

Idol Action: The Rise of Fan Activism and KPOP Stans

Julia Dickerson

Since 2020, KPOP stans have put fan-based activism on the map. Their outspoken actions have even gotten political and well-respected news media to report on and take fan-based activism seriously. Fan—or pop culture—based activism dates back at least to the 1960s, but its reach and power have grown exponentially since the advent of the internet. However, what fan activism has looked like has changed significantly since then and remains difficult to define. For this essay, “fans” will be defined as “individuals who engage deeply with and often assert their identity through popular culture content.” Activism is generally understood to be action taken to provoke political or social change. In this case, however, I shall take a definition of “fan-activism” from Fan-Scholar Henry Jenkins says that fan activism is “forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture.” It’s important to specify that activism is being conducted through the infrastructure of fandom because fandoms do not operate in the same way that political bodies do, or even other online bodies. Additionally, the pop-culture connection of fan activism is uniquely able to appeal to large groups of people, especially young people, and thus make political understanding and action more accessible. As fandoms continue to grow, so will their influence over politics, and it will soon be impossible to separate the two. Activism through Pop culture is the future of politics, because of the accessibility and youth members.

Fan activism’s efficacy comes from the ability of pop culture to encourage civic imagination. Pop culture often centers on young protagonists trying to make a change in their society or otherwise presents its readers with an idealized or dystopian society. In any case, the readers resonate with the book’s text, and it stirs their imagination. Pop culture allows people to imagine a better world and themselves as someone who can bring it about. Being part of a Fandom encourages exploration and imagination like that, as well as encouraging cross-culture connections. To participate in fan communities one must constantly be willing to consider new ideas and change their perspectives because fans come from everywhere to share their ideas and experiences. Fandom lowers the bar of entry to political participation as well. By simply being pop culture inspired, fan activists are able to bring fun into their work and help people understand the importance of political issues by drawing connections to pop culture. In this way, fandom has always been a place for people to learn and grow because it gathers many passionate people into one place and encourages them to make new connections. Fans organize cons and letter-writing campaigns, and the skills people learn in fandom are then easily applicable to political action. Lobbying a network not to cancel a show is not that different from lobbying the legislature not to pass a law. Fandom has also matured alongside its members. The people that got involved in the 2000s-2010, when they and the internet were young, have now grown up and some still participate. The adults bring their personal experience and knowledge to fandom and form inter-generational connections. They teach the younger fans how to organize these campaigns, the rules of fandom, and how to act on the internet. In turn, when those people grow up, they will pass on what they learned to new fans, and the cycle will repeat.

Fan activism has a long history, and participatory culture — one with low barriers to artistic expression and engagement, strong support for sharing one's creations, and informal mentorship where information is what is passed along to novices — even more so. The concept of youth connecting over a shared interest goes back far. One of the earliest recorded instances is after the toy printing press was created. Adolescents were able to start creating their own newspapers and writings — in the modern day we would call these “zines.” They could write, share, and create amongst themselves and even form their own “youth culture.” Like fandom, they held national meetings as well as local ones. Additionally, throughout history, people have been bonding over books and news stories. One of the earliest examples of fan activism though is in 1968. Due to low ratings, Star Trek was under threat of cancellation by NBC. Angered that their favorite show would be canceled, and motivated to prevent it, Caltech students and Star Trek fans held a protest. They marched through the streets of Burbank carrying signs and placed themselves outside of the NBC headquarters in Los Angeles. These tactics are not dissimilar to those used by civil rights protesters and looking at photos from this event, it even looks like a civil rights protest.



Although this event was ultimately unsuccessful, it proved that fan passion could be directed toward making change. This event serves as the basis for fan activism in the US.

Fan passion was no more evident than in 2020 when fan activism made the news due to the actions of KPOP stans. KPOP fans already have a history in social justice. 20 years ago KPOP fans began to donate money to charities and volunteer under their idol's name. Fans had originally been sending gifts to their idols, but when their idols asked their fans to volunteer and donate instead, they listened. This switch was incredibly effective and since then, KPOP fans have created a culture around doing good deeds in the name of their idols in order to promote

them, and it can even get competitive. Idols will even write songs about helping others or have their personal charities that fans can donate to feel even closer to the idol. The KPOP industry also has a history of controversies about its appropriation of black culture, so KPOP fans are hyper-sensitive to issues affecting black people. Because of this, KPOP fans were uniquely positioned to support BLM in the most extra ways possible. Additionally, KPOP fans are no strangers when it comes to mobilizing large groups of people to do things, especially online. Just look at how BTS fans managed to break the record for the all-time most-viewed YouTube video in 24 hours for a BTS song. So when BTS donated \$1 million to BLM, their fans responded fast. A fan activist organization called “One in an ARMY” started trending #matchamillion on Twitter, and managed to raise another 1 million in 24 hours. However, BTS fans aren’t the only KPOP fans that made the news. In June 2020, KPOP fans flooded the #whitelivesmatter and #alllivesmatter hashtags with ‘fancams’— videos of their favorite idols— as a way to reduce the amount of racism being posted to those tags. They did the same thing when the Dallas Police Department asked people to send recordings of protesters doing illegal activities to their iWatch app, managing to crash the app, as well as leave 1-star reviews. Fancams were already a natural part of the KPOP fandom, as they were a way for fans to promote the idols they loved, so making the step to submit or post them was easy. Additionally, they got encouragement from other members during the height of this protest since many Twitter users would promote the cause by saying “if you post your fancams to the #whitelivesmatter hashtag, I’ll retweet and give you free views.” This encouraged more people to take action, even if it was just for internet clout. KPOP fans also made threads of their favorite 1-star reviews of the app which were generally humorous and allowed fans to feel “in on the joke” and even encouraged them to leave their own reviews. The most targeted act came when KPOP fans and TikTok users signed up for free seats at the Tulsa Trump Rally and then never showed up, leaving thousands of empty seats behind. All three of these actions were so successful because they were free and easy to do from home, as well as game-ified the protesting. As one KPOP stan said, “I felt like it was, like, sort of a small thing that I could do, so I kind of felt, like, kind of giddy.” With support from many, and promises of internet clout, these ideas grew into a phenomenon eventually getting memed and spread beyond their original spaces on Twitter and TikTok.



Their actions even reached members of Congress, a marker of success that previous fan actions hadn't reached. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez replied to a Trump supporter's complaints about the rally by saying "Actually you just got ROCKED by teens on TikTok." With a congress member noticing their actions, this fan-based activism was finally put on the map for many people. Teens on Twitter and TikTok became a political market, not just kids goofing off.

With all this history, it's clear that fan activism is set to become an even more powerful political player in the future. The internet has made it so much easier for fans to find each other and organize. Now that politics has shifted online, political action has become an irreversible part of youth culture too. The only difference is that youth activism comes from their shared interest in pop culture, rather than a political party. Even so, fan activism has influence beyond just youth. If you attended any protest march in the US within the past 10 years, you'll have seen fandom-based signs. Politicians and journalists are starting to realize this, but it's a slow process. AOC, as mentioned in the tweet above, definitely understands. She can connect with young voters by playing Among Us with famous YouTubers, or talking about GOT with Elizabeth Warren on a podcast. She humanizes herself with this, and in the same breath encourages them to vote and listen to her ideas. I believe that pop culture's political influence will only grow as the internet generation grows into one that runs the country. Each generation has more internet and media literacy, and where there's the internet, there's fandom and space for connection across it. I believe that in the future the "fan" part of fan activism will fall away, and that grassroots internet-based style of activism will become the de facto method of political action. If you can go viral, you've got power through the public's attention, and fans know how to make things go

viral. Plus, it's infinitely easier to motivate people to action using something they already care about, like fandom, instead of convincing them to care about an issue. The fans who posted fancams, donated money and signed up for tickets are the future voters of our country, and they were spurred to action because of a call from their idols and community. If a political figure were able to similarly motivate fans, they'd wield the ability to inspire significant activism at the drop of a hat. That can no longer be ignored.

Works Cited

"About Us." One In An ARMY. <https://www.oneinarmy.org/about>.

Alexander, Julia. "K-pop stans overwhelm app after Dallas police ask for videos of protesters." *The Verge*, June 1, 2020.
<https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/1/21277423/k-pop-dallas-pd-iwatch-app-flood-review-bomb-surveillance-protests-george-floyd>.

BBC News. "K-pop fans drown out #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag Published." June 4, 2020.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52922035>.

Bedingfield, Will. "K-pop stans took on Trump in Tulsa, now they're after the White House." *Wired*, June 24, 2020. Accessed November 9, 2022.
<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/k-pop-trump>.

Benjamin, Jeff (Jeff_Benjamin). "Someone sent this to me yesterday and as hilarious as it is, I have to say I've been so proud of the #kpopstans stepping up in all this. Keep it up, y'all ♥." Twitter. June 3, 2020, 7:56 AM.
https://twitter.com/jeff__benjamin/status/1268194855634841615.

"Black Lives Matter." One In An ARMY. Accessed December 13, 2021.
<https://www.oneinarmy.org/black-lives-matter>.

Bruner, Raisa. "How K-Pop Fans Actually Work as a Force for Political Activism in 2020." *Time*, July 25, 2020. Accessed November 11, 2022. <https://time.com/5866955/k-pop-political/>.

Coscarelli, Joe. "Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans Are Turning Toward Political Activism." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 22, 2020. Accessed November 15, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/arts/music/k-pop-fans-trump-politics.html>.

Ekin, Annette. "Are K-pop and BTS fans a new force for social justice?" *Aljazeera*, July 1, 2020. Accessed November 11, 2022.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/7/1/are-k-pop-and-bts-fans-a-new-force-for-social-justice>.

Haasch, Palmer. "BTS stans matched the K-pop group's \$1 million Black Lives Matter donation in one day through the #MatchAMillion campaign." *Business Insider*, June 8, 2020.
<https://www.insider.com/bts-army-black-lives-matter-donation-one-million-matchamillion-blm-2020-6>.

Harrison, Scott. "From the Archives: 1968 protest against possible Star Trek cancellation." *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 20, 2017. Accessed December 3, 2022.
<https://www.latimes.com/visuals/photography/la-me-fw-archives-1968-protest-against-possible-star-trek-cancellation20170524-story.html>.

Hollingsworth, Julia.

"<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/22/asia/k-pop-fandom-activism-intl-hnk/index.html>." *K-pop fans are being credited with helping disrupt Trump's rally. Here's why that shouldn't be a surprise*, June 22, 2020. Accessed November 11, 2022.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/22/asia/k-pop-fandom-activism-intl-hnk/index.html>.

Isaac, Jessica. "Youthful Enterprises: Amateur Newspapers and the Pre-History of Adolescence, 1867—1883." *American Periodicals* 22, no. 2 (2012): 158-77.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23461333>.

Jenkins, Henry. Videoconference interview by the author. Zoom. December 9, 2021.

Jessica (jessbocc). "YALL THE KPOP STANS HAVE DONE IT AGAIN THEY FLOODED THIS STUPID HASHTAG !!! fr if u guys need views on your fancams drop them below i'd like to repay you for your service." Twitter. June 3, 2020.
<https://twitter.com/jessbocc/status/1268094240862633984>.

Lorenz, Taylor, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel. "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally." *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html>.

"< K-Pop's Digital 'Army' Musters To Meet The Moment. baggage In Tow." Audio, 03:33. NPR. June 24, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/882867577>.

Madden, Emma. "The BTS Army and the Transformative Power of Fandom As Activism." *The Ringer*, June 11, 2020.
<https://www.theringer.com/music/2020/6/11/21287283/bts-army-black-lives-matter-fandom-activism>.

McCurry, Justin. "How US K-pop fans became a political force to be reckoned with." *The Guardian*, June 24, 2020. Accessed December 3, 2022.
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/24/how-us-k-pop-fans-became-a-political-force-to-be-reckoned-with-blm-donald-trump>.

Munro, Scott. "K-Pop fans crash Dallas police force app in support of Black Lives Matter." *Louder*, June 1, 2020.
<https://www.loudersound.com/news/k-pop-fans-crash-dallas-police-force-app-in-support-of-black-lives-matter>.

ncitycroc. "THREAD OF BAD REVIEWS ON iWATCH DALLAS APP." Twitter. June 1, 2020.
<https://twitter.com/ncitycroc/status/1267607849183535104>.

Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria (AOC). "Actually you just got ROCKED by teens on TikTok who flooded the Trump campaign w/ fake ticket reservations & tricked you into believing a million people wanted your white supremacist open mic enough to pack an arena during COVID Shout out to Zoomers. Y'all make me so proud. ☺." Twitter. June 20, 2020.

https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1274499021625794565?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1274500359566897152%7Ctwgr%5E9d97e3f2d9881acdfccb106652d8f0e0ac457db0%7Ctwcon%5Es2_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftime.com%2F5866955%2Fk-pop-political%2F.

"Past Campaigns." One In An ARMY. <https://www.oneinarmy.org/archive>.

Wanshel, Elyse. "Dallas Police Ask People To Report Protesters, But Get Flooded With K-Pop Instead." *Huffpost*, June 1, 2020.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dallas-police-k-pop-george-floyd-protests_n_5ed5188dc5b63bc4db6bd376/amp?__twitter_impression=true.