

Fan power and capital in JKT48's *senbatsu sousenkyo* voting contest

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Received February 27, 2025/Accepted September 15, 2025

Abstract

Senbatsu Sousenkyo (SSK), adapted from Japanese idol sister groups, is an event that members JKT48 and fans look forward to. Through a voting system, fans play a role in determining which members will take center position in the next single. SSK as a general election always experiences a surge compared to the previous event. This shows the militancy of fans which has implications for the popularity of their idols. It cannot be denied that there are various capitals massively empowered to boost voting results. This research aims to explore the complex interactions and contestations of capital in popular culture, especially in the context of participatory democracy in SSK. This research also aims to identify the dominant forms of capital, explore the habitus displayed by fans, and analyze the doxa of the SSK competition arena as a reflection of power dynamics in popular culture. This research uses Pierre Bourdieu's approach in understanding the SSK phenomenon through the trilogy of habitus, field, and capital to analyze how fan practices reproduce power relations in digital fandom economies. This research uses qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques in this research involved document tracing, non-participatory observation, and analysis of physical artifacts on several fanbase accounts, such as @FreyanationID and @C_Jessination48. This research finds that various capitals in SSK interact with each other to determine the outcome of contestation through, especially economic capital as the main factor in the voting system that boosts voting preferences for certain idols. The victory obtained through the mobilization of economic capital also raises other capitals such as symbolic and social capital related to the 'closeness' and privilege obtained by fans. These findings indicate that SSK is a capital-driven battleground that reinforces consumerist culture, produces fan hierarchies, and institutionalizes economic stratification within the idol group entertainment industry.

Keywords: capital; Fans; Field; Habitus; Idol Group; *Senbatsu Sousenkyo*

Introduction

The optimization of digital media in increasing artist engagement through virtual proximity has often been done by Korean boy/girl bands. These digital activities even extend to many aspects-such as politics, crowdfunding, and concert mobilization-that connect idols with their fans (Trigo, 2020). Social media is even able to share idols' personal lives with their fans (Fan et al., 2023). The mobilization of all resources for the benefit of the agency is a separate note in the cycle of idols and their fans.

In another context, one of the most effective mechanisms in this commercialization is *Senbatsu Sousenkyo* (SSK), a Japanese idol group general election system that allows fans to participate in ranking their favorite idols through paid voting. SSK is an event that members and fans of idol groups, such as JKT48, eagerly anticipate. This event is a significant moment for idol group management to leverage fan involvement in determining the popularity of members through voting. SSK is adapted from its sister group in Japan, AKB48 (JKT48, 2024). This system serves to showcase the competition between members based on the support they receive from fans. According to Figure 1, in the SSK of 2024, the amount of support received by the first-place member shows a significant spike compared to previous years. This indicates the growing enthusiasm of the fan community.

The phenomenon of intense competition between idol group members is a major aspect of SSK. Each idol competes to gain the most support from fans to secure a strategic position in the group (Anggraini, 2016). Unlike the collective cooperation within the group, this system places each

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member in direct competition to obtain the highest number of votes and earn a spot in the main formation. This competition is not only determined by personal popularity but also by the ability of



fans to accumulate and invest their capital into voting.

Figure 1. SSK 2024 voting surge
(Source: Instagram account @48time)

This can be seen in how capital in various forms—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—plays a crucial role in influencing voting results. Economic capital, in the form of financial support from fans, is manifested through the purchase of voting tickets, while social capital is reflected in the interaction among various fan communities that organize support campaigns. Symbolic capital, such as the status of being a loyal fan, also strengthens the dynamics of this competition. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital is a form of social recognition that functions as a source of legitimacy in a field, allowing its holders to gain authority and organize practices that benefit them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the context of SSK, symbolic capital is reflected not only in the status and popularity that idols gain from voting results—which then influence their position in the entertainment industry—but also in the loyalty status conferred by fans on those who make significant contributions to supporting their idols. In this turn, affects the dynamics within the fan community and the idols' position in the entertainment industry. The SSK voting process is not merely a means of ranking members but also a reflection of the complex relationship between fans, management, and the idol group itself.

When releasing new songs, 48 groups follow two concepts: (1) *Senbatsu* (selected members) chosen by management and (2) *Senbatsu* determined by fan voting like general election, commonly known as *Sousenkyo*. *Sousenkyo* events are held across all 48 groups, where participating members compete to receive the highest number of votes to secure a spot in the latest single (Angelica & Fadil, 2023). Fans can vote in *Sousenkyo* by purchasing products or services provided by idol group management (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012b). These products and services include performance and concert tickets, video call sessions, meet-and-greet events with members, and endorsed merchandise. Each product or service contains a voting code that fans can use to vote for their favorite member.

SSK not only determines which idol group members will perform the latest single but also reflects the dynamics of the idol group's fan community. During SSK, fans vote to determine an idol's ranking. The higher an idol's ranking, the greater their chances of becoming the center of attention, securing the main position in the song, receiving more stage highlights, and gaining increased media exposure (Maharani & Az-zahra, 2024; Xie, 2021). The active participation of fans in voting demonstrates their support and involvement in the career progression of idol group members. Galbraith (2016) argues that fans are not passive consumers but rather active participants who consciously build relationships with idols in a way that benefits both parties.

In addition, SSK serves as a platform for idol group members to showcase their popularity and dedication to both the group and their fans. Members compete for a position in the main formation through fan support (Galbraith & Karlin, 2019). For management, this event offers strategic advantages, such as identifying the most popular members and recognizing those with a loyal fan base willing to make financial contributions to support their favorite idols. Thus, SSK is not merely

a competition but also a crucial tool for analyzing fan preferences and engagement patterns toward idol group members.

The JKT48 fanbase is known for its loyalty, unity, and strong community. The Japanese idol group members in Indonesia also treat their fans well, striving to build close relationships through both direct interactions and media engagement. Frequent interactions between members and fans foster a sense of intimacy (Chen et al., 2022). This emotional connection experienced by fans can be described as a parasocial relationship. In these relationships, social exchange occurs, as fans provide social resources in the form of support with the expectation of receiving emotional gratification from the members (Angelica & Fadil, 2023).

Previous research in Indonesia has primarily focused on marketing communication aspects and parasocial relationships between idols and fans (Maharani & Az-zahra, 2024; Mulya & Mulyana, 2022; A. O. Setiawan & Chrisdina, 2023), yet other studies have highlighted the hierarchical dynamics and capital contestations within fan communities. Chin (2018) and Abd-Rahim (2019) explain about fan social capital, cultural knowledge, and economic participation challenging the assumption that these spaces are egalitarian. Zhang (2022) further reveals how intimacy is commodified through platforms transforming symbolic affection into economic transactions. Meanwhile, Kuczaj (2025) critiques the rise of girls' capitalism, where merchandise, NFT-based voting, and fan-labor structures normalize hyper-consumption in idol culture. Although these studies uncover the underlying mechanisms of capital accumulation and symbolic power, they have yet to be systematically integrated within a unified sociological framework. By using Pierre Bourdieu's framework, this research provides a new perspective on understanding the phenomenon of popular culture through a duality perspective that reconnects *habitus*, *arena*, and *capital*. *Habitus* describes how fans and idols behave in an arena that is realized to be highly competitive to gain dominance (Takwin, 2006). An individual's position within the *field* is determined by their accumulated *capital*, whether economic, social, cultural, or symbolic (Rusdiarti, 2004). This perspective not only broadens theoretical insights into popular culture but also addresses gaps in discussions on power dynamics and capital within cultural and media products.

The research problem examines how different forms of *capital* are contested within the SSK idol group *field*. Additionally, this study explores how the collective *habitus* of fans influence the outcome of the member selection competition. Fans with a high level of dedication to their *idols* tend to develop strong emotional attachments, often perceiving idols as part of their family. This attachment motivates them to invest their time, energy, and financial resources in supporting their favorite idols (Milne & McDonald, 1999).

In the context of SSK, communication serves as the primary mechanism in the competition for *capital* within this *field*. It acts as a crucial tool for actors to establish, maintain, or negotiate their symbolic position. Fans utilize social media, community forums, and collective campaigns to mobilize support for their favorite idol members. Support fanbases also use communication to coordinate collective strategies, such as fundraising or joint ticket purchases. Through communication, fan communities support one another and build networks, thereby strengthening solidarity among them (McInroy, 2020).

Bourdieu is often associated with postmodernism, a movement that challenges and critiques modernist ideas. Postmodernism rejects or reinterprets existing theories, particularly modernism, which it critiques for its perceived failures, including its role in the erosion of human dignity. It represents a shift in intellectual thought, moving away from modernist principles toward new perspectives introduced by postmodernism itself (Harrison, 1993; J. Setiawan & Sudrajat, 2018).

Bourdieu's thinking was influenced by the sharp opposition between structuralism and existentialism. Drawing from these two schools of thought, he developed a theory known as *constructive structuralism* or social practice theory. Key concepts in Bourdieu's practice theory include *habitus*, *field*, *symbolic violence*, *capital*, and *strategy* (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011; Siregar, 2016). His theory focuses on the dialectical relationship between objective structures and subjective experiences in understanding social reality. This perspective, which Bourdieu termed "*genetic structuralism*," integrates the analysis of objective social structures with the mental frameworks of

individuals, arguing that neither can be understood separately from the broader social structure (Ritzer, 1997). In the dialectical relationship between objective and subjective structures, Pierre Bourdieu developed the concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* to explain how individuals interact in various social contexts (Husu, 2013). In the social field, individuals and groups strive to maintain or enhance their positions through various capital strategies. This concept is also relevant in research on social movements, where agents seek to accumulate capital and assert the legitimacy of their identities within the broader social structure. Therefore, social structure should not be understood as static but rather as a dynamic formation that continuously evolves due to agents' strategies in competing for dominant positions within specific fields (Bourdieu, 1993).

This research is expected to not only make a theoretical contribution to the study of popular culture but also provide practical insights in the form of critical perspectives for fans in the circle of relationships with idols, to escape exploitative symbolic violence. Through a critical perspective, fans can have an awareness that when competing to support idol members at the expense of their economic capital, often driven by the illusion of a personal relationship with idols or the symbolic desire to affirm their status as true fans.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design based on Stake (2010) which emphasizes an in-depth understanding of a particular case chosen for its intrinsic value in revealing complex social dynamics. This design was chosen to explore the phenomenon of *Senbatsu Sousenkyo* (SSK) as a unique and culturally significant practice within Indonesian idol fandom. Stake's approach was chosen because it allows to capture the complexity of interactions between actors (fans, idols, management) in a natural and dynamic social context. The focus is on the particularization process in describing how capital structures and *habitus* are formed and operate in one specific context, which is SSK JKT48 2024. The qualitative approach is conducted in a natural setting, with data collected descriptively and analyzed inductively to develop a deeper understanding (Fadli, 2021).

This research adopts interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through the meanings and practices of the actors involved. The study seeks to understand the *Senbatsu Sousenkyo* (SSK) phenomenon not as a fixed structure but as a dynamic arena where fans, idols, and management negotiate power relations through capital mobilization. Within this paradigm, the goal is not to generalize findings but to capture the contextualized logic and lived experience of the JKT48 fandom in the 2024 SSK event.

The data collection techniques in this research included document analysis, non-participatory observation, and the examination of physical artifacts. Document analysis involved gathering secondary data from various sources, such as articles, books, reports, and digital media, related to the 2024 SSK selection process, fan consumption patterns, and the dynamics of capital competition. Non-participatory observation was conducted through the analysis of video footage and digital archives to explore interaction patterns and competitive dynamics in the SSK field. The examination of physical artifacts based on three criteria: (1) involvement in large-scale voting mobilization campaigns, (2) consistent documentation of voting activities (e.g., donation reports, voting recaps), and (3) network influence within the JKT48 fandom as evidenced by follower count and engagement metrics. Accounts such as @FreyanationID and @C_Jessination48 were selected because they met these criteria and were central in crowdfunding and vote coordination during SSK 2024. Physical artifacts included voting recap spreadsheets, fundraising reports, and promotional materials shared within fan networks. Data saturation was determined when additional accounts and artifacts no longer produced new patterns or themes related to capital contestation and fan *habitus*. These recaps were analyzed to identify support patterns, fundraising strategies, and levels of fan participation in voting for their favorite idols. This analysis allowed the research to examine the relationship between the economic capital accumulated by fanbases and the success of specific members in securing strategic positions in the SSK field.

Findings from document analysis were cross-checked with observational data and fan-generated artifacts to confirm consistency. Peer debriefing with two independent researchers familiar with idol fandom studies was conducted to minimize interpretive bias. Additionally, member checks

were performed by informally validating preliminary interpretations with fanbase representatives to ensure contextual accuracy.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the role of capital in SSK, the strategies fans employ to allocate capital in maximizing support for idols, and the interplay between capital and fan *habitus* in shaping competitive dynamics. Additionally, it examines how fans' capital not only influences voting outcomes but also establishes hierarchy and power within the idol group community. The following is the data description and analysis.

Table 1. Findings through Fanbase Social Media Accounts

Findings	Description
	The image depicts fans making large purchases of beverage products totaling 28 million rupiah to obtain SSK voting codes. This highlights the role of economic capital in the SSK field, particularly in how fans' spending power influences vote acquisition. In this context, fans are not merely passive spectators but active participants who strategically allocate their resources to determine which members secure key positions in the group. However, it is important to recognize that this system is not entirely egalitarian.

Source:

<https://x.com/MainichiJKT48/status/1861697803124453796/photo/1>



Source:

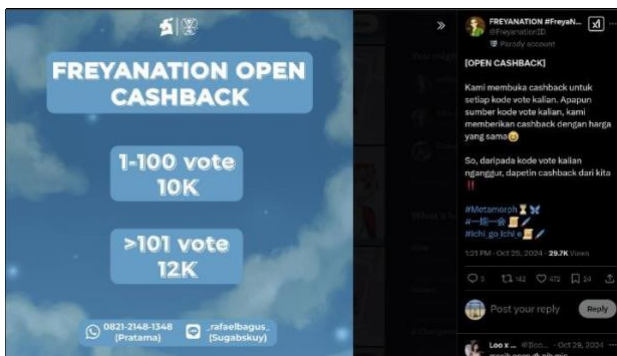
<https://x.com/Delynessence/status/1867417483646578716/photo/1>

The image displays donation reports from several fanbases, specifically those with the highest crowdfunding amounts, supporting their idols in SSK. The total donations collected were substantial, amounting to Rp218,325,439 from fanbase of Adeline Wijaya 12th generation and Rp91,150,522 from fanbase of Catherina Vallencia 12th generation, which were then converted into votes for the supported idols.



Source:

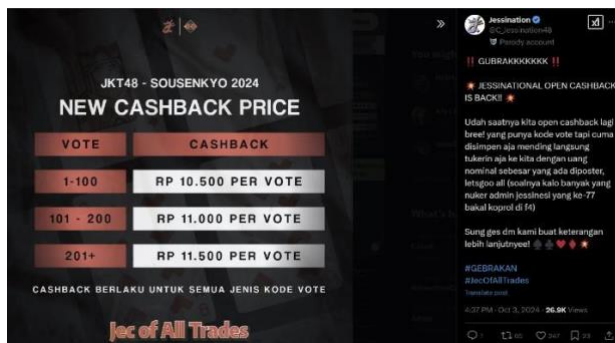
<https://x.com/CavalleryID/status/1867220040724132303/photo/1>



Source:

<https://x.com/FreyanationID/status/1849697815800447437/photo/1>

The image illustrates the cashback system in SSK's voting mechanism, which allows fans to exchange voting codes for a certain amount of money. This phenomenon is closely related to cultural capital, as understanding the SSK mechanism provides a competitive advantage for fans and fanbase communities (Cuijuan & Hai, 2023). This system also contributes to idols supported by fanbases achieving top rankings in SSK.



https://x.com/C_Jessination48/status/184177446744718149/photo/1

Types of Capital Used by Fans in Supporting Members

Based on Bourdieu's theory, there are four main types of capital operating in the SSK field, namely economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. The following types of capital are associated with the SSK field.

Table 2: Types of Capital in SSK

Capital Type	Description	Manifestation in SSK
Economic Capital	Financial resources that can be used to gain an advantage in the field.	Fans buy voting tickets to increase the ranking of favorite idols.
Social Capital	The social networks that fans use in <i>fanbases</i> are used to organize and support campaigns.	Fanbases fundraise and strategize collective voting.

Cultural Capital	Knowledge and understanding of competition mechanisms.	Fans understand the idol group's member voting patterns, vote distribution strategies, and how to optimally utilize the system.
Symbolic Capital	Legitimacy gained from community recognition.	Highly loyal fans who are active in voting campaigns are recognized within the <i>fandom</i> community. This loyalty gives them great influence in determining the outcome of SSK.

Economic Capital: Voting as a Representation of Purchasing Power

Economic capital is the most visible form of capital in SSK. Fans with greater financial means can purchase more votes and, consequently, exert a stronger influence in determining an idol's ranking. In practice, this economic capital is often mobilized through collective strategies, such as crowdfunding, where fanbases raise funds from the community to buy votes in bulk. The dominance of economic capital creates structural inequality, as SSK is largely shaped by financial resources, leaving fans with limited purchasing power with less influence in determining the election outcome (Burawoy, 2022). This demonstrates that the SSK field is not entirely democratic but is still controlled by those with greater access to economic capital.

Economic capital is the most easily convertible form of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In SSK fans or fanbases with substantial economic capital can purchase a large number of votes, thereby increasing their idol's chances of winning. Additionally, economic capital can be transformed into social capital through donations to fanbases, which enhance a fan's reputation within the community. It can also be converted into cultural capital by providing access to information and more effective voting strategies, as well as into symbolic capital by granting fans the status of a primary supporter of a particular idol.

Social Capital: Fanbase as a Field of Collective Habitus in the SSK Field

In SSK, social capital is manifested through fanbases that organize support strategies for specific idols. Fanbases with extensive networks and strong coordination are more effective in optimizing their resources to support their chosen idols. In this context, social capital not only serves as a tool for voting mobilization but also facilitates a more equitable distribution of resources among community members. Through well-established social networks, fanbases can garner broader support, both in the form of financial donations and participation in digital campaigns.

Social capital can also serve as a tool of exclusivity within the idol group community. Coleman's concept of "closed networks" (1988) illustrates how fan groups with greater financial resources can establish strong and mutually beneficial support systems that are difficult for fans with limited economic means to access. Fanbases with more structured organizations tend to dominate narratives and support strategies, while smaller fanbases often struggle to compete in this field. Consequently, success in SSK is determined not only by the number of votes but also by the extent to which fanbases can leverage their social capital to develop effective collective strategies.

Fanbases with high social capital exert greater influence in determining SSK outcomes, as they can collectively organize and direct support. Moreover, the equitable distribution of resources through donation schemes enables a broader range of fans to contribute, regardless of their individual financial capacity. Social capital also plays a crucial role in shaping hierarchies within communities. As Bourdieu (1986) explains, social networks are often leveraged by elite groups to maintain their privileges. Fanbases with strong organizational structures and extensive networks tend to dominate SSK outcomes, whereas smaller fanbases may struggle to compete due to limited networks and donation capacity. Thus, success in SSK is determined not only by the number of votes but also by the extent to which fanbases can manage and leverage their social capital to develop effective support strategies for their chosen idols.

Cultural Capital: Understanding the Mechanism of SSK as a Competitive Advantage

Cultural capital can be manifested in the form of cultural tastes, practices, interests, and preferences. Differences in cultural knowledge often shape social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of SSK, cultural capital reflects the extent to which fans understand the election mechanism and the strategies that can be employed to increase their idol's chances of winning. Fans who have followed JKT48 for a long time tend to have a deeper understanding of voting patterns, the system's mechanics, and optimal vote distribution strategies.

In the context of cultural capital, fans with a deep understanding of voting strategies can leverage systems such as cashback to optimize vote distribution and enhance the effectiveness of their support for idols. Experienced fans recognize that efficiently managing their voting stock—including selling or exchanging votes at strategic moments—can maximize their contribution to the competition. For example, some fanbases conduct voting trend analyses to determine the optimal timing for purchasing or exchanging votes to secure the highest possible number of votes for their idols.

Moreover, the existence of the cashback system demonstrates how cultural capital influences economic strategies within the SSK field. Fans who understand market patterns can leverage this scheme to recover a portion of their expenses, allowing them to allocate additional resources to support their chosen idols. However, access to this form of cultural capital is not always equal. New fans who are unfamiliar with these mechanisms may struggle to participate effectively and are more vulnerable to the dominance of more experienced fan groups.

Symbolic Capital: Legitimization in Fan Communities

Symbolic capital is a form of social recognition that serves as a source of legitimacy within an field, granting its holders authority and the ability to shape practices that benefit them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the context of SSK, symbolic capital materializes as the recognition and status idols attain based on their rankings. Idols who secure a place in the *Senbatsu* not only receive greater exposure from the media and management but also gain legitimacy as central figures within the group. However, symbolic capital is not exclusive to idols; it also extends to fans who actively participate in the competition. Fans who contribute significantly to voting campaigns often attain higher status within their communities and are recognized as devoted supporters. Thus, symbolic capital in SSK not only establishes hierarchies among idols but also within the fan community itself.

In idol group fan communities, the term *wotajir* refers to fans with high economic capital who actively allocate their resources to support idols through purchasing votes, merchandise, and participating in exclusive events. The term *wotajir* is derived from *wota*, meaning a fanatical idol group fan, and *tajir*, which means wealthy. Beyond representing high purchasing power, *wotajir* also embodies symbolic capital, granting them status and recognition within the fan community. In line with the concept of symbolic capital in SSK, fans who contribute significantly to voting campaigns are often regarded as true fans and gain legitimacy within their communities. As dominant actors in the SSK field, *wotajir* have considerable influence over election outcomes, as they can purchase large numbers of votes to elevate their favorite idols' rankings. Their presence not only affects idols' chances in the competition but also creates a hierarchy within the fandom, where those who make significant financial contributions attain higher status than ordinary fans. In the context of SSK, loyalty is not only measured by the length of one's fandom but also by the extent to which one can convert economic capital into symbolic capital recognized by both the fandom community and the idols they support.

Doxa Competes in the SSK Arena

The SSK idol group can be understood as a field in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, a space of competition where various forms of capital are at stake to obtain symbolic legitimacy. This competitive space has its own rules, mechanisms, and objectives, making it a configuration of objective relationships based on capital strategies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this field, both idols and fans not only participate in member selection activities but also engage in capital battles that shape hierarchies within the idol group community.

While SSK is frequently framed as a participatory system where fans are empowered to determine idol rankings, the empirical findings suggest that this participatory democracy is highly

conditional. Participation is technically open, but in practice, it is stratified by access to economic capital. Fans with more financial resources not only dominate the voting process but also shape symbolic narratives within the community. This reveals that SSK participation reflects *market-based democracy* rather than egalitarian civic engagement. As Chin (2018) and Stanfill & Condis (2014) argue, fan participation often disguises deeper structures of control and commodification, where voting rights are purchased rather than granted.

The existence of SSK not only serves as an idol election event based on fan votes but also functions as a mechanism for idol group management to monetize fan participation. Through a paid voting system, the management creates a scheme in which the capital possessed by fans can be converted into votes that determine an idol's position. This aligns with Bourdieu's theory that domination within an field is not always explicit but is often concealed through symbolic mechanisms that participants accept as "natural" (Grenfell, 2014). In this context, SSK becomes an instrument that ensures capital generated within the idol industry continues to flow and generates profits for those who control the field, namely the management and owners of the entertainment industry.

Economic capital serves as the dominant factor in determining the final outcome, as fans with high purchasing power exert greater influence than those who rely solely on collective strategies. In line with Bourdieu's analysis, economic capital remains the primary determinant of power distribution in this competition (Bourdieu, 1986; Mohseni, 2022). This indicates that although SSK is presented as a democratic event, the system continues to reproduce inequalities rooted in the distribution of economic capital among fans.

Fan Habitus and Power Relations in SSK Idol group

Bourdieu explains that capital is inseparable from *habitus*, a mindset and disposition shaped by individual experiences within a particular social environment. Fan *habitus* develops through the socialization process within fandom communities. This habitus reflects how fans internalize the values, strategies, and practices of their social world, forming distinctive patterns of behavior in supporting their favorite idols (Fredianto & Septiawan, 2020).

Through the internalization of fandom structures, long-time JKT48 fans develop a deep understanding of SSK's competitive mechanisms, including voting strategies, merchandise consumption patterns, and participation in fanbase campaigns. Over time, they adapt to prevailing norms such as fundraising, bulk vote purchasing, and forming social networks with fellow fans. These practices become ingrained in their *habitus* and are automatically reproduced in each SSK event.

These habitus also shape how capital is utilized in competition (Reid, 2021). Older fans with high cultural capital tend to be more strategic in voting distribution and understanding voting patterns, whereas newer fans often rely on the community to learn effective support strategies. Additionally, fanbases with strong social capital can mobilize their communities collectively to maximize support for their idols.

Bourdieu emphasizes that every field has a power distribution mechanism determined by the capital structure operating within it. In the context of SSK, this power dynamic is evident in how the capital possessed by fans and idols influences their positions in the competition (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012a). SSK creates internal stratification, as only idol members who receive substantial capital support can sustain their positions and gain broader opportunities in the entertainment industry. The conversion of these forms of capital from objective representations to symbolic (subjective) representations in SSK reinforces social stratification in the idol industry, both vertically and horizontally (Gilleard, 2020). Idols who fail to enter the SSK rankings often face marginalization, experiencing reduced exposure and limited career opportunities, which may ultimately lead them to leave the idol group.

At the fan level, SSK creates a hierarchy within the community, as fan groups with greater economic and social capital exert a more dominant influence in determining the competition's outcome. This structure demonstrates that while SSK is presented as a form of democratic participation, in practice, it reproduces a structure of domination that favors groups with greater capital. Thus, SSK is not merely an idol selection event but also a field of power that illustrates how

various forms of capital interact to shape legitimacy and hierarchy within the idol group entertainment industry.

SSK not only creates competition between idols but also among fans. Fans compete to accumulate and display their capital to gain legitimacy within the community. This competition ultimately benefits the industry, as greater capital battles within the fandom lead to higher consumption. In other words, SSK serves as a capitalization strategy for the idol industry, framing exploitation mechanisms within a fan participation narrative. Fans are not merely consumers but also voluntary laborers who invest time, energy, and financial resources to sustain an industry structure that primarily benefits management. Research by [Stanfill and Condis \(2014\)](#) highlights the concept of fandom as labor, demonstrating that fans are not passive consumers but value producers who are often exploited by the media industry. Through their active participation in promotions, content creation, and unpaid labor, fans generate profits that frequently go unnoticed. Similarly, [Wang \(2020\)](#) explains that fans in the digital age maintain an increasingly complex relationship with the media industry. While they enjoy greater opportunities for participation, they are also more vulnerable to exploitation through unpaid labor in media marketing and production strategies. SSK intensifies this dynamic by fostering competition among fans to accumulate and showcase their capital, ultimately driving consumption and boosting industry profits. This competition generates revenue not only from voting sales but also from promotional activities voluntarily undertaken by fans, such as social media campaigns and crowdfunding.

As agents in the contestation of capital, idol group members are not merely objects of competition but also active participants who influence the dynamics of the election. Each member utilizes various forms of capital to mobilize support and secure a place in the *Senbatsu*. As female idols—at least in appearance—they are presented as agents with the power to motivate, seduce, or persuade fans to engage in capital contestation projects ([Kim, 2011](#)). Through the personas they construct and their communication with fans, they play a central role in fandom's consumption mechanisms. A member's success in this competition depends not only on the financial support they receive from fans but also on their ability to build social networks, maintain fanbase loyalty, and construct personal images and narratives that attract fan sympathy. In other words, members play a strategic role in shaping the dynamics of capital within the SSK field.

From a critical theory perspective, this competition reflects neoliberal structures in popular culture, where consumption mechanisms are framed as active fan engagement ([Cahill et al., 2018](#)). SSK creates the illusion of participatory democracy but ultimately upholds a free-market logic that benefits the group with the greatest capital ([Peck & Brenner, 2018](#)). In other words, the competition is not merely about which idol is most favored but rather about which idol has the fan base with the highest purchasing power.

Bourdieu also emphasizes that capital functions not only as a resource but also as a tool of social domination that reproduces hierarchies in society ([Schirone, 2023](#)). Symbolic capital enables individuals or groups to control social representations and define the reality considered legitimate within a society. This aligns with the dynamics of the SSK field, where members who accumulate significant *symbolic capital*—such as recognition and status as a fan favorite—have a greater chance of becoming the focal point of the idol group. Additionally, SSK provides symbolic recognition to fans within the broader fan community. Those who actively and substantially support a particular idol are often regarded as true fans or prime movers, thereby attaining higher status among fellow fans.

Furthermore, fans who control all four forms of *capital*—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—on a large scale tend to wield significant power in the field. In the context of SSK, this is evident in how fans with substantial economic capital support their idols through large-scale voting purchases, while social capital operates through fanbase organization and collective campaigns. Thus, capital must be present within a field for it to possess the power to create meaning. These characteristics of capital also function through *habitus*, which shapes fans' actions in supporting their idols. The SSK field, as a competitive space, serves as a site where capital is both utilized and contested ([Krisdinanto, 2016](#)).

Bourdieu also argues that power is neither simple nor entirely systemic (Calhoun et al., 1993). In the context of this research, symbolic power manifests in the SSK field through a dialectical relationship between fans' *habitus* and the capital they possess. Individuals who control capital while

possessing an adequate *habitus* will dominate the field and prevail in the social competition. This is evident in the SSK phenomenon, as members with dominant capital support—both in terms of vote counts and symbolic campaigns—successfully gain legitimacy and secure top positions in the competition (Aoyagi, 2020).

The findings also confirm that capital not only determines the hierarchy in idol competitions but also shapes the power structure within the fan community, making SSK *field* that reproduces social stratification in idol group popular culture. From the perspective of *habitus*, older fans with a deeper understanding of the voting mechanism tend to be more strategic in distributing votes, while more organized fanbases can leverage social capital to counterbalance the dominance of economic capital. This finding reinforces that SSK is not merely an idol election event but a capital-driven battleground that deepens social stratification within the fandom and serves as a mechanism for economic capital accumulation.

This study offers three key theoretical implications. First, by applying Bourdieu's framework of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*, the research recontextualizes idol fandom, typically studied through lenses of affect and consumer behavior, into a structured field of symbolic struggle. It shows that fan engagement is not simply emotional attachment or brand loyalty, but a strategic deployment of capital in pursuit of status, recognition, and legitimacy within the community. Second, the study extends Bourdieu's theory by illustrating how fan *habitus* evolves collectively through repeated exposure to competitive systems like SSK, resulting in a shared disposition that normalizes economic sacrifice and hierarchical participation. This collective *habitus* is not merely shaped by external structure, but actively reproduces the *doxa* of competition as 'natural' and desirable. Third, the findings refine the concept of symbolic capital by demonstrating its circular relationship with economic capital in the fandom economy, where symbolic recognition (as "true fans" or "wotajir") often depends on financial investment, while at the same time serving to justify further spending. Thus, this research contributes to the theoretical advancement of Bourdieu's cultural production model by providing empirical grounding in the context of digital fan economies, where cultural legitimacy is not only symbolically but also monetarily produced and contested.

Conclusion

This research found that various forms of capital in *Senbatsu Sousenkyo* (SSK) interact to determine competition outcomes, with economic capital serving as the primary factor in the vote-buying-based system. However, other types of capital also play significant roles, including social capital through fanbase mobilization, cultural capital in understanding voting strategies, and symbolic capital as a source of legitimacy for both idols and fans. The interaction of these capitals creates a hierarchy within the fandom community, where fans with greater access to capital exert stronger influence in the competition. Additionally, fan *habitus* shapes the competitive dynamics of SSK, particularly through the consumptive and competitive norms prevalent in the idol group community. This research also provides insights into how capital shapes competition and fan engagement in idol groups. For media practitioners and entertainment industry management, these findings underscore the need to critically evaluate the SSK model. Additionally, fanbase organizers can use these insights to strengthen social networks and cultural capital to mitigate inequalities, fostering collaboration over competition. For policymakers, this study highlights the importance of consumer protection and ethical guidelines in fan-driven industries, especially when economic participation borders on exploitative practices. Entertainment industry management should also evaluate the SSK model to ensure it is not merely an instrument of economic exploitation but fosters a more sustainable system that benefits a broader range of participants, not just those with high purchasing power. This research focused on capital contestation within one SSK cycle and analyzed fan dynamics primarily through digital artifacts and online networks. Gendered performances, class-based access to capital, and power asymmetries between management and fans were not deeply explored, leaving room for future studies to examine how gender roles, economic stratification, and cultural hierarchies intersect in shaping fandom power relations.

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