

Case of K-Pop Fandom as a Virtual Youth Subculture in Turkey: Collective Identity and Belonging

SOC 341 Final Paper

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In recent months, especially the Turkish conservative news outlets targeted Korean Pop, accusing it for creating a genderless society, giving the example of the members' appearances, male performers wearing makeup, looking effeminate.

In an interview given to Anatolian Agency, a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, known for his conservative stance, identified the K-Pop groups as “a subculture that emerges as an antithesis of the established order through music” and K-Pop fans as “a subculture consisting of teenagers in identity crisis” and acting as a “religious group” (Paksoy 2019). Further, Turkish media warned the families and called the government for necessary precautions against the “danger” of spreading K-Pop, which later received a collective adverse reaction on social media by fans.

I. Introduction

Abovementioned events drew our attention in the collectivity of K-Pop fans toward the offensive news about both K-Pop itself and its artists, how they collectively acted and resisted against a dominant discourse of conservatism, while contradictorily having a great following from İmam Hatip High School students. This specific case of K-Pop fandom in Turkey mirrors broader issues on culture, subculture, identity, and globalization in general, which we believe is worthy to discuss comprehensively.

This paper aims at analyzing the particular case of K-Pop fandom in Turkey with its cultural elements in general. This subject matter interested us in how it directly points to most of the micro and macro level issues in this globalized world. We will focus more on the cultural grounds and outcomes of our topic, as it offers lots concerning subcultures and collective identity.

We are going to create a framework for our research using the literature of popular music, fan studies and culture industry in order to approach the definition of Korean Pop industry critically. We also have conducted in-depth interviews both online and face-to-face and observed the activities of fans in social media platforms, particularly on Twitter. For face-to-face interviews we have visited the Cheongdo Kore Tatlı Kafe, located at Kadıköy that serves Korean food. Cheongdo have become a center for K-Pop fans to gather for their social activities, where they display K-Pop music videos in sequence and posters of the bands. However, not only K-Pop fans visit the cafe, but also the ones who are interested in Korean cuisine culture. Another reason for us to choose to visit this cafe is that it had been accused of engaging in Christian missionary activities and also “promoting homosexuality” according to the rumors on Twitter several months ago. This drove us to think of this cafe as the concrete target of criticisms against K-Pop fandom, since the fandom itself as a collectivity would be hard to be treated as one.

The questions we asked, included the process of becoming a fan, how participants define being a fan and its practices, how the experience of being a fan in Turkey stands out for them, whether they get criticism from their family or friends and do they feel as belonging to the fandom. We found some of the fans randomly and others through snowball method, we contacted them via direct messages online. For the most part they were willing to answer our questions.

II. Korean Wave and K-Pop: history and the functioning

Before getting to the history of both Korean Wave and K-Pop, it would be useful to speak a little about the political and economic landscape of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s as well, in order to understand the existing culture industry. In 1988, democratic and liberal reforms occurred in South Korea, which caused an economic boom in the country's wealth. Democratic reforms led to neoliberalization of Korean culture. Until that time, the government controlled what was to be broadcasted and held the power of the media. By the time, Korean Wave emerged in mid-1990's with the diplomatic relations with China resulting in the increase of popularity of Korean TV series and pop music in "Chinese-speaking communities" and the term "Korean Wave (Hallyu)" was first used to describe the concert of the boy band H.O.T. held in Beijing in 2000. The emergence of K-Pop intersects with the time that television was in extensive use, therefore it have become heavily associated with visuality: music videos and dance choreographies... This visuality still occupies the focus of K-Pop.

K-Pop, with its different genres, grew more and more since the turn of the 21st century having entered first in the Japanese music market. Psy's Gangnam Style, released in late 2012, would be the best example that could represent the first rapid rise of K-Pop globally. As it was released, Gangnam Style ranked at the very top of music charts of different countries such as the UK, US, Russia, France, Australia, etc. Also its music video became very popular on YouTube, having been watched over 3 billion since its release in 2012.

Under the title of Hallyu (Korean Wave) in the official website of the Korean government, korea.net, the rise of K-Pop is categorized into three generations, of which the first is the one of Psy's Gangnam Style, second is the one led by the girl band Girls' Generation and the boy band Big Bang, and the last one is the generation that has greater impression today, generation of the bands like BTS and TWICE. Our focus in this paper will be more on the third generation and especially on BTS, as our interviews showed that fandom in Turkey revolves

around the third generation and BTS and also it offers more concrete elements for our subject matter.

“BTS is rewriting history...”. With their vocal abilities, stage performances, dance choreographies, BTS has become that much popular to be mentioned in Le Monde (known French newspaper) with high praises. During the BTS’s generation, a music festival held in Brighton, in US, The Great Escape, in which very much known American stars took stage, organized a “K-Pop Night Out” in May 2017, meaning that BTS was very much effective for K-Pop in entering in the US music market. With all these festivals, music awards and several talk shows (in the USA mostly), “BTS has become the most successful K-Pop act in the world”. ((KOCIS) 2019)

What is distinctive about K-Pop is its running in the production process of bands and “idols”, which we will mention later on as a “manufacture”. It is necessary to assign considerable paragraphs to it in order to distinguish K-Pop from Western pop music we are used to. The products of Western and Korean pop music are the outcomes of very divergent processes and the ways they deal with the music industry differ from each other in how they treat musicians and how the music industry emerged. The emergence and the foundation of the artists of K-Pop since the 1990s is highly connected to the economic boom and the market. Korean Pop managerial companies had emerged, of which the most predominant ones were YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment and JYP Entertainment. All of these companies were founded in the 1990's - the biggest one today, Big Hit Entertainment that manages BTS, was founded in 2005. They all operate as record labels, talent agencies, music production companies and music publishing houses. These companies created “star making academies” where they enroll young people (as young as 10-14 years of age), discovered and groomed by talent scouts, and train them through an “in-house system”, of which the programs are very strict. These future-stars are taught in 4 languages, which would form the biggest market for K-Pop, trained 12 hours a day on singing, acting and dancing; in other words they get ‘manufactured’ for reaching global audiences (Oh

and Rhee 2016). And this industrialization of pop music, makes K-pop “pop music made in South Korea for non-Korea” (Shin 2013).

The trainees sign contracts which have very harsh conditions such as being monitored constantly, having no social media accounts or relationships that company would not allow, monitoring calorie intakes and random tests of mental endurance; in short companies interfere in every realm of these young people’s lives. Moreover, these contracts do not guarantee a trainee to become famous or be put in a band and this training period may take five years; when a trainee becomes a “star” from “star-making academy”, a vast amount of money he/she earns goes to the company. This is why these contracts often get called “slave contracts”. So, what is it that makes them accept the terms of contracts then? Although there is no certain answer for this, it is basically explained with low wages and economic conditions mostly.

These band members who are trained by companies are called “idols”. By a majority they are, as idols, in their early 20s. These manufactured bands are also very formulaic; consisted of young, attractive same-sex members stressing signature dance moves, catchy songs based on physical attractiveness. Each member of the K-Pop bands have certain roles in the group. For example, the term “maknae” refers to the youngest member. Every band has a leader who is usually the oldest member, the one who was trained longer. Vocals are qualified by their singing abilities, there are also rappers. Dancers usually stay at the center in a performance. “Visual” is the most conventionally attractive member of the group. And the face of the group is the one who is accepted as the most famous member. These roles may simply override each other. Each “real” Korean Pop fan knows how the roles are distributed in their favorite bands.

Pop stars who graduated from the star-making academies have no creativity over their products (but recently some bands such as BTS overcame this, as fans stressed on interviews too). Instead, lyrics are written by the companies, for example, members do not play a significant role in the production process of the outcomes. This, first contradicted with the assertions that fans made during our interviews about how bands and their members were “powerful” and

“inspirational” for them, since both the training process and the producing process limit and oppress the members’ creativity and agency, while they perform songs about concepts such as empowerment, courage, self-confidence, etc. However, the fact that they get oppressed in their own production, does not necessarily mean that they are powerless rather than powerful, or dull instead of inspirational. As fans know so much about these companies and the functioning of them, it is hard to say that they got blinded by their commitment to bands. They might have described them as “powerful” and “inspirational” for that the members undergo such harsh processes.

III. Culture Industry and Critical Theory

Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer’s co-written essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” is one of the most important texts written on the topic of culture industry. They wrote the essay in 1940’s in the United States, a period of Hollywood at its peak, the golden age where big film studios controlled the industry and actors and produced mass amounts of films every year. This whole fabrication, industrialization and characteristics of Hollywood at this particular era are not so much different from what we see in Korean entertainment industry. Therefore Frankfurt School’s interdisciplinary, neo-Marxist approach and writings bear significance because of their critical position, but their views also have its critics which will be mentioned.

Adorno, more than Horkheimer, wrote several essays on the music and culture industry. He saw the culture industry as a tool to control people, desensitizing and passivating them, stripping humans of their creative potential, and keeping them distracted. The standardized music down to their number of beats and duration, which has no specific form works as a tool. (Adorno 2015, 49) The music is easy to hear, and unlike “serious” music (musicians such as Beethoven and Schönberg for him), music for entertainment was “complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as an expression, the inability to communicate at all. (...) Today

the power of banal extends over the whole society.” (Adorno 2015, 34) Adorno used popular music to criticize modern life and he had a pessimistic stance on it.

Adorno also one of the first thinkers who wrote on fans, in his essay “On the Fetish Character” where he identified types of fans. However for Adorno, trying to analyze the fans and their practices was meaningless because “if someone tried to ‘verify’ the fetish character of music by investigating the reactions of listeners with interviews and questionnaires, he might meet with unexpected puzzles.” (Adorno 2015, 45) He argued that fans had nothing meaningful to say about the object they consume because they are so deep into the discourse of industry, they are just “temple slaves” to the music industry. (Adorno 2015, 39) To put it more broadly, he reduced fans to simple consumers. However, our findings from our interviews have been powerful, we believe, in opposing Adorno’s reduction of fans to simple consumers, which we will discuss later on along with the agency of fans in fandom.

Adorno’s and Frankfurt School’s writings on mass culture had been criticized and dispensed; especially Adorno’s views were seen as “elitist” and “arrogant” and his conception of the audience as passive masses now are confronted on contemporary publications of media studies. (Hills 2005, 46) However, we believe that his argument on industrial production of culture is still relevant, especially for our study. Our assertion is that if Adorno had been alive today, he probably would not have been surprised with the popularity of the K-Pop industry, or the form of popular music has taken today. One of the common responses we got from non-fans on the account of why they do not like K-Pop was the “repetitiveness of melodies” and “formulated, carbon copy bands”. Observations we made on fan forums also showed us that pop fans in general complain about music becoming more repetitive and standardized each year.

In addition to Adorno’s criticism of the music industry, we would like to mention the industrialization that we have observed, of not only the music itself, but every product of the bands and the fandom. We believe that the following example would best clarify what we mean. In 2018 the electronics brand LG launched a new model of cell phone called LG Q7+ BTS

edition in collaboration with the BTS band (LGXBTS). In its promotion video on YouTube, this new cell phone has special features peculiar to BTS and its members, such as ringtones, wallpapers, emojis and stickers, etc. What is more interesting with this cell phone is that it offers an alarm system which provides Wake Up and Good Night calls from the members of BTS. So, the fans (considering the users as fans) have a chance to get woken up at the arranged time by selected members. This virtual application makes fans experience, perhaps, a dream for them. Here, the relation between the markets and the culture is overt. Markets and companies utilize the fandom's sensitivity, love and commitment to BTS; and as we observed, the elements of the fan identity turn into a commodity.

Of course, there is not only this case of LGXBTS, but much bigger, there is a huge industry revolving around K-Pop, such as clothing, documentaries, concert movies, etc., in which the market and the bands are highly interconnected.

IV. Fandom and Subculture

Fans are perhaps the most visible form of audiences. Fan culture is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement. (Lewis 1992) It presents an area where fans act as active and creative actors within the fan culture. But what does “fan” mean? This is a question perhaps that can easily be explained by many people, everyone knows a fan of a music band, a tv show, somebody who can produce information on the object of their fandom, can quote their favorite lines or lyrics, chapter and verse (Click and Scott 2018). They interpret the texts, participate in communal activities offline or online, and they are not atomized. So based on that, how to define “fandom”? For Cavicchi (1998, 9) fandom is a functional operation enacted by each individual: “It might be useful to think about the work rather than the worth of the fandom, *what it does*, not what it is, for various people in particular historical and social moments.”. Therefore rather than focusing on trying to define fandom, we will try to look into their practices.

As an addition to our observation process online, we also asked this question of “what does a fan do?” to fans themselves. Considering the fact that we conducted these interviews through their twitter account where they solely write about K-Pop, their favorite bands and “bias”, having a social media account can be accounted as a part of this process. But what they do on twitter is perhaps more important. As it stated, fans interpret texts and produce information with agency. Twitter, as a social media platform which allows their users to write text up to 280 characters, provides fans an unparalleled platform.

Marxist ideas separate the value that users find in their personal consumption of a product (use value) from the way that production, marketing and marketplace can socially facilitate another level of perceived value (exchange value). Both use value and exchange value comes from fans’ processes of valuation. Yet in relation to the cultural processes of the media industry, the split between producer and consumer cannot be mapped neatly on to star and fan. Many texts allow their audiences to enter particular realms of imagination and fans often role-play (Sandvoss 2005, 46). That means fans also intervene in the production. Fans also have agency where they are often motivated to help others through sharing their favorite texts, and not for anyone’s financial gain which exemplifies the agency of the fans.

This process of role-play is perhaps most observable in fan-fiction. One of the most common practices of K-Pop fandom in Turkey is creating/requesting fan fictions from other members of the fandom. The members who have creative/imaginative abilities write stories related to band members and fans on request. These stories take forms of pictures that are photoshopped or text that vary on their length.

V. Internet and Changing Fandoms

The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of

cultural production (Click and Scott 2018, 15). This new medium called “internet” has provided a great speed of access to the information and created new means of public performance. It allows sharing and archiving, a practice which had been significantly harder before.

Youtube, which was founded in 2004, offered fans to upload their own inventions: concert videos recorded by fans, television appearances, commentary on music or music videos released by the groups etc. And it is not only used by fans but production companies and bands also have their own channels and accounts. Other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have opened up a new environment, and became a showcase where fans can share their cultural capital. Cultural capital, the knowledge on the subject of fandom is a very important factor within the dynamics of fandom, that often creates hierarchy and differentiates a fan from others. With additional blogs, forums and so forth; these platforms became the field where fans exchange ideas in a productive way.

Especially now in 2010’s, social media has allowed celebrities and fans to connect in a way that was never possible before at this range. Celebrities are now able to instantaneously and directly communicate with fans. And not only this, but fans are able to communicate between themselves faster and directly. Fans always used to have a feeling of intimacy to their subject of fandom, which often seen inadequate by many, that is possible to be realized as “unobtainable yet accessible”. Nowadays the internet allows people to connect through webcam, making long-distance relationships possible; in a way that face-to-face interaction lost its importance against mediated communication (a type of communication signified by the usage of technology (Ribes 2011)). The Internet paved the way to see this form of intimacy that fans have more acceptable and less inadequate. Now the stars who had been so far away are closer than ever before in the realm of the digital age, and this changed the expectations of fans about the interaction they have with stars. The stars now can and may follow them on social media, make a live broadcast where they directly answer their questions without the interference of a third person.

Fans who are interacting in an electronic environment create a specific kind of community that even becomes more important than the object of the fandom itself. Cheryl Harris (2010, 6) quotes “*Fans are also motivated by self-invention, in which fandom provides an opportunity to live in and through a set of symbols that are expressive of one's aspirations rather than “reality”.*” Web is perhaps the most democratic place right now. Now that the fan community can organize itself online in a particular way, people can distribute their own understandings and interpretations to each other without a need to be mediated through commercial channels. (Duffett 2013) Although that doesn’t mean that commercial channels do not attempt to control these understandings, or the internet is a truly liberal place where everyone can speak their mind. On the topic of fandom, fans are often scared to share their “unpopular” opinion, scared to get criticized by “older fans” or other reasons.

VI. Discussion: Analysis of Interviews

VI.a. Practices and Language: Shared Meanings and Fans as Active Consumers/Content Creators/ Agency of Fans

Fans particularly use Korean words or words that have changed meaning within the context of fandom in their sentences to mark their fan identity and be visible to other fans. This type of writing is so extensive that the people who are not in fandom are often unable to decipher the sentences. Regardless of the language of the text, these words are included in the sentences. The word “bias” might mean “prejudice against one group” in English language but in Korean Pop fandom it refers to their favorite member of the band. One fan defines bias as “Bias is the member I like differently than other members. I feel related to that member in some way. For example Yoongi (member of BTS) has talked about his anxiety and his failures. This is something I relate to, so he is important to me.” “Oppa” is a phrase that is often used in romantic manner especially in fan fictions, which means “older brother” in Korean. Many younger fans get criticized for their obsession with their Oppas.

Every K-Pop band has a name for their fanbase which are decided by the company they belong to, instead allowing fans to choose it for themselves. For example, the biggest group of K-Pop BTS which we are primarily exploring, announced their fanbase name as ARMY in 2013. In most of the interviews we did, BTS fans never hesitated to call themselves as ARMY. They have said that the name represents how fans stand together and support BTS. The other fanbase names are also related to the emotions of love and support. EXO's fans are called "EXO-L" which means EXO and Love, expressing the love between fans and the band. BIGBANG's fandom is called "V.I.P" which means Very Important Person; again a name that glorifies fans.

Not being able to name themselves does not mean that fans are passive consumers. Being a fan, as stated in previous sections, includes an active, creative process where they produce meanings and contents. When we asked what a fan does to interviewees, they often listed streaming their music on online platforms, supporting projects that they do (one included the project BTS did with UNICEF), voting for their band in an award competition. One thing K-Pop fans are known for is doing streaming parties and tweeting to hashtags that are related to their bands. Streaming party means when a band releases a new video on YouTube, fans are supposed to watch it again and again in order to make the number of views increase. It is an activity that almost resembles a "fan labour", fans are using all their technological devices (phones, tables, computers) to help the video gain views. Fan accounts with a high rate of followers online encourages everyone to join these online streaming parties and condemns the one who does not work enough by declaring them fake fans. On account of these parties, the most popular music video of BTS on Youtube, DNA, has 729 million views since its release one years ago.

There are also fan pages for each band for each country. Those pages translate interviews of the band to Turkish, upload fan performances, give information on concerts and keep fans updated with the band. The biggest BTS Turkish fanbase account has approximately 100.000 followers on Twitter. A sixteen year old fan who works voluntarily for this page to translate interviews stated that this helped her fluency with English immensely. Those pages inform fans

to trend certain hashtags on Twitter, by that way band members can see that and give responses to them. Keeping connected with band members with any means is very significant to fans.

VI.b. Collective Identity and Belonging

Many fans state their reason to become fan as the appeal of difference. For them, Korean music is different from what they have seen before. An 18 year old fan says: *“It’s a different culture, music and language than we see in American pop or Turkish pop. (...) Not only the songs and lyrics but they were giving something from their own lives. Yes, other cultures have it too, but K-Pop bands are also doing it with dance. Even without music their dancing tells so much.”*

The other major themes with fans were meaning and messages. Especially BTS fans underlined that BTS is able to write their own songs (unlike other bands who are under strict control with contracts), and give uplifting, supporting messages to fans. A 21 year old fan explains her process of becoming a fan as *“I was in a major depression, then I found BTS. The messages they were giving attracted my attention. There are many bands who do music, but what makes BTS different is their message. I was so impressed and it distracted me from the things that I had in my mind. It still is.”* A 31 year old BTS fan who practices medicine also stressed a similar point: *“Becoming a BTS fan almost completely changed my life because of the messages they give, their life views has made me look differently to life. Messages such as loving yourself, explaining yourself and facing yourself.... And I saw the results of showing will and effort.”* According to interviewees, giving messages of power by referencing their own hardships is a very strong tool for fans to like the band. This makes fans feel more powerful.

Being able to keep in touch with BTS members is another distinctness fans state compared to other bands. As it mentioned, selecting a bias is closely associated with the degree of being relatable, a process of identification. Fans love being connected to their biases and idols

and they express this view as: “*unlike Western stars, BTS is very, very active on social media. We even know what their favorite season is.*” Most frequently used platform by BTS, as many fans told us repeatedly, is a forum called Fancafe. It is hosted on a Korean social media server and in Fancafe fan members share their thoughts regularly, write long or short texts on anything. They also do scheduled chat sessions with fans, share pictures that have not been shared any other place. The site and texts are in Korean, but there are fan accounts on social media who translate updates on Fancafe to their own language.

As the band who has the highest global following, BTS also has the biggest fan base in Turkey among the K-Pop bands. Some of the participants identified themselves as “ARMY” instead of a K-Pop fan. A BTS fan says they only listen to BTS, because being a K-Pop fan also includes listening to many bands who are under strict control of companies with formulaic music. They reject this identity and do not put BTS under the K-Pop categorization. For an outsider, this distinction carries no meaning but within fandom this discourse is known and a topic of many arguments.

We got different answers to our question on “Do you feel like you belong to fandom?” The fan who works as a translator said that she feels belonging because she works and contributes to fandom in which she has made many friends, and now she can’t let go. She says BTS worked hard to get to the place where they are now and they work for fans so she and other fans are also working for fandom even more than they work for themselves. This reciprocal working theme between fans and band was a recurring theme. Fans want to do something for the band because they are empowered with their songs. This reciprocal relationship can be explained as a gift economy. It does not necessarily have to be a material giving such as songs, video clips, etc.; but for example, it can be also considered as a gift when artists declare their love and commitment to their fandom.

Being on Twitter, talking about similar topics and making the same jokes are other characteristics of the feeling of “being a member of fandom”. Many fans told that they made

friends within fandom, on twitter or on other social media platforms. One 16 year old fan said that her current social circle is the people she met through doing dance covers to the BTS songs, and sharing the same interests makes people more appealing in her eyes. On this particular issue of collective identity, perhaps one fan gave us the most explanatory answers. A 29 year old engineer told us regarding the feeling of belonging: *“I feel completely belong to fandom. Because I did so many things and I am still doing. I am active. Being belong to this fandom makes me feel very good, not particularly because I am in the fandom but with the things it brings to me. (...) I am trying to help fans who live in Turkey. I am 29 years old and I have a job. Economically, I am not like a student. Making students happy makes me happy too. (...) When I was younger they made me happy too, I know what that feels like. So being in fandom definitely stimulates my helpfulness. (...) I have so many friends around the world because I am an ARMY. I have stayed for 15 days with my friend in Korea whom i have met online. (...) Think it like this: Your friends found a group in high school and then became globally famous. This is how I feel.”* Her position in the fandom is one of the parts of his identity and her “active” status increases the feeling of belongingness. We observed a strong relationship between being active and creative with feelings of belonging within fans.

VI.c. Gender and Age Characteristics of Fandom

Gender is an important topic to consider within the fan studies. Especially in our topic regarding both fans and object of fandoms/the band members. Male K-Pop band members often get criticized because of their feminine looks. Fans themselves explain this with cultural differences. For them, maleness is performed differently in Korea than it is in Turkey and biologically, Korean males do not grow hair, they say. Some of them keep their fanship secret because of this criticism. One fan says: *“My father especially criticizes BTS. He says “Why do you listen to them? They look like queers (top).”* As previously mentioned in the opening, news published by conservative outlets were also tackling with the gender issues with K-Pop bands, declaring them a project to create a genderless society with headlines *“Homosexual Army is Coming!”*. In the comment section of the same article, we discussed similar defence strategies

used by fans. This is an issue that can be interpreted and explored more, but our interviews fell short to give us more concrete answers.

Despite our best efforts, all of the fans we've interviewed were females, with ages ranging between 14 to 31. Even one of our interviewees, who is a very active fan, had difficulty in directing us to a male fan. The distribution of ages to social media platforms goes as follows: the youngest and "immature" fans are active on Facebook. An older fan said that *"They are so young and they think they are going to marry their oppa."* Teenagers who are more interested in visuals are active on Instagram and the "old" and "mature" ones are active on Twitter. The fans that we have interviewed on Twitter were not shy to position themselves at the top of the fandom hierarchy because of Twitter's reliance on texts, rather than visuals.

VI.d. Othering, Stereotype and Resistance

K-Pop fans are aware of the prejudice against them and they have explanations for it. One fan categorizes K-Pop fans into three categories *"The ones between 10-15 years of age, 16-18 years old and the ones who are over 30. Old fans have jobs but they are still fans and they still go to concerts. The youngest group especially uses social media accounts such as instagram, facebook, twitter. The things they share on instagram... They get made fun of, and it creates prejudice."* K-Pop fans indeed are subjects of ridicule on social media platforms. An account called "Out Of Context Şizofrenik Kpoppers" on Twitter exclusively focuses on the "bizarre" contents and comments made by Turkish K-Pop fans. This account has over 13.000 followers on Twitter. When we reached out to them to talk, they did not want to give an interview but they stated that they are also K-Pop fans, but not ridiculous ones like others. So this account serves the purpose of differentiating and othering within the fandom and uses language, signs and symbols that are only understandable within fandom. They often make fun of fans who do not follow norms of being in a fandom.

One of our interviewees, Duru (she said it is okay if we use her name, she “does not hide anything”), 16, told us a story about the collaboration of LG and BTS mentioned in the section of Culture Industry. And further explained this categorization within the fandom. For the promotion of LG Q7+ BTS held in Cevahir Mall, a mockup of the group had been made. As she puts it, *“They had made a mockup of course, it got bitten. I mean, they bit it, they bit the mockup...”* After this incident of biting the mockup, of which she showed a picture, she was very much comfortable with making differentiations among the fans: *“now there is an ARMY mass who hands out water around for fans and help, and there is another one which bites the mockup.”* Giving this differentiation, she also made sure that she was not one of the fans who would bite the mockup. She thinks that the difference between these two types of fans mostly results from age, which brings us to the age scale of fandom mentioned before.

More important than the hierarchy between the fans Duru claimed, for us/me, was how she points out that she could empathize with the ones who criticize K-Pop fans because of the differentiation among fans. *“If someone had told me this, I would have taken a dislike to the fandom.”* For her, it appeared as those who would bite the mockup make non-fans regard the fandom repulsive.

Young fans are seen at the bottom of this hierarchy, and shamed because of the possibility of infamizing the fandom. “Of course all fandoms have kids under 16, who do weird stuff. But when they stereotype us as “Korecan” based on those kids, surely we get mad.”, an older fan states. Korecan is a derogatory nickname used by other groups to define Korea fans, although there are also people who try to reclaim the word for more positive use.

Based on our interviews we also observed the possible resistance capable of the K-Pop listeners against the dominant media discourse. Regarding the degrading news that is published by the media, one fan states: *“I know BTS, so i can recognize that they are making fake news. They make news without researching. So what about the news that I don't know about truly? I lose confidence in the media.”* This attitude is especially prevalent for the news that is mentioned in the opening. Fans commented on and criticized the news, and have sent over 50.000 messages

to the writer of the article on Twitter. One fan stated that *“There is a concern for the future and future generations, and they exploit this concern by marking everything as a threat.”* The questioning and distrustful attitude of fans was very observable and our assertion is that being a fan contributes to this attitude.

VI.e Being a Fan in Turkey

One of our questions that we tried to answer was how the experience of being K-Pop in Turkey differs from being a fan in any other country. Participants said that except the hospitality and the respect to the elders, they see no similarity between Korean and Turkish culture. The main difference of being a fan in Turkey for them is firstly economical. Because of the prices, they are not able to buy albums and any other of their products. And following that, the security issues in Turkey make it hard for big bands to do concerts. Concerts are one of the places where fans collectively come together in a ritualistic way, reinforcing their collective identity. But instead, they go to the movie screenings or other smaller events who do not include the physical participation of the band members. This lack of physical gathering may be seen as a reason for the high rates of participation in the online community.

Fans also see Turkish people as “close minded” and “non progressive” by referring to the criticism in the media. The discourse on gender, male performance and makeup also comes up again in this discussion. “BTS performed at Grammys, and in Turkey people are still calling them girls because they have no beard. Turkish people have no capacity to understand this success.”

Some assert the conservative characteristics of K-Pop fans, in the news mentioned İmam Hatip High School principals warn families against listening to K-Pop. Some fans also criticize this contradiction of being a Muslim and an “extreme” fan. In a flood of tweets on Twitter one fan said *“I confess that i really don’t want to hang out here anymore because many of you are boasting of being one of the hell people. (“cehennem ehli”). (...) Yes i am an ARMY but this does not change the fact that i am a Muslim. (...) It is sad to see the many of you have abandoned*

religion by comparing BTS to God.” This topic perhaps needs more data and in-depth analysis but following Jackie Stacey’s argument on reasons for women going to cinema, the concept “escapism” can be applied to this. She describes an utopian sensibility of women going to cinema in wartime England, and defines cinema as a transitional gap between everyday life and a fantasy world (Storey, 2001). Drawing on this argument and the “empowerment” and “independence” messages that bands are giving, social media and content from the band may provide a utopia and possibilities for the conservative, young female fans who might go through hardships.

VII. Conclusion And Limitations

Clifford Geertz (1973, 20) states “All of our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. Cultural analysis is guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses.” Therefore our interpretations of the data we collected from fans are merely an interpretation, but we believe that they are better than a simple guess, comparing and applying theories as “outsiders”.

Even though the space we conducted the study was predominantly the internet, a space of which its openness is still debated, observation of it still takes a vast amount of time, and we are aware of the limitations we have.

K-Pop and Korean studies are becoming a popular area of research recently, and vary between different disciplines, that (such as Media and Communication Studies, Social Psychology) they write on it from different perspectives. Throughout our literature research, we have found articles which study K-Pop fandom regarding subtopics including, but not limited to, racism and abuse, diaspora and symbolic interactionism. We had benefited from these articles but more than that, this exemplifies the diversity of the topic and our limited approach to it. Considering that it is a vast area to study, as a consequence of the limitations mentioned

previously, we are able to focus only on certain parts of this phenomenon. So that we may present meaningful work on the issue, providing a satisfactory contribution to subject quality wise. We believe that the K-Pop phenomenon in Turkey is a valuable subject to study and further research on the issue would provide an understanding of youth and social media and may contribute to the literature on youth and fan studies.

It is also very important to note the defensive stance of the fans we have interviewed throughout the process. Becoming an object of a “sociological study” or recently receiving a huge backlash from media and “non-fan” people shaped our interviewees’ answers to us. When we asked questions to learn their practices as a fan, or what constitutes being a fan; the answers we received were quite defensive and even aggressive. This attitude was common especially during the start of the interviewing process. They often stated that they are “normal people” who have “normal lives”, and they do not do anything to differentiate them from the other people. Because of our lack of experience as a limit, we had a hard time doing interviews online. But regardless of our scope of study, our assertion is that even this attitude we have received from fans have been meaningful.

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