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When Paid Intimacy Fails: Target-Specific Accountability in Chinese K-pop Video Call Events

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ABSTRACT

K-pop video call events turn intimate access into a paid encounter involving idols, entertainment companies, sales platforms, and fan organizations. This study develops target-specific accountability as an analytic model for tracing how fans assign responsibility to particular actors in a paid encounter and translate dissatisfaction into targeted criticism or selective withdrawal. Drawing on interviews with Chinese fans and industry respondents, together with online materials, the analysis identifies three domains in which accountability judgments arise: interactional accountability for attention, recognition, and responsiveness during the call; procedural accountability for access, selection, communication, delivery of purchased albums and promised benefits; and organizational accountability for scheduling, workload, and complaint handling. A failure may become visible through one actor while responsibility is attributed to another. These attributions shaped the target and scope of response, from idol-directed criticism and refusal to participate in later calls to platform complaints, company-directed withdrawal, and campaign-specific purchasing suspensions. In Chinese K-pop fandom, cross-border intermediaries and organized purchasing networks can circulate dissatisfaction and, in some cases, support coordinated economic action. The study shows how responsibility attribution shapes the target and scope of disengagement within a hybrid fan-consumer relationship, rather than assuming a transition from emotional attachment to consumer rationality.

KEYWORDS

video call events, paid intimacy, target-specific accountability, responsibility attribution, Chinese K-pop fandom

K-pop video call events emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative to face-to-face fan signing events. Fans typically purchase albums to enter a lottery, and selected entrants speak with an idol through KakaoTalk, Line, WeChat, or a similar service in a brief, timed interaction (Jeong, 2026). The format gives overseas fans one-to-one access without traveling to South Korea while linking that access

to physical album sales. Fans often preserve and share calls online, allowing moments of attention, hesitation, or distraction to be replayed and compared (Jeong, 2026). The materials examined in this study span 2022 to 2024. At the time of the 2023 fan interviews, several participants also reported attending offline events, so the study captures a period in which video calls coexisted with renewed in-person access for at least some fans. Because the encounter is short, paid, and readily circulated, both the interaction and the procedures surrounding it become open to evaluation.

Video calls entered a fan economy in which attachment, consumption, and organized support were already intertwined. Fan scholarship has long challenged passive-consumer models, emphasizing how audiences appropriate, interpret, recirculate, and produce meaning from commercial culture (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992, 2006). K-pop fans likewise buy and stream music, circulate information, translate content, organize projects, and coordinate purchases. Paid access is evaluated within an existing history of attachment, spending, and fan labor.

Research on K-pop explains how the industry organizes and monetizes intimacy. Idols maintain fan relationships through fan service and repeated communication, while entertainment companies structure this work (Choi, 2020, 2023; Lee & Prey, 2025). Paid fan platforms make the commercial arrangement especially visible because interfaces, access rules, and payment systems organize asymmetrical communication (S. Kang, 2022; Shen & Hallinan, 2024; Zheng, 2026). Fans remain active consumers, organizers, promoters, and cultural producers within those systems (James, 2024, 2025; Sun, 2020). This scholarship explains investment in paid intimacy but says less about what happens after a disappointing encounter: how fans decide what failed, who should answer for it, and where to direct a response.

Chinese K-pop fandom offers a valuable

analytical site for examining that process because participation is shaped by cross-border conditions and organized fan infrastructures. Chinese K-pop communities coordinate information, translation, emotional investment, and purchasing across national boundaries (F. Kang & Sohn, 2018; Su & Chang, 2021; Sun, 2020, 2022). Social media also supports information production and sharing within Chinese fandom (Liu, 2016). These networks help fans secure access and products, compare experiences, and aggregate purchases, while also providing organizational structures that can support coordinated refusal. Nationality may also become salient in how fans interpret their treatment, particularly where attachment to Korean idols coexists with national and political discourse (Chen, 2017, 2018; Y. Wang & Park, 2022).

Consumer attribution research helps explain what follows a disappointing paid encounter. Reactions to product failure vary with how consumers understand its cause and responsibility (Folkes, 1984). In multi-actor services, consumers may hold a platform responsible even when they identify an individual provider as the immediate source of a failure (Fu et al., 2026). In this study, responsibility attribution refers to the judgment of who caused or controlled a problem. Accountability refers to treating that actor as the appropriate target of criticism, complaint, or withdrawal. Target-specific accountability traces how these judgments connect a perceived failure to a particular responsible actor and to the criticism, complaint, or withdrawal directed toward that actor. The analysis distinguishes three domains of control within the same paid encounter: interactional, procedural, and organizational. These domains are analytically distinct sites at which control over the event is exercised, not fixed actor categories. They capture the immediate interaction, procedures that organize access and delivery, and organizational decisions about scheduling and management. A problem visible in one domain may therefore be

attributed to an actor operating in another.

Interactional accountability concerns an idol's attention, recognition, responsiveness, and use of purchased time. Procedural accountability concerns entry requirements, lottery operation, platform communication, and delivery of purchased albums and promised benefits. Organizational accountability concerns scheduling, repeated events, company communication, and complaint handling. The study examines how fans connect a perceived failure to a responsible actor and then to a particular response, and how Chinese cross-border conditions and organized fan infrastructures affect how dissatisfaction circulates and, in some cases, becomes coordinated.

Hybrid Fan-Consumer Relations and Paid Intimacy

Cultural studies approaches treat consumption as an active practice: audiences appropriate commercial culture, produce meanings, and build communities around it (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Fan scholarship likewise describes fandom as personal, social, productive, and economically entangled (Sandvoss et al., 2017). These approaches make a strict division between an emotional fan and a calculating consumer difficult to sustain.

K-pop makes this overlap especially visible. Choi (2020) treats fans as active consumers whose purchases are bound up with intimate attachment, while Kim (2020) describes a consumer-fandom in which consumption helps constitute fandom itself. Chinese K-pop fans translate content, manage accounts and collective support, and help cultivate idols' visibility (Sun, 2020; Yan & Yang, 2021), while James (2025) describes fans as consumers and cultural producers within commercial platforms. Fans can care deeply about an idol while monitoring prices, comparing benefits, coordinating purchases, or judging whether paid access was worth the expense.

These practices give a brief paid encounter a longer history: fans may arrive at a video call after sustained investments of time, money, and organizational labor rather than as purchasers of an isolated transaction. That longer history helps explain why the meaning of a two-minute call can exceed the immediate purchase itself.

K-pop idols also perform work directed at sustaining these relationships. Emotional labor refers to managing feeling and emotional display as part of paid work (Hochschild, 1983), while affective labor draws attention to labor that produces or manages affect and social connection (Hardt, 1999). Korean scholarship shows how idol training and performance incorporate demands to manage emotion, expression, and fan-facing conduct (Pang & Oh, 2018; Won & Kim, 2012). Choi (2023) similarly describes idols as affective laborers who maintain fan relationships through spoken exchanges, gestures, messages, and music.

Relational labor draws attention to the longer relationship within which a particular display occurs. Lee and Prey (2025) show how ongoing communication with audiences becomes directly monetized on K-pop fan platforms. A video call lasts only a few minutes, but fans interpret it through months or years of media exposure, purchases, messages, and prior meetings. Minor signs of inattentiveness can acquire meaning through a much longer relational history.

Video calls place that relationship inside explicit commercial procedures. Access depends on album purchases and lottery selection; the interaction occurs through a designated service and fixed time; signed albums and benefits must later be delivered. Research on fan platforms shows how paywalls, interfaces, and interaction rules organize intimacy (Lee & Prey, 2025; S. Kang, 2022; Shen & Hallinan, 2024; Zheng, 2026). In video calls, fans may evaluate the idol's attention alongside selection, communication, order delivery, and the organizational conditions behind the encounter.

Fan Disengagement and Selective Withdrawal

Fan scholarship has devoted more attention to attachment and participation than to how support is reduced, redirected, or maintained in altered form. Hills (2005) describes cyclical fandom, in which fans move among objects of attachment rather than crossing a single, permanent boundary out of fandom. Jeong (2026) examines withdrawal alongside resistance and collective mobilization in K-pop fandom; her account of former Kang Sung Hoon fans includes a participant who stopped supporting him while continuing to support the other members of SECHSKIES. In a different media context, Mardon et al. (2023) show that formerly positive parasocial relationships with social media influencers can persist as negative attention and criticism. These studies caution against treating disengagement as a single or complete break.

Disengagement can vary in object, scope, and practice. Fans may reduce spending, stop a particular activity, redirect attachment, or maintain critical attention without leaving fandom altogether. Existing research establishes the variability of withdrawal, but the process through which fans decide what or whom to withdraw from remains less developed, especially when a paid encounter is jointly organized by multiple actors. Video call events make that problem particularly visible because the idol, entertainment company, seller, platform, and event staff occupy different positions within the same commercially organized interaction.

Chinese K-pop Fandom as Cross-Border Infrastructure

Chinese K-pop fandom operates through networks connecting consumption, translation, information sharing, promotion, and project management. Studies identify time, emotional investment, financial devotion, and

interdependent fan organization as central to Chinese idol fandom (F. Kang & Sohn, 2018; Su & Chang, 2021). Sun (2020) documents specialized and managerial labor through which fans translate content, run accounts, organize events, and manage collective support. Liu (2016) likewise shows how information production and sharing strengthen online K-pop fandom on Weibo. These practices give communities durable organizational capacity.

Consumption within these networks can also operate as a visible form of collective support. Chinese K-pop fans use regional album sales and organized purchasing to demonstrate support, while fan organizations coordinate distribution and other projects across borders (Su & Chang, 2021; Sun, 2020, 2022; Y. Wang & Park, 2022). Purchasing is therefore not always an isolated transaction: fan organizations can aggregate individual commitments into visible collective support. That same organizational capacity becomes relevant when support is later suspended or redirected.

Cross-border participation also introduces additional intermediaries and logistical steps. Sun (2022) documents translation, group purchases, delegated purchases, and the movement of physical products across borders. Such practices can place regional sellers and other intermediaries between Chinese fans and the Korean entertainment market, extending participation beyond a direct fan-company relationship. Platforms further shape how those networks operate. James (2024, 2025) treats platformization as infrastructure for K-pop participation and shows how fans work within systems they do not control. Recorded interactions, purchasing information, complaints, and fan-club statements can circulate through such networks, enabling comparison and coordination without guaranteeing consensus.

Existing research also shows that organized fan infrastructures can be redirected from support toward collective action. E. S. Wang

(2022) examines political consumerism among Chinese K-pop fans under nationalist pressure, while Zhuang et al. (2023) show how existing fandom networks and tactics were repurposed for nationalist mobilization. These conflicts differ from the present study, but they demonstrate that infrastructures created for promotion and purchasing can support coordinated refusal or mobilization when collective interpretations shift.

Cross-border participation also shapes interpretive context. Chinese fandom of foreign popular culture can coexist with nationally inflected discourse (Chen, 2017, 2018; Y. Wang & Park, 2022), while Korean fans may distinguish between domestic and overseas fans in national or cultural terms (Berbiguer & Cho, 2017). These studies do not establish discriminatory video-call selection; rather, they show why fans may draw on nationality when interpreting experiences in transnational fandom. The question for the present study is how such interpretations intersect with opaque procedures and judgments of responsibility.

The analysis treats interactional standards as potentially shared across fandoms. The Chinese case is analytically significant for the cross-border conditions and organized infrastructures through which such judgments can circulate and sometimes become coordinated.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do Chinese K-pop fans evaluate perceived failures in video call events and attribute responsibility across the interactional, procedural, and organizational domains of the event?
- RQ2. How do these attributions shape target-specific criticism and withdrawal, and how do Chinese cross-border conditions and organized fan infrastructures affect how dissatisfaction circulates and, in some cases, becomes coordinated?

METHOD

This qualitative study draws on interviews with Chinese K-pop fans, interviews with industry respondents involved in video call events, and selected online materials. The researcher who conducted the interviews had participated in fan signing events as a fan and had also worked for a video-call platform in event planning and operations. This experience provided practical familiarity with the event procedures examined in the study. The analysis treats it as positional context, not independent evidence.

Participants and Recruitment

Fan participants were recruited through a post in a Douban K-pop fan group between May 15 and May 30, 2023, followed by individual contact. Eligibility required participation in at least two video call events. Ten women, all Chinese nationals and aged 19 to 25, participated in the study. Throughout the article, “Chinese participants” refers to nationality rather than place of residence. At the time of interview, eight resided in China, one in South Korea, and one in Japan, and they reported approximately one to four years of fandom participation (Table 1). They had attended between two and 15 video call events. Six reported participation in group orders as part of their fandom activities. Group-order organization was not a focus of the interviews, so this information is used as participant context rather than as a separate interview theme.

Three industry respondents were recruited through the researcher’s acquaintances or referrals and were selected for direct experience planning or operating video call events and knowledge of Chinese fans or the Chinese market. They included the chief executive officer of an entertainment company, the chief executive officer of an album-sales company, and an entertainment-company employee working in a China-facing marketing capacity. Table 2

Table 1. *Fan Participant Characteristics*

ID	Age	Fandom tenure	Residence	Fan activities	No. of calls	Most recent call
P1	20	1–2 years	China	Album purchasing; offline events	3	Mar. 2023
P2	22	1–2 years	China	Album purchasing; group orders; offline events	15	Apr. 2023
P3	19	2–3 years	China	Album purchasing; group orders; offline events	2	Feb. 2021
P4	20	1–2 years	China	Album purchasing	3	May 2023
P5	22	2–3 years	China	Album purchasing; group orders; offline events	3	Feb. 2023
P6	21	2–3 years	China	Album purchasing; group orders; offline events	4	Feb. 2023
P7	19	1–2 years	China	Album purchasing; group orders	2	Mar. 2023
P8	23	2–3 years	China	Album purchasing; offline events	6	Apr. 2023
P9	22	2–3 years	South Korea	Album purchasing; group orders; offline events	3	Sept. 2022
P10	25	3–4 years	Japan	Album purchasing; offline events	2	Nov. 2022

Note. All fan participants were Chinese nationals. Age, fandom tenure, residence, and participation information reflect the time of interview. No. of calls = number of video call events attended.

Table 2. *Industry Participant Characteristics*

ID	Employer type	Position	Interview Date	Language
S1	Agency	CEO	Jun. 7, 2023	Korean
S2	Album seller	CEO	Jan. 24, 2024	Korean
S3	Agency	China marketing staff	Apr. 6, 2024	Chinese

Note. Organization names are withheld to protect participant confidentiality.

summarizes the respondents’ occupational roles, interview dates, and languages; organization names are withheld to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection and Online Materials

Before the fan interviews, participants were offered a choice between an online voice call and text communication. All 10 chose text-based interviews through WeChat, which were conducted in Chinese from May to June 2023 and lasted approximately 50 to 70 minutes each. Interview topics included reasons for participating, efforts made to enter events, a memorable positive or negative call, reactions to disappointing clips circulating online, and

perceptions of differential treatment.

The three industry interviews were conducted in person in the respondents’ offices and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. They took place on June 7, 2023, January 24, 2024, and April 6, 2024. The first two were conducted in Korean and the third in Chinese. The same researcher conducted all fan and industry interviews. Questions addressed why companies hosted video call events, how they understood the needs of Chinese fans, how they interpreted publicly circulating examples of disappointing video call interactions, whether companies monitored such incidents, how they might respond to them, and whether they were aware of concerns about differential treatment.

The study also used selected public Douban discussions, Weibo posts and fan-club statements, and fan-shared clips or transcripts. Separately, the researcher directly contacted a seller offering fansign-cut information on Twitter/X and retained a screenshot of the seller's reply. "Fansign-cut" refers to an informal estimate of the number of albums thought necessary for a competitive fan-signing lottery entry. The screenshot records the seller's stated fee and conditions and the information requested from a prospective buyer. It is treated as contextual material rather than as an interview, and the seller's identifying information was omitted. One of the fan-club statements examined in the Results was issued by a Chinese fan club dedicated to Jang Wonyoung, a member of IVE. These materials were used to contextualize specific cases and expressions of dissatisfaction rather than as a systematically sampled content-analysis dataset. Four linked public posts remained accessible at final verification. The Wonyoung fan-club post had been deleted by then, so that case was checked against a screenshot archived during data collection. Interview evidence, industry accounts, public materials, and the researcher-obtained fansign-cut screenshot are identified separately in the Results.

Data Analysis and Translation

The fan interview material was analyzed in Chinese so that participants' original wording could be retained during interpretation. The researcher first read each interview in full to develop an overall understanding of the participant's experience, then reread the interviews comparatively to identify recurring patterns across cases. During these readings, attention was given to what occurred during video call events, what participants regarded as satisfactory or problematic, whom they held responsible for particular experiences, and whether or how their subsequent fan activities changed. Relevant passages were identified and

compared across participants, and recurring experiences were grouped according to their substantive similarities.

The comparison initially centered on recurring issues involving idol conduct during the call; participation and selection procedures; communication and delivery of purchased albums or benefits; company scheduling and management; judgments of responsibility; and participants' responses following negative experiences. Cases were then compared to examine why apparently similar problems did not always lead participants to hold the same actor responsible or respond in the same way. Positive experiences were considered alongside negative ones when they helped clarify the standards participants used to distinguish satisfactory from disappointing interactions. The three industry interviews were examined alongside the fan interviews to provide additional context concerning event procedures, scheduling, workload, and company decisions. Selected online materials were used to contextualize specific cases and public expressions of dissatisfaction rather than analyzed as a separate, systematically sampled corpus.

Through these comparisons, recurring patterns were organized into three broader accountability domains: interactional, procedural, and organizational. The analysis then focused on the relationship among where a perceived problem occurred, whom participants or public sources held responsible, and the target and scope of the response. These comparisons formed the empirical basis for the target-specific accountability framework developed in the study.

Interview quotations were translated into English by the researcher. A faculty advisor reviewed and revised the translations where needed to check their meaning against the original material. Minor clarifying insertions are indicated in brackets, and ellipses indicate omitted material.

Ethics and Anonymization

Formal Institutional Review Board review was not sought for this study. The fan interview participants were adults, and the interviews concerned fandom participation and video call experiences. Before the fan interviews, the researcher explained the study's purpose and content through WeChat and obtained written consent through the chat prior to participation. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their responses could be used anonymously in academic research, including a subsequent research article. Names and other personal information were removed and replaced with participant numbers. Interview records were stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer and were not accessible to others. Industry respondents were assigned S1 to S3 identifiers, and organization names were withheld. For public Weibo and Douban materials, individual account names and identifying information were omitted; the fansign-seller contacted through Twitter/X was also not identified. Public figures, organizations, and campaigns are named only when necessary to understand the case.

RESULTS

Commercial and Operational Structure of Video Call Events

Video call events were organized across several actors before a fan ever reached the screen. The idol occupied the center of the visible encounter, but access, delivery, and scheduling were shaped elsewhere. Industry and participant accounts reflected this division of control: S3 described platforms passing winner lists to entertainment companies, P5 attributed delayed order delivery to the platform, and S1 situated fan-signing

events within company-controlled promotional schedules. The event was therefore experienced as a single paid encounter even though different actors controlled different parts of it.

The structure was tied directly to album sales. Industry respondents likewise described video call events as serving both album-sales goals and overseas fan access. S2 explained that signing events are organized "for the sake of album sales and company revenue" and that the video-call format allows companies to reach more fans and generate additional sales. S3 described video calls as an alternative form of access for Chinese fans unable to attend offline events, while also noting the benefit to entertainment companies.

This division of labor provides the organizational context for the findings that follow. Fans encountered one paid event, but different actors controlled different stages: platforms handled winner lists and order delivery, entertainment companies managed artist participation and scheduling, and the idol performed the visible interaction. The findings below show how this distribution of control shaped where fans directed dissatisfaction.

Standards of a Satisfactory Video Call

The interviews first establish what participants regarded as a satisfactory video call. A successful interaction did not require an elaborate performance. Participants focused on whether the idol appeared to listen and respond to the particular person on screen. Interviewees described wanting close interaction, personalized responses, and an emotional connection. One fan (P1) explained, "In the process of growing fond of idols, it's inevitable to have a desire to understand their thoughts better and to receive some response to the love we give." Another participant (P2) recalled sharing personal worries and receiving reassurance: "I asked her what kind of presence I am to her, and she said I'm her energy." These comments describe a wish to be acknowledged

in real time, not evidence that the broader relationship was equal or fully reciprocal.

Participants also distinguished a response tailored to their circumstances from a generic expression of sympathy. One participant described the best call as an exchange in which the idol attended to the practical details of a canceled concert trip before offering reassurance:

I mentioned that I originally planned to attend the concert in June, but couldn't because it clashed with important real-life matters. She first showed concern about whether I could get a refund for my flight, hotel, and concert tickets, and how much of a loss I might incur. Then she comforted me by saying it's okay, because something huge and great will definitely happen. (P5)

The sequence mattered: the idol asked about refunds and possible losses before offering comfort, which P5 read as evidence that her circumstances had been heard and taken seriously.

A second participant (P10) valued the care with which a male idol considered questions about his company and possible overseas concerts. The participant said that he approached the questions "with serious thought" and answered them, said that he liked his current company, and explained that future overseas concerts depended on the company's arrangements. The participant said she "could feel his apology," described his image as more real and gentle after the call, and noted that he made a heart after the time ended. Here, the positive evaluation rested less on receiving a desired answer than on the impression that the idol had considered the questions before responding.

A public Weibo clip provides a smaller example of cross-cultural recognition. In the clip, a fan asked Red Velvet's Yeri to offer a Chinese New Year greeting in Chinese. Yeri consulted the event translator and repeated "Gong Xi Fa Cai," a conventional wish for prosperity. Although the clip cannot establish the broader quality of the fan-

idol relationship, the fan could read Yeri's effort to respond in Chinese as a culturally specific form of individualized attention.

Participants judged calls positively when the idol seemed to listen, answered the specific question or concern, and used the limited time in a way that felt directed toward the caller. Small gestures mattered because fans read them as signs of individual recognition. These positive accounts establish the interactional standard against which screen switching, multitasking, and formulaic replies were later judged.

Interactional Accountability and Idol-Directed Withdrawal

The standards described above became consequential when fans located a failure in the idol's conduct during the call. Interview accounts and online materials referred to divided attention, screen switching, long silences, formulaic replies, and other responses that fans considered inattentive. These behaviors did not carry a fixed meaning. Fans interpreted them in relation to the money and preparation required to enter the event, the brevity of the call, and their prior history with the idol. When the idol was treated as the actor responsible for the disappointing interaction, the response was directed toward the idol or toward future encounters with that idol. Participants repeatedly described the call as purchased time. One interviewee explained why even a small lapse could matter in such a short encounter:

The two minutes of the fan call event are something fans have bought with real money. As long as those two minutes can entirely belong to me, that's the significance of the fan signing for me. Those two minutes are like a vitamin for the fans. If the vitamin, which is supposed to replenish strength, goes bad, of course the fans will be angry. (P9)

The metaphor links payment to a bounded

expectation of focused recognition: because the two minutes were purchased, divided attention could undermine the emotional value the participant associated with the event.

Screen switching provides a direct example of idol-directed attribution and withdrawal. In a public Weibo post dated January 24, 2022, a fan documented the idol changing the video-call display during several signing-event conversations. She interpreted the action as an unwillingness to look at fans during interaction time they had paid to access. The fan described having spoken with the idol more than 40 times at signing events and having sent a support coffee truck for his first web drama. She wrote that the idol “doesn’t have the most basic professional ethics of an idol” and urged other fans to “love yourself more.” She ended the post by saying, “So, I stop here” and “I will find someone better.”

The post ties the decision to a specific history of support and to repeated conduct by one idol. It does not document withdrawal from the group, K-pop, or fandom in general. Because the fan ended support for this performer while saying that she would find someone better, the most defensible reading is idol-specific withdrawal.

Other participants used the same incident to explain their own standards. One participant (P3) said, “Being caught switching screens really diminishes the affection. The precious time I dedicate to them means nothing to them.” This statement attributes the failure to the idol’s use of attention, rather than to the lottery, seller, or company.

Divided attention was evaluated in similar terms. Fan-shared material showed an idol replying to messages during a call, while one interviewee (P7) described seeing clips in which another idol appeared to doze off during signing events. The interviewee had previously recommended that idol for his good attitude and said that the clips made her feel deceived. In these examples, disappointment centered on the perception that the idol’s attention was directed elsewhere during

the interaction.

Formulaic responses raised a related concern about whether the caller was being individually acknowledged. A separate participant (P8) described a friend who attended almost every call event but received replies such as “love you” and felt that the idol did not remember what she said. In another fan-uploaded transcript, the caller stated, “I don’t want to attend your events anymore . . . because you’ve always been cold to me,” while the idol responded mainly with repeated words, nods, silence, and a final “ok.” The caller’s statement defines the withdrawal narrowly: she would stop attending that idol’s events.

One participant (P4) described a different path from a disappointing first signing to event-specific withdrawal. She recalled being nervous and excited before the call but finding the exchange awkward. When she asked the idol to record a short message of encouragement, “he said I should just listen to their songs more often.” She concluded, “After that signing event, I never went to their signing events again.” The account does not establish that she stopped following the artist or group. It shows how a single interaction could be judged as sufficiently unsatisfying to end participation in that artist’s signing events, a narrower form of withdrawal than leaving fandom altogether.

These accounts do not show fans simply abandoning attachment and becoming consumers. Rather, withdrawal became targeted when fans attributed the disappointing conduct to the idol: they criticized the performer, stopped attending future calls, or ended support for that individual. The next section turns to failures located outside the interaction itself, where responsibility shifted toward sellers, platforms, and event procedures.

Procedural Accountability: Access, Selection, and Delivery

Not every perceived failure occurred during

the call. Fans also evaluated the procedures that determined who could enter, how much they might need to purchase, and whether albums and promised benefits were eventually delivered. In these cases, the idol was not necessarily the actor held responsible. Attention shifted to lottery rules, fansign-cut sellers, album-sales platforms, and the division of responsibility between platforms and entertainment companies.

Uncertainty about the eventual winning cut line created a market for fansign-cut estimates. The researcher-obtained screenshot described in the Method showed one Twitter/X seller charging 15,000 KRW for an estimate, disclaiming any guarantee of success, and asking for the applicant's category as "Korean/Foreigner." The screenshot documents how nationality was made salient in this informal information market; it does not show whether platforms themselves used nationality in winner selection.

The entertainment company's access to information was limited in a different way. An employee explained that the company received the winner list from the platform but did not receive applicants' individual order quantities:

The signing platforms will only pass on the list of fans who participated in the signing session; they won't provide us with the exact number of album orders. . . . The platform only provides us with the list of winners and does not disclose the number of albums ordered by fans. Our responsibility is solely to ensure the artist's participation in the signing event. (S3)

S3 said the entertainment company received winner lists from the platform but not applicants' individual order quantities. The selection process therefore remained opaque in the evidence available to this study, and nationality-based explanations could not be verified or ruled out.

Procedural dissatisfaction continued after the call in P5's account. She described albums and photocards remaining undelivered even as the same platforms began later rounds of events: "The

platform's delivery is really slow; many platforms haven't even shipped orders from call events held a year ago, and it's already the second year." Here, the perceived failure concerned order delivery rather than the idol's performance, and P5 attributed the delay to the platform. The procedural cases shifted evaluation away from the idol. Selection remained difficult to assess because the available evidence did not include platform-level order data, while P5's undelivered orders provided a clearer basis for platform-directed criticism.

Organizational Accountability: Scheduling and Company Responsibility

Participant, industry, and fan-club materials situated signing events within comeback schedules that also included broadcasts, rehearsals, content production, travel, and other promotional work. This scheduling context affected how fatigue could be interpreted during a call. An entertainment company CEO described a typical day during an album-promotion period:

When idols start their comeback schedules, their schedules are incredibly tight. If I were to break it down over 24 hours, it would look something like this: they wake up around 2 to 3 a.m. and head to the salon before 5 a.m. . . . Before the actual show, there's no rest for the members . . . and after the actual show, they often have fan signing events. . . . They usually get little sleep. . . . With such demanding schedules, idols can become very tired, especially during album promotions. (S1)

The account places fan signing events near the end of an extended workday, offering an organizational explanation for fatigue without deciding how any particular call should be judged. P5 similarly entered a signing event with the day's schedule already in mind:

That day, I actually prepared myself for her lack of enthusiasm because the signing started at 1 PM local time. She had a solo event in the morning, then rushed

to a group event, and immediately after that, she had the signing. You could tell she was a bit tired during the signing. (P5)

P5 linked the idol's low energy to the preceding schedule, showing how an interactional problem could be interpreted through organizational conditions.

The Wonyoung fan-club statement directed frustration toward company scheduling itself. The fan club described what it called "death schedules" and stated that one album had been followed by "47 fan signing events." It also claimed that Wonyoung traveled to three countries in one week and sometimes returned on a red-eye flight for the next schedule. These figures and travel details are claims made by the fan club and were not independently verified in this study.

The statement separated Wonyoung's conduct from the company's scheduling decisions. It described her as professional but attributed her visible fatigue and discomfort to Starship's scheduling. The fan club criticized continued signing events and what it regarded as inadequate attention to Wonyoung's rest and individual activities. It also claimed that she had not appeared on a variety program individually for more than 700 days and explained Chinese fans' desire for such activities partly through limited physical access, writing that "our channel is just a small screen." The complaint therefore targeted the company's allocation of Wonyoung's time rather than Wonyoung herself. Support for Wonyoung remained intact while criticism targeted Starship. The same visible condition, fatigue, was therefore evaluated during the interaction but attributed to an organizational decision.

From Criticism to Selective Economic Withdrawal

Criticism and withdrawal could occur in sequence rather than as simple alternatives. An entertainment-company employee explained why

complaints to a company might receive no direct response:

The entertainment company's lack of response is because they feel it's unnecessary. The company's email inbox is filled with various complaints about the company's arrangements every day, and it's impossible for the company to respond to each one. From the company's standpoint, rather than selectively responding to complaints, it's better not to respond at all. (S3)

The respondent presented nonresponse as a practical organizational choice. P10 separately argued that written protest was unlikely to produce change and that economic pressure might be more effective:

I don't think boycotting through text alone will be effective. . . . Because the Chinese market is so vast, companies may just think there will always be people continuing to buy. . . . If real change is to be made, it might only be through measures like stopping album and merchandise purchases. (P10)

P10 framed reduced purchasing as a possible means of economic pressure when written protest seemed unlikely to produce change. The Wonyoung fan club described this sequence directly: after stating that it had pursued protests and advocacy for a year without change, it announced that it would stop buying group albums and merchandise, paying for what it regarded as excessive signing events, and supporting Starship. At the same time, it stated, "We will continue to firmly and unwaveringly support Wonyoung forever." The fan club separated continued attachment to Wonyoung from spending tied to company decisions. The evidence does not establish whether this action changed policy.

Organized purchasing was especially visible in the STAYC case. Six interview participants reported group-order participation as part of their

fandom activity, although the interviews did not systematically examine how those purchases were organized. In a public Weibo statement dated July 25, 2023, seven Chinese STAYC fan clubs that had been negotiating album prices with sales platforms jointly announced the closure of “all Chinese purchasing channels” after describing the platforms’ responses as “no reply, perfunctory tone . . . resolutely unwilling to compromise.” The STAYC statement shows organized purchasing infrastructure being used for collective withdrawal.

The Wonyoung and STAYC cases differed in target and scope. The Wonyoung action targeted an entertainment company while preserving support for the idol; the STAYC action suspended coordinated purchasing for one comeback following a dispute with sales platforms. Neither case establishes departure from K-pop or from the artists involved. Together, they show how fan organizations that coordinate spending can also withhold it from a specific target.

These cases place the Chinese contribution in the infrastructure surrounding the encounter. China-facing sellers and platforms mediated access and delivery, nationality entered the informal fansign-cut market, and Chinese fan organizations could coordinate or suspend purchasing. Together, these features show how dissatisfaction could circulate and be organized through cross-border networks.

DISCUSSION

Research has shown how K-pop organizes and commercializes intimacy (Choi, 2020, 2023; Lee & Prey, 2025; S. Kang, 2022) and how fan support may be reduced or redirected (Hills, 2005; Jeong, 2026), sometimes through resistance or collective mobilization (Jeong, 2026). The present findings identify the attributional process connecting those conditions to targeted responses: fans interpreted what went wrong, who caused or controlled it,

and where criticism or withdrawal should be directed. Positive calls established a standard, while failures were attributed across interactional, procedural, and organizational domains.

The multi-actor organization of video calls is central to this process. Fu et al. (2026) show that, in multi-actor services, consumers can hold a platform responsible even when they identify an individual provider as the immediate source of a failure. The present findings show a similar separation between the visible problem and the actor held responsible. Target-specific accountability extends this question by tracing how responsibility attribution across three domains of control shapes where response is directed. The analytic purpose of these domains is to distinguish the site at which control is exercised from the actor held accountable. An interactional problem can therefore be interpreted through a procedural or organizational condition. The model traces attributed responsibility rather than determining objective responsibility.

Fan-consumer hybridity explains why cost and affection appeared in the same evaluations. Fan scholarship treats consumption as compatible with active interpretation and production (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), while K-pop research shows consumption, labor, and attachment operating together (Choi, 2020; Kim, 2020; Sun, 2020). Participants referred to recognition, money, preparation, professional conduct, and care without abandoning attachment. After disappointment, consumer language marked a change in which standards became salient. A fan could still care for an idol while asking whether paid time was used appropriately or whether a company deserved continued spending. This is evaluative recalibration within an already hybrid relationship, rather than a conversion from fan to consumer.

Video calls sharpen this evaluation because they create a bounded interval of paid attention. Idols’ fan-facing work can be understood through emotional, affective, and relational labor (Choi,

2023; Lee & Prey, 2025; Pang & Oh, 2018; Won & Kim, 2012). The call does not create the relationship from nothing; fans bring histories of content, messages, purchases, and earlier meetings. They can also identify when the paid interaction starts and ends and compare it with other calls. The vitamin metaphor captures a bounded expectation of focused recognition during the purchased interval, without implying equality across the broader fan-idol relationship. Payment makes attention unusually visible as an object of judgment while the longer relationship gives that attention emotional meaning.

Attribution also clarifies what disengagement means. The screen-switching fan ended support for one idol, and another participant stopped attending that artist's signing events after a disappointing first call. Wonyoung's fan club preserved support for Wonyoung while withholding spending associated with Starship's decisions, and the STAYC fan clubs suspended coordinated purchasing for one comeback after a platform dispute. These actions differ in target and scope. Hills (2005), Jeong (2026), and Mardon et al. (2023) each show in different ways that attachment can shift, persist negatively, or coexist with selective disengagement. In a multi-actor system, stopping one transaction or relationship does not establish exit from the group, K-pop, or fandom as a whole.

Criticism and withdrawal also appeared sequentially in the public fan-club cases. The Wonyoung fan club said it had pursued protests and advocacy for a year before announcing purchasing suspension. The STAYC fan clubs described unsuccessful price negotiations immediately before closing purchasing channels. In these two cases, voiced dissatisfaction preceded target-specific economic withdrawal, illustrating how organized fan groups could move from criticism to selective sanction.

Studies of Chinese K-pop fandom document collective organization around information, translation, purchasing, and cross-border

access (F. Kang & Sohn, 2018; Liu, 2016; Su & Chang, 2021; Sun, 2020, 2022). In the materials examined here from 2022 to 2024, this infrastructure was most visible in the fan-club cases and in the intermediaries surrounding access. The STAYC fan clubs used coordinated purchasing channels in a dispute with sales platforms. What distinguishes the Chinese case in this study is less the content of interactional standards than the cross-border and organizational infrastructure through which dissatisfaction could circulate and, in some cases, become coordinated. This accords with work showing that fandom infrastructures can be redirected toward collective action (E. S. Wang, 2022; Zhuang et al., 2023).

Nationality entered the interpretive frame when relevant information was limited. Chinese fans can negotiate affection for Korean popular culture alongside nationalist discourse (Chen, 2017, 2018; Y. Wang & Park, 2022), and Korean fandom can distinguish between domestic and overseas fans in nationally inflected ways (Berbiguer & Cho, 2017). In the materials examined here, the fansign-cut seller's "Korean/Foreigner" category made nationality visible within an informal information market, while S3 said platforms did not disclose individual order quantities to entertainment companies. The evidence does not establish nationality-based selection rules. It shows how procedural opacity can make nationality-based explanations difficult for fans to verify or dismiss, shaping judgments of fairness and responsibility without proving discrimination.

These findings have several limitations. The fan sample was small and purposive, and the fan interviews were retrospective and text based, while the three industry respondents represented a limited set of organizational positions. Eight participants resided in China, whereas P9 and P10 resided in South Korea and Japan, and the interviews were not designed to compare residence-based differences in access

or participation. The study therefore does not estimate the prevalence of particular responsibility attributions or establish effects such as whether purchasing suspensions changed company policy. Public online cases were used illustratively rather than systematically, and the fansign-cut screenshot documents a single seller exchange. Finally, the empirical materials capture video-call practices and interpretations from 2022 to 2024, a period in which offline fan events had also resumed alongside video calls. Because event formats and platform procedures may change over time, these findings should be understood as historically situated rather than as a description of all current video-call events.

CONCLUSION

Paid video calls combine an intimate encounter with a commercial and organizational system that extends far beyond the idol on screen. This study shows that dissatisfaction in such encounters is not best understood as a simple loss of attachment or a movement from fan to consumer. Fans evaluate where a problem becomes visible, interpret which actor caused or controlled it, and direct criticism or withdrawal accordingly. Target-specific accountability captures this process by tracing responsibility attribution across interactional, procedural, and organizational domains and the response directed toward the actor held responsible. It helps explain why the same event system can generate idol-directed criticism, refusal of future calls, platform complaints, company-directed withdrawal, or campaign-specific purchasing suspension while attachment to other parts of fandom remains.

The study's central theoretical contribution is to distinguish three elements that are often collapsed in accounts of fan dissatisfaction: where a failure is experienced, whom fans hold responsible for it, and where they direct their response. This shifts the study of disengagement away from a

binary question of whether fans stay or leave and toward the target and scope of withdrawal. It also extends research on commercialized intimacy by showing that control over a paid encounter can be distributed across the actors who organize access, interaction, and order delivery. The actor visible at the moment of disappointment is therefore not necessarily the actor fans ultimately blame. For research on Chinese K-pop fandom, the findings further locate the significance of the Chinese case in its cross-border infrastructure rather than in interactional expectations specific to Chinese fans. In the cases examined, regional sellers, platforms, translation, organized purchasing, and fan organizations shaped how experiences were interpreted, compared, circulated, and, in some cases, converted into coordinated economic withdrawal.

Future research can examine how the boundaries of this model vary across fandoms. Comparative studies could investigate whether responsibility attribution takes similar forms across national fan communities, event platforms, and different forms of paid fan access. Longitudinal research could follow complaints, purchasing decisions, and subsequent participation over time to distinguish temporary sanctions from more durable forms of disengagement. Research involving entertainment-company staff, sellers, event workers, and platform operators could also examine how these actors understand and negotiate responsibility when control over a fan encounter is distributed across organizations. Examining target-specific accountability in other forms of monetized fan access would help clarify which dynamics identified here were specific to the 2022–2024 video-call context and which extend to other commercially organized relationships between audiences and public figures.

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