent on the object of fandom but on the community itself. Understanding such an emotional commitment can be a good starting point for digital activism to emerge and a way to help reinforce the positive aspects of fan performativity. Explorations of activism emerging in fan communities are gaining attention within Fandom Studies. Ashley Hinck published *Politics for the Love of Fandom* in 2019. In this work, she highlights the necessity to consider fan action as a key part of contemporary public discourse. Her study centers on fans' performance of citizenship. Their citizen identity develops by virtue of ethical frameworks and modalities emerging within these fan groups' ecologies, implying specific ethical obligations (29) that motivate political action.

Successful transnational online communities have also appeared aside from traditional fandom circles—understood as those that are built around a popular culture product such as *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*. Heft *et al.* argue that there is nowadays such a thing as a global public sphere that creates political discussions across borders. According to their study, the political right in Europe appears to have been more successful than other groups at creating a transnationally shared epistemology. The evidence shows that countries with less established right-wing circles tend to rely more on online communities across borders (2020). People also tend to gravitate toward ecologies where their opinions are shared and reinforced, and these are easier to find on the Internet. Moreover, certain online spaces have the potential to operate under the false pretense of remaining apolitical. The central preoccupation here is that people's extreme lack of contact with any dissenting voices has led to the spread of radicalization and the resurgence of fascism that we are encountering all around the globe.

There is a need for effective activism to promote equality in order to prevent the ongoing expansion of fascism and nationalism that we have seen these past years. Considering the recent history of transnational alt-right groups and how K-pop stans have confronted it, it is possible that we are facing a key development in the performativity of digital activism. With the recent example of K-pop stans in mind, fandom-formed activists continue to flourish with an ever-increasing global and

digital perspective. Nowadays, conversations on activism cannot overlook the qualitative peculiarities that both fandom and the online environment grant it if we aim to better understand both their commitment within the community and how effective their social and political action can be despite the assumed performativity. Regardless of the ultimate success of these activist endeavors, instances found in the K-pop fandom show that those who truly care about political issues are willing to engage in public discourse with the tools that the digital environment provides. We know that the emergence of such communities is highly dependent on emotional gain and affect, which can function as a motivator that triggers active participation. Within the framework of transcending materiality that the digital seems to offer, it would be interesting to further explore how these relationships of affect through the screen can surpass the effervescence of in-person protests and offer a platform for successful activism.

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