
Negotiation of Meaning in the Participatory Culture Communication Practices of the Carat Medan Community

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ABSTRACT

The rapid changes in popular culture trends on social media often cause fan communities to shift quickly and not last long. However, the Carat Medan community has been able to endure for nearly a decade. This study analyzes how the negotiation of meaning within participatory culture communication practices in the Carat Medan community functions as a strategy to maintain the community's existence from 2017 to 2026. The research method using a field study. Data were collected through structured interviews, documentation studies, and participant observation across various community activities. The findings show that the sustainability of Carat Medan is driven by a the community collective ability to negotiate the meanings of messages and values, which are then aligned with the local cultural context. This process encourage the transformation of fans from active consumers into prosumers who contribute to the producing community activities and collaborating with local media. This study concludes that communicative flexibility, the creation of a safe third space for interaction, and a strong participatory culture enable the community to remain cohesive and to navigate internal dynamics despite ongoing changes in social media trends.

Keyword : Community, Cultural Communication, Negotiation of Meaning, Participatory Culture



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Korean Hallyu tren, which began emerge in Indonesia in the early 2000s, captured public attention and evolved into a prominent popular culture phenomenon. During that era, broadcasts of Korean dramas and K-Pop programs on private television stations expanded audience exposure and introduced a new form of entertainment. This interest did not stop at passive consumption, it continue into communication activities among fans, especially through social media. Digital spaces brought together individuals with shared interests, giving rise to fan groups that served as platforms to exchange information, engage in discussions, and construct collective interpretations of the cultural objects they followed.

Over time, these groups evolved into more established fan communities. A community can thus be understood as a "third space" that is relatively safe for interaction, sharing experiences, and strengthening social networks among its members. Within the current context of media and popular culture development, the third space formed within fan communities has also transformed into an increasingly complex arena for participatory culture practices. In this arena, fans do not merely consume cultural products, they actively produce, distribute, and negotiate meanings.

The Carat Medan community serves as an example of this third space, representing the collective identity of fans of the idol group SEVENTEEN in Medan City. This community become a platform for fans who initially sought entertainment but subsequently became involved in negotiating meaning to understand and interpret their experiences within social reality. Established in 2017, the Carat Medan community has demonstrated consistency and resilience, sustaining itself for approximately nine years. This condition indicates a relatively strong process of meaning negotiation among its members, enabling the community to maintain its existence amid shifts in the entertainment industry trends.

The members' enthusiasm for attending and organizing various events also demonstrates an emotional investment in celebrating their identity as SEVENTEEN fans. Furthermore, the community's ability to establish strategic partnerships as media partners and secure sponsorships signifies a shift in the role of fans from passive consumers to cultural producers (prosumers). Unlike many K-Pop studies that predominantly focus on digital interactions on social media, this research highlights how the dynamics of the negotiation of meaning are constructed through communication practices within participatory culture in the Carat Medan community, specifically in its efforts to sustain community existence. This study employs a qualitative method with a field study approach.

The negotiation of meaning within participatory cultural communication practices is a social process that occurs when community members exchange symbols, experiences, and values to co-create a shared understanding. Language, symbols, and meaning constitute three essential pillars that not only express activities but also actively shape social reality within a society (Novia, 2025). Within the scope of arts and cultural communities in Medan City, the Carat Medan community plays a vital role as an important vehicle for social interactions that are communicative, educational, and cultural. Through diverse activities such as art discussions, cultural performances, creative literacy, and other social activities, this community establishes a space for dialogue that allows each member to interpret culture based on their lived experiences.

The Carat Medan community can be defined as a participatory cultural group, wherein communication serves as the primary foundation for fostering social solidarity. Each individual within the community brings a diverse social, educational, and cultural background, which generates various perspectives regarding the cultural symbols utilized in community activities. The negotiation of meaning can be established through attitudes of mutual respect, understanding, and support to create a harmonization of differences within the community (Erlangga et al., 2021). Therefore, the negotiation of meaning becomes crucial for reaching a mutual consensus regarding the values, goals, and cultural identity that the community aims to build.

Within participatory cultural communication practices, the negotiation of meaning occurs not only through formal discussions but also through everyday interactions. The use of unique language and distinct communication styles within the community is vital to reinforcing bonds among members (Rahmah et al., 2025). This is implemented so that community members can mutually respond to ideas, symbols, language, and cultural expressions that emerge during community events. This process demonstrates that culture is not static; rather, it is continuously reconstructed through social interaction.

The active involvement of community members is a key element in the process of negotiating meaning. Every member has the opportunity to express opinions, provide interpretations, and critique ideas that arise within the community. This situation fosters a democratic, two-way communication environment. Within this participatory space, cultural meaning is not dominated by a single party but is instead collectively formed through dialogue and shared experiences. A sense of belonging stems not only from a formal organizational framework but also from a collection of meaningful interactions that develop emotional security, shared beliefs, and relationship sustainability (Nurfarida et al., 2025). In this manner, cultural communication becomes more open and capable of reflecting the diversity of individual identities within the community. Based on the background outlined above, this study aims to describe the negotiation of meaning within the participatory cultural communication practices of the Carat Medan community through a dynamic process that is continuously moving and shaped by social interaction.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method utilizing a field study approach with structured interviews. Qualitative research is a type of inquiry that aims to deeply understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects such as behavior, perception, motivation, and action through a holistic and descriptive approach expressed in words and language (Hakim, 2026). The selection of this qualitative approach was driven by the researcher's need to describe the interview outcomes with the research subjects, allowing specific questions to be adjusted and analyzed within the appropriate context. Through this approach, the researcher hopes to uncover the reality behind the human interactions within the Carat Medan community. The researcher was directly present within the

subjects' ecosystem to observe how the process of meaning negotiation and participatory cultural communication practices develop within the community.

The research subjects were selected based on specific criteria deemed capable of providing the richest and most relevant information for this study. The researcher selected the community owner to gain a strong historical perspective regarding the members' transformation from 6 individuals to 670 members. In collecting data, the researcher applied participant observation, thereby becoming directly involved in community activities, including the execution of both small-scale and large-scale events. This observation focused on examining communication behavior, interactions, and how the community manages emerging conflict dynamics. Furthermore, the researcher conducted structured interviews, which allowed for a deeper and more flexible elicitation of information. The researcher also performed a documentation study by gathering group activities and social media posts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that the negotiation of meaning within participatory cultural communication practices at the community level is a dynamic, continuously moving process shaped through social interaction. Within the Carat Medan community, communication does not merely function as a medium for transmitting information; rather, it serves as a vehicle for dialogue that enables the exchange of symbols, interpretations, and lived experiences. This process is crucial because meaning is not static; instead, it is continuously constructed, negotiated, and produced through ongoing social interactions. Language adjustment serves as a negotiation tool to maintain social harmony, achieve social acceptance, and minimize cultural distance (Qur'ani & Ridho, 2026).

The negotiation of meaning explains that audiences do not always receive messages exactly as intended by the sender; instead, they interpret them based on their own experiences, values, and social situations. This concept aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model, where encoding is the process of sending a message wherein the message is first encoded into a specific narrative format and decoding is the process by which the receiver interprets the message through varying frameworks of reference. Consequently, the resulting meaning does not automatically match the meaning initially offered.

In K-Pop fandom, the negotiation of meaning can be understood as a form of bargaining between the original meaning offered by the K-Pop industry where, for instance, the definition of "support" is often associated with boundless consumption and the social reality of the fans within their environment. Fans may accept parts of the message, such as the importance of loyalty toward the idol, while simultaneously adjusting their practices to remain aligned with their economic conditions, norms, and daily priorities. Thus, the audience's position is neither fully oppositional nor entirely compliant. The meaning of support is reshaped through consensus and experience (Hall, 1980).

For communities, the negotiation of meaning acts as a mechanism that sustains activities over the long term. Agreed-upon meanings are dynamic but are continuously updated through interaction, discussion, and decision-making. Through this process, differing viewpoints can be channeled into a shared understanding, including establishing the boundaries of fandom practices deemed supportive of the community's identity and the idol's image.

Previous research shows that the reception of Korean culture in Indonesia does not stop at consumption but also shapes social participation and specific lifestyles. The interactions built within the K-Pop fan community in Medan play a role in shaping social identity and strengthening the community's presence as a gathering space (a third space) for its members (Nasution & Bakti, 2020). Building upon these findings, this study positions the negotiation of meaning as the foundation for the long-term sustainability of community activities. In aligning the aspirations that emerge within a community, the resulting meaning is a product of consensus that continuously evolves through interactive dialogue. For fans, the negotiation of meaning allows them to redefine the concept of "supporting the idol," identifying what form of support is most feasible and appropriate for community members within their daily realities.

The negotiation of meaning often involves diverse perspectives that can give rise to conflict or tension. However, within a community that prioritizes a participatory culture, these differences become a rich source of interpretation. Open dialogue processes enable community members to understand each other's viewpoints, thereby producing inclusive agreements on meaning. Negotiation

is carried out through dialogue formulated with reference to cultural values to provide a rapid response (Kaisupy & Maing, 2021). In this context, communication functions both as a conflict resolution mechanism and as a tool for building social consensus.

The negotiation of meaning within the Carat Medan community stems from efforts to align various individual interpretations in supporting the idol group SEVENTEEN. The researcher found that members do not passively accept the K-Pop industry's narrative that demands boundless consumption. Instead, they negotiate by prioritizing the community as a shared space for connection.

The outcomes of this negotiation of meaning are subsequently disseminated and reinforced through cultural communication practices. Intercultural communication is the process of exchanging information, meaning, and symbols between individuals or groups from different backgrounds. The Korean Hallyu phenomenon is a form of intercultural communication that bridges global fans through music, drama, social media, and language (Jin, 2016).

The exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages influences the lifestyle, popular culture, and language of fans. As found in previous research (Simbar, 2016), the communication of Korean culture in Indonesia has triggered the adoption of new lifestyles, visible in the consumption patterns of beauty products and fashion. This cultural communication then fosters distinctive fan behaviors, creates strong fan communities, influences consumption behavior, and drives the adoption of vocabulary applied in daily life.

In the phenomenon of fan communities or fandoms, cultural communication serves as a bridge between global messages from Korean culture and the social context of society in Medan. Research by Nasution and Bakti (2020) regarding the K-Pop community in Medan demonstrates that interactions within this community are capable of creating a hybrid space. This aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "Third Space," where local and global identities can meet, negotiate, and coexist harmoniously without eroding the original character of the local community.

Cultural communication also functions as a means to establish boundaries and solidarity within the group. From Emile Durkheim's (1912) perspective, social solidarity is produced and maintained through repeated collective practices and shared symbols. Through the use of specialized terms, specific communication styles, and agreed-upon norms, the community reinforces emotional bonds among its members. This communication practice also extends to interactions with external parties, such as vendors and sponsors, where the community must communicate their values professionally. Consequently, cultural communication becomes a strategic tool for the community to maintain its existence while gaining recognition from the broader social environment.

The meanings that have been negotiated and communicated are then concretely manifested through participatory culture. Henry Jenkins (2006) defines participatory culture as a condition where the audience takes an active role as cultural producers rather than merely consumers. In the fan ecosystem, this participation manifests in organizing events, creating creative content, and forming strategic collaborations as media partners.



The agreed-upon negotiation of meaning regarding idol support can also transform into a form of charity. In celebration of a member's birthday, the community participated by distributing school supplies to two orphanages, namely Ade Irma Orphanage and Bait Allah Orphanage. This activity was conducted in collaboration with Indomilk and Chitato, as one of the group members simultaneously served as the brand ambassador for those products.

This participatory culture fosters collective independence, where each member feels a shared responsibility to contribute according to their capacity. Participation is not viewed as an obligation but rather as a form of self-actualization and identity expression that signifies being part of the group. It is through intense involvement in various activities—both on small and large scales—that members

practically develop their organizational and communication skills. This prosumer practice (acting simultaneously as producers and consumers) serves as the driving energy behind the community's continuously productive and evolving dynamics.

Within participatory culture practices, every community member plays an active role as both a creator and a receiver of meaning. They do not merely accept messages passively; instead, they provide responses, reinterpretations, and even generate new meanings that are relevant to their social context. Public spaces function not only as historical heritage but also as means for reflective and inclusive social learning for individuals embedded within communities in society (Amanda & Wijayati, 2026). This phenomenon is visible across various community activities, such as group discussions, art events, local traditions, and digital interactions on the community's social media platforms. Through this process, communication becomes a tool for constructing a collective identity while reinforcing social solidarity.

The community owner emphasized that they remain consistently open to members' aspirations, provided that the proposed ideas support the existence of SEVENTEEN. If a proposed idea potentially damages the image of the group or its members, it will inevitably be negotiated beforehand to align with the community's vision. This aligns with Stuart Hall's model, wherein members accept the dominant value (supporting the idol) but negotiate and adjust it within the local boundaries and norms in Medan.

The ability to prioritize the community's interests has been a key factor in ensuring community stability from 2017 to 2026. This negotiation of meaning is subsequently manifested through participatory culture. Within the Carat Medan community, this is evident in the transformation of the fans' role shifting from mere spectators into active event organizers.



In other activities, such as joint screening events (nonton bareng or nobar), a unique practice occurs: the voluntary distribution of "freebies." An informant who participated in an event stated that during a previous event, they had only come to watch. However, seeing other friends distributing freebies such as member photos, homemade stickers, and cute little gifts made them feel happy to receive it. Consequently, for the current event, they prepared their own freebies to distribute to other members. They discovered that seeing others happy to receive their freebies brought them a sense of joy as well.

These data demonstrate how fans process original content into new creative works. This indicates that the meaning of supporting an idol is negotiated—shifting from merely purchasing albums or other official merchandise into making an emotional contribution to fellow fans. This practice successfully dissolves age barriers among participants and establishes a third space for their shared identity.

The researcher found that the stability of the community is maintained due to a clear separation between personal issues and collective identity. The dynamics of maintaining community stability are evident in how conflicts arising from within the community membership are managed; they are resolved through internal communication and are not viewed as systemic threats. Instead, they are regarded merely as personal matters or isolated incidents involving individuals who do not represent the collective identity of the Carat Medan community. By isolating these personal issues, the community has successfully avoided the internal fractures that typically serve as the primary catalyst for the dissolution of fan communities. This specific strategy has enabled the Carat Medan community to endure and remain sustainable as a solid space for identity up to the present day.

Ultimately, the entire process of negotiation, communication, and participation culminates in a community that has successfully formed and endured as a stable social entity. In this study, the community is viewed as a dynamic entity that binds its members through shared interests, visions, and emotional experiences. Growing from a small group of six individuals into a large organization comprising hundreds of members proves that this community possesses a system capable of adapting to changing times from 2017 to the present.



The community's existence is also sustained by its capacity to manage both internal and external dynamics. Furthermore, the community functions as a third space that provides a safe environment for its members ranging from adolescents to adults to interact. Its success in maintaining its existence over many years demonstrates that the community has successfully constructed a profoundly strong sense of togetherness among its members.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study and discussion regarding the negotiation of meaning and participatory cultural communication practices within the Carat Medan community, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The negotiation of meaning in understanding "idol support" serves as the primary driver for the community's growth. Over its nearly nine years of survival, during which membership expanded by almost 10,000%, the community has successfully aligned individual aspirations with collective goals. Within this framework, interpersonal conflicts among members are treated as personal matters rather than systemic failures of the community.
2. A robust participatory culture coupled with prosumer practices enables the community to function not merely as passive content consumers, but as active event organizers and strategic media partners. The community demonstrates the capability to execute events resourcefully by assessing the situational availability of spaces and resources.
3. Guided by the core principle of "facilitating aspirations that support the idol," the community successfully establishes a collaborative space that is both economically and socially advantageous. Ultimately, this demonstrates that the K-Pop fandom in Medan is a highly organized and sustainable social entity.

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