

# From Play to Idols: How Superfans Shape Esports Ecologies

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

League of Legends (LoL) presents an increasingly hybridised fan ecosystem in which platformed spectatorship, emotional investment, and transnational fandom flows intersect. While existing work in esports audience research has focused largely on motivations and consumption (e.g. Hamari and Sjöblom 2017; Tang et al. 2020), comparatively little attention has been given to superfans as high-intensity, highly organised participants whose practices shape visibility, discourse, and stakeholder behaviour across esports ecosystems. This study examines these dynamics, paying particular attention to how globalised fandom formations, especially those influenced by East Asian idol-culture logics, circulate within platform-mediated fan spaces (e.g. Zhang and Negus 2020). Drawing on Edlom and Karlsson (2021), this study treats superfans as a behavioural and analytical category rather than a fixed identity label, locating them within the wider LoL player and audience base through the intensity, accumulation, and organisation of their engagement rather than through wholly separate practices. Two research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How do LoL fans and superfans engage in practices that produce pleasure, identity, and community within platform-mediated esports environments?

RQ2: Through what mechanisms do superfans shape visibility, discourse, and stakeholder behaviour across cross-cultural LoL esports ecosystems?

Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines a bilingual online survey (N = 385), in which 84.94% of respondents were also LoL players, with thirteen semi-structured interviews collected across Chinese and Western contexts. This player-spectator overlap is central to the analysis, as many participants approached professional esports not only as viewers of mediated performance but also through gameplay literacy, interpreting skill, strategy, and competitive expertise through their own experience of play. Superfans were identified through self-reported behaviours,

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indicators of time, emotional, and monetary input, and open-ended narrative accounts. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. This design captures both patterned behaviours at scale and the meaning-making processes through which fans construct pleasure, identity, community, and commitment.

Findings show that superfan practices are structured around three core dimensions of input: time input, emotional input, and monetary input, reinforced by a strong orientation toward loyalty. These inputs underpin a spectrum of pleasurable and community-oriented activities, including co-viewing routines, intensive match tracking, translation and subtitling work, curated highlight circulation, and proactive moderation or reputational defence. Such practices align closely with the participatory cultures outlined by Jenkins (1992; 2006). Pleasure is expressed not only through spectatorial enjoyment and gameplay-informed appreciation of skill and strategy, but also through affective labour, symbolic intimacy, belonging, and the satisfaction derived from contributing to community infrastructures.

Addressing RQ2, the study proposes a Superfan Influence Model developed inductively through thematic analysis of survey narratives and interview data. The model identifies four pathways. First, visibility amplification describes how coordinated engagement (e.g., clipping, hashtag promotion, livestream activity) boosts particular narratives or personalities within platform algorithms. Second, social coordination includes organised banner projects, support routines, fundraising, and collective protest actions. Third, economic signalling describes how clustered spending on tickets, memberships, merchandise, or sponsor products guides institutional priorities. Fourth, norm-setting and boundary-work refer to the definition, reinforcement, and policing of acceptable fan conduct through moderation practices, reputation defence, and the exclusion of perceived outsiders. These pathways offer an analytical lens for understanding how clustered superfan practices may shape visibility, discourse, and affective dynamics within platformed esports environments.

Cross-cultural analysis demonstrates that these dynamics are not uniform. Chinese participants described highly ritualised, emotionally charged, and organisationally sophisticated practices that draw on and resonate with K-pop and J-pop fandom structures. These included birthday projects, airport greetings, data-fandom practices, notably “控评” (kòngpíng, coordinated comment management), and diverse fan typologies (e.g., girlfriend fans, CP fans, data fans, and anti-fans). By contrast, participants from Europe and North America engaged in many of the same behaviours but with less institutionalisation and weaker emotional intensification. These differences suggest that how superfan influence is organised may vary across cultural contexts: Chinese participants more often described coordinated visibility work and ritualised support, whereas Western participants tended to describe more individualised or loosely networked forms of participation. In this sense, transnational cultural flows, particularly the global circulation of East Asian idol-culture practices, help shape pleasure, identity, and participation in transnational esports fandoms, echoing wider patterns of K-pop’s transnational spread observed by Jin (2016).

This study contributes three key insights. First, it offers an empirically grounded model of superfan influence that explains how participatory practices translate into platform visibility and stakeholder response. Second, it demonstrates how global fandom flows carry idol-culture logics into esports, producing new forms of pleasure, community, and affective labour. Third, it highlights the need to treat superfans not simply as heavy consumers but as culturally embedded actors whose practices carry meaningful implications for platform governance, organisational communication, and audience dynamics. While grounded in LoL, the model offers a starting point for future comparative work across other esports titles and cultural contexts, particularly within MOBA titles and publisher-led competitive ecosystems.

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