

Analysis of the Profound Relationship between the Development of Idol Museums and the Fan Economy

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Abstract: In the era of commercialization, the art exhibition industry has continuously driven innovation and development in museum exhibitions through advancements in art forms, exhibition content, and presentation methods. Idol museums represent a novel fusion of the entertainment industry and museum exhibitions. While they offer artistic value, they are often limited to a specific audience. The fan economy significantly supports idol museums, yet the impact of over-commercialized operations and high prices on fans warrants investigation. This paper examines the HYBE INSIGHT Idol Museum in South Korea and compares it with the KPOP exhibition at the V&A Museum in the UK to explore the relationship between idol museums and fans, as well as to consider future development directions.

1. Introduction

With the innovative development of the cultural industry and the commercialization of the market, museums have evolved from serving for something to becoming interactive experiences designed for audiences^[1]. Consequently, it is crucial for commercial museums to accurately target their themes and audiences. In this context, idol museums, primarily aimed at fans, have emerged. Entertainment companies capitalize on fans' devotion by showcasing idols' filming locations, costumes, and creating videos of idols visiting these exhibitions, thereby attracting fans. In South Korea, companies such as HYBE, SM, and YG have adopted this strategy, with HYBE Entertainment even establishing an idol museum, HYBE INSIGHT. This museum specializes in creating thematic photo-shoots for its artists and organizing traveling exhibitions in four Asian cities. However, unlike other commercial museums, idol museums often feature high ticket prices and extensive merchandise sales driven by the fan economy^[2]. This paper explores the relationship between fan economy and idol museums through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory, aiming to identify new breakthroughs for the sustainable development of these museums and better balance the interests of entertainment companies and fans.

2. The Relationship between Idol Museum and Fan Economy

2.1. The Birth and Development of Idol Museum

Since the 21st century, museums have increasingly embraced marketization. Hooper-Greenhill suggests that especially during economic downturns, museums should consider themselves as market participants rather than merely custodians of artworks^[3]. Consequently, the audience profile of museums has evolved, leading to the emergence of more commercial exhibitions with popular themes aimed at attracting the public, thereby increasing museum visibility and revenue^[4]. It is advisable to keep all the given values.

Capitalizing on this trend, entertainment companies have established dedicated areas in their stores to display idols' performance costumes and photos, drawing fans' attention. Prominent companies like SM Entertainment and HYBE Entertainment have taken this a step further by founding their own museums. These museums showcase costumes and performance sets from various musical eras^[5], fostering a sense of identity among fans and encouraging visits and purchases of related merchandise, thus boosting idol museum revenue.

HYBE Entertainment, after initial experiments with idol museum operations, launched a themed exhibition for its HYBE INSIGHT museum titled "The Daydream Believers." This exhibition integrates its planning and layout with the theme, narrating the journey and story of idols' dreams coming true^[6]. It includes interactive elements such as a writing wall, allowing visitors to engage in painting and writing, thereby fully expressing their thoughts, thus achieving the ideal expression of the new paradigm^[7]. These participatory activities undoubtedly offer significant emotional value to fans, strengthening the bond between fans and idols, museums, and entertainment companies, ultimately generating greater benefits^[8].

2.2. Idol Museum and Fans Complement Each Other

As a commercial project, the idol museum focuses on idols as its primary selling point and leverages the fan economy to generate revenue. It essentially functions as a marketing activity for the idol brand. When fans see their favorite idols featured in the initial promotion of the museum, they are likely to form an emotional connection with the museum. This connection fosters loyalty to the idols and piques interest in the museum, leading fans to purchase admission tickets and additional merchandise co-produced by the museum and the idols^[9].

At HYBE INSIGHT, five groups of idols are exhibited. Each group participates in themed photo-shoots, which are then made into collectible random photo cards. Fans receive a single photo card, randomly distributed based on the idol group they choose, making these cards highly attractive and collectible^[10]. This strategy effectively enhances brand marketing and drives further development and revenue.

However, this relationship also imposes significant burdens on fans. The desire to obtain photo cards of their favorite idols is strong, but the randomness of distribution greatly increases the difficulty of acquisition. As a result, some fans linger outside the museum after visiting, seeking to trade cards until they get the ones they desire. Others purchase additional products in the museum store, hoping to obtain items featuring their favorite idols. From a marketing perspective, the production and distribution of random cards is highly successful, drawing numerous fans to the museum. However, for the fans themselves, this practice significantly increases the time and financial investment required. While it effectively boosts museum revenue, it places considerable strain on the fans, highlighting a double-edged sword in the relationship between idol museums and the fan economy.

According to the study by Eunjung Park and others (2019), fans often watch the performances of

idols, so they have a strong interest in the costumes and stages of idols^[11]. Therefore, the idol museum displays the most intriguing aspects for fans, fulfilling their personal emotional needs and promoting fan consumption. The museum also provides various photography areas, such as photo spots with multiple monitors and free instant imaging photo areas^[12]. These photo opportunities allow fans to share images within their communities, reinforcing their social identity^[13] and meeting their needs for social satisfaction. When fans are emotionally satisfied, they are more likely to promote the museum voluntarily^[11], effectively becoming unpaid promoters for entertainment companies^[14].

With the widespread reach of new media platforms globally, fan-edited videos and written content become powerful promotional tools, bringing increased visibility to the idol museum and attracting more fans and visitors interested in the exhibition theme. Among the fans are numerous Key Opinion Leaders from various fields, whose endorsements can attract a broader and more diverse audience to the exhibitions. Particularly for those planning to visit Korea, this museum often becomes a highlight in their itinerary. While the fans promoting the exhibition may gain some traffic and benefits from social media platforms, HYBE INSIGHT, which does not directly contribute to this promotion, ultimately reaps the most significant benefits.

This ability to draw different audiences is closely tied to the exhibition's compelling themes. HYBE INSIGHT's exhibition emphasizes the importance of dreams at both the beginning and the end, encouraging viewers to pursue their dreams diligently. The exhibition concludes with a quote from Larry Niven: 'Everything starts as somebody's daydream'^[15]. This provides each viewer with emotional value and satisfaction, enriching their real-life experience.

However, not all interested fans can visit the exhibition. The exhibition is displayed in only four cities in Asia. Although fans can rely on social media platforms to experience the atmosphere and enjoy the joy brought by idols and Korean pop culture^[16], they cannot fully engage with the on-site equipment and the process of co-creation. This gap can lead to dissatisfaction among fans, potentially resulting in a decline in the reputation of the HYBE INSIGHT brand.

While HYBE INSIGHT offers a unique and immersive experience, its higher fees compared to other celebrity museums can elevate visitors' expectations, potentially leading to greater dissatisfaction if those expectations are not met. Below is a comparison of the prices and highlights of HYBE INSIGHT and other idol museums and Korean pop culture exhibitions.

Table 1: Comparison of prices, highlights and scores of different idol museums/exhibitions.

Museum/Exhibition name	Price	Highlight	Tripadvisor Score
HYBE INSIGHT	35,000	special custom theme, Samsung Electronics Technology Cooperation, Free instant photography	2.5
SMTown Coexartium	18,000	SMTown movie playback, self-selected music playback, AR group photo space	4.5
V&A Hallyu Exhibition	0	interactive K-pop dance challenge, a more comprehensive display of Korean culture	No Data

In Table 1, the ticket prices, exhibition highlights, and Tripadvisor score for the three KPOP exhibitions of HYBE INSIGHT, SMTown Coexartium, and V&A Hallyu Exhibition are listed and analyzed. By comparing three sets of data, it can be found that although HYBE INSIGHT charges significantly higher fees, its designs are not substantially superior to those of other idol museums and exhibitions. Even the V&A Museum, which offers free admission, boasts unique attractions. This discrepancy in value can lead to two main forms of fan dissatisfaction. Firstly, fans who cannot

afford the high price may express discontent. Secondly, fans who visit but feel the experience does not justify the cost may become dissatisfied with both the museum and the company behind it. This trend is evident in the comparison of ratings among these museums. Most low-scoring comments on the website highlight that the exhibition is not worth seeing, the ticket price is high, and the content does not meet expectations. Therefore, it is crucial to enrich the exhibition's content.

3. The Innovative Development of The Idol Museum

3.1. The Solution and Innovation of Internal Problems in Idol Museums

Considering the openness and community-based nature of the museum industry, it is essential to deeply understand the needs and acceptance of fans and audiences^[4]. While financial aspects are a significant concern, especially for exhibitions funded by commercial institutions where financial stability may be precarious^[4], excessively high ticket prices can deter many potential visitors. Instead of relying solely on high ticket prices, museums might achieve greater benefits through other means. High-quality merchandise imbued with idol value^[17] and a pleasant environment in accompanying facilities, such as coffee shops, can attract more visitors and enhance their overall experience. Here can serve as a foundation for the fan community, offering audiences a sense of belonging and encouraging them to spend more time organizing or participating in activities. By hosting co-creation events, where the museum only needs to provide the venue, it can reap significant benefits.

Improving the quality of the exhibition itself is equally important. Fans are the primary audience, and the culture of fan communities cannot be overlooked. Fan communities, or "fan circles," consist of individuals who identify with each other and form a collective. Each member of this circle values active participation^[18] and the connections they make with others^[19]. Therefore, integrating activities that encourage fan participation is crucial.

For instance, incorporating dance challenge activities similar to those held by the V&A Museum, combined with the company's music, can foster communal fan activities and increase engagement. Additionally, creating other immersive activities will enable fans to better feel their connection with the idol and the fan group within the museum. These activities can enhance the fan's sense of identity and emotional satisfaction, ultimately boosting the reputation and popularity of both the brand and the idol museum.

Fans who cannot attend in person must not be overlooked. While hunger marketing can effectively satisfy consumer desires^[20], every fan and audience member is a potential consumer. Therefore, establishing an online digital museum or creating a series of engaging videos can be a more sustainable strategy to stimulate future visits. However, it is crucial to distinguish between online and offline audiences effectively, ensuring the protection of the rights and interests of fans present at the museum. Providing these fans with greater participation opportunities can satisfy their desires and stimulate further consumption.

3.2. The Idol Museum's Empathy with the Public Audiences

Unlike the specific needs of fan groups for community and emotional connections to idols, the general public seeks novelty, interest, aesthetic appeal, and empathetic storytelling in museum exhibits. Therefore, focusing on the cultural industry aspects of idols and narrating the stories behind the industry can engage the public more effectively than merely displaying walls of idol photos.

For instance, HYBE INSIGHT collaborates with Samsung's latest technology, but these advancements are currently used solely to display various forms of idol photos. This approach may

be boring for the general public and can lead to visual fatigue for fans. Instead, leveraging new technologies to convey deeper narratives can attract and retain a broader audience.

Moreover, planning activities that delve into the behind-the-scenes aspects of the idol industry, such as video shoots and diverse photo scenes, can captivate the public's interest. These initiatives can also potentially convert general visitors into idol fans, creating a virtuous cycle within the industry.

4. Conclusions

This paper delves into the emerging cultural industry of idol museums, using HYBE INSIGHT as a case study. It examines the role of the fan economy in the growth of idol museums and the emotional value these museums provide to fans. By aligning with current museum development trends, this paper seeks to identify sustainable strategies to attract the general public to idol museums.

While many academic studies focus on fan culture and modern museums separately, few integrate the two fields. This research aims to fill that gap, though it acknowledges the need for further investigation into fans' specific attitudes and needs regarding idol museums. As Holdgaard and Klastrup note, designing a genuinely creative and participatory museum is challenging due to the necessity of balancing user needs with limited resources^[21]. However, continuous adaptation and self-development are crucial for the sustainable evolution of idol museums.

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