

Julia Trzcińska

Polish K-Pop Fandom

Phenomenon, Structure
& Communication



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Introduction

This book was written for people who would like to learn more about Polish K-Pop fandom, but it can also be of help for those who are looking for some basic information about fan studies or K-Pop in general. Korean music has only recently started to gain popularity in Poland (as well as in other European countries). Some may affiliate K-Pop with Psy's *Gangnam Style*, a track which was virtually inescapable in the summer of 2012, but around that time the European K-Pop fandom was already well-developed, as evidenced by the Korean group Big Bang winning MTV European Music Award in 2011, or the flashmob fans organized in front of the Louvre museum that forced one of the biggest Korean entertainment companies to organize one more concert of their artists in the same year. Nevertheless, K-Pop's international popularity peak is often being connected to BTS' success, when they were awarded the Top Social Artist Award and successfully performed during the Billboard Music Awards in 2017. It would be difficult to say how many K-Pop fans there are in Poland now and how the number changed over the years, but it is still undoubtedly growing.

This book is not only meant to provide a set of basic information on Polish K-Pop fandom, but also to connect Polish and international fan studies, which at this point are often focused on products of English-speaking cultures. There are many publications on fans of sports, celebrities or TV shows but K-Pop is different from these fields as it is

something between a celebrity fandom and a music fandom, with many cultural elements influencing its shape. Some fans call K-Pop a “complete product” as it provides music, choreographies and visually refined music videos, but also a type of lifestyle, with elements of food, cosmetics, and everything South Korea has to offer. It is also a phenomenon that can be analyzed from many different perspectives – not only sociological or related to culture studies, but psychological or connected to political science or media studies as well. This text will focus more on people who form Polish K-Pop fandom, how they communicate within those communities and how they establish structures, instead of the media text itself and its interpretation. Moreover, it must be noted that the category of Polish K-Pop fandom may be unclear; in this book, it will be used when talking about people who use Polish Facebook groups dedicated to an idol group or K-Pop in general, as it will be explained further later on.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first one focuses on fandom and fan studies, providing the definitions and explaining what it actually is. It also presents how fans were perceived in the past and how it changed over the years. Understanding the notions related to fan communities will be crucial for understanding the parts that follow, in particular if one is not familiar with terms such as *fan* or *fandom*. Another aim of this chapter was to briefly show the history of fan studies as a research field and try to point out to possible directions that were already undertaken by many great scholars – however, mainly in the United States. Later on, the first chapter tackles the issue of new technologies and how they changed the fandoms and fan motivation theories. Next, it discusses fan creativity and the sphere of fanart and its economic potential. This part combines different approaches and uses not only media fandom literature but also sport fandom examples and psychological approach which will prove to be significant in the part approaching fandoms as an example of religious form or idol worshipping. Fandoms are also described in the context of global and local perspective which seems especially important from the point of view of K-Pop fandom. Lastly, the first chapter covers the phenomenon of anti-fans, who are an interesting example of emotionally involved people who have great knowledge about a given topic, but decide to hate it instead of loving it.


The second chapter is a concise description of Korean pop music. It is important to understand that K-Pop cannot be seen only as pop music, but as a broader phenomenon too. This chapter provides a definition, as well as a brief history and main characteristics. It explains what the Korean Wave is and what role K-Pop plays in it. It also tries to explain the popularity of this genre and discusses its potential increase. K-Pop is shown here not only as a cultural product but also in terms of its relations to its home state and South Korean soft power and economy. This chapter presents the negative sides of the Korean Wave and K-Pop as well, such as the rise of the anti-Hallyu movement – its examples, causes, and possible development. Lastly, this chapter introduces the main topic of this book, the K-Pop fans, and explains basic terms and factors that will be important for understanding the principal topic of this publication.

After describing the methodology and methods of the research project, the time range, main hypothesis and research subject in the third chapter, the results are presented in the chapter four. This part discusses various areas of Polish K-Pop fandom in order to provide information about this community that would allow for its better understanding and further analysis. It is worth noting, however, that at the moment of publication of this text, some of the data might be already outdated, since there are constant changes in the Polish K-Pop fandom – mainly the increasing number of members, with new people joining every day.

The research project was focused on two main areas: structures and leadership, as well as communication and media use. The fourth chapter starts with general information about fandom members, such as age, gender, and their role in the fandom. It provides information about their motivation in relation to theories that were presented in the first chapter while overviewing fan opinions on K-Pop and their “road” to becoming a fan. The next part discusses how fans feel about being a part of the community and how do they define K-Pop fandom. Fans were asked not only to establish their borders of K-Pop fandom, and what for them is “us” and what is “them”, but also to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction that being a fandom member brings. After that the structures of the fandom, hierarchy establishing processes and the role of leaders are discussed. The latter is especially controversial among Polish K-Pop fans. Moreover, the communication

strategies, the language that the fans use and the process of obtaining and sharing information is analyzed and described. Chapter four also explains how the fandom uses social media, once again referring to theories that were presented in the first part of the book. The next part of this chapter shows the fans as a part of the entertainment industry, focusing on idol-fan-entertainment company relations and discussing fans as consumers. The last part discusses notions of nationalism in Polish K-Pop fandom experiences and how the fans deal with it.

The fans who have taken part in this research project and provided insightful answers and opinions in the interviews and in the surveys may find that not everything they shared was included in this publication. While this is undoubtedly true, and the apparent omission might be troubling, the issues and topics concerning K-Pop, its fans, and specifically the Polish K-Pop fandom are vast enough to avoid being contained in a single text; in fact, most of these topics would each require a book to be covered sufficiently. Nevertheless, I offer this book as a starting point for a discussion and further research, and as a means to enable better understanding of Polish fandom as a structure, while also giving insight into its members, whose fascination with a distant culture is a source of numerous positive as well as negative experiences.



1

Fandom and fan studies

C. Sandvoss, J. Gray and C. L. Harrington began their book *Fandom and Communities in a Mediated World* with a statement that “most people are fans of something” and ten years later added that now it is “even more commonplace experience” (2017) because of the technological and cultural changes. One could wonder why study fans and whether fans are typical media consumers or not if being one is not unusual. Such concerns about the object of research in fan studies are still present and yet each year the number of books on the topic and scholars who decide that they would devote their time to fans and fandoms seems to increase.

The following chapter aims to briefly explain the main issues regarding fans and fandom, but it is worth noting that some of them undoubtedly might be topics for separate dissertations. This subject is constantly changing and, while some of the works might be only of historical value quite soon, the pace of change is a part of the appeal of the research. It is important, however, to keep in mind that this book attempts only to present the basic information and problems that are necessary to understand Polish K-Pop fandom. Therefore, it might omit points that would be required to fully understand the notion of fans and fandoms as a whole – although such an undertaking would be extremely difficult, taking into account the number of fandoms, their different interests, practices, and constant transformations.

1.1 Definitions and research

Although the topic is widely discussed, its vagueness makes it almost impossible to find just one explanation of fans and fandoms and it seems like it would be an excessive simplification to use just one definition for this complex phenomenon. The controversies start at the very beginning with different understanding of the word itself. The word *fan*, being derived from Latin *fanaticus*, is mostly agreed on, if disliked, since originally it meant someone frantic or mad. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both words are also connected to *fanum*, meaning sanctuary or temple (Merriam Webster dictionary) and gives the word *fan* a sense closer to religion than madness. In its modern sense the term was first used in the 19th century to describe sports enthusiasts, but soon started to be used also for theatre-goers (Jenkins, 1992). It is assumed that since 1910 the notion of movie fan was almost identical with today's and meant a person who, regularly and with enthusiasm, attended film screenings (Siuda, 2012). K. Fuller noted, however, that being a fan has become much more often associated with women, and therefore understood as a non-serious and emotional activity, in contrast to men's logical focusing on substantive issues only while consuming media texts (2001). Jenson also wrote that this negative view of fans produced two models of a pathological fan: 1) the obsessed individual, who under the influence of the medium enters into an obsessive fantasy relationship (eventually leading to such deviated forms of interaction as assassination attempts), and 2) the hysterical crowd associated with screams, frenzy, or even riots.

The word *fandom* has at least two possible origins – one being a portmanteau of *fan* and *kingdom* (The Janissary Collective, 2014) and the other being just the *fan* with *-dom* suffix, which forms nouns denoting the condition or state. Interestingly, the suffix *-dom* is now often used to make a name for a specific fandom, such as Potterdom (Harry Potter fandom). Oxford Living Dictionaries provides two meanings of fandom: 1) the state or condition of being a fan of someone or something, 2) the fans of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc. regarded collectively as a community or subculture. The first definition underlines a state of a person, while the second one signifies a group of people, and the latter – understanding fandom as plural – seems much more common. M. Lisows-

ka-Magdziarz also notes that the word *fandom* can be used in two ways: one being a name for a group of fans and the other being a sort of media practice, a creative and participatory engagement in the consumption of a text, which means that one can both be a part of fandom and participate in it (2017). P. Booth also stresses the phenomenon's nature as a process. When writing about the media fandom he states that:

it is best understood as a continual, shifting *negotiation* and *dialogue* within already-extant industrial relations. That is both media fans and media industries must continually negotiate, navigate, and adjust to the presence of each other in tandem with changing paradigms of technological discourse in our digital society (2015:1).

N. Abercrombie and B. Longhurst also draw attention to the ambiguity of fans, writing about their resistance to dominant ideology, as well as about “construction of alternative fans’ communities based on the generation of particular forms of identification and identity” (1998). All those definitions show that fans and fandom are easier defined by scales, axes and directions, without one strict definition that would apply to every single case.

J. Fiske proposes three spheres that might be useful in analyzing fandoms and understanding the way they function: 1) Discrimination and Distinction, 2) Productivity and Participation, and 3) Capital Accumulation (1992). He observes that fans are very strict when it comes to drawing the line between what does lay in the realm of their interests and what does not, approaching the latter with prejudice. The same rule applies to fandom members and people from widely understood “outside.” In the second sphere, Fiske distinguishes three kinds of fans’ productivity: semiotic, enunciative and textual. The author believes that the first one is connected to popular culture production in general, not necessarily just fandoms, and it means creating the meanings of social identity. He presents the example of involvement in semiotic creativity by writing about fans of romance novels, who were confirming the importance of their feminine values in opposition to the patriarchal ones. When these meanings take their public form and appear in language (spoken in particular) and will be used in direct communication, they will become enunciative productivity. The last type – textual productivity – refers directly to the creation of works by fans. These works are often valued as high as those

officially produced, but they are distinguished by the fact that the primary motivation for their creation is not financial gain, even though it might be one of the reasons. Fiske also stresses that fans can not only create new texts, but participate in the original ones as well. He gives an example of a football match, during which a fan, while wearing specific colors and behaving in a particular way, becomes a part of the spectacle. Capital Accumulation, the last sphere, is based mainly on knowledge accumulation. That knowledge might be almost trivial, but it might also be on an expert level. According to Fiske, people who have the widest knowledge assume the role of an opinion leader in such groups, and they have more prestige than the other members. Capital accumulation might also take a material form of a collection of certain objects. Those collections are where the culture capital and the economic one collide. The last sphere stresses the economic importance of fandoms, especially for the culture production industry, but it is also very important for understanding how prestige and position might be obtained in fandoms.

The notion of participation seems to be the biggest change in understanding what fans are. In the beginning, fans were seen as passive and existing only thanks to the media and so-called modern celebrity system (Jenson, 1992). Over the years it changed not only in common understanding but also among the scholars. P. Siuda distinguishes the following three phases in fan studies: 1) the deviation wave, 2) the resistance wave, and 3) the mainstream wave (2010). The first wave was a result of fear of the modernity that was present in the academia – fans were described as neurotics, perceived in accordance with the definition of the word *fanaticus*. The change began in 1992, the year when the books *Textual Poachers. The Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by H. Jenkins and *The Adoring Audience. Fan Culture and Popular Culture*, by L. A. Lewis were published. Fans started to be regarded as creative and active. Siuda argues that the shift was caused by changes in the fan communities themselves. In the 1980s, they had taken opportunities to show their “better side” to the public opinion, and in the 1990s they gained a new tool that is still an important factor in fandom activities – the Internet. And precisely that tool, symbolizing the change from the individual to the collective is the main characteristic of the third wave that

started in 2009 with yet another H. Jenkins' work, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. The mainstream wave is much closer to P. Booth's understanding of fandom: the fans and the media owners, who used to fight against each other, are now bound to cooperate in culture production. The fans began to be understood as prosumers – a hybrid of a producer and a consumer. The third wave focuses once again on fans as individuals and their own motivations. In recent publications, however, there are indications at a new development which might be called the fourth wave – the media savvy user wave. Researchers start to look more critically at fan activities and the potential of fandoms. H. Jenkins' book has been criticized for being too optimistic and enthusiastic, as the author himself admits to be a “fan of fans.” The fourth wave would be characterized by focusing on fans' media practices and participation in a rather critical way: fans might be the new elite of media users, they might be ahead of time (although their practices will probably be obvious for everyone in the future), but they also might be being used by the entertainment industry for economic reasons. The fans are not only experts on a specific product, but they are also usually willing to stay loyal to one “brand”, with the need to collect its products. Fan studies seem to have reached the point in which scholars agree that the results of the research cannot be generalized into one set of characteristics that would apply to any given fandom. Likewise, there is a complicated notion of aca-fans, who are both fans and scholars. It gives them a better perspective on the research subject, since fandoms might be quite closed communities, using their own language or phrases, conducting kinds of “rituals” and exhibiting specific behaviors which might not be understood by people from outside. However, it might also lead to accusations of the lack of detachment which is crucial to objective analysis. Nevertheless, the history of fan studies is undoubtedly important for understanding present day research fields and for predictions about future directions. It also shows how the notions of fan and fandom have been changing and how differently they are being perceived now – and how they might be perceived in the future.

Fan studies have the potential to be a fully interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary field, though it remains mostly unfulfilled. The main obstacles

lay within the academia itself. As T. Turk argues, scholars tend to stick to just one perspective – their home discipline. Turk writes that it might be caused by systemic barriers, as she states that, “for most of us, there are few institutional rewards for doing truly interdisciplinary work—and few consequences for not doing it” (2018: 545). Fan studies are mainly or solely associated with media studies or cultural studies, but only making fan studies interdisciplinary can advance its development instead of halting it altogether.

P. Booth uses the 20th anniversary of publishing three major books on fans – Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers*, Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* and Lewis’ *The Adoring Audience* (all three published in 1992) to sum up the achievements of fan studies and point new directions (2012). His first discovery was that fans actually had a lot of interest in themselves within the academia (even if they did not know that such a thing as fan studies existed, they were really interested in finding out more about it), but he also mentions that it seemed like fan studies had drifted away from its main subject – the fans as such. Research projects focused on the development of the discipline, adding new topics and broadening its scope. While this is a significant achievement, according to Booth, it is important to share that obtained knowledge with fans and establish a fan-centric dialogue. Furthermore, Booth suggests that scholars have focused too much on online practices, often forgetting about the offline practices, which are equally important for understanding what fandoms and fans really are. The crucial postulate of his paper was bridging fans and scholars. In his research, the author discovered that fans know only books from the first wave of fan studies – the books that often used ethnographic interviews, but they were also published at least 20 years ago. It does not mean that it takes so much time for professional literature to get to the fans, but rather that they look for a specific kind of information. He stresses that both groups share the same values – belief in knowledge as a communal good being just one of them – and the scholars should try and share their research with fans during conventions and similar events. Fans are eager to know more about themselves but in very specific areas; practical aspects are appreciated more than the theoretical issues. Booth’s text stresses that fan studies focus on people and cannot be separated

from them. Mutual cooperation might lead to more projects in the future and developing the discipline.

Another paper on fan studies by S. Ford shows quite a few interesting findings (2014). Firstly, he points out the gender of the scholars during the Media in Transition 5 conference he attended. The participants were both female and male when the topics were mostly about fans' activities within a content producer logic and affirmational fandom practices (which he named '*fanboy*' focus), but substantially more women attended panels that "aimed at reconstituting media texts outside their original context for the fan community's own needs and desires" – concerning transformational fandom practices (so-called '*fangirl*' focus; Ford, 2014: 56). A way for overcoming the problem and bridging different approaches was a project ran by H. Jenkins and K. Busse, who divided 44 people into pairs of one male and one female scholar and asked them to debate their work and point of view with each other. This project helped not only with mutual understanding, but also added greatly to fan studies as a discipline by helping the scholars discuss their opinions. Moreover, Ford argues that "fan studies origin story", as he calls the way in which a scholar is introduced to a media fandom, has a tremendous impact on his or her future work and approaches. On his own example, he shows that there is a need to bridge differences not only between genders, but also between scholars who focus on different areas, such as sports and pop culture, or even between researches from different fields, just like in the case of bluegrass music fan studies and folk studies. The author believes that fan studies can only benefit from such discussions and serve as a more useful explanation thanks to that. Another observation made by Ford that is worth noting is that scholars tend to prioritize some fan activities over others, especially when it comes to fans' activities and creativity. It often seems that fandoms which engage in more diverse forms of fan work are perceived as more developed than the others, which can lead to the assumption that the media or pop culture fandoms will always be superior to sports fandoms. Although there are indubitable differences between various fandoms, they should not be compared to one another in order to determine their relative value. Having S. Ford's suggestions in mind, this book aims to bridge various disciplines such as political science, media studies and fan studies,

and offer a new perspective that might be useful in analyzing fans and fandoms. It also partly shows the results of the research from fandoms, such as sports fandoms, as well as psychological research to offer a broad perspective for future developments.

The problem mentioned by S. Ford regarding prioritizing a set of activities over others was also noted by M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, who analyzed the work on fanfiction written by L. Gałowska (2015). Gałowska was very critical while analyzing fans' writing skills, but the book's reviewer decided to defend the amateur writers. The reviewer commented that, while the world of fanfiction is indeed full of insanity, there is definitely more to it, and people who know about good texts, those lacking erotic themes, will be frustrated with the lecture. Lisowska-Magdziarz rightly points out that this is a perfect example of putting labels on fan activities – non-erotic texts seem to be acceptable, but the ones containing rather risqué scenes are definitely not (2017: 51).

Another scholar who has attempted to approach the issue of the positive and negative perception of fandoms was S. C. van de Goor (2015). According to her, such presumptions exist not only within the academia, but in the fandom itself as well. She argues that opinions which are predominant in a given group shape the discourse within it, with outliers being excluded in various ways, leading to situations such as E. Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence. It is also worth noting that fans' perception of the object of fandom can change when the text itself is granted a new perspective. A good example here would be Captain America, a comic book character who started being perceived differently by fans once he became a mainstream pop culture icon thanks to the movie adaptation of his adventures. Nevertheless, the most important thought of Goor's paper is that fandoms are often no longer understood as groups with the same affect towards an item, but a group of specific, policed set of beliefs (van de Goor, 2015), which is also an interesting topic for future research projects.

Fandoms are not always positive, support-only groups. Interestingly, the object of interest or other participants in the same fandom can become a target for attacks and various negative interactions. Fans seem to know how the outside people can perceive them and what stereotypes are functioning in the society, but they also almost always attribute a similar

treatment to other fandoms or other fans without any self-awareness. Such negative behaviors were, according to them, mainly overestimating the importance of a given show (or artist, group, *etc.*), excessive ownership of the object (forgetting that fans are neither producers nor screenplay writers and so on), unreasonable consumerism (such as getting a tattoo with a scene from a show or idol's face), or being emotional and thus more willing to spend money on merchandising (Stanfill, 2013). Research also shows that a discrepancy between treatment of male-oriented approach and female-oriented approach is quite frequent, with the latter considered less engaged, meaning that women supposedly treat being a fan only as a mere hobby, and for men being in such a community means advanced discussions based on specialist knowledge. Granted, this kind of a situation is less common than it was even just a few years ago; men and women discover that their interests and behaviors within fandoms are in fact very similar or the same. However, even women can still use specific words that diminish their own gender (in Polish it can be exemplified with the word *babski* meaning womanish or effeminate, mostly in a derogatory and depreciating way). Being interested in romantic relationships of the characters is seen as inferior as well, suggesting that if someone is absorbed by such, he or she probably misses out the complexity of the plot of the story. It is certainly a more complex cultural phenomenon, but it can be observed in fandoms and their perception as well. Moreover, M. Stanfill in her research found out that fans can be quite cruel to other fans, stating that they "devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge" or "are out of touch with reality" (2013: 10). The others in fandom can be described as immature, infantile, complaining, feminized. It seems that functioning in such a community as fandom brings out phenomena, opinions and behaviors that should be analyzed by both sociologists and psychologists. However, the analyzed examples show that intra-fandom relations differ greatly between fandoms and such animosities are only a possibility instead of a general rule. Although it would be impossible to imagine a fan community driven by internal hostile attitudes exclusively, it is also only natural that there are some differences and disagreements. The internalized stereotypes that function within a fandom should be analyzed in further research as they seem to play a great role in the communities and relations between fans.

Nevertheless, over the last 25 years or more, fan studies have become a new area for researchers from various fields. It has developed and changed, mainly because of the change in understanding of what a fan and fandom are, but also thanks to the significant change in the media and communication. Many scholars have started to discuss the future prospects and challenges for this field, even though it is still undoubtedly changing and developing, and now, in the age of ever-present media coverage, it is probably even more important to understand how people engage with media – fandoms being the most vivid example.

1.2. Fans' motivations, activities and skills in the 21st century

One of the most interesting issues in fan studies is the one concerning fans' motivations. The aforementioned economic potential of fans, which manifests primarily in purchasing products connected to their interest, might also be understood as their main motivation. P. Siuda underlines that it is not just buying when it comes to fans; their actions are much more similar to those of an art critic who carefully analyzes all the products available and chooses only the best ones (2012). The economic part of fan activities is also one of the most frequently criticized, with people seeing fans just as passive elements in the culture production industry understood in Frankfurtian way. Although it is true that fans are often eager to collect products or spend money on limited edition, sealed items, understanding their activities only as an economic process would be a great simplification and misunderstanding of the whole phenomenon. D. Chadborn, P. Edwards and S. Reysen chose three main factors they thought to be the most important fan motivations for further analysis and listed the following: 1) the purpose or meaning in life, 2) the escape from everyday life stressors, and 3) establishing and maintaining social connections (2017). These factors show clearly how broad the phenomenon is, and how much of it can be lost when thinking only about the income of the culture industry companies.

Fandoms as online communities can be analyzed with the typology that was proposed by A. Armstrong and J. Hagel, who distinguished four types of communities: 1) communities of transaction, 2) communities of interest, 3) communities of fantasy, and 4) communities of relationship (2000).

The first one revolves around buying and selling goods, transaction in its economic sense. The second one brings together people with similar interests, who not only exchange information (or goods), but in general share a common topic. Communities of fantasy describe groups where one can change or manipulate his or her identity or invent new stories and narratives. This group was compared to spontaneous theatre. The fourth community – the community of relationship – focuses on personal experiences, often intense ones. The authors underline that those four types are not exclusive, they can be mixed, and it seems a fandom can be all four types at the same time – making the fandoms one of the most complex online communities.

In 1995 D. Wann published a paper in which he described sports fan motivation scale. Although sports are experienced by its fans in a different way than media texts, it still can be a useful scale for further discussion and research. Firstly, the author makes a distinction between a fan and a spectator, with the notion of “enthusiasm” being the main difference between the two. He also observed that only around 4% of literature on sports psychology at that time focused on sport fans. After conducting empirical research, the author enumerated the following factors: eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family needs (Wann, 1995). Eustress, also called “the good stress”, means that sport provides its fans a kind of sensorial stimulation they need. Self-esteem is related to the feeling of accomplishment and success when the supported team wins, but Wann also points here to the feeling of belonging to a group. Thirdly, he points out the escapism from everyday, boring life routine into the world of sport excitement, which is connected to the need of being entertained. The author points out that watching sports is very much like going to the cinema or to the theatre, and can just be a way of spending time, requiring very little skills, or no skills whatsoever. The economic motivation is connected to sports betting and fans’ profits. Although this particular motive does not seem to apply to media fandom, it is definitely worth remembering, since there are certainly ways of earning money in fandoms and it cannot be overlooked that money might be the main motivation for some of the fans. Wann then mentions the aesthetic value of a sports event, which is a notion much easier to adapt to media fandom. The feeling of affiliation is also being discussed here, meaning both being

a part of a group of fans and having an opportunity to spend some time with one's family as well.

H. Jenkins has proposed five types of activities that are undertaken by fans (1992). It is worth noting that those spheres were proposed for TV series fandoms, but are common to most of the fandoms in general. Firstly, fandom means a particular way of reception. Fans are not only exceptionally mindful, but also critical. They might re-watch an episode or a scene of a show to understand it better and notice all of its details, and are always ready to discuss those with fellow fandom members. Secondly, fandom has its own ways of understanding and reading text and being a part of the community, which means behaving accordingly to the unspoken rules of a given fandom. Thirdly, fans can be seen as activists when they passionately fight for their vision of a certain text and their thoughts or opinions. They can also be the creators of their own genres and alternative ways of production; always in order to contribute to the community, not thinking about financial gain. The fifth and the last issue that Jenkins mentions here is fandom as an alternative community. According to him, fans do not see fandom as a place to run away from everyday worries, but rather as an alternative that might be even more democratic and human than their usual life. He argues that fandom members are seeking a place where they could make full use of their intellectual potential, since they often do not have such opportunities at work, and seeking a place where economic values would not be the most important ones. One might argue whether this vision is utopian or not, but it certainly gives a kind of fandom model and it might be useful as a scale for describing real fandoms in empirical research. Many experiences show, for example, that some fans are actually earning money doing things we would call fan activities, but it still does not mean that they are not genuinely interested in a given topic. On the contrary, their devotion makes it possible to create something other fans would appreciate. This is possible mainly thanks to the Internet and new media; for instance, YouTube allows earning profits from advertisements shown on uploaded videos. A fan can upload a cover song, performed out of sheer enthusiasm for the original artist, but can also earn money from ads, making the distinction drawn by Jenkins a little less clear.

L. Bennett shows in her work that the Internet development has influenced four areas of fandom functioning (2014). The first one is probably the most obvious one, since it would be difficult to argue that Internet has not changed the way we communicate with each other, and it is no different for fans as well. Fandoms were always centered around the exchange of information and opinions, but Internet, and especially social media, has made it remarkably easier. Not only the real-time contact, even with people from the other hemisphere, but also getting information on an interesting topic through hashtags and other tools, became a commonplace for most people. But that is not the only change in communication, as the relations between fans, the product and companies have changed as well. While all users gained an easier access to content creators, producers, directors and stars, the fans probably make the best use of it, posing questions and inquires, expressing critical opinions and discussing issues. The second area is creativity, which was influenced in various ways: facilitating the flow of artwork among fans, introducing digital art and making it easier for people engaging in the practice of role playing. The Internet also allowed for archiving one's creative works. Moreover, the artists themselves can engage their fans in the creative process, asking them to write parts of song lyrics, designing album covers and proposing plot twists or characters for stories and scenarios. Knowledge was mentioned as the third sphere that was influenced by the Internet. The aforementioned example of Internet archives is relevant here as well, though Bennett stresses the issue of secret advanced knowledge, as exemplified by spoilers. Fans usually seek information before it becomes known to the public, but they can also, on the contrary, try to avoid seeing or reading any information to make the screening or first listening a sort of ceremony. What has changed is that right now there is a choice. The phenomenon of collecting and archiving knowledge is strongly related to P. Lévy's *collective intelligence*, which can fully manifest thanks to the Internet and its network structure (1999). And lastly, the fourth area is the organizational and civic power. Fandoms have always been involved in some sort of activism, but social media made it even easier, just like they did for social movements (15M, Occupy Wall Street) or the Arab Spring, allowing for a spontaneous creation of networks. Similar processes have been described by

H. Rheingold as *smart mobs* with their main characteristics – grass-roots organization, the Internet as a tool for mobilization and a shared goal (2002). Another often cited work by M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes*, describes structures that have a rather unstable character, because they are not directive decisions of the society; instead, they are the result of spontaneous human emotions, interactions and relations (2008).

M. Juza along with M. Pręgowski conducted a research on motivation of Polish Star Trek fans. They differentiated three categories of motivations among the respondents: 1) self-oriented, 2) peer-group-oriented and 3) society-oriented (2011). The first one is mainly related to being interested in a topic, the need of self-development, but also to just having a way of spending free time. The second category revolves around building relations with others, but is also connected to a kind of commitment – the fans that were interviewed in the project stressed that they often create because they know that someone is waiting for their creations. The most interesting is probably the last category which indicates fans' engagement in enriching the culture and society's knowledge. Fans not only want to share their information on a specific topic, but also believe that their work can show others that they can engage in a similar activity by themselves. Juza argues that this part seems to be connected to what Jenkins described as civic activity (2009), and, which could be conflated with the aforementioned Bennett's fourth sphere that was influenced and changed by the Internet – the civic engagement and activism.

Undoubtedly, information practices are one of the most important fans' activities. L. Price and L. Robinson even argue that it “implies a distinctive pattern of information behavior” (2016: 7). Communication here is understood as a broad notion including aspects such as creation, dissemination, organization and use. Their research also showed that fans are social media savvy and that their strategies for obtaining information are sophisticated and, interestingly, informal. Fans are not only good at finding information they need, but they often share found data with others, in particular new fans, but also with broader groups if their opinion and sources become respected; in such a situation, they can become information gatekeepers. The fans can not only pass on facts, but also recommend valuable sources for reading or give advice on creative works, such as writing or painting. Price

and Robinson also stress that the central element of those information behaviors and strategies is a performance, and that it cannot be not taken into account when studying fan communities. Moreover, their research shows clearly a phenomenon that was often only suspected – blurring the borders between the offline and online. Although it sometimes seems obvious which behaviors belong to which group, it becomes more and more difficult to unambiguously determine (especially in situations when an offline activity is being documented and posted online). What is also very specific to fans' communication strategies is tagging and organizing posted information, done in various ways, but commonly perceived as something necessary for the flow of information and the general ease of finding it.

P. Booth also noted several differences in fan activities that were caused by the Internet and the new media, and pointed to the change in the audience relation with narrative on the example of wikis understood as “database of narratological content” (2009). By narrative database Booth understands a sort of archive with elements that can be freely used by the fans in order to create and write new texts, which can in turn be added to that database for others to see and use. He stresses, however, that a narrative database has a non-linear structure and its elements are connected only by the plot. Wikis and archives, as a form of such database, also allow for real-time interactions. What is interesting is that, according to Booth, wikis are only a shell that can be filled with content by the users themselves. It shows even more vividly the change in the way fans can use media that provide not only the information, but also new ways of sharing it with different people and creating new content. It also can be understood as a manifestation of the last of Bennett's spheres – organizational power. Although in many cases the Internet can be seen only as a mere facilitator of certain processes, knowledge archiving on such scale seems impossible without it. The open space for anyone to share their efforts at any time from any place would be unachievable.

R. Bury analyzes the way fandoms use specific social media. Although Facebook is used by most of the fans she investigated, the respondents stated that this platform is reserved for private life and it does not overlap with their fan activities, even calling it a “non-fandom space” (2017). The only case when people would mix those spheres is when other fans became their real-life friends. It must be noted, however, that those relations

would not be related only to fandom issues. Twitter, on the other hand, is usually used by fans to keep themselves updated with official information from the producers, companies and idols. One of the most frequently underlined features of that platform is the sense of immediacy and connection. The portal most frequently used by fans is, however, Tumblr, although it is a rather unknown platform among people who do not participate in fandoms. Bury observes that Tumblr mixes features of Live Journal and Twitter, making it a very convenient tool for fans and fandoms.

A categorization and examples of social media fan motivation types was proposed by Stavros et al., who analyze sports fans (2013). The researchers divide those motivations into four types: passion, hope, esteem and camaraderie.

Table 1. Categorization of social media sports fan motivation types.

Passion	Love	Team-directed displays of strong affection reflecting one or a combination of love, tribalism, encouragement and praise.
	Tribalism	
	Encouragement	
	Praise	
Hope	Ambition	Team-directed pronouncements centered on desirable achievement and outcomes demonstrating one or a combination of ambition, expectation and situational anticipation
	Expectation	
	Anticipation	
Esteem	Venting	Comments directed toward the team and/or fellow fans that share positive or negative personal fandom experiences, or proclaim expertise and knowledge in team related matters.
	Expertise	
	Sharing	
Camaraderie	Socialization	Community directed comments that reflect a desire for identification and interaction within the community, including knowledge seeking and preserving the group from negative influences.
	Belonging	
	Defense	
	Problem-solving	

Source: Stavros, C., et al. (2013), Understanding fan motivation for interacting on social media.

Probably the most common were posts conveying fans' passion and love for a team. Those posts often contained declaration of that team's central role in the fans' lives, as well as statements of fidelity and devotion. The researchers observed that, although social media usually serve as a tool for finding people of similar opinions and starting a discussion, for sports fans they were mainly a platform for stating one's passion. The biggest explanatory utility for other fandoms seems to lay within two last types, esteem and camaraderie, and it would be definitely worth conducting further comparative research of different fandoms' use of social media. The last two types revolve around the sense of belonging, sharing experiences and opinions, but also problem-solving and interaction within community.

The Internet also has its darker side and may have a negative impact on a person, but some of the phenomena are not as obvious as they may seem. R. Pearson gives the example of the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*, which was aired in Great Britain a few weeks prior to its US premiere. In the meantime, the Americans managed to watch it thanks to P2P (peer-to-peer) technology and kindness of the British audience (2010). Although many people would think that it would provide tremendous loss in earnings for the producers, it actually had quite the opposite effect. It seems that people who had seen it told their friends and relatives how good the series was, and thus encouraged them to watch it when it aired on TV. This is also the case for TV series and movies that were never meant for certain markets and would never be seen there without the Internet.

Moreover, many people see the same obstacles and dangers as they always do when discussing computer-mediated communication. People fear that all of the relations, including those of the fans, will be a form of escapism from real problems and that it will be used as a substitute for relationships in real life; clearly, that is a grave simplification of the problem. First of all, it is justifiable to say that online and offline practices are more and more interconnected and it is probably even more visible on the example of fandoms. Secondly, N. Baym argues that many positive online practices are later on used in offline practices too (2000). The most obvious case is learning the rules of a constructive discussion

and getting to know other opinions and attitudes, but also meeting new people and actually establishing new offline relations. Moreover, there are completely new, interesting phenomena, such as making the audience into fans by using social media techniques. Baym shows this on the example of the so-called camgirls who are not famous, but by using social media their “popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management” (2012: 289). Undoubtedly, social media can also change relations between idols and fans in many ways, making both groups closer. They change the fans’ world in many ways, and their presence is inevitable.

1.3. Fan’s creativity and economic potential

Although it has already been mentioned, creativity is, according to many scholars, the core of fandom activity and should be analyzed with special attention. H. Jenkins, while arguing in many of his works that fans are not social misfits, shows their creative and media savvy side calling them the poachers of textual meanings (2006). He shows that a fandom can be a place for all of the marginalized sub-cultural groups, such as women, LGBT community, young people and so on. Those groups see texts as something that must be not only reread, but also rewritten according to their needs, and thus Jenkins’ approach to fandom as a media practice can be clearly seen here. He stresses that being a fan does not mean passive reception, but a kind of cultural activity undertaken in relation to that reception, joining a community and sharing thoughts and feelings on a given subject of interest. Fans’ works are often dialectical: they always introduce a new issue and try to change the original text while being loyal to it at the same time, which means that fandom agrees on certain parts of text that cannot or should not be changed (or rather, continuously discusses which part should have such status), showing respect to the creators and their work. Although fans can be the cruellest critics, they are also the most loyal followers.

Fandoms are often described as examples of the so-called gift culture. Originally used in anthropology, gift culture also appears in modern days societies and groups. R. Sabotini writes that those gifts are the “center-piece of fandom” (2009). The gifts that fans give to each other are usually art objects, such as fan fiction, fan arts, fan videos, *etc.*, but those are definitely not the only things fans share with each other. Another very

popular fan activity undertaken by fans that can also be considered a gift in this category is the so-called *meta* – a narrative analysis of a media text (Hellekson, 2009). T. Turks writes that fans assign special worth to the activities that require time and skills, which are more important than the content or the social gesture (2014). What makes those gifts special is the fact that the person who is giving should always get something in return, and what is typical for fandoms is that those gifts will often be published in a way available to the whole community, even if it was made for a specific person. This process makes the community the main receiver of that worth (Turk, 2014) and is “designed to create and cement a social structure” (Hellekson, 2009). This phenomenon is especially visible on the examples of organizing events such as conventions or creating archives. Fandom’s gift economy is also said to be asymmetrical, because most of the fans will receive more than they give. What is noteworthy is that giving back can mean both exchange of content, but also feedback or discussion. Sabotini points out the role of fans who are nonproductive, meaning that they engage in consuming media texts and information seeking, but do not actively participate in communities. Those fans may, however, express their opinion, and thus in some way give back; for example, by sharing content posts on social media. E. Pearson also notes that a community has a sort of collective memory and fandoms in which members who are identifiable are more likely to be conducive to gift economy, since it can be relatively easy to attribute a gift to a person and judge whether a person is mainly a giver or a taker (2009).

Another important, but also vast problem is the fandoms’ economic potential, which can be closely related to the issue of creativity. This issue is connected to many other aspects that have already been mentioned, the Internet being probably the most vivid one. New technologies allow fans for completely new ways of communicating and undertaking fan activities, but changing relations between the producers (entertainment companies), the product (or an idol, musician, etc.) and fans is probably the most significant challenge right now for all of them. The problem was described by P. Gałuszka in an article on “new economy of fandom”, where he points out both the scale of current fan activities as well as their new forms (2014). Gałuszka proposes few new roles that a fan can

embrace. The first one is a “sponsor” who can buy things in a “pay what you want” system. Initially, it may seem that fans can pay without getting anything in return, but in fact, by improving the artist’s situation, they can expect new tracks, films, or texts in the future. Galuszka argues that this might be the future (and in some cases, the present) way of changing relations between artists and fans, without any company being involved to mediate and manage. Fans can also become co-creators by being encouraged to design album covers or make music videos. This form of cooperation can be obtained, however, only when the artists maintain contact with their fans via social media or emails (or, of course, personal relations). The third idea is that of a fan as a stakeholder in a quasi-business relationship. This idea is probably the most controversial as it suggests inviting people to invest money in exchange for future (possible, not guaranteed) earnings. The fourth concept is business-related as well, basing itself on crowdfunding, while the fifth shows fans as filters, an idea based on so-called netlabels – platforms enabling online distribution. The author notes that setting up such a platform usually starts with one person being a fan of a specific music genre (Galuszka, 2015). Although those five types of fans’ economic activities were created mostly to describe changes within music fandoms, it is possible to imagine such differences in other fields as well, though maybe not to that extent.

Crowdfunding as a sort of fan activity was also analyzed by M. Hills on the example of Veronica Mars fandom (2015). The author refers to the notion of affective economics, which is useful for discussion of the complicated relations between fans’ affective relations with media texts and economic factors. Hills analyzes the concept rather as a scholarly tool than a marketing strategy. He also alludes to K. Roberts’ *lovetmarks* – products which are in fact owned by their fans, not corporations (who are the owners of the legal rights). The concept is aimed to differentiate between the brands that are rather distant and failing to engage the audience, or consumers and those who can insert “themselves into consumer sentiment, memory and identity” (Hills, 2015: 185). Crowdfunding is sometimes perceived by scholars as something that does not require any creativity and thus is not an activity that fans should be expected to do. They argue that the only creative and active element is choosing a product to

support and that it has almost nothing to do with being in a fandom. Nevertheless, new ways of interactions between fans and corporations bring new issues and problems. Crowdfunding will probably never be a solution for every fandom, but it certainly can be one for the smaller ones and for people who wish to have more impact on their favorite content.

A concept related mainly to sports fandoms was described by M. Guschwan who regards sports teams as brands and analyzes the reception of them among fans (2012). He points out a very important, though often overlooked, problem of differences “between participatory fandom and brand-created forms of community” (Guschwan, 2012: 26). The latter he calls *brandoms* – a name especially coined for those groups that were created by brand managers. Guschwan observes that a clear distinction between a real fandom and brandom is difficult to find, because participatory culture is always connected to the market, which is caused by the fact that it is at least partly based on consumption. Branding is also often built on emotions towards product or company, and it often uses fans’ experiences in doing so. Although Guschwan gives an example of a football team’s fan, it is worth remembering that media fandom can also be manipulated into exaggerating their role in the whole system of production, and relations between fans and companies are still worth researching.

1.4. Fandom as a religious form, worshipping of celebrities and idolatry

References to religion and various forms of frenzy are often made when the common understanding of fandoms is involved. The word *idol* itself brings such connotations to the discussion, but there are also mentions of the cults and rites. Beside colloquial thinking there are, however, also scientific deliberations on the topic, showing such behavior as both religious form and as a psychological phenomenon – often rather negative. A. Löbert analyzes fans of Cliff Richard, a British singer, who according to her, just like Michael Jackson in the 1990s, invokes religious symbols and represents himself as a redeemer figure (2008). She writes about a concert experience as an event that held special meaning for the women she talked to. The concert served as a sort of a liberation; not only because

they participated in their idol's performance, but also due to that fact that the event was mainly for women, and their husbands were not expected to be there. Lastly, they had a chance to forget about everyday worries and problems for at least two or three hours. What is interesting in this specific example is the fact that women often attended those concerts in groups that would later go out together to eat, making the concert a larger social undertaking than just listening to music of one's favorite artist. One of the respondents in Löbert's survey explained that those concerts gave her something to look forward to, and that thanks to that she managed to get through the hard times she was experiencing. By showing that concerts are pivotal elements of Richard's fans' activities, Löbert further explains how this was related to religious forms. The concert is a sort of a ritual in which the fans regularly participate; it is also described as a form of taking a break from everyday life routine and thus has a similar role to a carnival. The author stresses, however, that comparisons with religious forms do not mean that she perceives fandom as a sort of religion. The observation is only useful as a phenomenon with similar practices that can help us understand what being a fan means and why people engage in fandom, but it is definitely not an attempt to treat fan actions as a form of religion *per se* (Löbert, 2012). She refers to Durkheim's work on religious forms of life and analyzes what can be understood as sacred and what as profane to describe concerts as primary interaction ritual. Such a ritual cannot mix the sacred and profane, and she points toward the stage as a kind of altar, being separated and higher than the audience. The fans themselves also care for the concert to not be interrupted by such behavior as eating or speaking loudly, which they see as a kind of profanation of the event. That is also why the husbands were not welcome at Richard's concert; they were symbols of the profane world and of another ritual – marriage. Löbert then asked fans about their individual experiences in everyday life as a type of the Durkheimian cult of the individual, and they often said that it is common for them to listen to Richard's CDs at work or while doing house chores. This stands in contrast with the French sociologist's conception and shows that, in this way, the profane and sacred can be mixed, which is even clearer when one thinks about the calendars, posters and memorabilia that fans use to adorn their houses. Interestingly, some of

the respondents stated that their fandom does have a kind of sacred feeling and, for example, they save watching the musician's videos for the time when their husbands are on work trips or use the watching experience to relax after work, but they do make a kind of special time out of it. In conclusion, Löbert proposes the following distinction:

Table 2. Distinction between four ritual action types for the interaction between a star and a fan.

	Presence of the star	Absence of the star
Presence of fellow fans	Primary interaction ritual	Secondary interaction ritual
Absence of fellow fans	Special rites	Cult of the individual

Source: A. Löbert (2012), *Fandom as a religious form: on the reception of pop music by Cliff Richard fans in Liverpool*.

The core interaction is the primary interaction ritual which, in this case, were the concert trips. In secondary interaction rituals the star is only present in a symbolic way: in the described fandom they were fan club meetings or joint preparations for the concert. Classified as special rites were the situations when people were allowed to meet the star backstage and the last one – the aforementioned cult of the individual. It is worth noting, however, that within each type fans can manifest different approaches and behaviors, but each one of them provides a sort of pleasure and reinforces being in a fandom as passion.

Idols can also purposefully use religious references. R. Till analyzes Prince's stage creation and off-stage works (2010). The artist often used many church-related symbols or means, such as organ music or even the phrase "Dearly beloved we are gathered here today...", which, according to Till, is used in order to prepare the audience that they are about to not only listen to their idol, but to worship him. Prince is also said to use the color purple as an indication that his work (and he himself by extension) is a mixture of the sacred and profane as blue is often a symbol of the human and red of the divine.

G. Laderman gives the example of Rudolph Valentino's death in 1926 as one of the earliest cases of celebrities being treated as deities (2009).

The author describes the people's need to be as near to their idol as possible, to see him for the last time and even bring gifts, a behavior that resembles a religious form; but he then points to the modern psychology and sociology findings that show people in general as born to mimic others, in particular those that seem the most successful and the fittest. In this approach fans are only the most vivid examples of such behavior.

Modern psychology also finds this topic interesting and focuses on the personality of an idol worshipper. The literature on this phenomenon is vast and varies in terms of valorization of it. Giles and Maltby observe that a number of people who can influence adolescents has changed substantially with the rise of mass media (2004). Back in the day only four groups had this kind of impact (peers, relatives, parents and teachers), but nowadays young people are exposed to a much wider spectrum of influential figures. It is important to note, however, that at this point of life it is only natural for people to seek role models (parasocial relationship). The research proves that if the attachment to one's parents is weaker, then there is a bigger chance that an adolescent would feel a stronger connection with idols and vice versa; however, this relation has a positive correlation with peer relations, suggesting that they develop simultaneously (Giles, Maltby, 2004). The study also shows that many teenagers form a strong relation with idols in times of solitude or stress, it may also be a way of dealing with distancing oneself from their parents as one ages, though this usually passes with time and one's maturation. The problem starts when a person becomes an adult and the relationship with an idol still dominates their life.

A similar problem was described by E. Fromm, who writes about idolatry (1998). He argues that every person, regardless of their relationship with their parents, has a deeply-rooted need for faith in an omnipotent and utterly wise figure (called by him a "magic helper") with which that person has a strong relationship. This relationship can often take a form of love or devout fear; Fromm points out that it resembles that of a parent and a child. The fact that the person is rather passive in such relationships (their role in it is solely forbidding abandonment) does not make it less intensive. On the contrary, the stronger their dissatisfaction with the relationships with their closest family and friends is, the more they will rely

on this magical helper; an idol. It must be stressed, however, that Fromm uses the word idol for religious idols, institutions, groups, charismatic leaders, parents or even nature powers. The larger idol's role in someone's life is, the more significant the problem with that person's self-identity. The idol, who is in fact a product of one's mind, becomes a being superior to that person, more important and dominating. The most obvious example for such relation is religion, but Fromm argues that even when its role lessened, nation, state and economy became such idols. These phenomena, when appearing on a larger scale, may even result in a cult of personality, imperialism or nationalism.

Scholars propose various categorizations and typologies for celebrity worshippers. First of all, McCutcheon et al. propose differentiation between mild forms (nonpathological) and extreme expressions (pathological). Fans' actions are considered to be pathological when they involve erotomania (delusions that a celebrity is in love with that person), stalking, inappropriate correspondence with celebrities that are often caused by trust issues and problems with maintaining relationships (McCutcheon, et al., 2002). Studies based on the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) suggest three sets of attitudes and behaviors associated with celebrity worship:

There is *entertainment-social* celebrity worship that reflects an attraction to a favourite celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain and social focus. There are *intense-personal* attitudes reflecting intensive and compulsive feelings about the celebrity. The most extreme expression of celebrity worship is *borderline-pathological*, thought to reflect an individual's social-pathological attitudes and behaviors. (Maltby, et al., 2006: 274).

Maltby et al. argue that those three sets may be related to the so-called Eysenckian personality theory that is extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism (2006). Although later studies show the correlation was not so obvious, it clearly shows how deeply idol worshipping is based in both theory of psychology as well as empirical research of the topic.

Interestingly, some of the psychologists seem to be skeptical towards fan studies, arguing that it may be a glorification of neuropsychological deviations; in fact, their research shows that "individuals who were more

strongly attracted to their favorite celebrity (celebrity worshippers) were likely to score lower on measures of general information, creativity, critical thinking, and spatial ability” (McCutcheon, et. al, 2003: 311), and that people with “higher cognitive functioning are protected from becoming absorbed in fantasies about celebrities for various reasons” (2003: 319). It seems, however, that the scholars do not differentiate here between the aforementioned pathological and nonpathological forms in their research, treating all forms of fan activities (from fan club membership to stalking idols) equally. G. Stever points out the differences in the meanings of a fan and a celebrity worshipper (2011). Although previous analysis often used those terms as synonyms, such presumptions can be “fundamentally flawed” and – as Stever’s studies show – in fact are. Fandom members cannot be treated as a whole: they present different levels of commitment, different behaviors and attitudes (and, of course, areas of interest). Certainly, some of them may be idol worshippers (such as the so-called *sasaeng* fans, further analyzed in Chapter 2), but it would be a mischaracterization if we would call lurkers idol worshippers and imply that their disorders qualify for therapy treatment.

1.5. Global fandom vs local fandom

Fandoms in the 21st century are inseparably connected to the Internet development and changes in the new media. The most significant changes that are caused by it are dissemination of fandom as a media practice and accessibility of those communities. Fandoms change just like the communication in general does: it crosses geographical borders and is not dependent on time.

With that in mind, research on global and local fandoms emerged, but not all scholars are optimistic about this vision. P. Siuda argues in his book (2012) that one, supranational fandom cannot exist, mainly because of the cultural differences that influence text reception and just the fact of the presence of diverse forms of access to those texts. The author points out that the academia seems to forget about regions that are not visible in the mainstream media, such as Africa, South America or South Asia. Siuda thinks that the first step is to acknowledge that only transnational, not supranational communities may exist; however, according to

him even those are unlikely to emerge if we consider determinants that are required for communities to be consolidated. He enumerates determinants of real societies (mutual interaction, similarity of activity and views, influence, support, cooperation) and virtual realities (similarity of activity and views, stability of identity, durability, support, cooperation) that cannot be achieved in transnational communities because of the economic, cultural, political and historical differences. The author writes that the United States of America are the core center of mainstream pop culture and that the countries that are far away cannot produce fan communities with all of the aforementioned determinants. Fans in those countries would not engage in all of the activities, such as guessing how the plot of a story would change or what were the secret meaning behind some symbols, even if someone had the access to all the texts and media. Although it is certainly true that it is impossible for a community whose members would perform exactly the same types of behaviors all over the world, perceiving media texts in the same way to exist, with the emergence of new, regional cultural centers, the existence of such groups on a smaller, yet still transnational scale could occur. Many experiences show that fans from all over the world often engage in similar or even the same practices and that language and cultural differences do not seem to be a problem. In particular, platforms such as Tumblr enable and encourage similar fan practices. Certainly, this does not apply to all fans from a given country, but it appears that in some cases people prefer international interactions to relations with fans from the same country. Although it requires further, mainly comparative research, this situation is visible in K-Pop fandom. A Polish fan can be a part of Polish community that functions mainly on Facebook with Polish as its main language, but can also be a part of the so-called international fandom and discuss or create in English in the same way as his or her colleagues from Spain, France, Colombia or any other country without mentioning their country of origin. While it is highly improbable for one, universal K-Pop fandom to ever emerge, especially when taking Korean, Chinese or Japanese fans into account, it seems that fans from non-Asian countries form a rather homogeneous group in terms of fan activities. Interestingly, however, it appears that those fans may be a kind of elite in their

home countries, both in terms of the use of media as well as socio-economic status; a fact that may confirm theories about similar life-styles and interests being the main features while forming groups understood as Maffesoli's neotribes. Although those observations are at this point only speculations, K-Pop fandom, and probably many others, seems to have a complex structure, meaning that within one country there are at least two "sub-fandoms" that differ in terms of what one can call geographical affiliation. Polish fandom could be understood as fandom that uses Polish as its main language and having predominantly Polish members, but also as Poles who participate in international discussions. Very often fans would choose only one of those forms and dedicate their time to it. If we add to that different levels of participation and creativity, fandom starts to be seen as a very complicated and complex, multi-level structure.

A. Kustritz, in the editorial in the *Transformative Works and Culture* special issue observes that fan studies are already a rather developed research field and not only comparative studies are needed, but it would also be interesting to explore various regions; however, it "requires consideration of how processes of localization and translation interact with international media flow and the specific legal, cultural, and linguistic contingencies of being a fan and enacting fandom in particular places" (2015). In the same book, one of the chapters was devoted to the problems of Polish fandom identity and patriotism. In the paper the authors argue that Poland historically and economically has semiperipheral status in the global cultural exchange (Kucharska, et al., 2015). Their research on science fiction and fantasy fandom (one of the oldest Polish fandoms, emerging in the previous, communist system) shows that Poles display very ambivalent reactions when their homeland appears in any media texts; on the one hand, they are very interested in the ways Polish accents may be used, but on the other they tend to be very critical, especially when it involves Polish history. Fan conventions are also almost always strongly connected to region-based fan organizations; however, the authors see the change in recent years into more Western-style, which means more commercialization and professional instead of volunteer, organization. This change was a response to fandom's demand, probably caused by globalization and spreading of ideas thanks to the Internet. In-

terestingly, Polish SF&F fans also see the need to protect Polish language. Although many texts are published in English, fans discuss whether some names, words or even whole texts should be translated into Polish. Finding consensus in this matter is rather difficult, but nevertheless it is worth noting that it became a topic for discussion, which is a part of a broader discussion on Polish (or other local fandoms) fandom as a part of global fandom in general.

By showing examples of manga and anime fandom overseas as well as K-Pop fandom beyond Korea, H. Lee argues that “transnational cultural fandom is emerging as a powerful force of cultural globalization and is making the globalization process further complicated” (2014). Using these two cases he indicates that the understanding of what local and global is changes and that it is often flawed due to our own perspective (which according to Lee is especially visible within American academia). He points out the new forms of fan activity that could emerge only in transnational environments, such as translations or subtitling. Lee rightfully stresses the relations between transnational fandom and nation-branding projects, which is a section in which fan studies should be analyzed in the context of international relations studies and public diplomacy.

Another interesting point regarding transnational media practices involves the type of those practices. Jenkins et al. write about differences between commercial distribution and grassroots, creative practices (2013). The first one can actually exist without cultural markers, while the second type requires more skills and knowledge to be understood and conducted. Participatory culture often mobilizes people to learn foreign languages or other countries’ culture to be able to understand all the nuances of the texts and fellow community members’ points and remarks. This, however, can produce the problem of the “impure” culture, a mix of different approaches and understandings, some of them rather distant from the original one, but the discussion on whether it is actually a problem remains unresolved.

It must also be stressed that there are two important factors that influence the relation between local fandom and its global dimension: technology availability and language proficiency. While it was already said

that the Internet changes fan communities and allows for their communication all over the world, it should always be considered within specific context. The case of Sweden, where 92 percent of all the citizens between ages 16 and 24 have the access to the Internet at home on a daily basis, and where the teenagers' English proficiency is exceptionally high, shows that those two factors influence their engagement in fan practices (Olin-Scheller, Sundqvist, 2015). Undoubtedly, for those fans participating in the international digital fandoms would not be an issue. In the same survey that was quoted in the Swedish case analysis (*SurveyLang, ESLC Final Report*, 2012) a table showing percentage of 15-years-old students at each CEFR level by educational system using composite index shows that, while 57% of Swedish students were on B2 level, which is considered a level that allows for fluent communication, in Poland the same proficiency was only at 10% at that time. In the ICT Development Index (published by the UN International Telecommunication Union, measuring both technology infrastructure in a given country as well as its citizen skills) Sweden is ranked at 11th place (with Iceland and South Korea being absolute leaders), while Poland is ranked at 49th between Hungary and Bulgaria (*Measuring the Information Society Report*, 2017). Although Internet access and language skills are not the only factors that influence fan practices in the international digital fandoms, they should always be taken into consideration.

1.6. Anti-fans

One of the fields that seems to be the least explored in the fan studies are the anti-fans – the people who have very strong but negative feelings towards certain subject. The common understanding would imply that those people are just what one could nowadays call “haters”, but the issue is much more complex. Anti-fans often have wide knowledge of the topic and are active in sharing their opinion on it, and thus can be sometimes understood as “ironic lovers” that find pleasure in bad texts (van de Goor, 2015). Sometimes anti-fans can be former fans who came to dislike a show or a musician after a change of style or a plot twist they could not accept. They disapprove of certain text or subject by “considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel” (Grey, 2007: 70).

D. Alters shows also that sometimes parents can become anti-fans (or non-fans), arguing that their role as media critics was in their understanding a part of being a parent (2007). Such people often refer to pop culture from their youth as something better, more valuable and through that criticism they can express their dissatisfaction with current socio-economic situation. More commonly, however, such sentiments would appear when there are binary oppositions, which are especially visible in the sports fandom. Being an anti-fan is in this situation determined by being a fan of the opposing team; the two sentiments become intertwined, since hate for one team originates from the need to protect the other (Theodoropoulou, 2007). The author also notes that this binary opposition is visible in cases of textual proximity, using Star Wars and Star Trek fans as an example of the communities which dislike one another. The hatred becomes anti-fandom when there is actually fear and respect for another team, band or whatever the subject is; as Theodoropoulou writes, “the fact that something is good enough to be a counterforce to a fan object is what creates a balance of fear and makes an anti-fan” (2007: 319). It also should be noted that, especially in case of sports fandom, though not exclusively in it, socio-historical background might play a crucial role in creation of attitudes towards certain subject. It is also said that discussion between fans and anti-fans are often very playful and both sides can take pleasure in them. That, however, seems to depend greatly on culture and maturity of the fans, as well as the aforementioned socio-historical factors. The difference between the Spanish league fans and the Polish league fans is clear in this matter even for people who are not sports fans. Spain has a long tradition of football games that is inscribed in the country’s culture (sports news magazines are often more frequently purchased than the national dailies), and although football clubs can be strongly connected to history or ideology, the relations between fans of the Spanish teams are much less hostile than in the Polish league, where fans are often aggressive towards each other and thus called pseudo-fans or fanatics. Nevertheless, the nature of such processes should be analyzed as a separate and very complex phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, anti-fans influence the image of a given interest (Grey, 2007). It can even be argued that in order to fully understand a certain

text, subject or phenomenon, we should analyze both the fans and anti-fans for their reactions and opinions. A. Hill (2015), referring to Grey's article, pointed out that there are moments in which people can be fans and anti-fans almost in the same moment. She analyzes professional wrestling and discovered that a live event is based on "sporting drama." The audience reacts to every movement by either cheering or booing and the wrestlers get motivation from it. Both negative and positive emotions, as long as they are strong, seem to give them energy to fight. Hill notes that such a behavior is a part of the role that both the audience and the wrestlers have to play. After the game they can become entirely different people.

Fans and fandoms are a complex field of studies that do not fit into simple definitions. They are not only better understood when using axis and directions instead of strict borders and general rules that apply to all the cases, but fan studies in general are (or can be) truly inter- or multidisciplinary. To present all of the nuances one would have to appeal to communication studies and media studies, but also to international relations and economic studies (fan investments, cultural production, center-periphery theory, cultural diplomacy, *etc.*), political science (both in terms of relations between cultural industry and the state as well as the hierarchy, structures and leadership within fandoms), gender studies, anthropology, psychology, or even law (copyrights). The ongoing changes in communication processes, technology, as well as in modern societies influence people's behavior and attitudes, which is clearly reflected in fan activities. The way they organize their communities which are independent in terms of rules and values from other restraints (as long as they are obeying the law) is an interesting phenomenon that can show us how people organize, communicate and form a structure, but also how they use media, interpret it and use their creativity.

In further parts of this book I will analyze the Polish K-Pop fandom in order to show how young people in Poland form communities, communicate with each other and what they consider important while forming structures and choosing leaders. This seems to be especially interesting, because I believe that the way they operate within such groups, and what

they learn from it, will in the future affect their behavior in larger groups and eventually in the society. Another intriguing aspect is the fact that the Polish K-Pop fandom is a local example of the global phenomenon and thus the research will be also an addition to the discussion on transnational fandoms.



2

K-Pop and the Korean Wave – a global phenomenon

Korean pop music (K-Pop) has gone through numerous changes in the recent years. Starting with the image of a poor imitation of Japanese pop music, South Korean entertainment industry grew to be a worldwide-respected and complex production system. Creative content export expands each year and Korean pop culture is not associated with traditional Korean music, an exotic novelty or just with nothing in particular anymore. Although still criticized for being fake and produced instead of being an individual form of art, the popularity of K-Pop has changed significantly. Nowadays, K-Pop bands perform in the United States of America with the most famous artists of the mainstream (mainly American) pop culture, while in Europe fans of this music genre become more recognizable. One could argue, however, that K-Pop just appeared out of nowhere and became popular overnight, but that is not the case. South Korea carefully constructed its pop culture success, undoubtedly with help of some exterior factors (economic and technological), but was far from leaving anything to chance. The following chapter will present the history of this phenomenon, its definition as well as the changes that can be noticed.

2.1. K-Pop – definitions, history, phenomenon

Although K-Pop definitely did not appear suddenly and without preparation, it is safe to say that its popularity skyrocketed in the last few years.

Korean pop music became a part of a wider phenomenon called the Korean Wave or Hallyu¹ (romanization of the Korean word한류, in Chinese 韩流, *hánliú*), and understanding it is crucial to understanding what K-Pop is. The name was coined in 1998 by Chinese media who experienced the swarming popularity of South Korean popular culture in their country (Kim, 2013). The late 1990s was the time when Seoul became an exporter rather than an importer of creative content. Previously importing mostly from China, Japan and Singapore, South Korea became a regional cultural center thanks to both internal and external factors. At that time Seoul had to overcome the IMF crisis and propose completely new programs to help the country's economy. Quite surprisingly for the international audience, South Korea chose pop culture and creative content export as one of the main pillars that were supposed to solve their problems. When devaluation of Korean won made products from this country affordable and competitive, the process only sped up. From the early 1990s, the entertainment industry in this country was already rather well-developed, and its high quality of production granted it a level of appreciation in Asia, where it was not much of a surprise that Korean pop culture became well-known worldwide. The second facilitator for such a success, though over a decade later, were new technologies, in particular social media (mostly YouTube). Although it could have been unexpected for European or American audience, by 2000s South Korea was a regional cultural center aiming for further markets, and a thorough analysis shows that the process was meticulous. Undoubtedly, while the economy crisis and technology development could not be planned, every other aspect of it was. Seoul very quickly understood the power of new technologies, investing in this sector and encouraging home companies, a process mirrored when it came to pop culture. It would be safe to say that the Korean Wave was a creation of both the Korean government and the entertainment industry.

Until 2013, the Korean Wave development was divided by scholars into two stages: the first one starting in the 1990s, and the second one in

1 The word will be used with a capital letter as the name of the phenomenon, however it does mean "Korean wave" and can be also written as *hallyu*.

2000s and lasting until now (Howard, 2013)². The first stage was led by Korean dramas (TV series or soap operas) and the so-called first-generation idol groups (such as H.O.T and g.o.d), while the second focused mainly on K-Pop. Both stages also differed in their geographical range, the first one focusing on Asia, and the second expanding on to the Middle East, Americas and Europe. Moreover, the second stage was characterized by more noticeable role of social media and fans, who became a sort of Korean culture ambassadors and started to introduce it to their friends. Although it might be too early to distinguish the third stage of Korean Wave development, it is safe to point to some emerging trends. If the first stage was led by dramas, and the second by music, it seems that the third stage might be led by lifestyle – a complex construct of cultural content mixed with cosmetics, technologies or even a type of aesthetics. If YouTube fueled the development of K-Pop and promotion of South Korean musicians, Instagram seems to promote a kind of lifestyle that is alluring to modern youth. The geographical scope of the phenomenon also seems to widen, with K-Pop idols performing on galas in the USA and making worldwide tours for their fans (just two or three years ago a Korean idol group's so-called world tour included only Asia and a few cities in Northern America). In the third stage, the Korean Wave with K-Pop and lifestyle as its main pillars might become an alternative mainstream culture instead of very powerful, but still peripheral content.

Although K-Pop is nowadays widely discussed, it must be noted that for many years Korean pop music was omitted because experts thought that it was just a copy of Japanese or Chinese one. K. Howard observes that even books devoted to Asian culture did not mention K-Pop, focusing only on traditional Korean music, language and history (2013), which was also fueled by the fact that Koreans themselves felt that K-Pop was

2 In the literature a division into following four waves can be also found: 1) late 1990s to early 2000s, 2) early to mid 2000s, 3) mid to late 2000s and 4) late 2000s until today. The first wave would cover Seo Taiji and the Boys' success and first governmental attempts to support creative content industry, the second was connected to the first successes of artists such as BoA and Rain who made K-Pop visible, but also to first failures in targeting US market, the third was led by boy and girlgroups with DBSK and Super Junior and their popularity in Southeast Asia, while the fourth is characterized by perfectly mastered production system and further expansion towards Europe, the Middle East and both Americas. (Jung, 2015).

too Western and too different from their traditional music. The other factor that greatly influenced Korean popular music market was the state that controlled broadcasting stations and culture until South Korean's democratization in 1988, though the control was relevant to some extent after that. Artists had to avoid controversial topics which resulted in very similar content being produced for many years. The change is often being attributed to the band Seo Taiji and the Boys who introduced rap music to Koreans, and who for the first time created their own image, instead of being dependent on broadcasting stations (Howard, 2013). This was the beginning of hybridization and mixing music genres that is a strong characteristic of K-Pop even today. Soon after Seo Taiji and the Boys' debut, first music videos started to be produced and first K-Pop bands started to appear. It is often mentioned that although K-Pop is often criticized for being "too Western" and different from Asian, traditional music, it was actually one of the first genres that managed to use well-known patterns and structures to make something completely new. It also used subcultures (such as hip-hop in the Western culture) to make mainstream culture products and mixed it with meaningful lyrics that were a very distinct characteristic of Korean ballads in the 1960s. Rap is also a noticeable characteristic of today's K-Pop: at least one of the group members is supposed to be a rapper and very often even more than a half of the group raps. Rapping in the verses and singing the chorus or having a rapped bridge in the song is still practiced and probably will not be changed in the nearest future. While rap and hip-hop might be associated with the US, the European influence on K-Pop is often seen through common utilizing of electronic music such as EDM.

Nowadays, the music is also inseparably connected to the visual sphere, and K-Pop should always be discussed as not only music but also choreographies, music videos and more. An important difference from other music genres is the whole system of promotion. Groups and artists not only release new music albums, but they "make a comeback", which means not only presenting new music, but also a new "concept" (image, style; different for each music album or sometimes even for each single). Every group has their main concept, such as being cute, funny, sexy, more like high school students or more mature, which is undoubtedly

connected to their fans and main target group age (and might change with time and the fans' ages as it can be seen on the example of older generation's groups such as Shinhwa, Super Junior or DBSK), but they also come up with new, more detailed ideas for every album. Those ideas are presented not only during the promotional photoshoots, but also during performances in music programs in all major TV stations (such as KBS' *Music Bank* running since 1988, SBS' *Inkigayo*, MBC's *Show! Music Core*, etc.) that are a part of promotion strategy as well. The groups battle each other in those programs, which makes K-Pop somewhat similar to sports in this regard. Stars compete in music programs, but also during award ceremonies, and fandom members behave in a very similar way to sports fandom members, supporting their favorites and being anxious about the results of their performances. This aspect makes different K-Pop group fandoms more competitive and sometimes hostile towards the others, as this kind of competition fuels comparisons between specific groups, especially those targeting similar age groups and those with similar concepts, or just those who are the most popular at a given time (as was the case with Super Junior and Big Bang around the year 2010, and is now seen with BTS and EXO).

K-Pop has been constantly evolving, and although some of its characteristics were present from the very beginning, it introduces new ideas as well, both in terms of music and promotion strategies. Just by looking at the winners of the Golden Disk Awards³ or Mnet Asian Music Award⁴, one can observe changes in style and strategies of the Korean pop music industry. Until late 1990s, the awards for Album of the Year were always awarded to solo singers, such as Kim Gunmo or Shin Seunghun who were mostly known for their ballads. The first boyband that got this award was SM Entertainment's H.O.T (Highfive of Teenagers), who won with their album *Wolf and Sheep* in 1997. For four more years the title was awarded to ballad singers, and in 2001 the group g.o.d (Groove Over Dose) won with *Chapter 4: Road*. Since 2005 only idol groups have been winning the Album of the Year at the Golden Disk Awards. It is worth noting,

3 Annual Korean music awards ceremony first awarded in 1986.

4 One of the biggest music awards ceremony in the region organized by South Korean entertainment company CJ E&M first held in 2006.

however, that ballad singers are still very popular, as it can be evidenced by singer IU's massive popularity.

Picture 1. The boy group H.O.T performing the song *Candy* in MBC's *Top Music* program, 07.12.1996. The group used the elements of hip-hop style in their outfits, mixing it with colorfulness and playful elements such as giant gloves that matched the general happy feeling of the song.



Source: MBCKpop Official YouTube channel.

Since around 2005 K-Pop began to take shape it has currently. Although at first it was criticized for being too similar to J-Pop aesthetics-wise, soon enough it proved to be a unique hybrid of both Western and Asian music genres. One of those one-off characteristics is based on Korean values and ballad-driven history of popular music, as K-Pop artists are usually rather modest compared to their Western counterparts, both in terms of songs' lyrics and idols' appearance. Not only their lyrics are analyzed; the dance routines are also scrutinized by state institutions or broadcasting stations before releasing a new track, and it is determined whether they are suitable for television or not. Some of the K-Pop artists choose to purposely publish controversial songs, but if a group or a singer aims for the Song of the Year title, they have to consider all of the interpretations to avoid a possible ban and repercussions.

Picture 2. Screenshot from DBSK's music video for *Mirotic* (released in 2008). It is one of the most well-known K-Pop songs and has been covered by many other artists, but at first it was ruled by the Commission of Youth Protection to be overly sexual and not suitable for minors.



Source: SMTOWN Official YouTube Channel

Since 2010 Golden Disk Awards' have been dominated by SM Entertainment's idol groups such as Girls' Generation, Super Junior and, since 2014, EXO. The entertainment company is known for focusing on visual aspects and the looks of its artists; it would be safe to say that, since 2010, the beauty of idols was increasingly important in K-Pop world⁵. The specific, rather effeminate type of male beauty has its own name in Korean language: men with delicate features are often called *flower boys* but, unlike in Western countries, the term has very positive connotations.

While looking at MAMA and GDA ceremonies, one might say that the last three years in K-Pop have been dominated by the boy bands EXO and BTS and the girl group Twice, which in fact is telling when it comes to the trends that can be seen in K-Pop's development.

5 South Korea is known for its enormous plastic surgery and cosmetics market. It is one of the first countries that introduced cosmetic products lines for men. It is believed that this fact is rooted in Korea's cultural heritage, which is even reflected in country's traditional clothing, *hanbok*, which emphasizes face and posture of a person that is wearing it, unlike Chinese clothing emphasizing legs or Japanese kimono stressing the nape of the neck.

Picture 3. A screenshot from Girls' Generation hit song *Gee* music video showing aesthetics that have dominated K-Pop for many years: colorful clothes and sets, but also beautiful faces and slim figures of idols.



Source: SMTOWN Official YouTube channel.

Picture 4. After being criticized for becoming too similar to Western artists and forgetting about their roots, the idol group BTS recorded a song *Idol* with music video (and the song itself) filled with references to Korean traditional culture elements.



Source: Big Hit Entertainment Official YouTube Channel.

EXO is a group that was targeting two markets (Korean and Chinese) at the same time, which shows how serious Korean companies are about expanding the popularity of their bands. BTS originally focused on hip-hop music, bringing back the memories of the first K-Pop groups, while Twice are being called “K-Pop darlings”, and rely on their cute concept combined with catchy hit songs and easy to repeat trademark dance moves.

Picture 5. Screenshot from Twice’s music video for the song entitled “TT”, which shows one of the easy to repeat trademark hand gesture.



Source: JYP Entertainment Official YouTube channel.

The hybridization of K-Pop will probably evolve even more, considering how many new strategies appeared only in 2018. One of the ideas that is definitely interesting and worth following is the SM Entertainment strategy for the group Super Junior. While the group’s song *Sorry, sorry* was played in most of the East and Southeast Asian countries in 2009 and is thought to be one of the K-Pop’s milestones, the group’s popularity faded slightly with EXO’s debut and Super Junior members serving their obligatory military service (and therefore disappearing for almost 2 years). The entertainment company, seeing that Super Junior is no longer a top idol group in South Korea, has changed the strategy and seems to focus on Latin America where the band’s popularity was the largest. In 2018 the group released two songs that were partly sung in Spanish in collaboration with other artists (*Lo Siento* with Leslie Grace and *One More Time (Otra Vez)* with Mexican band REIK) and one song, *Ahora Te Puedes Marchar* sung entirely in Spanish by Super Junior members.

Picture 6. A screenshot from Super Junior's music video for the song One More Time (Otra Vez) with interior design elements associated strongly with Latin America.



Source: SMTOWN Official YouTube Channel

While singing in other languages, especially in Japanese and Chinese, is nothing new in K-Pop and can be seen on the example of yet another song released in 2018 – GOT7's *Lullaby* released in four different versions (English, Chinese, Korean and Spanish) – Super Junior's case is particularly interesting because it is not only about one song or album, but it seems like a new, long-term strategy for that band. It is also noteworthy that it influences the group's popularity not only in the Latin America, but in Korea and the rest of the world as well bringing out cultural hybridity as one of the most important of K-Pop's features.

Well-known by its fans, Korean pop music also became an interesting topic of detailed analysis for scholars and experts. Studies focus on both practical applications as well as theoretical approach or models for comparative studies. M. Seo adopts W. Griswold's Cultural Diamond model (2008) and proposes K-Pop success' diamond model with four apexes that can help to analyze the phenomenon in which he shows the inseparable elements that, according to the author, were crucial for this genre's rising popularity.



Figure 1. K-Pop success' diamond model. Source: M. Seo (2012), *K-pop's Global Success and Implications*.

Seo has changed *producers* from the original model into *preparation* (talent agencies systematic preparation system), *cultural object* into *content* (singing, choreography, styles), *social world* into *delivery* (active use of social networking sites), and *receivers* into *consumers* (IT-savvy fan base). The changed model shows a modern day creative content production strategy. The first element is at the same time one of the most actively criticized aspects of K-Pop – idol trainings. Such trainings in South Korea are known to be exceptionally long (usually five to seven years), very harsh and, what is probably the most difficult part, they do not guarantee becoming an idol. After few years of exhausting practices the company may decide that a trainee is not good enough and decide on not letting him or her debut, which can be especially difficult for young people. Seo, however, rightfully notes that this competition, introduced at the very beginning and letting only the best of the best into industry, guarantees the highest level of the industry. The trainings teach the aspiring stars not only dancing and singing, but also acting, entertaining and foreign languages. When it comes to delivery, the model stresses the use of social media as a crucial point in communicating with global markets. K-Pop has skillfully

embraced new technologies and used them to overcome American hegemony in the world's mainstream pop culture and reach their audience through different channels. Although the first fan base of Korean dramas consisted mostly of middle aged women, K-Pop is believed (and many researchers confirm that) to be music of young people, for whom the new technologies are just a part of their life. It seems that Korean entertainment industries have very quickly grasped the potential of fandoms, their creativity and loyalty, and used it to promote their content, which is also the last element of the model and underlines the fact that K-Pop is a complex product. It is not only music, but also choreographies, style, aesthetic and so on. Under the label of K-Pop, a fan or a consumer gets a whole set of artistic endeavors. Idols are often used as multi-use product and although it may sound like a 21st century form of slavery (and in fact, in some cases it would not be far from the truth), Korean idols know exactly what they are doing while signing contracts. Their image can be connected with different products and used as props in commercials or as co-creators of them. Similar techniques are used in the Western industry, but it seems that South Korea is more open about it and, in a rather Confucian style, Korean idols seek opportunities to help their company expand and therefore help their country – a concept that will be described further in the next part of the chapter.

It must be underlined that Korean pop music was not always the same as the modern K-Pop is. Even until the 1990s pop music in South Korea did not stand out from the rest of Asian music, which was caused by the aforementioned strong relations with previous government, which until 1988 was *de facto* a military dictatorship. Music at that time had different objectives than it has today: it was supposed to be cheerful, rather tranquil and not concern any sensitive topics (Howards, 2013). Although most of the scholars agree that K-Pop is substantially different from traditional Korean music, H. Sim, S. Kim and B. Lee show some similarities between modern Korean music and *gwangdae* – traditional entertainers-performers (2017). Beside the fact that both *gwangdae* and K-Pop are about performance (Kim, Bae, 2017), the first similarity would be forming groups. *Gwangdae* also used to form something the scholars call “credible commitment” – a set of values and customs binding a group of entertainers that undoubtedly can resemble the trainings of future K-Pop idols. The young artists are taught not only

skills required for their job, but also an ideology, a set of values and norms. The competition present in the process of training new idols is also a common point for both systems. Although very stressful, it allows the artists for self-development and skill improvement, which is one of the most distinctive features of K-Pop. Many people criticize this genre for not being artistic enough or being just a sort of idol factory, but no one denies the artists' dancing and singing skills. Similarly, for *gwangdae*, who had to compete with other groups, since in the Joseon era there were limited opportunities for all of the groups to perform; therefore, everyone had to try to improve their abilities and become the best in order to earn a living. The third common feature that was listed by the scholars was a type of satire and humor (*pungja* and *haehak*) that both K-Pop and *gwangdae* share. It is said that K-Pop often shows particular social environment and puts it in a critical perspective by using a satirical aesthetic (just like Psy's *Gangnam Style*). Surprisingly, the last common feature is the Korean language itself and its characteristic sound (Sim et al., 2017). There are even more similarities that are listed by some other scholars, who argue that the fast and repetitive tempo, so typical for the biggest K-Pop hits, is also a reference to traditional Korean songs. Nevertheless, it is sure that with the rise of the Korean Wave popularity, Koreans and other scholars are beginning to analyze more thoroughly the origins and characteristics of K-Pop.

Korean pop music should always be seen as a long-term strategy of both entertainment companies and the government. A good example of such approach is SM Entertainment's⁶ group EXO. The company's CEO Lee Sooman said in 2005 that, "this would be the world's first example of a 'franchised' pop band. We will use Chinese talent to appeal to a Chinese audience but meeting Korean production standard" (Kim, 2007: 340). In 2012, seven years after those words were said (and one can only speculate when the idea for this band first appeared), the band debuted and from the very beginning was split into two subgroups – EXO-K (K standing for Korean) and EXO-M (Mandarin).

6 Until very recently Korean music industry used the name of the Big Three for the three biggest entertainment companies: SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment; however, after debuting the band BTS (Bangtan Boys), a fourth company – BigHit Entertainment – entered this elite group. The original Big Three is listed by the Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency as "related companies" (*Investment Opportunities in Korea...*).

Picture 7. Screenshot from one of the first scenes in EXO-K's *Wolf* released in 2013 with a famous tree formation that was part of the dance choreography and is still considered to be a group's trademark.



Source: SMTOWN Official YouTube Channel

The subgroups were supposed to promote simultaneously in two countries – Korea and China – having the same songs in two versions and, at the beginning of their career, they successfully did.

Picture 8. Screenshot from the same scene, but in EXO-M version of the music video, with visible change of the group member singing a specific part and Chinese subtitles.



Source: SMTOWN Official YouTube Channel

In 2015, after three Chinese members left and thus disbanded the EXO-M subgroup, the band started to promote as one group, EXO, but its company, SM Entertainment, did not stop with similar experiments. In 2016 the group NCT (Neo Culture Technology) debuted. The band is more of a project of the SM's CEO, as it assumes a limitless number of members divided into multiple sub-groups (SMTOWN, 2016) and its main role was to “localize” K-Pop within various countries (Jung, 2016). The project was a part of a broader strategy of *cultural technology* (kor. 문화기술, *munhwakisul*), also coined by Lee Sooman, and first mentioned in 2011. It is worth noting, however, that culture technology was also a concept closely related to the strategy of KOCCA and based on a book published in 1999 that was written by eleven engineering and humanities professors at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (Lee, 2012). Its first objectives consisted of casting, training, producing and marketing – all of them were also mentioned in Seo's analysis of K-Pop success. Cultural technology can be also understood as the first stage of Lee Sooman's concept, while Neo Culture Technology as the second. The main difference would be introducing foreigners and opening two new markets (Chung, 2011). While cultural technology focused on Korean artists, Neo Culture Technology aimed to recruit artists from other countries and promote the music in their home countries later on, just like they did with EXO-M and its Chinese members. Neo Culture Technology can be also seen as five separate projects: SM Station, EDM, Digital Platform, Rookie Entertainment and one experimental group – NCT. Although the analysis of business strategies is not the aim of this book, the example of SM Entertainment clearly shows that K-Pop cannot be regarded just as a music genre; it is a long-term, complex strategy and a continuously developing phenomenon.

The notion of an idol is also something that has changed in the recent years. As J. M. Kang argues, they “existed long before the Korean Wave started, it was only in the recent years that they were ‘discovered’ and became part of the dominant discourse” (2017:1). Idols in South Korea are not only celebrities, the term is used for singers in their teens or twenties that were trained by entertainment companies. The status of an idol means both criticism for being mass-produced and lacking authenticity,

but also a kind of respect for being a part of the Korean Wave and being seen as a cultural ambassador of the country. The life of an idol is, for the same reason, thoroughly scrutinized by public opinion, because the members of the bands are seen as the state's representatives.

2.2. The Korean Wave and politics – soft power, the role of the government and nationalism

As it was underlined from the very beginning of this chapter, K-Pop as a phenomenon cannot be analyzed without its relations to politics and government, and therefore it is important to see the Korean Wave as a public diplomacy (and more broadly soft power) tool. Although named one of the Four Asian Tigers, and after the so-called Miracle on the Han River, South Korea's international situation is still strongly influenced by many exterior factors, but mainly by the presence of North Korea and its nuclear threat, as well as the constantly developing China. Because military solutions were not an option for Seoul, the South Korean government had to learn to use soft and network power and its potential in order to overcome the so-called weak power mentality (Rewizorski, 2016). One of the tools that were used for it was the cultural diplomacy and the use of the Korean Wave (in the literature one can find the name of Hallyu bandwagon, underlining the leading role of pop culture in this process). In accordance with J. Nye's soft power concept (2004) Hallyu (and the second pillar of South Korea's soft power – successful democratization) is used to attract international public opinion. South Korea established the Presidential Council on Nation Branding in 2009 and the Korea Public Diplomacy Forum in 2010; since that moment, the government proved to set nation's image and public diplomacy as one of its primal goals in foreign affairs. One of the two main government institutions is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and, established mainly to promote the Korean Wave abroad, Korean Culture and Information Centre (KOCIS). In 29 countries, there are also Korean Culture Centers (Dhawan, 2017) which have a role similar to British Council (the United Kingdom) or Alliance Française (France) and focus on teaching language, explaining culture issues and promoting their country. In these efforts the state joined forces with the entertainment companies

(Fuhr, 2016), but R. Kim rightfully observes that although their objectives might seem similar, in fact they are not (2011). The state implements solutions in a top-down way, while the companies react to the market's demand and their main objective will always be income. Although many state institutions established in order to develop public diplomacy and state branding can mean significant changes in this area, it can be dangerous if those institutions do not work together on one, consistent vision of their work and the expected turnout of their actions (Kim, 2012).

W. Ryoo also observes that the Korean Wave can be seen as an example of the changes in global cultural flow, making peripheral regions play a more important role (2009). In the regional dimension, this means increasing acceptance for neighboring countries or those in the same cultural area at the expense of the economically strongest or politically strong states. Undoubtedly, the Korean Wave has changed South Korean relations with the neighboring countries – China and Japan (Lee, 2011). It is also said that the biggest change can be seen among the youngest generation in Japan which does not remember the historical disputes and sees South Korea mainly through the lens of its pop culture (*Despite diplomatic rows...*, 2018; Lee, 2018). It must be noted, however, that pop culture can be a double-edged weapon in public diplomacy, as could be seen with the THAAD dispute with China, which will be further analyzed at the end of this chapter.

In 2005, Samsung Economic Research Institute published a report on the Korean Wave's influence on other countries as a four-step process (Ko). The report shows both diplomatic side of the phenomenon as well as the impact on the state's economy. Although thirteen years have passed, the stages seem to remain relevant. The first stage consists mainly of consuming creative content (here, the report listed Russia, Egypt and Mexico), second stage implies tourism and consuming products related to creative content (Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan), the third buying products that are not directly connected to creative content, but also lifestyle and products made in South Korea, such as the electronics and new technologies (China and Vietnam). The last stage is similar to general soft power main objectives – South Korea would become a state worth following and a kind of a model for other countries. In 2005 no country

was considered to be at that stage, but Thailand was said to be the closest. The analysis of how the interest in the Korean Wave began proves that the report is still valid. Very often users start with being interested in only Korean dramas or the music, but then become interested in other aspects of the Korean Wave quite soon after. This happens due to the aforementioned long-term strategies and trainings, since idols whose first occupation is being a member of a group, often, after gaining a significant popularity, become actors and their fans are often eager to watch a movie or a drama starring said idol, therefore consuming yet another Korean cultural product.

A. Ryzhkov and N. López Rocha also note that what can be observed currently should be called Hallyu 2.0, because it already entered the phase when the music and dramas are not the only thing that is being promoted and used to create the state's brand with the support of the *Han Style* project (2017). The authors argue that when the government decided to actively promote a specific image of South Korea in the world, the Korean Wave had already been doing so for quite some time. They also rightfully stress (in accordance with W. Ollins) that the process of building the nation's brand cannot be something created by the elites and communicated to global audience, but it must be understood and agreed on by the nation itself. The main factor that seems to defend the Korean Wave in this perspective is the fact that it originated in South Korea and its primarily pop culture, meaning that it was not "given" by the elites as a product ready for promoting abroad. The phenomenon is also an issue that makes the Koreans proud; the fact that Hallyu is getting more and more popular overseas empowers their national identity. Nevertheless, the Korean Wave is very often seen merely as a product of entertainment companies and many Koreans would rather see the country promotion based on traditional culture.

Hallyu 2.0 and the fact that people are beginning to be interested in other Korean culture products than music and dramas also influences tourism. One of the most distinct features that attracts the foreigners in South Korea beside the cultural products are the cosmetic and plastic surgeries (Bae et al., 2017). This shows how deeply a certain lifestyle or image can affect people's lives, as some of them not only listen to what

they think the Koreans are listening to, they eat what they believe is being eaten in Korea, but they even want to look like Koreans do. Of course, it can be a dangerous phenomenon if the other country is perceived as a kind of utopia and its reception does not involve any critical perspective (as it often happens, especially with young people), but it certainly demonstrates how important the notion of public diplomacy (as well as soft power in general) and building a nation brand is for the state's economy and prestige in the international arena.

Undoubtedly, pop culture can also spark conflicts between countries and nationalist movements, just like it happened with TV advertisement of a bottled water brand in China, starring two very popular, at the time, Korean actors (Fedorenko, 2017). Although South Korean idols often endorsed products in China, the bottled water that caused tension was said to be originating from the mountain chain that is a site of territorial disputes for many years. Its highest peak is a legendary birth place of Korea's founder, and since 2004 it has been designated as a UNESCO heritage site. The issue was even more complicated in this case, since at that time China was trying to show Korea's history as yet another of their dependent kingdoms, and Korean nationalists accused the two actors of being corrupted by Chinese government, as the ad used the Chinese name of the mountain chain instead of the Korean one. This situation shows clearly how difficult it became for idols to function on the international arena and promote abroad because of the close relations between entertainment and politics, and how there are many factors to take into consideration when doing so. O. Fedorenko argues that "demands levered on Hallyu celebrities from transnational capital, domestic observers, and foreign audiences are fundamentally irreconcilable" (2017: 499). A similar situation happened with the idol group Kara. The members were asked by a journalist about a sensitive territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan; while the celebrities remained silent, they were criticized by both the Koreans and the Japanese. Sometimes scandals erupt after seemingly innocent actions, like it happened with Girls' Generation ex-member Tiffany Young, who used a Snapchat geofilter while being in Tokyo on the eve of Korean national holiday. The filter used the so-called Rising Sun Flag elements and the singer was forced to shut down

her Instagram account, post a hand-written letter of apology for her fans and take a break from her schedules (both with the band and her solo activities). The netizens (Internet users who in Korea are mainly active in cafes and forums) even demanded her leaving the entertainment industry completely. The described situations show how difficult it is for both the idols and their companies to function in the era of social media, when even their smallest action is being scrutinized and often criticized, but it also shows the real tensions between the two countries and the rise of nationalistic movements that are again beginning to be more and more important in the modern world. It also poses questions about the border between the capital, politics, entertainment and national identity – just like in the line from one of the netizens quoted by Federenko who asked Kara members: “which country are you from? Are you thinking only about making money?” (2017: 510). With Hallyu’s growing popularity and the mediatization of almost every aspect of our life those conflicts will probably be even more common in the future and they certainly will have to be addressed by the entertainment companies who wish to promote abroad.

Globalization may also uncover some practices and behaviors that were previously unknown to the international public, but commonly present in South Korea, like it happened with negative depictions of Black Americans. Often seen only as an innocent comedy practices, performing with Rasta wigs and blackened faces were very common in the pre-Internet era. With the growing popularity of the Korean Wave and new technologies, Koreans started to be criticized for racism (Han, 2015). G. Han argues that grounds for such strong delineation between Koreans’ own nation and foreign nations can be related to Japanese occupation and its repercussions, as the others symbolized a threat. The author calls it a “nouveau-riche racism”, and writes that it may be typical for rapidly-developed economies. Although such practices were visible in the Korean media for a longer period of time, they became criticized only when the international public became aware of this behavior. This case shows that the popularity of the Korean Wave may in the future influence the practices and attitudes among the Koreans themselves as they will meet with international opinions and critique, not only praise.

2.3. K-Pop and the Korean Wave go global

The importance of the creative content for the state's economy can be seen on the data collected by Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA, 2016). The Agency measured cultural content sales and exports and proves the gradual growth in this sector.

Figure 2. Culture content sales (USD billion)

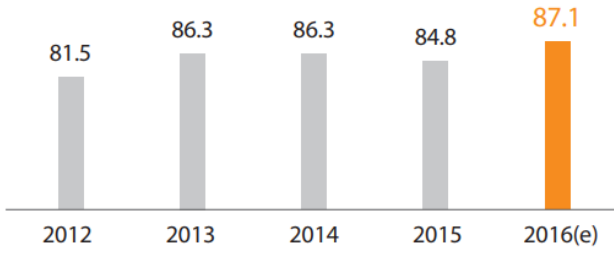
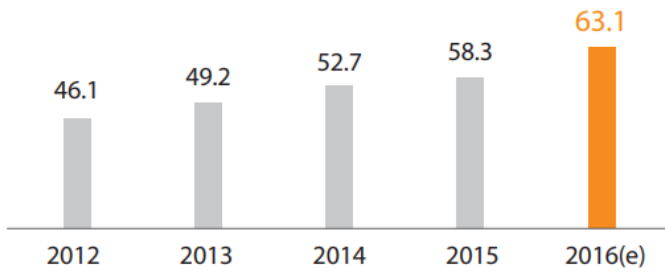


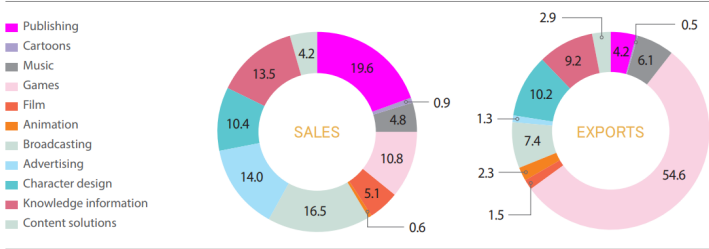
Figure 3. Cultural content exports (USD 100 million)



Source: Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), 2016.

The same report also includes a figure with the breakdown of cultural industry sales and exports by sector. It is very interesting, as it shows how broad the notion of cultural industry is and how many elements it consists of. The figure below clearly indicates that music and broadcasting are only a small part of the actual numbers and that we cannot overlook games and publishing when talking about South Korea's creative content in general.

Figure 4. Breakdown of cultural industry sales and export by sector (%)



Source: Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), 2016.

The fast development of the phenomenon became the reason to predict its impending fall, especially when people considered the year 2012 and Psy's *Gangnam Style* to be the peak of popularity of the Korean Wave; however, the reality proved all the skeptics wrong. In 2013 the World Association for Hallyu Studies was established, and its founder postulated Hallyu studies independence from Korean or East Asian studies in general (Oh, 2017). I. Oh states that the Korean Wave's global spectrum is one of the two of its main characteristics (the other is feminine fandom). For the better understanding of the phenomenon, the author proposes his understanding of differences between localization, globalization and localization:

In pop culture studies, we should define globalization as a worldwide domination of one hegemonic culture such as the U.K. and U.S. culture. (...) Localization refers to modifying global cultural contents to the demands of local consumers. For example, Sherlock Holmes becomes Aibō in Japan, whereas Superman turns into My Lover from a Star in South Korea. However, here is a big difference between Japanese and South Korean localization. Whereas Aibō is more popular than Sherlock Holmes among the general Japanese public, the former is not popular among Westerners or other Asians, except for a small number of Japanese drama buffs. Whereas My Lover from a Star is not as popular as Superman among the general Korean public, it is very popular among female fans of Hallyu all over the world (...). Japanese localization is so perfect that no foreign competitor can easily please the Japanese general taste, whereas Korean localization is meant to be re-exported to other parts of the world with a Koreanized image of a superman, regardless of whether it is better than the original superman (Oh, 2017:160)

The last part is an example of what Oh calls the glocalization – a situation in which the products are re-exported to other countries because of the small home market. Similarly glocal culture means the hybridity of local characteristics that change global culture and produce something completely new, but with both universal and unique features. Moreover, it can be useful for local communities by empowering them, though thanks to the universal characteristics they can also be globally consumed (Jang, Song, 2017). The quoted fragment also indicates the difference in the approach for the purposes of the two East Asian countries, which, for a moment, fought for a regional cultural center title. Oh argues also that the gender divide is one of the reasons for the global success of the Korean Wave. He points out that producers skillfully address women in their work and that, for example, Korean dramas heroines represent characteristics that were traditionally considered Western male universalism characteristics (“wisdom, rationality, tenderness and care, and scientific reasoning with active social participation”, Oh, 2017). The scholar thinks that by showing women overcome struggles that are similar for women all over the world as, for example, by showing women having successful careers in an occupation traditionally associated with men, the Korean Wave can attract female audience on a worldwide scale and is deliberately doing it. Another interesting fact used in production process is the androgyny of male idols, who tend to have rather feminine facial features with masculine body shapes. The concept of “beautiful boys” is not new (it was already known in Renaissance or Japanese theatre), but quite surprising in Confucian South Korea. The male idols should have perfect proportions and the so-called golden ratio. In fact, the latter is often commented on by South Korean plastic surgeons, who from time to time choose the most ideal idol’s facial features. In conclusion, Oh argues that the Korean Wave in fact does not invoke Korean or Asian values, but it rather focuses on the global values of female universalism; he also stresses that the gender divide is not an accidental outcome, but a well-planned long-term strategy of the producers.

W. Jang and J. Song also think that the Korean Wave blends Western and Asian values, but instead of female universalism, they stressed modernization and notions like pure love or familism as the main factors that

attract the global audience (2017). The authors argue that it must be also noted that K-Pop has been strongly influenced by many music genres such as “American folk music and hip hop, Japanese enka, and European electronic music”, which was caused by historical and socio-economic factors. The scholars also point out that modern K-Pop as a music genre reflects world trends, but Korean idols are perfect examples of Korean national culture and the notion of a broadly understood “Koreanness.”

Another interesting phenomenon in this regard is the inclusion of English language in K-Pop lyrics, which is a very common practice – or, as some even argue, a typical feature of the genre. The so-called English fever in South Korea began in the late 1990s, and the fact that it is reflected in pop culture should not be surprising. English becoming more and more present in Korean media was also caused by the fact that Koreans began to study abroad, and Korean-Americans who decided to use their skills in both languages (Dal, Ryoo, 2014). The entertainment companies very quickly decided that teaching their trainees foreign languages should be one of their main tasks. Putting a few words in English into songs has a few reasons: it can attract foreign listeners, it can attract Koreans themselves, but it also makes a song „catchier”, because the English words or phrases are usually easily repeatable. The authors argue also that it can be understood as a manifestation of hybridization of K-Pop. The English appropriation in K-Pop can be seen in three areas: the names of the artists, in song lyrics and song titles. This also shows changes in the social sphere, as the lyrics in English can sometimes be slightly sexual, and also in communication, because the research shows that the songs in the 21st century compared to those from the 1990s tend to operate more on the basis of a catch-phrase or an easily repeatable word. Many fans see the use of English (or even English as they make fun of the common mistakes made by Koreans) as a playful side of K-Pop and, although it might sound arguably ridiculous to native speakers, they treat it as a characteristic part of this genre, making it even more unique (Yoon, 2017).

One of the case studies regarding K-Pop entering foreign markets is the one conducted by W. Ye and S. Kang, who analyze the aforementioned SM Entertainment’s strategy for the Chinese market (2017). The company was chosen because it has a unique production system and because it suc-

cessfully entered overseas markets thanks to this system. First of all, SM Entertainment divided their production process into three separate departments that focus on casting, training and marketing processes. Throughout the years, the company had to adapt to the changes in the Chinese cultural industry policy. The authors distinguished three stages of this process. The first stage started in the late 1990s and since there used to be very few policies in China, it meant relatively easy entry for foreign companies, which was used by SM Entertainment. When the Chinese cultural industry policy changed, the company had to adapt to it, and therefore established a branch in China and a joint venture with a Chinese company. Since 2013, when the policies became much more specific, SM Entertainment had to form an alliance with large-scale Chinese enterprises. The company, however, faced many obstacles and was not always successful throughout those years. The biggest issue in the recent years was the THAAD issue and political tensions between two countries, but there had also been problems with Chinese idols' contracts and withdrawals from the company (for example the aforementioned case of EXO-M members, who, most likely, after achieving popularity as K-Pop idols decided to start solo careers back in China). Nevertheless, SM Entertainment's artists' popularity is similar to that of the Chinese artists. The studies' objective was to prove that entertainment companies are not only manipulated by the government, but that they are active players, forming their own, successful strategies; undoubtedly, the case of SM Entertainment proves that thesis. The other very important conclusion of this research is that the company managed to succeed in the Chinese market thanks to its adaption strategies that changed over time, in response to the changes in cultural industry policy.

Although the Chinese market is undoubtedly one of the biggest, it is not the only one that has already been analyzed by scholars. The biggest number of publications can be found on other Asian countries, such as Japan (Takeda, 2014), Indonesia (Nugroho, 2014), or Thailand (however, the works are quite often devoted to the Korean Wave in general, not only K-Pop). Those countries started to be interested in Korean pop culture back in the 1990s or early 2000s, and there are numerous works available on different aspects of the phenomenon. Moreover, several K-Pop artists originate from these countries, making intercultural analysis even

more complex. The second region that has relatively many publications about the Korean Wave's influence is Latin America. S. Yoon analyzes the popularity of Hallyu in Chile and Argentina (2009). Interestingly, she starts with the conclusion that ordinary Chileans and Argentinians have very limited knowledge about Korea, but quickly explains that this is the reason for the Korean Wave's fans' young age, as it is easier for them to obtain information about this country thanks to the Internet, which seems common for Hallyu fans all over the world. She points out that this causes great discrepancy in the societies of those countries, with the majority not knowing almost anything and Hallyu fans having very wide, expert-like knowledge. She also points out that, although nowadays knowledge about Korea is obtained almost solely through the Internet, a great role in introducing Asian culture was played by Japanese animations that very popular in the 1990s such as *Doraemon*, *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball*, *Pokémon*, *Card Captor Sakura*, or *Yu Gi Oh*. Many fans of those animations expanded their interests when the Internet allowed for that and started to be interested in other animations or even other countries' culture. Yoon argues that in Chile and Argentina the Japanese pop culture fans form real urban tribes, and it certainly facilitated K-Pop expansion in those countries (2009). The second phenomenon that made Korea more accessible in South America where Korean dance machines "Pump it up", which were known for requiring more mastery from participants than the Japanese ones, and for allegedly more rhythmical music, but they also made the K-Pop songs more familiar to the players using the machines. The third facilitator, as in many other countries in the world, was mostly K-dramas, quite similar to *telenovelas* in some aspects, with titles such as *Winter Sonata* gaining massive popularity. South American fans are mostly female (around 98%); in 2009, the number of K-Pop fans in Chile and Argentina was estimated for 2000–3000, but the scholar explains that it is almost impossible to achieve a precise count. What Yoon found surprising was the fact that K-Pop fans were not only living in big cities, but they were located all over the territory of Chile and Argentina. Another interesting fact for those two countries was an absence of fan-clubs devoted to actors, like they exist in Mexico or Peru. When asked about motivations for liking K-Pop and K-Pop bands, Yoon's respon-

dents pointed to four main reasons: 1) the music was more accessible than J-Pop (less dark and more catchy), 2) the music and artistic production is much more careful, 3) the artists maintain intense contact with their public, 3) the music is more romantic and optimistic. In 2009 most of K-Pop fans in Chile and Argentina used many online fanclubs to communicate with each other, with DBSK being one of the most popular group. The fact that J-Pop facilitated K-Pop's expansion in South America was also observed by J. Choi (2015), who presents the example of South Korean singer BoA performing theme song for a Japanese animation series. This pattern of being interested in Japanese popular culture and then widening of one's perspective and being interested in South Korean popular culture as well is named *cultural glide* or *cultural transfer* by Choi. In the same article he also proposed another term that he found useful while studying J-Pop and K-Pop fans in South America: *digintimacy* (digital + intimacy), which "refers to the concurrence of technologically rendered immediacy and cultural/psychological intimacy" (Choi, 2015: 106), and is believed also to induce cultural glide.

Although South America was one of the first regions to become interested in K-Pop, it is certainly not the only one. Some studies about the Korean Wave in Europe have already been published as well. V. Mazana described Hallyu's popularity in Czech Republic. In the first sentences of her work, she rightfully states that whereas Japan, China and Southeast Asia have been swept by the Korean Wave, Europe has not been flooded yet, but she believes 2010 to be the critical year for Hallyu fandom development in her country. Similarly to Poland, K-pop fans in Czech Republic are called K-Poppers, and they focus on organizing contests, fan events and "overall promotion of Korean popular culture" (2014:47). The study proves, however, that more than 90% of Czechs had never heard the word *Hallyu* or *Korean Wave* and do not know what it means. Just like J. Choi predicted, many fans became interested in Korean pop culture through Japanese one, as the Japanese culture and history is better known to Czechs in general. Interestingly, Mazana mentions that there is a numerous population of Vietnamese living in Czech Republic, but no Hallyu fan stated that they became interested in Hallyu after being first familiar with Vietnamese culture, which seems to be true for Polish fans as well. The other

surprising fact was that although most Czechs do not know what the Korean Wave was, 48% answered they do not like K-Pop, with 39% not knowing what it is and only 13% stating positive answers, which proves that the Czech people are aware of the existence of such a phenomenon. V. Mazana also observed that Czech Hallyu fandom was predominantly female, and sought the reason for it in the concept of a romantic and caring man, who cares about his appearance and expresses his emotions, in contrast to a stereotypical Czech man. The author asked her respondents if they would like to have a Korean partner and 40% stated yes, 33% that they did not know and only 19% that they would not. The answers to this question correlated with questions about opinions on Korean and Czech men's manners. Those who expressed their wish to find a Korean partner believed Korean men to be caring, good-looking and hard-working, while those who would not like to enter into such a relationship shared that they were worried about different mentality that might endanger harmonious relationship. The same study also provided very interesting opinions on K-Pop with answers varying from "perfect, original, creative, colorful, innovative, and fresh to commercial, sexist, and artificial" (2014:55). Another interesting tendency observed among Czechs was that they were significantly more tolerant towards women than towards men. When shown a picture of two famous and often praised for their appearance South Korean artists – Rain and IU – the male singer was seen by 62% of respondents as not attractive, while the female singer was described as pretty by 86% of Czechs. This pattern seems to be also present in Polish society, as well as stating that Korean idol group members are homosexual (which is also very often meant in a negative way) and that Korean pop culture is bizarre or weird, which can be often seen as displays of racism present in Central-Eastern European countries in general.

Although quite late, the Korean Wave has reached Poland as well. P. Kida argues that the best advocates of Korean culture among Poles were and still are universities (2014). Korean studies are becoming more and more popular in Poland, but higher education knowledge is less likely to change the opinion of an average Pole, and the universities' proposals often cannot match young people's needs. Since 2010, the other institution responsible Korean culture promotion is the Korean Cultural Centre in

Warsaw, which regularly organizes events and contests. In 2013, a Facebook-based audioblog *Zakorkowani* was created by two Poles living in Seoul, Anna Sawińska and Leszek Moniuszko. Sawińska is also known for her publications on Korean culture and her personal blog *W Korei i nie tylko* (eng. In Korea, but not only), as well as numerous interviews and comments for Polish media. P. Kida also argues that it was *Gangnam Style* that has “awakened” Poland and made way for Korean culture in Polish mass media (an example of Polish commercial television TVN devoting an entire episode of their morning program to South Korea⁷). It should also be noted that there is a publishing house Kwiaty Orientu (eng. Orient’s flowers) that is known for publishing South Korean novels, and that Korean movies are rather known among Polish audience, but are seen as independent, instead of blockbuster movies. One of the blockbuster movies that gained popularity in Poland was *Train to Busan* (known in Poland as *Zombie Express*). The movie’s premiere was also an opportunity for people interested in K-culture to show their fandom to their colleagues and fellow citizens of Warsaw. There was a contest to dress as a zombie with prizes such as film boxes, cosmetic products and others. Poles were so eager to do so, that even Korean press agency Yonhap News covered the event (2017). There also were cultural events organized during the premiere of *The Age of Shadows* (pol. *Gra Cieni*). Moreover, movie-wise, in November, in Warsaw and Wrocław, there is a movie festival concentrating on Asian cinema – the Five Flavors Festival – that always screens Korean movies as well and seems to be gaining popularity with each year. In late 2015 and 2016, a historical K-drama *Empress Ki* was aired in Polish television (TVP2) and became quite popular, although not as popular as the other costume TV series aired at that time, the Turkish *The Magnificent Century*. Moreover, it should be noted that Korean cosmetic products are becoming more popular in Poland with brands such as Missha or Skin79 having their own stores in Polish shopping malls, but also with stores such as Sephora or

7 This trend seems to continue as, after the first program devoted to South Korea, there were others, seemingly sponsored travel programs with journalists of TVN travelling to Seoul. In 2018, two episodes of a popular reality show *Lepiej późno niż wcale* (eng. *Better Late Than Never*) produced by TV Polsat were also taking place in South Korea with Polish participants meeting a popular K-Pop band Momoland. Moreover, the program itself is based on the Korean reality show – *Grandpas Over Flowers*.

Hebe selling Korean beauty products on a regular basis. The South Korean beauty routine is well-known among young Polish women, and Korean sheet masks are a top-seller product. Strictly music-wise, there is one radio program (*Teraz K-Pop*, eng. *K-Pop Now* on Radio Czwórka) and one TV program (*K-Pop Non-Stop* on 4fun.tv channel) devoted entirely to K-Pop, both hosted by Klaudia Tyszkiewicz – a journalist and a K-Pop fan. Although only four years have passed since Kida's analysis was published, it seems that the reception and popularity of the Korean Wave and K-Pop in Poland has changed significantly. While we are still not “swept” nor “flooded”, Polish audience is definitely “awakened.”

2.4. Anti-hallyu

Although the Korean Wave and K-Pop are mostly praised for their positive influence on South Korean economy and nation brand, there are also critical voices regarding the phenomenon. The most commonly encountered argument is that Korean pop culture is nothing more than just a system that produces identical idols with identical songs, or that Korean dramas are just emotional soap operas that always tell the same story. Moreover, it can sometimes be heard that K-Pop is not much different from the Western music. Apart of those voices that, in fact, misunderstand what the Korean Wave is and analyze everything from the Western perspective, there are movements that do not involve individual tastes, but bigger groups or even countries.

The Anti-Korea movement signs can be found in many Asian countries, but Anti-Hallyu movement is mainly associated with Japan where it is called *kenkanryu* (jp. 嫌韓流). The cause of this anti-Korean sentiment should be associated with the historical disputes between two countries – mainly with the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima), Japanese occupation of Korea (1910–1945), but also the comfort women issue (sexual slavery during the time of occupation that the Japanese disclaimed) that was officially resolved by the two countries in 2015, but is still a hotspot in the relations between the two countries (Trzcińska, 2018). It should also be noted that the 2000s is also the moment of the revival of the right-wing ideology that happened around the time when South Korea outstripped Japan in terms of being the biggest pop

culture exporter in the region. The analysis of the Google trends inquiries show clearly that around 2009 K-Pop became more popular than J-Pop; but around 2011, K-Pop's popularity skyrocketed with interest in J-Pop decreasing, a trend which is continuously progressing even now. It can be easily understood that the Japanese feared for their position in the international arena, especially with the previous historical disputes in mind. The anti-Korean sentiment in Japan has an institutionalized form, however, and it is associated with the Zaitokukai group, a right-wing populist group that builds its identity on the hate for Zainichi – a Korean minority living in Japan (Mikalajunaite, 2015). The group was so vicious in their actions that Japan was warned by the ONU about its hate speech and being a potential threat to public order. The group's members think that Korean culture is impure and that Korean pop culture is a propaganda tool, an approach that already managed to lead to riots on Japanese streets (*Japan's right-wing...*). The Japanese also began to produce cultural products that are showing the threats of Korean pop culture. The most well-known example is the manga *Kenkanryu*, which tells a story that takes place during the 2002 Football World Cup, co-hosted by Japan and South Korea. It tries to argue that South Korea used the event to promote itself and close several important business deals, using illegal methods and, surprisingly, its publishing was not opposed by any politician – on the contrary, some of them even praised the title for the truthful representation of the relations between the two countries (Onishi, 2015). It soon led to publishing of other titles which directly criticized Korean idol groups, suggesting, for example, that girl bands are in fact offering sexual services to the Japanese elites and that they are depraving men. After getting no response from the government, Koreans soon started to be seen as barbarians, an example of which can be seen in the TV advertisement of instant noodles being eaten by one of Korean singers. The idol used the pot's lid to cool down the noodles, which is a very popular way of eating it in South Korea, but in Japan it was seen as a lower form of neighboring nation's development and was widely discussed (Kim, 2012).

The other example of a very strong, negative response to South Korea's pop culture was the 2017 THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area

Defense) dispute between South Korea and China. Firstly, it is important to point out that from the very beginning the reception of the Korean Wave in China was different than in Japan (Lee, 2011). The Chinese not only imported the Korean products, but very often also followed their solutions. Some may even argue that reception was too positive, as there was once a case in which the Chinese administration had to state a warning after a young girl was diagnosed with glaucoma caused by binge-watching of one of the most popular Korean dramas *Descendants of the Sun* (Premarck, 2017). In China, the opposition to South Korean pop culture was not started by the audience itself and the Chinese people like it was in Japan, but it was used as a political tool by the Chinese government. The crisis in diplomatic relations between the two countries began back in 2016 when the Korean government decided on deploying the THAAD system on its territory. While the system was meant to defend South Korea from North Korean missiles, China stated it is a great danger to their own safety and unofficially banned all of the Korean productions on their territory. Beijing denied using such practices, but in reality South Korean bands suddenly had to cancel their Chinese concerts, Chinese-Korean productions stopped getting permissions for operating on Chinese territory and even cosmetic products could not be imported (Jozuka, Han, 2017). It must be stressed that China is a major economic partner to South Korea, and such restrictions are a great loss for Seoul. There were also opinions that the THAAD dispute was just an excuse for China to stop the Korean Wave in their country. Nevertheless, the situation caused tremendous loss for Korea's economy, especially in the tourism sector, and it ended only in the beginning of 2018.

The two presented cases of Anti-Hallyu sentiments show that when pop culture meets politics it must be used carefully. South Korea has been accused of using cultural imperialism many times and, as it can be seen on the examples of the aforementioned situations, such accusations can provide measurable loss for the country's economy and image. Although those two cases were historically or politically induced and they regard the neighboring countries relevant to South Korea, it can be expected that such tensions might occur in the future with other countries if Seoul continues the one-way cultural production transfer – only exporting

their culture instead of forming a dialogue with other countries. Moreover, those two cases forced South Korea to look for new markets and therefore open up for new opportunities, such as the Indian market that becomes increasingly important for the Korean Wave (Dhawan, 2017).

2.5. K-Pop fans

Although it may seem trivial, K-Pop would not exist without its fans – both Korean and international. Though many people do not understand their fascination or argue that they should be interested in their own culture more, more fans join the K-Pop fandom every year. The first characteristic trait striking everyone who starts to take interest in K-Pop fandom is the aforementioned gender divide. The Korean Wave fans are predominantly feminine and I. Oh argues that this phenomenon “allowed the rise of Hallyu in all corners of the world started from three factors: gendered melancholia, racial melancholia, and postcolonial melancholia. To be a Hallyu fan, one must have at least one of the three types of melancholia” (Oh, 2017: 162). As it was already mentioned, the scholar thinks that women being the main part of the K-Pop fandom is not a coincidence, but a long-term strategy. Undoubtedly, it is safe to say that fans of the Korean Wave in general and fans of K-Pop in particular are young females; however, the percentage and the age differs even between bands. While it is clear that the bands that debuted earlier would have older fans, the difference tends to be significant even between the bands that debuted around the same time. The gender percentage also may vary; for example, the band EXO has the highest percentage of males that constitute around 8,9% of the audience (data based on concert tickets sold in Korea), while the band BTS has an audience consisting in about 96,6% of female fans. Similarly, with age, approximately 68% of BTS concert audience is comprised of teenagers (10–19), while EXO’s of young adults (20–29). Interestingly enough, the latter has also the highest percentage of fans aged 30–39 (Koreaboo, 2016). The differences might be caused by the aforementioned concepts that different groups choose. What is more, Korean fans seem to be much more critical towards their favorite artists and they do not hesitate to share their opinions on portals such as Naver or Daum when they get tired with a concept and they perceive it as boring.

What is typical for K-Pop fandom is that the official fandom names are chosen by entertainment companies (along with the fandom's official color and a lightstick that is used during concerts). Although the companies do not influence the fandoms' hierarchies and structures, they promote certain behaviors by making forums and fan sites that require official membership, but also by providing goods such as SM Entertainment's SMTOWN passport (a personalized small book that could be stamped at various SM events).

The aforementioned fandom-friendly portal Tumblr provides their own statistics of the most popular tags and organizes it into the so-called Fandometrics. On May 1st, 2017 they added K-Pop to that list, making it the first and, so far, the only music genre being regularly measured (the other categories are, among others, music – bands, music – solo artists, video games, TV shows – animated, TV shows – live action, movies, albums, actresses, reality stars, and athletes or models). The statistics show the most talked about bands, top ships⁸, and suggest blogs to follow at the end. The fact that K-Pop has its own statistics and that it is listed as a separate list from music bands or albums in general shows how significant this phenomenon is and that it is still growing; above all, it shows that K-Pop fandom gains recognition.

K-Pop fans undertake offline and online activities, some similar to other fandoms, such as meetings and conventions, while other more typical for K-Pop fandom such as song covers or dance covers (and challenges such as “K-Pop in public”, with dance cover groups dancing to popular songs in public places). They have also special portals such as AsianFanFics (AFF) for fanfiction devoted almost only to K-Pop idols.

K-Pop fandom, although usually perceived as creative and colorful, has also its darker side. Although idols are generally loved by their nation, sometimes they have to face pathological and extreme displays of affection or hate. It must be stressed that those displays are not very common, but nevertheless they became classified as a separate phenomenon

8 Shipping in fandoms means wishing that two characters or two people would end up in a romantic relationship, or actually believing that they are in one. Very often “the ship” would involve two people that cannot be officially recognized as a couple for various reasons. In K-Pop fandom shipping usually means wanting two members of the same band to be together.

and those extreme fans are now called *sasaeng* fans (사생팬). The name is a portmanteau of the words *sasaenghwal* (사생활) meaning “private life” and *fans* (Williams, Ho, 2016). Those fans are trying all means to become remembered by an idol, not only invading the idol’s private lives with their presence (which was the origin of the name) but also coming up with other radical ideas such as installing CCTV cameras in idol’s parking lot at home, sending letters written with menstrual blood, pursuing idols in cars and causing accidents, attending marriages of idols’ relatives, breaking into idols’ apartments or even trying to fool idols by renting vans similar to those of their managers (Allkpop, 2015). The goal is simple – to get the attention of an idol and be remembered, even if that means hurting the idol or someone else. The *sasaeng* phenomenon originally emerged in Korea, but started spreading just like the Korean Wave. Undoubtedly, it is more intense in places when idol can be met in person, but with K-Pop becoming more and more popular and idols making world tours, it may spread even further in the future. What is also dangerous, despite the obvious harm that may be done to idols, is the fact that mass media tend to present the *sasaeng* fans’ actions as representative of the whole K-Pop fandom (Williams, Ho, 2016). This is yet another phenomenon that seems to be connected to the rising social media popularity.

Social media not only make it easier for fans to get more information about their favorite idols or even to follow them if they happen to recognize a specific place, but they also generate completely new phenomena like the so-called the *Sehun Effect*⁹ (Leal, Smith, 2016). It happens when an idol appears on another person’s social media, thus doubling or tripling the number of likes and comments. What also changes is the type of comments that differ depending on the posted content. It was noted that photos in which male idols appear with female friends produced the most reactions, and Leal and Smith argue that the *Sehun* effect may be a very dangerous technique to use for idols (2016). Fans react in a very hostile way towards women that seem too close to their favorite group

9 Named after Oh Sehun from the aforementioned group EXO.

members, and some even think that a woman who enters a relationship with an idol should be prepared for the “most intense loathing” (Williams, Ho, 2015). This sentiment seems to be common for many of K-Pop fans with varying degrees of intensity, and might be especially disturbing when it comes to *sasaeng* fans, who might actually be the cases of what is described in psychology as pathological idol worshiping and erotomania; when the fans are sure that the idol is in love with them. It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the celebrity’s real partner might be in danger, because of the fans’ behavior and attitudes.

Understanding the whole notion of the Korean Wave is crucial for understanding what K-Pop is and what it means to both Koreans and the international public. It is not only yet another music genre, but also a powerful public diplomacy tool that can both attract the foreigners, as well as cause problems if not used wisely. South Korea is still learning how to use it efficiently and make the best of it but undoubtedly shows other countries its own strategy for nation branding with the use of popular culture as well as for the entertainment industry that does not have any equivalent in the world.

The K-Pop fandom can be treated as yet another example of fandoms and it certainly does display features characteristic for other fandoms as well; there are, however, aspects that are exclusive for this fan community, or at least have not been described outside of this fandom. The K-Pop fandom shows, for example, specific media practices. Just like in other fandoms, the social media plays crucial role in this community, but it was K-Pop fandom that had the so-called Sehun effect named and distinguished by the scholars. Although similar practices may occur in other fandoms as well, here it was probably the most visible and easy to notice.

It is also worth stressing once again that K-Pop is not only music genre. Its fans appreciate the whole product that South Korean entertainment industry provides: the idols’ appearance, their style, choreography, visual elements and the music as a whole. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Tumblr chose K-Pop as the only music genre in their Fandometrics, understanding the complexity of the phenomenon.

3

Methodology and research methods

As it was already presented, fan studies are, or should be, an interdisciplinary research field. This means not only different perspectives that can be mixed in order to analyze this phenomenon, but also mixed methods. In this research two main methods were used with an addition of one complimentary method. At first, pre-research was conducted in the form of short interviews during a K-Pop related event. After combining the results with previous projects carried out by other scholars, it was possible to create an online survey for Polish K-Pop fans. Gathering the answers allowed to proceed to the third stage of the project – interviews with administrators and moderators of Polish K-Pop fan groups. The results from these two main stages were compared with content analysis of posts in Facebook groups as an additional method. The main aim of this research was to widen the knowledge about Polish K-Pop fandom and to lay the foundations for further research.

The research questions mostly revolved around three spheres: communication, structures and media usage, but many of them allowed for the better understanding of the Polish K-Pop fandom in general – a topic which has not been researched yet. In addition to the questions that were posed to determine some basic information about the fandom some more specific questions were asked such as: do fans use media in a special way? Where do they get information from and what will they consider while

sharing it with the others? Do they indicate that the knowledge about K-Pop or bands is crucial for them in determining the hierarchy, if it exists? How do they view the issue of fandom leaders? Many questions also referred to the more general information or other fandom issues that have not been researched yet, such as the general information about the fans, their motivation, perception of other fans, and perception of the Polish fandom's place in the international fandom. The main objectives were connected to hierarchy, structure and communication but since it was probably the first research on Polish K-Pop fandom it was crucial to acquire more information about the phenomenon in general, for better understanding of the aforementioned issues. The project, concerning many other issues and questions, would also allow for the longitudinal research in the future or for comparative analysis with other countries.

3.1. Previous research projects on fans and fandoms

In the first chapter many research projects have been already described, however, without focusing on methodology. The discussion of methodology in fan studies starts with cultural studies and the two paradigms: structuralism and culturalism (Evans, Stasi, 2014). As A. Evans and M. Stasi write:

structuralism claims that all experience is the outcome of a series of universal laws, whether in societies or in the unconsciousness, culturalism suggests that culture should be studied through the way people experience it, thus permitting a sense of agency even while this is within cultural constraints (2014: 9).

The authors also discuss ethnography as a core method in the cultural studies, but unappreciated in fan studies, the usefulness of S. Hall's coding/decoding concept or other reception-based approaches, but also psychoanalysis in the media and cultural studies. Moreover, the scholars show that the research conducted by an acafan can be seen as a self-reflexive autoethnography, which also corresponds with M. Hills work on the topic (2002).

One of the research projects that was used as a reference for this study was P. Obst, L. Zinkiewicz, and S. Smith's study on sense of community in an international community of interest (2001). The scholars combine previous research and develop a survey-based project. The par-

ticipants were 359 science fiction fans attending a convention in Melbourne (Australia) in 1999. Research materials consisted of a questionnaire containing measures regarding basic demographics, but focused on the so-called PSOC – psychological sense of community. Combining inquiries from other projects, the authors asked 59 questions regarding the Sense of Community Index, the Psychological Sense of Community Scale, the Neighborhood Cohesion Instrument, the Community Satisfaction Scale, the Urban Identity Scale and the Multidimensional Measure of Neighboring¹⁰. Next 22 questions regarding levels of identification were included, combining issues from Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale and the Strength of Ingroup Identification Scale. The last two questions mentioned the overall global sense of community. All of the issues were responded to on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. In the end, the issues were grouped into five categories: belonging, cooperative behavior, friendship and support, conscious identification, leadership and influence. This research project was a starting point for creating the online survey, but also for some questions during the interviews.

The second research that was used as a reference was L. Chen's analysis of Chinese fans of Japanese and Korean pop culture (2018). This project focused on nationalistic narratives and international fandom, and seemed important not only because of the fans' object of interest, but mainly because of the central position of the issues of nationalism and internationality. The first project used as a reference focused more on community, identities and fandom as a group, while the second one was more closely related to political sphere, mentioning the role of state policy, capital and diplomatic relations, but also fan labor. The author analyzes the transformation of Chinese cultural policy (mentioned already in the SM Entertainment case) and compares the policies regulating the import of Japanese and Korean pop culture products. On these examples the author shows how both state and market shape the fandoms. Although the intention of this study was not to analyze Polish nationalism, Chen's work helped pose questions regarding K-Pop fandom as a political, state-related

10 All of the mentioned indexes and research projects were described and cited in Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith's article.

phenomenon, because it is so closely related to Korea's culture. K-Pop is not only different from other musical genres because, as it was already mentioned, it is a much more complex product than just music; however, it is also strongly connected to a specific country and its culture. That fact makes it even more interesting in terms of international K-Pop fandom and specific fandoms within other countries. The project on Chinese fans shows many issues that should be analyzed: the evaluation of the object of interest; the question whether one can be a fan of other country's culture or should they focus more on his or her national products; how other people react when hearing about South Korean popular culture as the main interest; whether the language barrier is still a problem; or can K-Pop be a start of fascination with other countries' music or other popular culture products. Although in Poland there is no anti-Hallyu movement, like in Japan or China, it was also interesting to ask Polish fans on their opinions of this international aspect – whether they encounter prejudice and misunderstanding, or maybe just language barrier in their everyday life, and how does that affect them.

3.2. Pre-research: K-Content EXPO Central Europe in Warsaw

On August 11th, 2017, K-Content EXPO Central Europe took place in Warsaw and presented an opportunity to conduct a pre-research on Polish K-Pop fandom. The event, organized by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, KOCCA and Korean Culture Centre in Warsaw allowed for participant observation and interviews. During the day, the fans gathered in order to see screenings, exhibitions and workshops related mainly to the Korean Wave, but also to the traditional elements of Korean culture and the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. In the evening the event was closed with the concert of K-Pop groups A-Pink, Victon, Teen Top, Edie Kim, 24K and Jae Jung Parc.

First of all, the event made it possible to scrutinize outfits, symbols and other elements that served as indicators for one's identification with fandom (either K-Pop fandom or specific group fandom), but also to see the fans' interaction with each other. Polish K-Pop fans met there were very open and eager to discuss fandom issues, just like Booth describes in his work (2013). Virtually almost every person asked whether he or she

would agree for a short interview said yes. The only issue that seemed to be worrying them was the fact of recording their answers but after explaining that it would be used only for research purposes, all of them said yes. The interviews were not structured, their main objective was mainly to see what issues would be raised by the fans themselves, but also to obtain information on their sense of identity and understanding of fandom in general. Most of the participants were asked for email addresses which was used later on to send out links to an online survey. Another aim was to define what kind of language the fans use, so it could be used while preparing further questions for the next stages of the research.

3.3. Online surveys

Surveys are one of the most basic research methods in social sciences. They can be conducted from a very small to very large scale; the largest one, involving the whole population, is called a census. Collecting a number of responses leads to more quantitative approach, but surveys allow for collecting qualitative data as well. One of the most significant challenges of this method is the representativeness, since very often less than 30% of the analyzed group responds (Adams et al., 2007). However, in the case of this research project it did not seem to be a problem, as 1394 surveys were collected.

The surveys were conducted online via Google. Firstly, the link was sent to the people that shared their email address during K-Content EXPO – almost 30% of those fans filled out the questionnaire within two weeks. Secondly, the link was on Polish Facebook groups devoted to either a specific band or K-Pop in general. The groups were selected according to the numbers of users – for each of the most popular K-Pop bands, one Polish group was selected. The groups were: Seventeen Poland SPAM (5 925 users¹¹), BTS A.R.M.Y Poland (24 836), SHINee Poland SPAM (4 648¹²), EXO Poland (10 968), K-Pop Poland (18 445),

11 The numbers as for July 14th, 2018. It must be noted, however, that many users are members of multiple groups at the same time.

12 P. Kida in his work from 2014 noted the following fan clubs (which are presumably the same ones as described in this study) and the numbers of their members: Shinee Poland—6,169 members, Super Junior Poland—450 members, K-pop Poland—1,702 members, which shows an enormous change over 4 years.

2NE1 Black Jacks Poland (1 840), BIGBANG POLAND (VIP) (4 803), WANNA ONE POLAND (3 511), Super Junior Poland Spam (2 194), GOT7 Poland (7 035), MADTOWN (598). Only in one case, the administrator of the group (iKON Poland, 3 459 users) did not agree to share the link to the survey and therefore, the group did not participate in the research.

At this point it is worth noting that estimating the number of Polish K-Pop fans is very difficult. Most of them are active in some of the groups, but many fans are just lurkers, very devoted to their favorite group or artist, but either not participating in the community at all, or using portals other than Facebook. This difference can be seen on the example of the most popular Polish K-Pop fan page on this website, SHINee Poland, which has 55 345 likes and 41 606 followers¹³. The two most popular worldwide groups' fanpages also have more followers and likes than the closed groups: EXO Poland with 12 308 likes (12 170 followers) and Bangtan Boys Poland with 25 030 likes (24 755 followers). It might also be true that, in case of the older fans, there would be a preference of the international fandom over Polish, and they therefore would rather use websites like Tumblr that do not necessarily force users to reveal their country of origin. However, out of the people interviewed during the K-Content EXPO, no one mentioned websites other than Facebook, and therefore it can be assumed that if the Polish K-Pop fans wanted to be a part of Polish fan community, they would participate in events such as K-Content EXPO and would be more keen on using Facebook groups to communicate with others. Others, like it was mentioned, most probably use other websites and feel more as a part of international fandom, or prefer to just follow information about certain group or idol, but without engaging in other fan activities. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of members in both groups, this research project focused on

13 An estimation of the number of Polish K-Pop fandom members is challenging, because Polish fans exhibit different styles of fan activities. It is almost certain that all of Polish K-Pop fans use the Internet and social media to get information on their favorite groups and idols; however, other activities they undertake differ greatly. Nevertheless, the aforementioned over 50 thousand of likes on the SHINee Poland fanpage means that there are at least 50 thousand Facebook users who, at some point in time, became interested in this band to the point of being willing to get regular information about this idol group in Polish language.

the group that uses Facebook for communication with other members of the fandom and attends K-Pop related events in Poland.

The survey consisted of 78 questions, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and starting with basic demographics. It should be noted, however, that this section contained questions that were more about the fans' perception than the facts. As the pre-research showed, the Polish K-Pop fans were very often teenagers and therefore it was easier to ask them, for example, about their financial situation as perceived by them, than about the annual income of their parents. The first part consisted of questions about age, gender, perceived financial situation and the place of residence. Second section of questions asked about the position or role in the fandom, undertaken activities and participation, whether their interest in the Korean Wave started with K-Pop (and if with something else, then what it was) and whether they participate in Korea-related events, conventions or other types of meetings with fellow fans, whether K-Pop fandom was their first one and if they are interested in Japanese or Chinese culture as well. Next part of questions (and the longest one) used a Likert scale for answers (from 1 – “strongly agree” to 5 – “strongly disagree”) and was based on many of the Obst, Zienkiewicz and Smith's questions, such as: I feel like a part of the fandom; I would like to be a part of the fandom in the future; Being a part of the fandom is important to me; I feel good whenever I hear about the fandom's success. Part of the questions regarded communication, and part fandom structures, hierarchy, leadership and the respondent's views on K-Pop. The final part asked the fans about their motivation and reason for liking this music genre and about specific, internal norms within the fandom.

One of the problematic parts was drawing a line between K-Pop fandom in general and a specific group or idol fandom. In the interviews, the questions regarded both of those cases, but in the surveys it sometimes might have been unclear for some of the respondents. At the very beginning there was an explanation that we would like to ask about the K-Pop fandom, and only in case of a misunderstanding or uncertainty to refer to the fandom of a certain group, but it might have been unclear for some of the respondents.

3.4. In-depth interviews

The second stage of the research consisted of in-depth interviews with administrators and moderators of the aforementioned Facebook groups. The interview as a research method resembles an everyday conversation, and is sometimes seen as:

the space between views, not the views themselves but the negative condition under which people may express their views to each other and to themselves. It is the very condition for critical reflective dialogue to emerge and be maintained and for a provisional consensus 'for all practical purposes' to be framed without it falling into sterile, totalitarian monologue (Barbour, Schostak, 2000: 43).

The interviews are sometimes seen as a family of research approaches instead of a single method. An interview can explore both broad cultural aspect as well as personal views, and can have more qualitative or quantitative approach (Arksey, Knight, 1999). Used in conjunction with surveys, interviews are one of the most popular methods in social sciences.

The interviews in this research project were conducted either personally or via email from December 2017 to February 2018. There were 14 interviews in total and the interview scenario consisted of almost 40 questions, although not all of them were usually answered by one person. The questions covered some of the issues that were already mentioned in the surveys, in order to get more information on the issues that were unclear or could be understood in different ways, but they also used some projection techniques, such as personification or sentence completion.

The questions concerned the same main three spheres as the surveys: hierarchy and leadership in the fandom, communication and media usage; however, they allowed the respondents for a more open response. At this point it was crucial to find out whether the administrators and moderators, who are undoubtedly opinion leaders in such groups, felt like leaders in fandom and how they understood this notion. This was also one of the challenges that arose after the survey stage – the notion of a leader seemed to be very controversial for fandom members, and it was important to find out more about their understanding and opinions on the topic.

Another challenge might have been the representativeness. Compared to the surveys, not many interviews were collected; nevertheless, it seems

that the interviews provided the answers for the questions that arose after the first stage. Moreover, like it was already mentioned, it was difficult to estimate the number of Polish K-Pop fans, an issue which applies to the administrators and moderators as well, since very often they are active in more than one group, while other administrators listed on the group page might not be active at all.

3.5. Content analysis

The last stage of the research project was the content analysis that was used only as complimentary research method. Content analysis is one of the most popular methods in media and communication studies, but in this research project its aim was to prove or falsify the answer given by the fans in the surveys and interviews, and to point out the issues that should be researched in the future.

In order to post the link to the online survey and get in touch with the administrators, access to Facebook groups was needed. After being accepted (often only after answering questions about the given band), the general activity in the group was being observed daily for six months (from January to June 2018). The posts that were analyzed were randomly selected for qualitative analysis. There was no code book for this stage, as it only served as a complimentary research method and an addition to the previously gathered data.

The chosen methods allowed for triangulation and combining the qualitative and quantitative data. Methodological triangulation is used to assure the outcome and conclusions by combining at least two methods to analyze the same subject. It was possible to obtain the information on the three main spheres that were analyzed (hierarchy/structure/leadership, media usage and communication), as well as additional data on the Polish K-Pop fandom in general. The last stage of the research project also indicated certain directions which can be pursued in the future projects, and can be of use while conducting comparative or longitudinal analysis.



4

The Polish K-Pop Fandom

As it was already mentioned in the second chapter, K-Pop is gaining popularity worldwide, and it is no different in Poland. Korean pop music may not be played in the most popular radio stations yet, but its fans can be seen on the Polish streets. Bravo, one of the most popular Polish teenager magazines,¹⁴ used to print posters with K-Pop stars alongside ones picturing One Direction and other culturally-relevant celebrities, which means that even the traditional media saw the potential and the rising number of the Polish K-Pop fans. The number of Korea and K-Pop-related events, such as parties organized by private companies, as well as festivals organized by Korean Culture Centre in Warsaw is gradually increasing.

Although, similarly to many other countries, the Polish K-Pop fandom functions mostly online, a set of offline activities are also undertaken. There are numerous fan meetings, workshops and parties. Interestingly enough, it seems that conventions devoted to just one artist are less popular. It is worth noting, however, that the Polish K-Pop fandom is changing and there are already about ten professional groups organizing K-Pop parties. Fans from smaller cities come to the larger ones, the capital in particular, to attend such parties and share this experience with their fellow K-Pop fandom members who know as much as they do about South Korean popular music. Besides

14 It stopped being published in the beginning of 2018 but it was one of the most popular magazines for teenagers since the 1990s.

parties, there are various offline activities that are undertaken by Polish fans, and as many companies noticing the potential of this market, organizing workshops and trips to Korea (such as K-Pop School of Dance, also known as K-Pop SOD, in Poznań). There are also activities on the contact point of offline and online activities, such as cover dances which are practiced and mastered offline, but most of the time are recorded and uploaded online later on. Some of the Polish dance cover groups, such as Kyara (43424 subscribers on YouTube), Error 404 Dance Team or Omona Team, won dance contests and are already well-known to fellow K-Pop fans. Similarly to the situation with parties and conventions, there are already companies who help young K-Popers with making their fan activities more professional – for example, the company Tokyo Studio, which makes videos for dance cover groups. Overall it could be seen, however, that fandoms' activities are mostly scattered, with only the Korean Cultural Centre as an organization known nationwide for organizing Korea-related events. Nevertheless, most of the activities take place in larger Polish cities, and Korean artists' concerts occur almost solely in Warsaw.

Still, most of the fan interactions occur online. Facebook groups are the most popular among Polish fans, but they also use Twitter, Wattpad, Instagram and Tumblr. The last one is used mainly by fans feeling more as a part of the international K-Pop fandom and those who do not feel the need to identify with any particular country. As it was previously mentioned, during pre-research almost no-one admitted to using Tumblr, which might suggest that this platform's users have different fan engagement or fan activities patterns, as most certainly there are Polish K-Pop fans on this website. This means that the presented results show just a part of the whole phenomenon that is the Polish K-Pop fandom, analyzing people who identify as a part of the Polish-speaking fandom first and foremost, and who are active online. Having that in mind, the main aim of this research project is to analyze the group that has the sense of community and seemingly tries to interact with one another. Although the lurkers and people who are just less active, or active on other platforms, are also a part of the so-called Polish K-Pop fandom, this project focused on the Facebook-centered, Polish-language users.

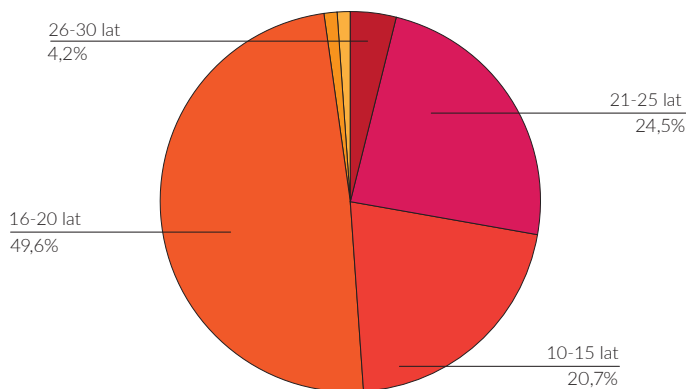
All of the following information obtained in the research project concerns about 1400 of Polish K-Pop fans using Facebook as their main means of

communication with other fans and undertaking fan activities. It is difficult to determine whether the data can be generalized for all the Polish K-Pop fans, because, as it was already mentioned, it is almost impossible to estimate the exact number of members of this group. Considering that 50 000 fans in Poland is the highest number of people who were or still are interested in at least one K-Pop group (as it was explained before in the methodology chapter), 1400 would form about 2,8% of that count. Nevertheless, some of the answers were repeated in both the surveys as well as the interviews, or even in other sources that they might be considered common to most of the Polish K-Pop fans. In this chapter the term “Polish K-Pop fandom” will, however, refer to the analyzed group, and it must be noted that in some cases the data might not be entirely true for all the Polish K-Pop fans.

4.1. General information

The research proved some information that were already found in other countries, namely regarding gender and age of the K-Pop fans. As it can be seen on Figure 5., almost half of Polish K-Pop fans are 16–20 years old and almost 94.8% are 10–25 years old. The survey did not have an option of “below 10”, since Facebook policy does not allow people under 13 to use the website but it is highly possible that some of the fans were younger.

Figure 5. Polish K-Pop fans' average age.

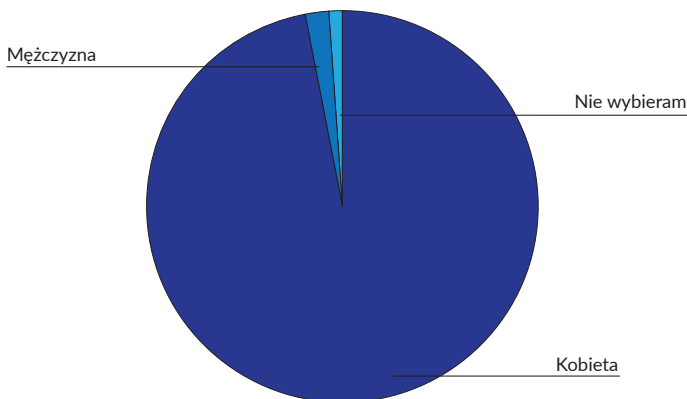


Translation of the categories: “lat” – years. N=1394

Source: Author.

The results for gender were also largely unsurprising. As it was described in chapter 2, the K-Pop fandom is mostly female fandom. It was briefly explained before and has already been analyzed by many scholars for other countries, and the Polish case seems to confirm that rule, with 97.4% of the fans identifying as women, 1.4% as men and 0.9% as neither.

Figure 6. Polish K-Pop fans' gender.

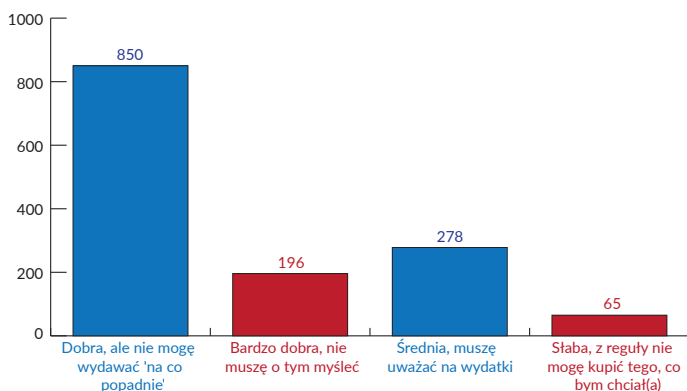


Translation of the categories: "kobieta" – woman, "mężczyzna" – man, "nie wybieram" – I do not choose, N=1394. Source: Author.

Another question in the basic demographics section regarded one's subjective financial situation. As it was already explained, for this research the income of the family expressed in numbers was less important than the way the fans felt about their financial situation. The question was asked in order to verify the potential status among others which could be based on having or not having money, but also to indicate one's inclination for buying K-Pop related goods and merchandise. As it can be seen below on Figure 7, most of the fans felt that their financial situation is good, but that does not entitle them to spending money thoughtlessly (61.2%), 14.1% said that it is very good and they do not have to think about it at all, 20% agreed that their financial situation is rather average, and they have to be careful what they spend their money on, while 4.7%

thought that their situation is bad and they cannot afford to buy items they would like to. Overall, it can be said that Polish K-Pop fans feel that their financial situation is good, or even very good.

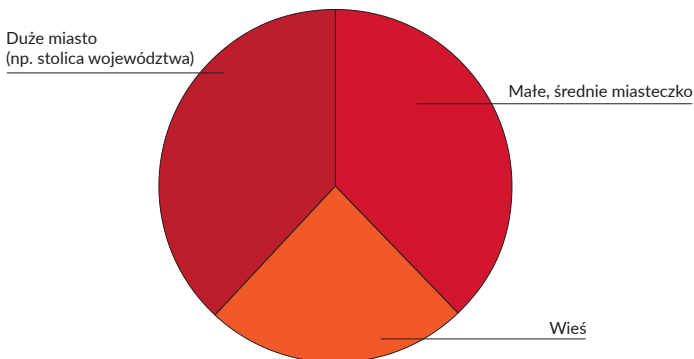
Figure 7. Subjective financial situation (as seen by fans themselves).



Translation of the categories: “Dobra, ale nie mogę wydawać ‘na co popadnie’” – good, but I have to be careful what I spend my money on, “Bardzo dobra, nie muszę o tym myśleć” – very good, I do not have to worry about it, “Średnia, muszę uważać na wydatki” – average, I have to pay attention to what I spend my money on, “Słaba, z reguły nie mogę kupić tego, co bym chciał(a)” – bad, usually I cannot afford to buy things I would like to. Source: Author.

Another information that was measured mostly as a subjective category was the place of residence. Although the categories may seem vague, since it is difficult to determine when one should consider a location a village, and when a small city would be a better label, if the actual resident count is not provided; once again, it seemed more important how the fans felt about their place of residence. It might be misleading from a sociological point of view, but as a category that could serve to build a position in a hierarchy, it was more important to find out how the fans saw themselves, and therefore how they could present themselves to others.

Figure 8. Polish K-Pop fans' place of residence.



Translation of categories: “duże miasto (np. Stolica województwa)” – large city (i.e. Voivodeship’s capital), “wieś” – village, “małe, średnio miasteczko” – small, middle-sized city, N=1391
Source: Author.

As it can be observed on the Figure 8., the results for all three categories were almost the same, with 39.4% of the respondents living in a small or a middle-sized cities, 38.2% in large cities and 22.4% in villages.

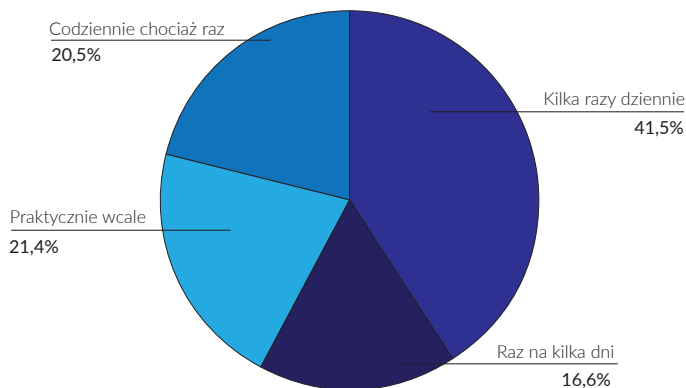
When it comes to strictly fandom-related questions, the first one regarded one’s position in the fan community and undertaken activities. 86.7% said that they have no special role or position, and they were just following the news, 7.2% are administrators of websites, blogs, groups, *etc.* and 6.1% were former administrators. 1.7% of fans were founders of a Polish fanclub of a group or idol and 1.6% of fans were founders of a Polish fanclub of a member of a group or a pairing¹⁵. Other answers included different kinds of administrative work, but it seems that those fans did not see themselves as administrators, just as a kind of an assistant to the actual administrators. One person indicated “funny movies and memes” as their position, one mentioned being a “broker”, handling the group’s orders of K-Pop-related merchandise and some indicated translating as their job in the fandom. Interestingly, someone stated “being a famous person in the fandom” or “running a Tumblr” as their position, and other pointed to being an “originator of charity actions” and “organizer of fandom conventions.” A few fans stress

15 Due to the dominance of same-sex groups in the K-Pop industry, it is very popular among fans to believe in romantic relationships between the members of those groups. Such a couple is usually called a “pairing”, a “ship” (from *shipping* that is derived from the word *relationship*) or an OTP – “one true pairing.”

being an author of fanfiction as their main role, a member of a choreography cover group or being a reader. Moreover, some answers clearly show that fans wanted to differentiate between providing information and being an administrator. It also seems that being active in discussions and providing information is regarded as a different activity from just following the information; fans often stated that they are just followers, but they also occasionally write comments or posts. This kind of repeating answer shows that discussing and providing information is not seen as a basic fandom activity for the fans, seeing as they did not choose that option. This can also mean that fans understood the following information only as being a passive audience that does not voice out its opinion in any way. Only few respondents chose more than one option in the survey, while the rest decided to add the fact that they are also commenting and posting by themselves. Interestingly, one person underlined that she was one of the first people to organize K-Pop-related events during anime conventions. This answer shows not only that person's thoughts on what a position in a fandom may be, but also the background of K-Pop's rise to popularity in Poland.

Regarding their activities in the fandom, fans were asked how often they engage in online fan activities such as commenting, posting, liking, reblogging, *etc.* This question was only about online activities, not about offline conventions or meetings.

Figure 9. Frequency of fans' online activity.



Translation of categories: "kilka razy dziennie" – a few times a day, "raz na kilka dni" – once in a few days, "praktycznie wcale" – almost never, "codziennie chociaż raz" – everyday at least once, N=1394.

Source: Author.

The fans presented a very diverse approach, as 41.5% of them said that they engage in such activities a few times a day, 20.5% at least once a day, 16.6% once in few days and 21.4% almost never take to online activities. Interestingly, fans are not very active online – the questions mentioned the simplest online activity, such as liking a post, and even so, almost 40% of fans said they do it almost never or once in a few days.

4.2. Motivation and opinion about K-Pop

One of the most important issues was the fans' motivation to be a part of the K-Pop fandom. They were asked at the beginning whether K-Pop was their first interest when it comes to the Korean Wave, and if that was not the case, what their main interest was. 86.6% stated that K-Pop was the first cultural product that introduced them to the rest of the Korean pop culture, while 13.4% said there was another central point of interest, enumerating examples such as Korean dramas and variety shows, Korean Culture Festival in Warsaw, Japanese dramas or anime, East Asian culture or music in general, but also cosmetic products and beauty industry, sport, dance or food. If the dramas were their first object of interest, fans often mentioned that the series they watched had a nice soundtrack that led them to find out more about its artist, or a member of an idol group was one of the actors and they wanted to get more information about that person. Interestingly, one person said that they encountered a fanfiction on the portal Wattpad first and then became interested in the music, while another person stated that the first thing they encountered were random photos and edits of Asian idols on Twitter that interested them, which means that fan art was the first cultural product that introduced them to the K-Pop fandom. For 65.4% of the respondents K-Pop fandom was the first fandom ever they were a part of.

Many issues and motivations pointed out by fans resemble the aforementioned Wann's concept. Out of eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family needs, the economic and the family needs seem to have the least importance for the Polish K-Pop fans. When asked whether fandom is associated with having prestige, 40.5% of fans said that they absolutely disagree with this sentence, 27.8% that they rather disagree. Only 10.3% of fans agreed

(both “strongly agree” and “rather”), showing that fans do not consider prestige to be a part of the K-Pop fandom. Similarly, K-Pop as “something different” or niche does not seem to be a reason, as almost equal number of fans chose all five options on the Likert’s scale. Moreover, the fans mostly strongly disagreed that they are interested in K-Pop to have common topics with other people (41.8%) – only 6.7% strongly agreed and 9.6% rather agreed.

In an open question section fans could freely express their motivation and thoughts on K-Pop in general. Most of the fans said that their main reason is just the fact that they like this music genre. Another often mentioned reason was everything that is already considered as a part of K-Pop besides music itself (like it was described in chapter 2): choreography, style, the visuals. It was also often mentioned that K-Pop can improve one’s mood, and the fans very often share how this passion changes their lives and how important it is now (but it must be stressed that they mean K-Pop as a music genre not the K-Pop fandom in this part, at least not as the main focus). Being different than Western music (although rarely specified in what aspects and how) and not being too focused on sexiness and exposing bodies were also important factors for Polish K-Pop fans. What might be surprising for the Western culture-oriented people is that fans repeatedly stress that idol groups’ members cooperation and closeness, being like family to each other, and their mutual interactions all were a substantial factor that attracts them to K-Pop. Moreover, fans point to the fact that they were able to get more information about Korean culture and South Korea in general thanks to their interest in its pop culture. Undoubtedly, some of the most fascinating answers were the ones that were very personal and described how fans identify themselves through K-Pop. Some people wrote that it helped them find their identity and it is now a part of their lives, which seems to be an enormous role for a music genre, and shows clearly that K-Pop should not be treated only as such, but should be seen as a broader phenomenon instead. Another fact that proved this right was that fans often, while being asked about K-Pop, mentioned food, cosmetics or other products as a reason for liking it, which might mean that K-Pop is identified as a synonym for the Korean Wave in its entirety.

Fans also pointed out to fandoms as their reason for liking K-Pop – this answer was especially visible among Bangtan Boys (BTS) fandom, calling themselves A.R.M.Y. Their “positive energy” and support for the idol group were mentioned as one of the factors that were the most important. In the interviews, one of the administrators said that K-Pop helped her friend to recover from depression; other examples of that therapeutic side can also be found in the posts published in the Facebook groups. Some of the less frequent, but still present factors were: Korean language, uplifting lyrics, inspiration for one’s creative pursuits, the diversity (of music styles as well as bands and idols) which makes it difficult to get bored with K-Pop, the idols’ image and hard work, and idols-fans relation (being close, sharing information, interactions and the so-called fan service). Fans are not uncritical in their opinions, and they very often point out that after getting to know K-Pop more, they see that artists are being created just for fans who rarely get the opportunity to get to know their real personalities. This also seems to be one of the most controversial issues in K-Pop fandom, as almost equal number of answers stresses the closeness of K-Pop idols and the relationship they have with their fans thanks to social media¹⁶. Another critical point raised by one of the administrators is that, although at first glance it seems that K-Pop is not overflowing with sex-references and half-naked bodies, it contains a multitude of sexual innuendos, and even the “cute schoolgirl” concepts can be sexualized, which might be dangerous for young females and is a phenomenon that should not be overlooked.

In one of the questions fans were asked to describe K-Pop as a person in order to better understand how they perceive it. Most of the answers stated that it would be a colorful and cheerful person, who makes others feel better. This person would be almost always smiling and would make a perfect companion for playing. One respondent stressed that, without question, such a person would be genderless. Nevertheless, they should be attractive and pleasing to the eye – though in a different way for ev-

16 This argument was also raised by fans appearing in the documentary movie “Beyond the Limits of K-Pop” (2017) which was shot during the group 24K’s third visit in Poland, as the fans there stressed that they admire the sense of unity between group members: their even dance moves, solidarity, and being in close relations with each other.

ery person. The same goes for the person's character. The respondent explained that it is because the K-Pop idols are being created for fans who cannot always see their real personalities at the first glance, it should be similar with K-Pop as a person. Another person wrote that:

It takes a long time to reach him and fully understand him. He¹⁷ is malleable, sometimes he can be hurtful, but most of the time it is nice to be with him – he can cheer up, comfort and even connect people. He is like the best psychologist, he can motivate in a great way. People have extreme opinions about him, some people may even hate you because of your relationship with him; but they have no actual reason, apparently they are just shallow. I also think that being with him makes a person more tolerant and open to his diversity and differentness. He is always happy to welcome everyone to his circle of friends, but popularity does not make him a worse person. [*Mops*¹⁸]

Ninilova also provided an interesting, vivid description of such a person:

It is a person with whom you will always find a common topic. She¹⁹ is very relaxed, but she sometimes has a mood. Sometimes she is stubborn and unreasonable, but still cheerful and playful. You can confide in her your problems and be sure that she will listen and comfort, and always be there when you want to share some good news. If you need someone to go out for a coffee and a gossip – call her. She has her own colorful style, combines sweatshirts which are too big for her with short skirts, loose ponytails with large earrings; something you would not try on your own, but you will admire how good it looks on her. Stylish street style? She knows what is fashionable. She always looks fresh, with sparks in her eyes and a cheerful look. Bright face, freckles, baby face, perfectly made – whether it's a natural makeup or an evening one. Flawless.

Among the rest of the mentioned characteristics there were also: charismatic, hardworking, ambitious, talented, and having colorful hair.

When asked about their thoughts on K-Pop's future, fans said that they believe that it'll become even more popular and that there will be more and more new groups. They thought that it is a relatively new phenomenon and will be even more recognizable and popular worldwide.

17 *K-Pop* in Polish takes masculine forms.

18 All the quotes in this part are taken from the interviews with the administrators and moderators.

19 The quote did not define the gender of that person, but in Polish *osoba* (a person) is feminine and therefore all of the verbs and adjectives were used in feminine form, but it is not certain, whether it was done on purpose or just as a reference to *person*.

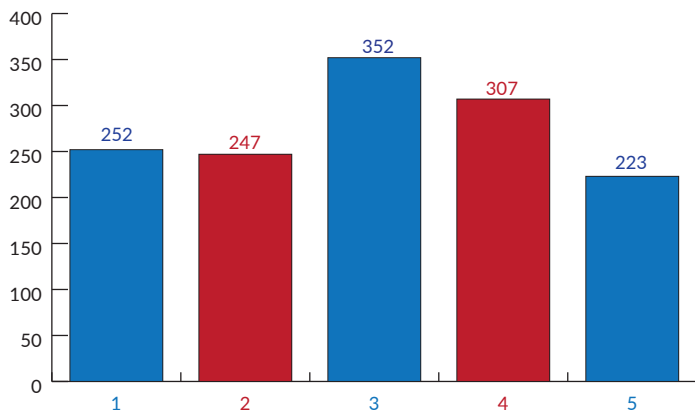
Moreover, most of the fans said that, although they will grow older and have families, and thus probably will not have time to engage in fandom like they do it now, they are sure that K-Pop would still be important for them and that they might still be following updates on their favorite idols. One of the things that worries them, however, is the fact that K-Pop is, in their opinion, becoming more similar to American music, and that in the future this trend might continue, leading to a situation when, eventually, it will lose its originality and its specific characteristics. They also wished that “world tour” would at some point in the future really mean the whole world, instead of just Asia and two cities in the North America, like it still happens currently. Another issue is the so-called “seven years curse”, which seems to preoccupy some fans. The “curse” means that most of the idol groups disband after seven years of activity in the entertainment industry. There are some groups that celebrated their 10th, 15th or 20th debut anniversary, but it is true that it is not easy for the artists to maintain their popularity at the same level for many years, and most of those groups have had breaks of varying lengths. Nevertheless, one of the answers regarding the future seems to be particularly accurate: “K-Pop will undoubtedly surprise us in the future” [*Manida*].

4.3. Fans, community and identity

Another important issue that was being researched was the way the fans see themselves and how they see their fellow fandom members. 33.7% strongly agreed that being a part of the fandom is a very important part of their everyday lives, while 28.3% said they rather agree (62% in total). Only 7.2% strongly disagreed and 7.5% thought that it was a rather untrue statement in their case. Moreover, 68.7% stated that being a part of the fandom is important to them (40.7% strongly, 28% rather agreed). The percentage for the activity in the fandom, however, presents itself conversely. While most of the fans agree that fandom is an important part of their lives, they were not as sure if one’s activity and participation in fandom’s life is an important part of their everyday life. As it can be seen on Figure 10., most of them could not answer this question, and when the other gave their opinion on the topic, it was very diverse. 22.2%

said they rather agree with the sentence that their fandom activity is an important part of their day, 18.2% said they strongly disagree, 17.9% rather disagreed and 16.1% strongly agreed. The numbers show that most of the fans find it difficult to evaluate this aspect, and once they attempt to, their answers are very different from each other, proving that fandom per se and activity in it is not the same for most of the fans. The answers seem to show that Polish K-Pop fans value the fandom as a concept and community more than fandom as a practice.

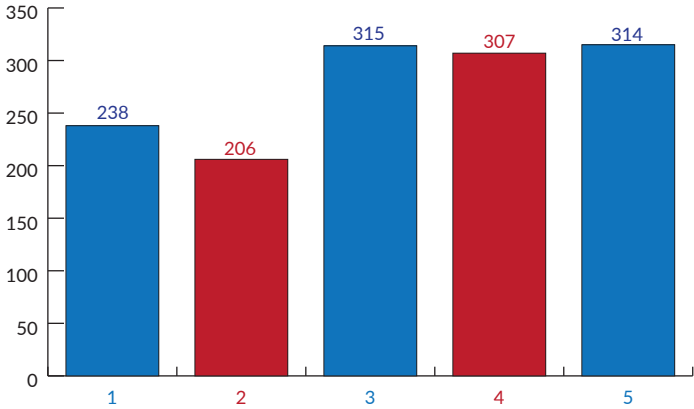
Figure 10. "My fandom activity is an important part of my day."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

When asked if they often think about being a member of the fandom, 30.5% of fans strongly agreed, 25.7% rather agreed, 12.9% strongly disagreed, 10.6% rather agreed, while 20.3% did not have any opinion on the topic. This question was one of the factors measuring the so-called conscious identification. Fans were also asked about their thoughts on K-Pop and fandom as a part of their image. The results from these questions were, however, very diverse, which can mean both that different people have different approaches, as well as that this question might have not been precise enough and, in some cases, might have been misunderstood.

Figure 11. "Being a member of the fandom is an important part of my image."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

On Figure 11., it can be seen that fans generally agree with the notion that being a member of the K-Pop fandom is an important part of their image, but the number of people who could not answer or disagreed was also quite high, with the difference not being substantial enough to reach concrete conclusions. Similarly with Figure 12. and the statement that being a member of the fandom is not related to the way they perceive themselves. Most of the respondents (27.5%) did not know or did not have an opinion, 20.6% rather agreed, 20.4% strongly agreed, 19.8% rather disagreed and 11.7% strongly disagreed. The results seem to suggest that most of the fans do see being a member of the fandom as a part of their image, but not necessarily as a part of their identity.

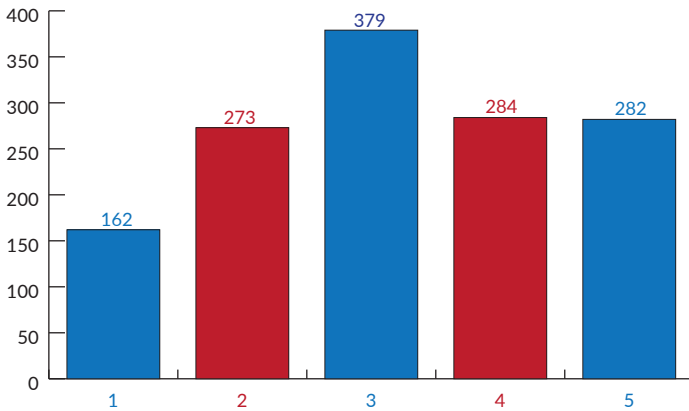
More insight on the topic of how the fandom and K-Pop itself help the fans identify themselves can be found in the interviews, where the fans were able to speak more openly on the topic. One of the administrators shared her story of how K-Pop helped her find her style and identity:

I was so in love with this, now, of course, I see plenty of cons with all this. But I just had enough of what is happening in the West, everything is full of vulgarity, everything is just sex, vulgarity, everything... I just had enough... For me it was so hideous, that when I saw all these cute faces,

I was like: God, I found my place on Earth. I took out all of the pink clothes, I took out all of the dresses from the wardrobe and damn, I was like, now I am myself, someone understands it, I will go to Korea, I will live there, it will be wonderful. Yes, that was my first “ignition”, when I got to know it. I think everyone was like this [in the beginning]. [W23]

At this point it is important to note that in many of the interviews’ answers it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between K-Pop itself and the fandom in general, as fans seem to perceive it as two sides of the same phenomenon. Nevertheless, just like in the quote above, it gives more information on both the motivation for taking interest in K-Pop, and on how it changed one’s own perception. Another person said that thanks to her favorite group member she was able to change her attitude towards many issues for the better, that she is motivated to do things she was never motivated to do before and that, overall, she feels that her life is better than it was.

Figure 12. “Being a member of the fandom is not related to how I perceive myself”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

The question of whether the fans feel more like a part of Polish K-Pop fandom or international K-Pop fandom is an important query for other parts of the project, and here as well, the answers were inconclusive. When

confronted with a sentence “I feel more a member of the Polish fandom than the global one”, 28.7% of the fans did not have an opinion and the same number strongly disagreed with it, while 22.8% rather disagreed, 12.8% rather agreed and 7% strongly agreed. These findings are rather surprising because of the pre-research, during which most of the fans said that they identify mostly as Polish fans, and not necessarily as international or global ones. The question of the relation between identifying oneself as a Polish or an international fan and attending K-Pop or Korea-related events could also be a part of future research, as it seems that fans who identify themselves primarily as members of the Polish fandom might be more willing to attend such events in Poland, while people who identify themselves as international fans might perhaps focus more on online activities.

In the interviews, the fans were asked whether they feel more like a part of international or Polish fandom, but also about the borders between the general K-Pop fandom and the fandoms of specific groups, and if it is possible to be in a few of those, or one should be devoted to only one group as their main interest. One of the administrators shared her thoughts on that:

It would be nice to try to create one big K-Pop fandom, but I think it would be a problem. There would probably be clashes. Everyone thinks that “his/her” group is the best and that there will probably be arguments. It is better with separate fandoms. Fans of a given band, even from around the world, can get along because they think in the same way. [W22]

Another person shared that, in her opinion, K-Pop fandom can be seen as a genealogical tree, and it is just one, big family [W23]. In general, it seems that most of the answers from the interviews agree with that concept. One person, however, noted that the general fandom cannot just be reduced to the sum of particular groups’ fandoms, since many people are in groups’ fandoms but identify themselves also as general K-Pop fans [Uru]. Most of the administrators also agree that, although they focus on one or two groups, it is possible to be active in many groups’ fandoms, and it just depends on a person’s ability and willingness to devote their time to that interest. It seems that a frequently-occurring way of starting to be a K-Pop fan is getting to know everything at first

and then choosing just one or two favorite groups, but there were also other opinions:

Of course there is something like the K-Pop fandom, but sometimes people are confused about what it is. Of course, everyone has the right to call themselves a K-Poper, if they feel like belonging to this fandom, but I think that to actually be a part of it, you have to be more interested in everything that happens in K-Pop – that means watching comebacks, debuts, some major disbandments, the basic information. If someone prefers to focus on one or two teams, without even knowing about the most important events for K-Pop, in my opinion, they should stop calling themselves a K-Poper. [*Mops*]

Ninilova also added to this topic:

To be honest, my little dream is that K-Pop fans should be ONE big fandom with mutual respect towards each other and all the artists. Unfortunately, seeing many ‘fandom wars’ and hatred (especially on the line “EXO-L – ARMY”), I must answer that this is a collection of fandoms of individual bands. What is more – not even groups, but group members (...). Of course, we all qualify in the extensive category of ‘K-Pop fans’ because our bands belong to the genre of K-Pop music, but I will not risk saying that we are all in the ‘K-Pop fandom’ as one. [*Ninilova*]

Many fans observed, however, that fans can sometime unite, especially when, for example, a K-Pop group is being nominated for an award in the same category with another, non-K-Pop artists. Even if someone is not a fan of that specific group, there is a larger chance that they would vote for that group, just to increase K-Pop’s popularity worldwide.

Moreover, the question about differences between the countries was brought up, and, in the interviews, the administrators shared their thoughts on the topic. One person said that there are differences and, for example, the Korean fans tend to be more meddling and more hateful. The others did not agree with that opinion and said that the only difference is that Korean fans have easier access to concerts and merchandise. Manida also added:

From what I have noticed, for example, the Korean fandom does not really like international fans. It is seen in the media that sometimes they make fun of us, they have an unflattering opinion about us. It also works, of course, the other way around. I think that this is primarily due to cultural differences and values. [*Manida*]

It is also quite visible that the borders between fandoms are usually drawn between the international fandom and the Korean fans, making it two “sub-fandoms”; however, it rarely happens with, for example, “Asian” and “European” fandoms or between other specific countries. It seems that the most significant difference can be observed exclusively with relation to the Korean fans. It is worth stressing, though, that many fans also underline that they do not have that much contact with international fans. Interestingly enough, another point that was often brought up was the issue of money – many administrators observed that although there are not many differences, money is sure an issue for Polish fans, since it is more expensive to order a piece of merchandise from Asia, and the currency exchange can also be problematic. An interesting view was presented by Hoseob, who had experiences with fandoms from other countries:

Uniting fans from various countries occurs when there are concerts of a given group in a certain country. That is, when fans from Germany or the Czech Republic come to Polish groups, they ask if someone could help them grasp everything, and vice versa when the Poles are going somewhere. (...) Differences... I think that when it comes to the organization of concerts, the Polish fandom is the best at it (in Europe). Banner actions, lightsticks, fundraising for cakes, *etc.* (...) And also the fact that, in general, the fandom in Poland mostly lives in the “community”, because I participate in many groups of other European countries and most often there is silence for a few days or weeks, sometimes someone adds something, a discussion begins, and with the Polish groups, every day something new happens. [Hoseob]

In this part fans were also asked to imagine a party at which the personified group fandoms meet and what it would look like. Uru described the following situation:

I think that such an event would be like meeting a large group of friends. Some would stick only with a handful of people, others would be open and friendly enough that they would spend this time with everyone for a bit. I will mention here only two fandoms that would definitely joke around with one another, jokingly hit each other, *etc.* They are complete opposites appearance-wise. Pastel pink/blue Carat²⁰ with black Monbebe²¹. This relationship is like those two buddies who have known each other for years. [Uru]

20 The name of the boy group Seventeen's fandom.

21 Monsta X's fandom name.

Ninilova provided a discerning analysis of many fandoms in a form of an entertaining story. Although it is quite long, it provides a detailed description of some of the K-Pop fandoms and allows for a presentation of how their relations look like:

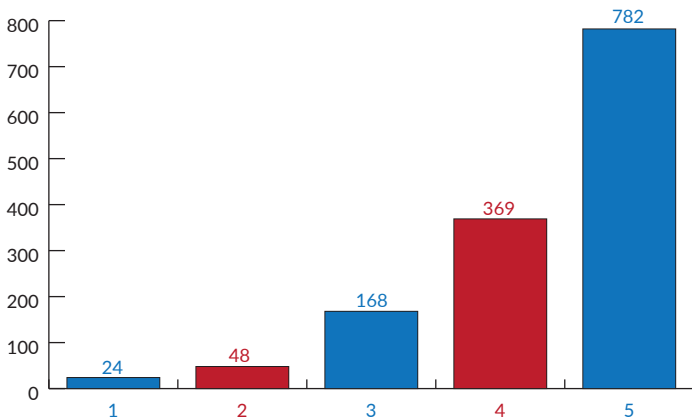
We have two very bold braggarts – EXO-L and ARMY²², who shout each other out about what they did last weekend and how are they popular with others. They do it with a glass of their favorite champagne. Did I mention that it is the same kind? Next, we see Wannable, who approaches each guest with a different opinion on the same subject, depending on the person she changes her mind. You can feel fakeness from her, but you can also see excitement on her face. A malleable personality – she can be the most beloved friend or the biggest shrew. With a smile on her face, Joyful looks at her. She has just returned from the marathon that she has won and feels that this is her well-deserved rest. She is friendly with Wannable, but she does not want to be eternally in her shadow, therefore she tries to set the limits of that similarity. She does not know too many people at the party. Recently, someone mentioned that the characters of NCTzen and IGOT7 are similar, but both of them have not had the chance to check it. IGOT7 sticks with Monbebe. IGOT7 suggest to take over the world, to which Monbebe reacts with surprise – he does not know whether it is a joke or not. NCTzen would gladly join the plan if he knew about it. For now, he is sitting and trying various types of foreign wines at the bar, which is also the favorite activity of IGOT7, immediately after complimenting everyone around. Monbebe is lost in the crowd of all these strong personalities, as one of the few loyal people in the group. She is already a bit sleepy, but still politely nods to everyone she talks to and, from time to time, modestly adds her opinion about her few successes. Shawol and VIP are sitting on the couch and, with lemonade in hand, they lead a stress-free conversation about old times. They are not in a hurry, they know their high position in the hierarchy, but they never abuse it. They have a more mature view on the world and command respect, having a mysterious aura around them. They contain great strength, which they show only on the dance floor.

Manida also added that “they gossip, backbite, but also joke, exchange the latest information, and talk about potential cooperation”, but all of

22 Two biggest K-Pop fandoms (of the groups EXO and BTS) at that moment, who often start the so-called fandom wars. The others are: Wannable – Wanna One fandom, Joyful – JBJ fandom, NCTzen – NCT fandom, IGOT7 – GOT7 fandom, Shawol – SHINee fandom and VIP – Big Bang fandom. The description uses both feminine and neutral forms – often for the same fandom as if the author wanted to avoid specifying gender.

the descriptions show that, although fans often stress every K-Pop fan being equal and K-Pop fandom being one big family, it does not mean that all the family members are identical. On the contrary, the story shared by Niniłova gives insight into how diverse this community is and that fans themselves know that very well and are probably proud of it. Although they do not always have a very positive opinion on other fandoms, it comes with a thorough analysis of that fandom and their own experiences, rarely because “everybody says so.” As for the differences between the K-Pop fandom and other fandoms, administrators mention loyalty as something that is different and more present in the K-Pop fandom, but do not give any other specific examples.

Figure 13. “I feel a part of K-Pop fandom.”



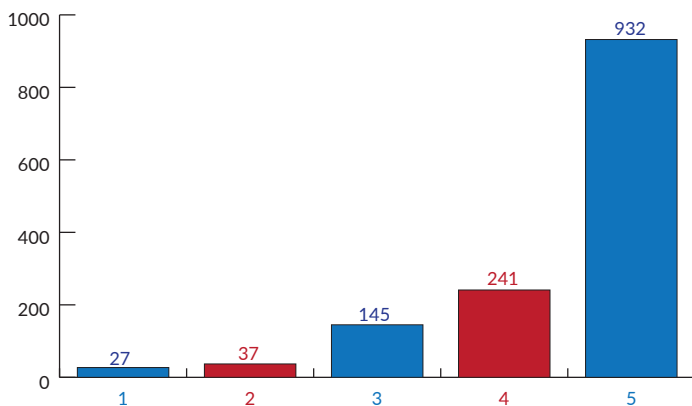
Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know / I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

One of the core issues in the K-Pop fandom is the sense of community. It should be noted, however, that there is the K-Pop fandom and there are the group fandoms, and the division between them is sometimes unclear. A sum of groups' fandoms does not necessarily equal the K-Pop fandom. That is something that could be easily observed during the pre-research stage, when after asking the fans whether they feel like a part of the K-Pop fandom, there were many completely different answers. Some people said

that they were only K-Pop fans, and not fans of any specific group, others said that they have only their favorite group and they do not identify as a part of the K-Pop fandom in general, while for the rest it was obvious that being a fan of a specific band means being a fan of K-Pop. A similar problem might come up with the aforementioned geographical division, as some of the fans might identify just as Polish fandom members, as only international fandom members or as both. Nevertheless, the questions from the pre-research were asked once again in the online survey and the results can be seen on Figure 13.

Figure 14. also shows the fans' attitude and opinion on their own role and part in fan community, as it depicts their willingness to stay in the fandom in the future. As it can be seen, the majority (67.4%) strongly agreed with the presented sentence, 17.4% rather agreed (84.8% in total), 10.5% did not know, while 2.7% rather disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed. Asking about the future, in fact, mainly shows how the fans feel about their participation in fandom's activities now and whether they would like to withdraw, because they are not satisfied, or if the participation provides whatever the fans need.

Figure 14. "I plan on staying in the fandom in the next years."

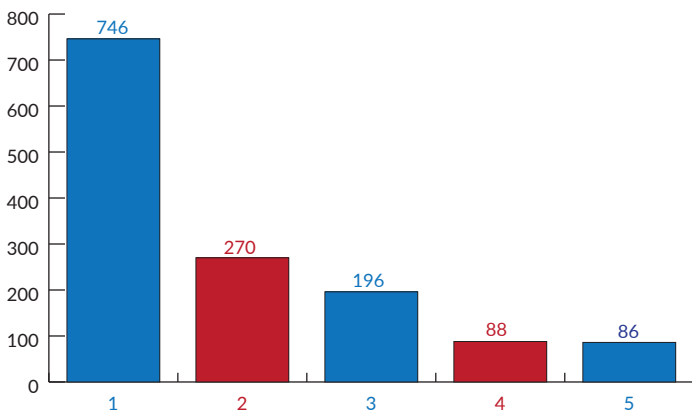


Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

What is more, 53.9% strongly agreed that they are usually satisfied with being a part of the fandom, 29.1% rather agreed, 12.7% did not have an opinion, while only 2.7% rather disagreed and 1.6% strongly disagreed, which shows the overall high satisfaction. Very vivid answers could also be seen when the fans were asked whether, if given the occasion, they would leave the fandom. 75.8% strongly disagreed with such an idea, 15.5% rather disagreed, 6.5% did not know and 2.1% strongly or rather agreed. Relatively high number of the K-Pop fandom members also agreed that being a part of the fandom is good (56.5% – strongly, 31.2% – rather) and only 1.8% disagreed. Unfortunately, the survey did not allow for further elaboration, but it would be interesting to analyze why people stay in the fandom although they do not see it as beneficial, and if they say they would leave it in the future, why they do not do it now.

Another part of the survey questions regarded being loyal to one another, and fans' relations with other fandom members in general. The fans' sentiments towards the sentence "I do not care if the fandom is successful or works well" can be seen on Figure 15. 53.8% of the fans strongly disagreed with that sentence and only 6.2% strongly and 6.3% rather agreed.

Figure 15. "I do not care if the fandom is successful or works well."

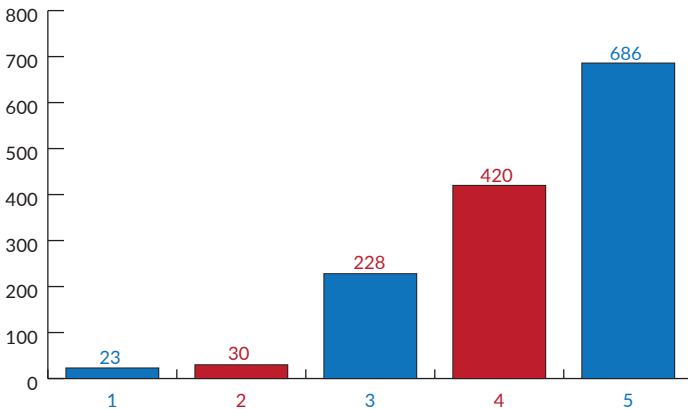


Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Another interesting issue was the question about being loyal to other fandom members. As it is a rather difficult problem and “being loyal” was not defined in any way, many “I do not know” answers were expected, but, surprisingly, only 21.6% of the fans chose it, while the rest rather (32.2%) or strongly agreed (35.8%). 4.5% strongly disagreed and 5.8% rather disagreed. The results show that there is a relatively high feeling of loyalty among the Polish K-Pop fandom members. Recognizing fellow fandom members was visibly less clear. Although the pre-research showed that fans find it very easy to recognize other fans, for example, on the street or in other public places, the survey showed that the answers were very diverse. The most frequently chosen answer was “I do not know”, with 34.4% of the fans. Slightly more fans would agree (27.6% rather and 13.2% strongly) with that sentence, but not much less disagreed (14.9% rather disagreed and 9.9% strongly).

Most of the fandom members would like to work together with others to make the community work better (31.9% rather agreed and 29% strongly agreed) and almost 50% admitted that they feel good whenever they hear about other fans’ successes.

Figure 16. “I feel good when I hear about the successes of other fandom members.”

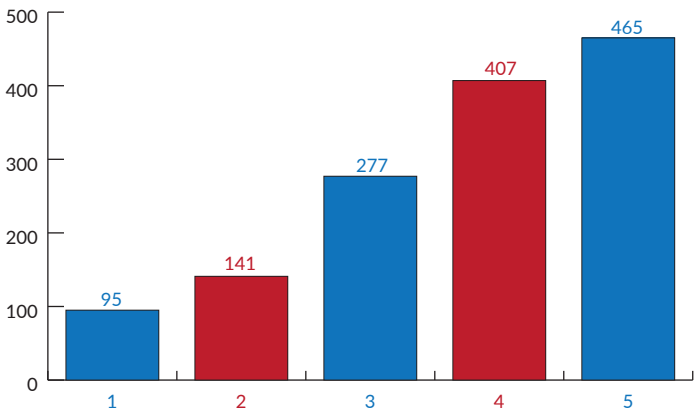


Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

The willingness to cooperate is also visible in the answers to the questions regarding readiness to solve a problem if any comes up. 37.7% strongly agreed that the fandom members would be ready to solve it and 32.5% rather agreed, totaling the overall positive response at more than 70% of all the answers.

Another crucial question for group identification was the one regarding the categories of “us” and “them.”

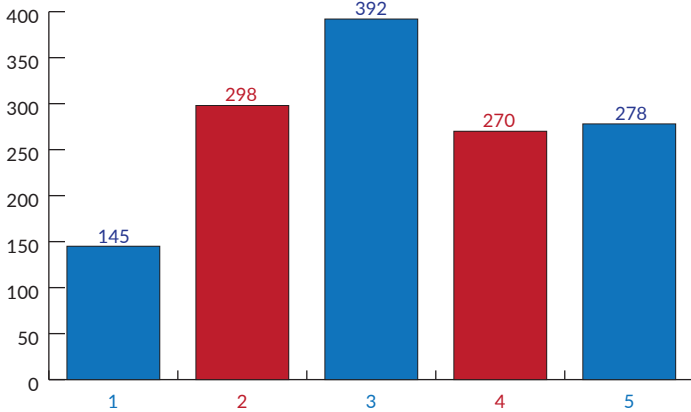
Figure 17. “When fandom members plan something, I think of it as something that ‘we do’ and not ‘they do.’”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

It was slightly different when it came to shared values because, although most of the fans would agree that they share similar values with fellow fandom members, with 33.% rather agreeing, and 20.5% strongly agreeing, 27.6% could not answer this question. These numbers mean that while fans would mostly agree, some of them are not sure about it. Another case of interesting results could be observed for the question regarding communication with individual members of the fandom.

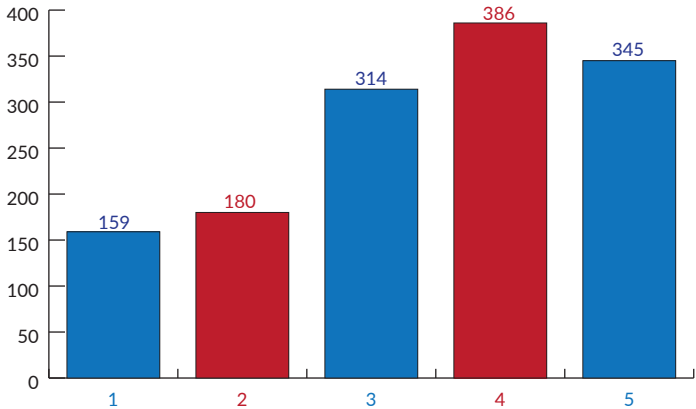
Figure 18. "I rarely contact individual members of the fandom."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

As it can be seen on the Figure 18., the approach to this issue was not unambiguous. Most of the fans could not answer this question, while the rest of the answers got similar number of votes, with only “strongly disagree” being chosen visibly less often. This question might be an issue related to the communication sphere, rather than the fault of the community as such but it also shows the relations between members of the group. Those relations are also reflected in the questions asking if the fans do not have any friends they can rely on in the fandom. 37.3% strongly disagreed with than sentence, meaning that they do have such friends, 22.9% rather disagreed, 17.6% did not know and 22.2% agreed (8.7% rather and 13.5% strongly). Interestingly, however, these numbers were not reflected in the question about being able to talk to someone from the fandom, if someone would have a need to talk to others.

Figure 19. "When I need some contact, I can turn to someone from the fandom."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

As the Figure 19. shows, the results were quite similar for most of the answers. Although most of the fans would agree with this sentence, the result was not as decisive as in the question regarding having friends one can rely on in the fandom. This might be caused by the question itself; it may have suggested a rather brief and random interaction with another fan or might have meant that fandom members rely on each other in cases of serious problems; or even that they have a deep belief that if anything serious would have happened, others would be willing to help, but do not necessarily need to contact each other on everyday basis. Similarly ambiguous results were obtained from the question about frequent help offered to other fandom members. 31.4% of fans did not know how to address an issue brought by the sentence "I often help other members and they help me – even in crisis situations." 20.4% rather agreed, 17.9% rather disagreed, 16.7% strongly disagreed and 13.6% strongly agreed. Perhaps in this case the word "often" might be the cause of misunderstandings, as some people might have not encountered a situation in which their help was needed, but it also shows that other fandom members might have not actually felt that they could ask for it. This issue was also addressed by administrators who often mentioned their willingness

to help others and being happy if they could provide any comfort or support to others. It also seemed that they were asked for help especially by younger fans. One of them said that “Yes, of course [fans can ask for help]. We help each other in every respect. We are friends, so we talk about everything”, and after being asked whether she herself helps others, “I always gladly help” [W22]. Another administrator added that “it all depends on the person, but usually I have seen that most people from my fandom are willing to help” [Luna], and yet another one said, “Definitely yes, there is always a person who will be happy to help, even with personal matters. The K-Pop (Polish in particular) fandom seems to have very close in-group relations” [W24]. Manida also shared that:

If we talk about things such as, for example, charity, then yes. When it comes to personal matters, it depends on whether we are close to the other fans. We usually turn to family and best friends for help. [Manida]

The difference between the answers from the surveys and the ones from the interviews might also be caused by the respondents’ role in the fandom: the administrators, most probably, are the ones who would be asked for help by others, or at least would be able to notice people in need of help while organizing fandom’s activity online. It may be different, however, for less frequently active and less involved fans. It also might be related to the fact that helping is seen as a part of the administrators’ work in a sense; while most usually the helping is meant to be of technical, group-related sort, sometimes it takes on a more personal aspect.

The following table shows the correlation between questions regarding the feelings of loyalty towards other fandom members, the importance of being a part of the fandom, and the satisfaction derived from being a part of the fandom and helping others. As it can be seen, unsurprisingly, the highest correlation score was found among the issue of the fandom membership having significant importance and being happy about being a part of the fandom. Similar score was also present for importance of participation and loyalty towards other fans. Moreover, the feeling of loyalty has relatively high correlation with being happy about being a part of the fandom. Feeling loyal and helping others also had a positive, but less significant correlation, as well as being happy about being a part of the fandom and helping others.

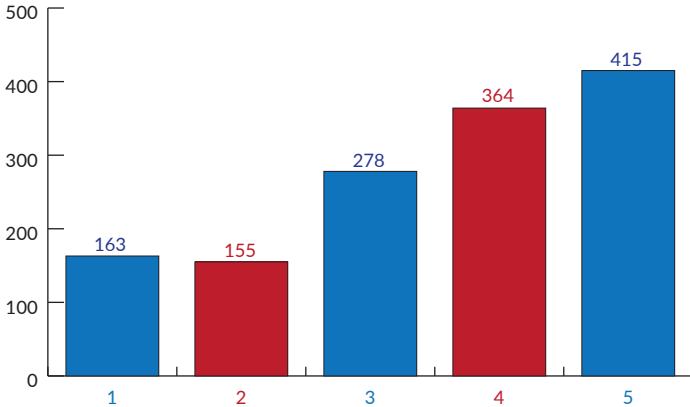
Table 3. Correlation between questions regarding loyalty, satisfaction and helping others.

	<i>I feel loyal to other fandom members.</i>	<i>I often help other members and they help me – even in crisis situations.</i>	<i>Being a part of the fandom is important to me.</i>	<i>Generally, I am happy to be part of the fandom.</i>
<i>I feel loyal to other fandom members.</i>	1			
<i>I often help other members and they help me – even in crisis situations.</i>	.456951679	1		
<i>Being a part of the fandom is important to me.</i>	.65404085	.415820197	1	
<i>Generally, I am happy to be part of the fandom.</i>	.554680706	.328147059	.655012632	1

Source: Author.

The question that combines being a part of the community with the issue of one's own identity was the question about sharing a deep sense of belonging with other fandom members. 30.2% strongly agreed with that sentence, 26.5% rather agreed (in total 56.7% being positive) and only 11.9% strongly disagreed, 11.3% rather disagreed. The answers were quite surprising because of how strong the sentiment in question was, mentioning not only sense of belonging itself, but even “deep sense” that suggest more intense relations.

Figure 20. "I share a deep sense of belonging with other fandom members."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Nevertheless, most of the fans agree that friendships and relations they made due to being a part of the fandom are very important to them: 27.9% agreed strongly with that sentence and 27.3% rather agreed (55.2% in total).

The administrators mention the characteristics and requirements that K-Pop fandom members should meet. When they were asked about the features of a K-Pop fan in general, they mostly enumerated being open, full of energy and straightforward, but the respondents were once again very cautious not to generalize. They were also asked if age can be a problem, if someone can be too young or too old to be a fan, and most of the administrators agreed that the age should not be a problem, but also mentioned that some situations require maturity, rationality and calmness that younger people often lack; still, young age could not be considered an obstacle for becoming a K-Pop fan. Concurrently, it was observed that being a fan is a time-consuming activity, and it is easier for younger fans to devote many hours to K-Pop. When asked about the requirements, the administrators agree that a fan should have some basic knowledge (although the definition of what basic means is varied: for some being just a vague idea of what K-Pop is, for others the basic

knowledge about a given band and for yet another set the basic information about everything that is going on in the industry). One person said that the crucial part is not having knowledge, but the willingness to have it, as the difference between being just interested in something and being a fan relies on the commitment and time spent on it [*Ninilova*]. There is no better or worse knowledge, but there should be a sort of knowledge nevertheless. One's activity also did not seem to be a crucial feature; interviewees agreed that it depends on a person, and the fact that someone is not active does not necessarily mean that they are not a fan. Another administrator, however, shared her more negative view on some of the fans as well:

...it used to be the same with anime fans. And now this is the case with K-Pop fans. These are usually shut-in people who build their personality on the Internet, as what they would like to be, while in reality they are completely different people. (...) I remember how I met such people, sharp-tongued I would say, whose only arguments were swear words, then you already know that it makes no sense to talk to such a person. And then you meet such people in reality and, you know... Heads down and they say nothing. And the only thing that is vivid is their clothes. [*W23*].

It must be stressed that this description was not referring to the fandom in general, but it indicates some of the more negative sides of it as well.

To conclude the section of information on Polish K-Pop fandom as a community and identity, as well as on fans' motivation, the answers to the questions concerning the best and the worst aspects of K-Pop fandom can be quoted. According to fans, some of the best aspects of K-Pop and specific groups' fandoms are: having fun together, the enthusiasm during comeback period²³, the pride of being a part of this fandom and having other people with whom one can talk, attending conventions and meeting other fans in person, seeing how the rules and habits within the fandom and during meetings change over time, seeing how the group changes

23 In K-Pop, the time when a band, group or an idol releases a new album is called a comeback, and it is never solely about the music itself. During the comeback, artists reveal their new concepts, styles and actively promote their songs in music programs such as SBS' *Inkigayo* or KBS' *Music Bank*. The comeback period usually starts with rumors on possible concepts, music style, titles or even members' hair color. It is usually fostered by the entertainment companies which share hints, teaser photos and teaser videos before releasing a new album.

(since it is like watching a child grow up), listening to new albums and remembering songs, having the dream to actually meet the artists, the everyday following of the updates on artists' activities, organizing fan events and charities, having K-Pop as a source of inspiration, being more open (both in terms of other cultures as well as other people or trying new things), the amount of new songs, improving one's mood with reality shows starring idols, learning new languages (mostly English was mentioned), being able to quickly find information online. Among the worst aspects, the following issues were mentioned: supporting just one band and simultaneously hating the others, leaving the fandom of a group just because of the change in their style or the fact that one of the members left, fandom wars and prejudices towards specific fandoms, people who believe too much in ships and possible romances between idols, being misunderstood by people who are not interested in K-Pop, K-Pop goods and merchandise being quite expensive (leading to periodical financial problems if someone finds it difficult to restrain from buying new items), but also issues related to groups and idols starting with members leaving bands, losing in music programs and mentions of even more serious cases such as idols' deaths²⁴. One of the administrators also described a situation in which she went with her friend to a K-Pop party and saw many young, drunk girls eager to meet older Asian men also present at the event, which could possibly be dangerous to the female fans.

4.4. Structures, hierarchy and leaders

The Polish K-Pop fans were also analyzed to find out more about the structure of the community, its hierarchy and leadership. Fans were asked not only about their own role, but also about what empowers others in

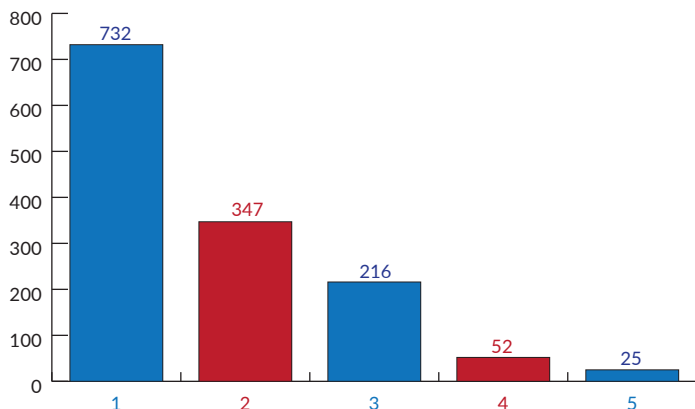
24 The most recent case was the suicide of SHINee's member Kim Jonghyun, which happened on December 18th, 2017, and is still considered a shock for many fans during the time of this research project. After his death, many discussions on idols' lives struggles and mental health started leading to raising awareness of the less glamorous problems of the idols, and depression as a mental illness that should be professionally treated. Nevertheless, there was a report of suicide attempt by one of the Indonesian fans, and many people worried about the so-called Werther effect (copycat suicide). Another well-known case in the industry was the car accident of the girl group Ladies' Code. After speeding on a slippery road, the groups' manager lost control over the group's van which led to one of the members' death on arrival and the other one dying a few days later in a hospital. Both cases disclosed the darker side of K-Pop industry and showed that idols are also human beings.

the fandom, who is the leader and what a leader should be doing in the fandom specifically. Moreover, the issues regarding establishing of the hierarchy were analyzed. This topic seems to be exceptionally interesting in K-Pop fandom (or perhaps other Asia-related fandoms as well), since K-Pop fans tend to follow the Korean rules of being respected due to being older or more experienced. The trend is especially visible in the international fandom, where more experienced and knowledgeable fans are often called *unni* (kor. 언니), meaning older sister²⁵. In the Korean language, using this form implies a more formal approach, therefore one showing more respect to that person. There is also an honorific suffix *-nim* (kor. 님) that is used to express respect to people we do not know; in the fandom, for example, this suffix is often used when referring to well-known or liked authors of fanfiction, called *authornim*. Moreover, in the K-Pop fandom there are phrases borrowed from other fandoms, such as “notice me, senpai” meaning that a given person would like to be noticed and acknowledged by someone older or more respected than him or her, borrowed from Japanese manga and anime story conventions. It should also be noted that K-Pop and the Korean Wave represent Confucian values and it seems that, to some extent, its fans try to follow the rules they find important or interesting; the rule of seniority, often presented in K-dramas, being one of them. This is why K-Pop fandom seems to be different from other fandoms when it comes to its hierarchy and structures.

One of the core issues here was the feeling of having influence on fandom’s activities and organization. The fans were asked if they agree with the sentence “I have practically no influence on how the fandom works”, and they seemed rather perplexed about this question, as most of them answered “I do not know” (30.9%), 21.2% rather disagreed, 19.4% strongly agreed, 19% rather agreed and 9.4% strongly agreed, showing that the answer depended greatly on personal experiences that varied between individuals. The answers about fans’ opinion on whether one actually cares for fandom’s organization and for its working structure can be seen on Figure 21.

25 Similarly, members of idol groups are called *oppa* (kor. 오빠) – older brother, which is a term that expresses closeness and respect at the same time.

Figure 21. “Nobody especially worries about how fandom works as a whole.”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Here, the Polish K-Pop fans mostly did not agree with the statement (strongly 53.4%, rather – 25.3%); only 5.6% agreed. This shows that although fans are not sure if they have any influence on fandom’s inner workings and organization, it is clear for them that there are people who care about it and it is not being neglected.

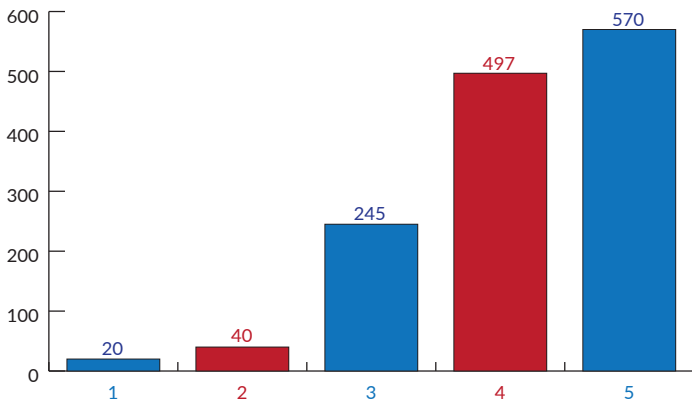
Having (or not having) an influence on fandom’s organization is also connected to the notion of leadership, which appears to be quite controversial for the Polish K-Pop fans. Although during the pre-research this category did not seem to be misunderstood or questionable, in the surveys and interviews it caused numerous controversies. The word itself was not clearly defined (only some examples of certain roles in the fandom in the form of an open catalogue were provided) in order to let the respondents understand it in their own way, but in some cases it seemed to have rather negative connotations, which will be further explained and quoted after showing the results of the survey.

The online dictionaries provide the following definitions of a leader: “the person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country” (Oxford), “a person who leads, such as a) guide, conductor, b) a person who directs a military force unit, c) the principal officer of a British political party, d) conductor” (Merriam Webster), or “a person in control of

a group, country, or situation” (Cambridge). Primarily, this category was used in this research project to describe people such as administrators, moderators or others that could be seen as the fandom’s elites. The questions that were asked about the leaders were partly inspired by the aforementioned project by Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith regarding science-fiction fandom in the United States. Moreover, it is believed that information may be seen as a kind of power and therefore people who manage information and are opinion leaders might be seen as the leaders in a given group.

The first leader-related question in the survey required the fans to assume an attitude towards the sentence stating that the leaders of individual fan groups manage them for their own profit. 57.7% strongly disagreed with that sentence, 26.9% rather disagreed, 11.6% did not have an opinion and only 3.7% rather (2.9%) or strongly (0.8%) agreed. Similarly, fans did not agree with the sentence suggesting that the leaders of fan groups are not particularly sensitive to the voices of other, “ordinary” members. 48.8% strongly disagreed, 25.4% rather disagreed and 7.2% thought that this was true. The leaders’ work was also analyzed in other questions. Figure 22 shows the opinion on the leaders’ interest and involvement in fan groups management. 41.5% agreed that the leaders are involved and are good at managing the fan groups, 36.2% rather agreed, 17.9% did not have an opinion and 3.4% disagreed with this sentence.

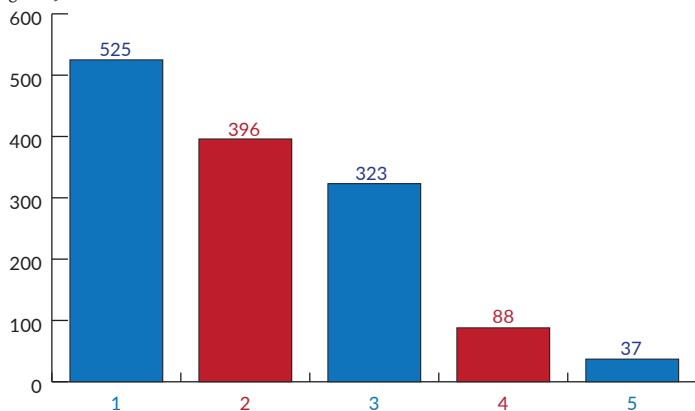
Figure 22. “Leaders try to know what is happening in fan groups and manage their functioning well.”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Moreover, the fans were asked whether they think that the Polish K-Pop fandom lacks true leaders – once again without defining what that would mean. 38.3% strongly disagreed, 28.9% rather disagreed and 9.1% in total agreed with that sentiment. It is worth noting, however, that the answer may mean that fans feel like there should be more people leading the fan groups or – on the contrary – that the fandom just does not need any leaders. Nevertheless, only less than 10% of fans feel that something should change in this regard.

Figure 23. “Fandom lacks true leaders.”



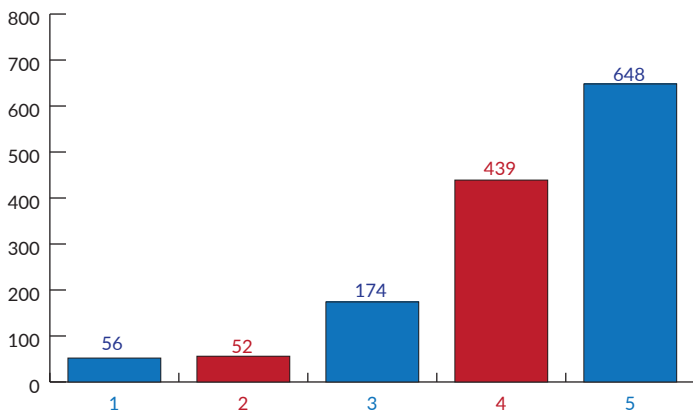
Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

The Polish K-Pop fans rarely contact fandom leaders: 72.3% disagreed with the sentence “I have a frequent contact with the fandom leaders (administrators, moderators, founder of fan sites, etc.)”, but at the same time most of them agreed that if there was a need, they know that they can contact the fandom leaders and expect an answer to their questions or requests (58.6% agreed, while 19.3% disagreed).

Another issue that was crucial for this project was the factors which were important for hierarchy building and a fan’s status in the group. Many prior studies on fans indicate that knowledge is one of the key factors to ascend to a higher position in the fandom. Knowledge, in this

case, is meant both as knowing a lot about a given topic in general, but also as the ability to obtain new information, in particular from official sources. Ideally, a person with a higher status in the fandom would have both wide knowledge on past events and could easily remember important information, but would also have an access to the news – preferably faster than the other members, so they would also play a role of an opinion leader, just like in Fiske’s concept. The fans’ response seems to prove that this concept is an important factor, as can be seen on Figure 2.4.

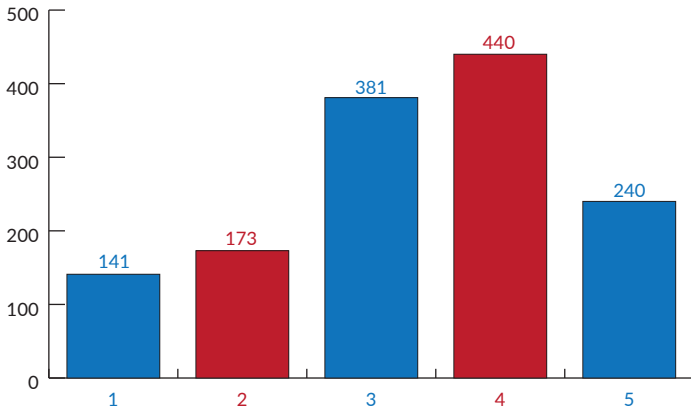
Figure 2.4. “I believe that people become fandom leaders thanks to their knowledge and their commitment to the fandom’s activities.”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Most of the fans would strongly agree (47.3%) or rather agree (32.1%) with the sentiment, while 12.7% did not have an opinion, 4.1% rather disagreed, and 3.8% strongly disagreed. A similar question was asked regarding publishing fan art online as a factor helping establishing a higher position in the fandom.

Figure 25. "I believe that through fan art you can build your position in the fandom."

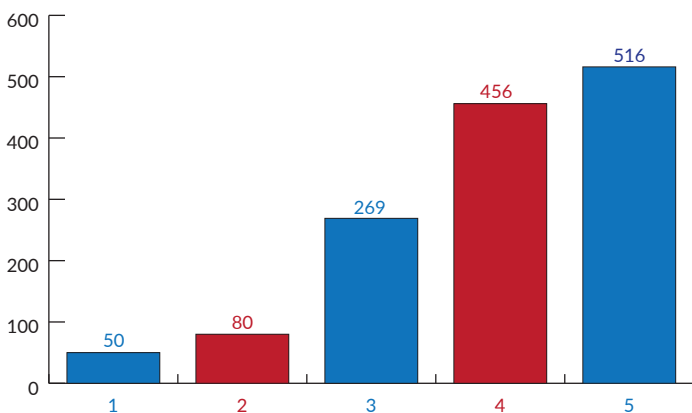


Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Although seen rather positively as a way of building position, fan art is not as obvious a way of gaining fandom standing as knowledge or involvement in the fandom's activity. 32% of fans rather agreed with the provided statement, 27.7% did not know or did not have an opinion, 17.5% strongly agreed, 12.6% rather disagreed and 10.3% strongly disagreed. The least obvious was, however, the speed of action when it comes to establishing new fanclubs as a form of leadership. 35.9% of Polish K-Pop fans did not have opinion or did not know whether they could agree with the sentence "I believe that the most important thing for being a leader is to quickly set up a group and reach its potential members." 22.7% rather agreed with this sentence, 20.4% rather disagreed, 11.6% strongly agreed, while 9.4% strongly disagreed, which means that the answer for this question is not really clear.

The important issue is that the fans do not see the leaders or the fandom's elite as something distant or inaccessible.

Figure 26. "I believe that it is possible to 'climb the ladder' and become a leader from an ordinary member."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know / I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Almost 71% of fans would agree with the sentence stating that it is possible to become a leader from an ordinary fandom member, 19.6% did not have an opinion and only 9.4% disagreed with it.

An interesting insight was provided by administrators and moderators who can be seen as fandom leaders, at least in regards to the Facebook groups. Hoseob provided a short description of the evolution of Internet tools used by the Polish K-Pop fandom in the last few years:

But then [in 2010] the online fandoms looked differently and you began to form a group of fans of a certain group on the forums and, really, if someone did not know how to find such a forum, they did not join it. Then the forums ceased to be popular, and everything moved to blogs such as Wordpress. From that moment on, I started to be an admin because I created a blog along with the first founder. After a few years, Wordpress has ceased to be so popular and the fanpages started to be present only on Facebook (though not all of them, since there are still fandoms using blogs). [Hoseob]

The administrators and moderators are responsible for keeping order in those groups, meaning that they check whether posts are related to the main topic (though there are also “random days”, when it is not al-

lowed to post content related to the group, and only unrelated, “random” posts may be published). They also check whether information on one topic is added to an already existing post as a comment, instead of multiplying posts on the same issue; they also moderate discussions to prevent rude and pointless arguments²⁶. Moreover, the administrators are sometimes responsible for publishing posts related to the group and finding information on the group; if they see that fandom members are not doing it, they should post up-to-date facts and photos. The administrators are also able to delete or disable comments. In this sense, it is safe to say that if not as leaders, they can be seen as information and communication managers, which gives them certain power. Administrators themselves said that “the most important thing is that everything should be published on a regular basis and from real and well-proven sources” [W22]. Luna also added that the most important are “commitment, willingness and cooperation. Work on the site is voluntary, so if someone applies for it of one’s own free will, it should not be the case that only one person does everything for the others”, but also that “being a few steps ahead” is crucial [Ninilova]. Mops said that even if she does not post updates by herself, she has to be sure someone else will do it, and that she likes to make sure that fandom members are feeling good in the group. To that effect, she often organizes integration games or contests. DW also added more information on how her role has changed over the years and how she became an administrator:

I mainly manage the group, but also provide information. In the beginning, I was a little gray mouse²⁷ who did not know anything. I felt the insufficiency of information. I wanted to know what the boys were doing. I also knew that the activity on BB²⁸ groups was poor, so I started to add information. [DW]

26 One of the administrators [W24] used the word *gównoburza*, which is a literal translation of the English *shitstorm* – a word with many meanings, but here used as a controversial argument that has no goal other than to cause commotion. Such arguments are usually very emotional and often use *ad personam* arguments in a rather unpleasant way. The other characteristic trait of such arguments is that they tend to get out of hand quickly and preventing one is much easier than stopping an ongoing discussion.

27 Polish idiom meaning a person (usually a woman) who does not stand out in any way and rarely voices out her opinion; a mouseburger.

28 BigBang.

Ninilova also shared her story that started with just listening to K-Pop and evolved into recommending songs to her friends, at first from time to time, then on a regular basis. After one of her friends became interested in the topic, Ninilova became a sort of a guide for her, which led to a more extensive interest in the topic.

Interestingly, the administrators underlined that, in their opinion, there is no such thing as having a higher or a lower position in the K-Pop fandom. Nevertheless, some of them thought that there are some differences and some contradicted themselves in further parts of the interviews, in which they were providing examples of various positions and what might be the reason behind their status. DW mentioned that popularity depended mainly on the activity and connections of certain persons. One of the administrators also elaborated on this topic:

In every fandom (speaking about the groups on Facebook) there is a need for people who will manage the group. It is not to say that these people have a higher position; the only thing is that they will certainly be more recognizable and respected (or at least they should, to keep the balance and order in the group). There are no better or worse people in fandom. We all love the same thing, so we are equal. Social status and other such aspects are of no importance here. (...) As I mentioned, there are no higher positions. There are only people who somehow manage [the groups] to provide the order but are not better than others [*Uru*]

Mops mentioned that although she does not like to be called famous, even her friends used to regard her as such, and she thought that there must be some truth to it. When analyzing the cause of such perception, she admitted that she is very active in many groups – in some as an administrator, in others as a moderator; she likes to organize fandom projects as well. She also added that she is naturally energetic and bubbly, and although she was not popular from the very beginning, it was quite easy for her to get attention and then quickly become popular in the fandom. It seems that in the Polish K-Pop fandom, being popular very often means a higher position. Some of the fans see that and stress that it cannot be understood as leadership, rather as a representation of the fact that those people are more visible than the others and this visibility is obtained by being active in fandom initiatives. Once again, it was stressed

that everyone in the fandom is equal. Ninilova explained that the administrators do have greater responsibility than other members, but they do not have a higher position and cannot be called leaders. She also explained that a leader is someone who is respected and admired.

Nevertheless, there were also voices agreeing with the sentiment that the administrators can be leaders if one looks at fandoms from the Facebook groups perspective, and that Korean fans tend to look down on the international fandom. While it is true that they have easier access to many aspects of the fandom, and in this sense can be seen as leaders in terms of “being first” to experience new developments, they also perceive themselves as superior. The also administrators mentioned the disruptive forms of getting attention, such as the aforementioned arguments. One of the administrators admitted that she often sees people intentionally writing controversial comments in order to start an argument, and therefore get attention, even if it mostly is a negative one. Moreover, some people stressed that no one should get financial benefits from a higher position in the fandom, suggesting that such situations happened before, although no example was given. An interesting point of view was also shared by one of the administrators that experienced a traumatic event in her favorite band’s life very personally. Over a hundred fans wrote to her to ask how she was feeling after that happened, which was a nice gesture, but at the same time it made her feel uncomfortable, as she believed she was suffering just as they were, and they should not worry about her in such a situation; it was also difficult to reply to such an amount of messages when she was really struggling. From her description it is clear that there was a clash between her role as a leader and as a fandom member. The other fandom members saw her as more than just a moderator of a discussion, and felt the need to check up on her. At the same time, from the way she described it, she felt responsible for cheering up the group, even though her own emotions also played a significant role and she did not want to be at the center of attention at that given moment [W₂₃]. It must be stressed, however, that the administrator originally brought this situation up as a proof of the fandom’s good side, and she admitted that she will remember it as something nice that the fellow fandom members did for her. The same administrator shared her experiences with fans who

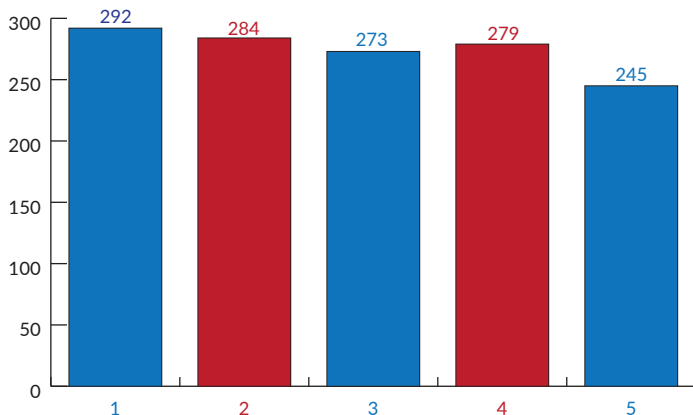
joined her group only to become administrators and after being accepted, immediately wrote to her, asking what they should do in order to become one, which shows that being an administrator in the fans' eyes seems to have many perks. Moreover, she mentioned the cases of deliberate breaking of the fan group's rules, which are posted and pinned in every Facebook group, to challenge the administrators' power.

What helped in increasing the popularity and therefore alleged higher status of the active group members were also the aforementioned random day posts, during which fans are able to share their own photos, their rooms and other things. The interviewed administrator admitted that it is very easy to gain more attention if a given person posts a pretty picture of themselves or can brag about their bedroom, things they own and so on. This seems to be very similar to non-fandom teenager peer groups, as similar trends were described by middle school and high school Polish students who pay more and more attention to designing their own image; while it is not an online-specific phenomenon, it is most prominent on the Web.

R. Sabotini (1999) analyzes fan activities seen as similar to the Native American cultures' concept of potlatches, which were meant to establish or uphold one's position in a given group. She argues that a convention or a chat group can be seen as having a similar meaning for present-day groups such as fan communities. The main difference, according to Sabotini, is that in fan groups everyone is competing for that status instead of giving it to the host, but "the way that status is established and maintained in both worlds is through the creation of the feast and the distribution of gifts." The feast for fans would consist of any type of fan content, such as online discussions, articles, development of fan sites, reviews, critiques and so on. The author explains, however, that although "high quality feast dishes nourish the fandom, and the reader, the list recipients feel emotionally enriched for it", they do not generate a status as high as the traditional gifts in the form of fan art. Her hypothesis is that the high-status fans must give traditional gifts because, as she explains, "in general, fans are competitive and insecure, and by having a high-status, a fan is groomed and cared for by the community, and their ego is stroked." Nevertheless, producing the high quality gifts means having to deal with high expectations and demands from the other fans as well.

Regarding fan art activities, the Polish K-Pop fandom was very uneven in its answers. The following figure (27.) shows how many fans would agree that they often engage in such activities.

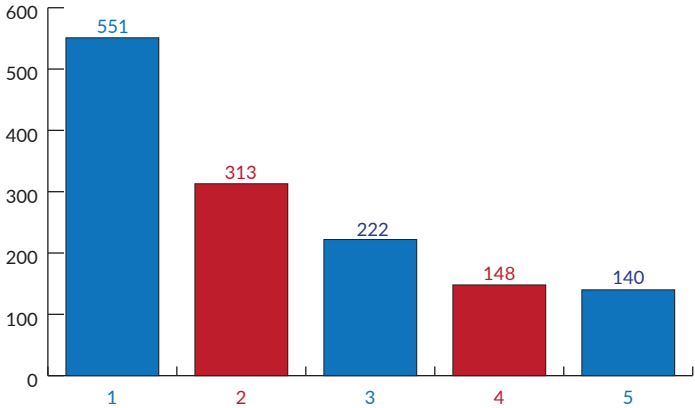
Figure 27. "I gladly engage in fan activities, such as writing stories or drawing."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

As it can be seen, the results for all of the options were very similar. Almost the same number of fans chose each of the possible options: 21.3% strongly disagreed, 20.7% rather disagreed, 20.3% rather agreed, 19.9% did not have an opinion, while 17.8% strongly agreed. The answers show that it is not obvious for Polish K-Pop fans that fan creation of any kind is one of their basic fandom activities. It may be caused by the type of their interest; it can be argued that many other objects of interest, such as TV series or books, require more involvement on fan side, as they do not provide as much new information on everyday basis as the K-Pop fandom, which is a hybrid between celebrity fandom and music genre fandom, providing new information either on the idols' life, their new music or on both on a daily basis. It is possible that for many fans simply following information is sufficient to keep them occupied and satisfied. Another figure (28.) shows how willing fans are to share their creations online.

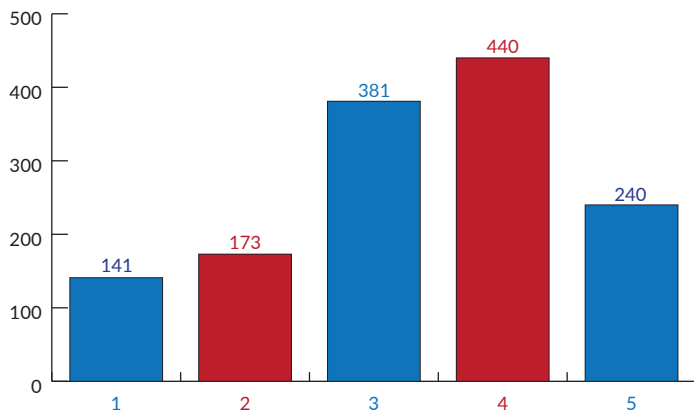
Figure 28. "I am willing to share my work on the Web."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

In this regard, a very negative attitude could be seen from the survey results, as 40.1% strongly disagreed with the sentiment of willingness to share their work online. 22.8% rather disagreed, 16.2% did not know or did not have an opinion, 10.8% rather agreed and 10.2% strongly agreed. It is possible that many of the fans who said that they do not engage in fan art creation strongly disagreed, but it is worth noting that only basic demographic section was obligatory for all of the fans; the rest could be skipped, and some of the fans did so in this case. Nevertheless, it seems that even the fans who write, paint or make cover songs, do not share it online, and therefore Sabotini's theory would not apply for the Polish K-Pop fandom at all. However, the next table provides converse conclusions, because fans generally agreed with her (32% rather agreed, 27.7% did not know, 17% strongly agreed, 12.6% rather disagreed and 10.3% strongly disagreed).

Figure 29. "I believe that through fan creation you can build your position in the fandom."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Once again, however, comparing the surveys with other methods brought up slightly different conclusions. The administrators in the interviews mostly admitted to creating fan art, even if only in the past, and actually sharing it with fellow fandom members, although most of them said that they were sharing it only with friends and close friends. Many of them also said that they at some point in time have created fan art as a gift for their friends, either as a one-time issue or on a more frequent basis. One of the administrators also added that, after sharing a cover of a song with the group, the views on that video went up very quickly, and she was even recognized once at a party after releasing it [W₂₃]. The situation was described as very nice, but also very strange for that administrator, as it was difficult to define whether her popularity as an administrator eclipsed the appreciation of the quality of the cover in this case.

Yet another approach could be seen in the content analysis, which showed that high quality fan art gains tremendous popularity in the Facebook fan groups, some of them reaching over 1500 likes and 100 comments. Most of the comments in this case are very positive, with short messages like "I love it", "it's beautiful" with a lot of emojis

or gifs with group's members showing hearts, sending kisses, *etc.* Rarely, fans asked how long did it take to make it, or what tools a given person used. There were also cases in which fans expressed their opinion in not as positive way (especially with less obvious forms of fan art, such as clothes, tattoos designs, *etc.*), but it seemed that the feedback was always presented in a way that would not discourage the creator from doing anything in the future, and often providing tips for further development.

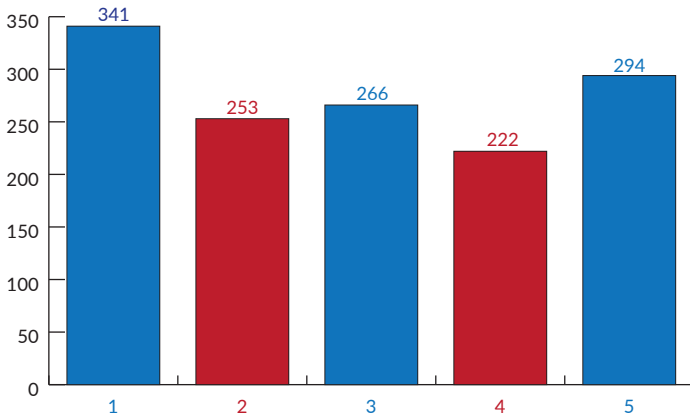
In general, it seems that fans have a very negative view on the hierarchy in the fandom, expressing a wish for not having any, but at the same time admitting that not everyone has the same position. The Polish K-Pop fans believe that fandom should be a place where everyone is equal, but at the same time they know very well that there are people who have to manage the group, make the final decisions and be sure that everyone obeys the rules; therefore, the administrators have a kind of power. There is also the issue of popularity which makes people enjoy special privileges and is something many people strive for. It is not clear which factors influence a fan's position in the fandom's hierarchy the most, but knowledge of the topic is just a small part of them.

4.5. Communication, getting information and free expression.

When talking about knowledge, it is necessary to analyze how fans get information and communicate with each other, in particular since it was argued before that the administrators can play the role of opinion leaders which gives them certain power.

One of the core issues in this sphere is the language the fans use in their everyday life fandom activities. The Polish K-Pop fandom is an interesting case, because the object of interest is already connected to a language, while international fandoms usually use English as their main language. In this case the Polish fans function in the environment that uses three languages: Korean, English and Polish, which might cause communication problems. Firstly, the fans were asked whether Polish sites are the ones they get the most information from and the answer in the surveys did not provide a clear answer.

Figure 30. "I gather the most information from fansites in Polish."



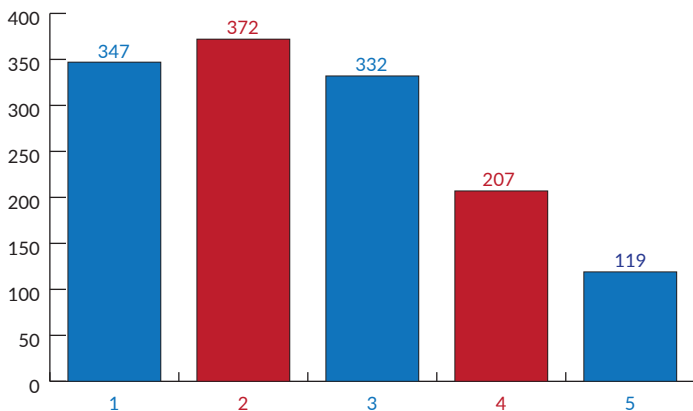
Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

The Figure 30. shows that the source of one's information depends greatly on the individual. 24.8% strongly disagreed with the sentence that they use mostly Polish sites when looking for information, 21.4% strongly agreed, 19.3% was not sure, 18.4% rather disagreed and 16.1% rather agreed.

The next two questions asked about Korean and English language. Fans mostly disagreed with the sentence that not knowing Korean is a problem for them (27% rather, 25.2% strongly), but 24.1% did not have an opinion and 23.6% (15% rather, 8.6% strongly) agreed, which shows that for some fans it still is a problem, and a rather serious one for some of them.

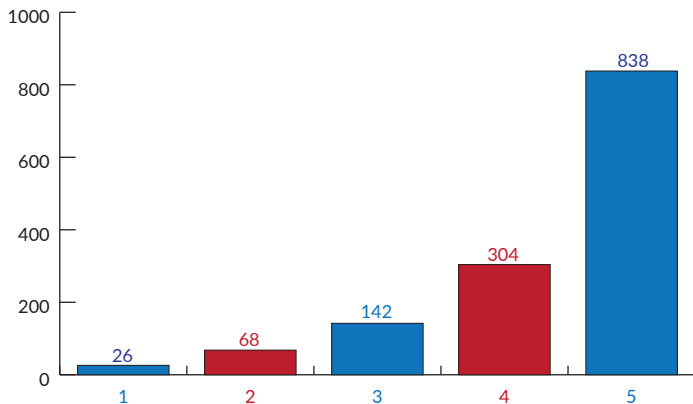
The answers about English were more obvious, as 60.8% of fans strongly agreed that knowing English is important for everyday life fandom activities, 22.1% rather agreed, 10.3% did not know and only 6.8% strongly or rather disagreed. Although these responses were not surprising, the answers that were collected during pre-research were, as a large number of fans there admitted that they do not know English very well and they wait for the Polish fans to translate the news, making themselves reliant on the processing of the information by fellow fans.

Figure 31. "Lack of knowledge of the Korean language is a problem when participating in the fandom."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

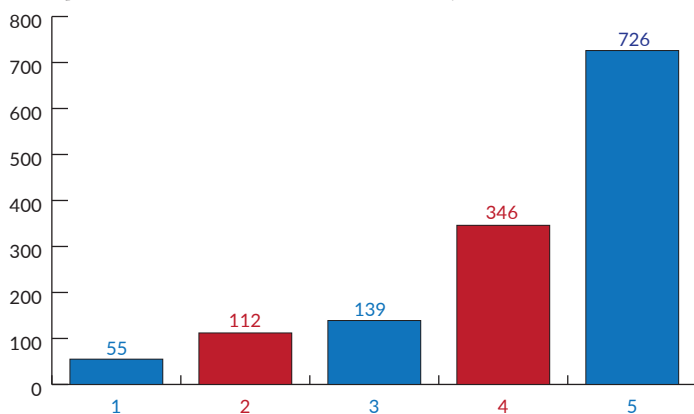
Figure 32. "I believe that, in my everyday functioning in the fandom, the English language skills are very important."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Fans were also asked about their information sources, and in the survey they answered if they follow official sources such as entertainment companies' websites or idols' social media profiles by themselves. 52.7% strongly agreed, admitting that they follow information on their own and do not rely solely on updates posted on Facebook groups, 25.1% rather agreed, 10.1% did not know, 8.1% rather disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. These numbers show that fans want to be updated as quickly as possible rather than wait for someone else to publish the information for them, although Facebook groups can make it easier if someone wants to have all of the information in one place.

Figure 33. "I follow the official sources providing information about the idols, such as the entertainment companies' websites or official accounts on social media myself."



Categories: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - rather disagree, 3 - I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 - rather agree, 5 - strongly agree. Source: Author.

Fans shared not only the language, but also the origin of their information and, unsurprisingly, social media dominated this sphere, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram being the main sources of information. One person mentioned that it depends on the type of information they look for: with basic, background information they would use official websites, and for updates on idols' lives and activities they would prefer social media. Websites providing the latest news in English, such as Allkpop, Soompi or Koreaboo, were also mentioned. Twitter was often mentioned

as a source of very fast updates; if the speed of updates is the most important aspect of information gathering, one would use this platform. One of the administrators described her experience with Twitter as follows:

In general, I have learned to use Twitter recently because I had to for the group; because it was like I am sitting and I am waiting for information, I am waiting for information, and I know that it already is on Twitter. Well, that is good, that is where I looked through some of the most popular accounts and somehow I found it. [W₂₃]

What is interesting is that most of the fans, after being asked about their information source, began enumerating social media platforms, as if it was only natural that they would find their news online and the questions must have been only about the websites they use. Only one person mentioned getting information from friends.

The administrators also explained what kind of information they share with other fandom members. Firstly, “the information everyone is waiting for”, meaning comeback information, but also updates on idols’ lives. Some interviewees revealed that they feel very happy when people are excited about something they shared. Sometimes they share “funny things” they find amusing and think that other fans would appreciate as well. Interestingly, one of the administrators said that “the most important are probably the timeliness of information and its official status. If these two conditions are met, it can be even the largest nonsense, but I am happy to share it with others”, and added that, “I also sometimes like to spread rumors, but there must be an appropriate argument.” From the content analysis it was concluded that fact-checking in the fandom is getting progressively more important, and if a piece of data is not a confirmed information it should contain a hashtag marking it as a “rumor.” Fans are also diligent in adding names of the fansites or fan accounts they got their information from and, if it was translated, the name or nickname of the translator. There is also another hashtag that is attributed to partly confirmed information – the “theory” hashtag which is especially visible in ARMY and EXO-L fandoms, because both BTS and EXO publish content that allows for fandom theory creation, as the meaning of certain symbols as well as the bands’ future concepts lend themselves well to speculation.

As the Polish K-Pop fandom might cause difficulties because of its main interest object being from another country and culture, the fans were asked about the communication barriers they face and their overall opinion on communication in the fandom. Indeed, the language was mentioned as one of those barriers. Some fans even wrote that, in order to participate in the K-Pop fandom, one should know English, as it opens new possibilities, but the others thought that there are so many translators that the language cannot be seen as a barrier. Many fans also try to learn Korean – at least in a basic capacity. One of the administrators summed it up as follows:

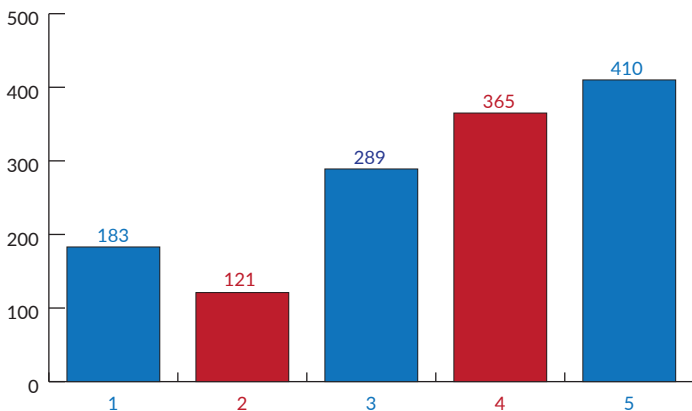
Overall, I rate their [Polish K-Pop fans] level as good. K-Pop is a great motivation to learn languages, not only English, but Korean as well. People try to learn at least the basics in order to write or say a few words to an idol, and sometimes they tie their future with Korean, choosing a faculty with this profile. (...) If we want to actively work in fandom (search and share information, run websites, fanpages, blogs or YT channels), then foreign language skills are very important. However, when our fandom life is limited to reading information provided by others, I think that mastering a foreign language is not as necessary; after all, there are more and more places on the Polish Internet where you can read K-Pop news in Polish. [W24]

It is worth noting that the K-Pop idols themselves often struggle with English, although during training days they are obliged to master foreign languages as well. They usually know some expression in English, Chinese and Japanese, but are rarely able to communicate freely in any of these languages. It changes with new groups, which often have some foreign members, but older generation groups still may have problems with using English in their communication with fans.

Fans were also asked if they could imagine the fandom without the Internet, and most of them agreed that it would be very difficult both in terms of getting information and communicating with other fans. It is obvious, however, that the borders between offline and online activities are becoming progressively more blurred. Although Booth argued that not only online but offline fandom activities should be researched, as they are being neglected by scholars, it seems that defining what is offline and what is online is almost impossible; very much so in

the case of the Polish K-Pop fandom, but presumably in case of other media fandoms as well. Even real-life meetings are usually scheduled via Internet, handmade fan art is shared in form of photos and commented upon on social media websites, while almost all of the information about K-Pop comes from the Internet and is mainly being discussed there.

Figure 34. "I get to know other fandom members more often on the Internet first and then offline."

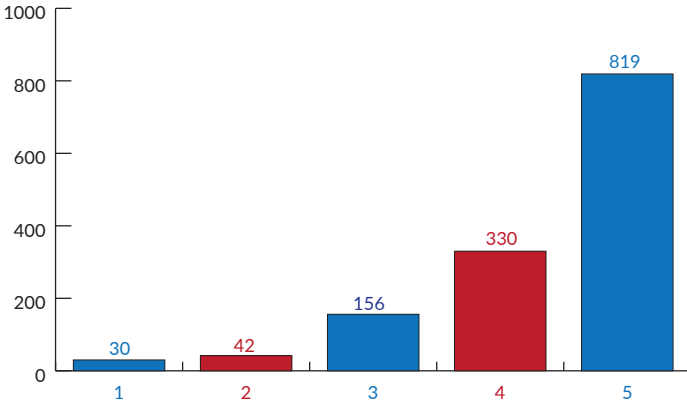


Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

As the Figure 35. shows, most of the fans usually meet their fellow members online, and then that relationship is continued offline. 30% of the Polish K-Pop fans strongly agreed with this sentiment, 26.7% rather agreed, 21.1% could not answer, 13.4% strongly disagreed and 8.8% rather disagreed.

Overall, the fans agree that the Internet is very important for their everyday fandom life and that language may be a barrier, but not one that is impossible to work around. Therefore, fandom in general does not mention any major communication barriers inside of the group. The fans agree, however, that the fandom uses words and expressions that might be impossible to understand for someone from outside its structures.

Figure 35. Fandom has its own words or terms incomprehensible to people outside of it.



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

59.5% of fans strongly agreed with this sentence, 24% rather agreed, 11.3% was not sure and 4.3% disagreed (3.1% rather, 2.2% strongly). Fans also gave examples of such expressions: “there are sayings typical for fandom borrowed from group members or fragments of songs. As a Carat²⁹, I happen to use ‘아주 [aju] nice³⁰’ when I like something” [Uru]. Another administrator added:

In the K-Pop fandom, there are a lot of words known only to its members (...). These are mainly expressions that do not have their equivalents in our language, such as ‘oppa³¹’, ‘aegyo’, ‘rookie’, ‘bias’, ‘maknae’. K-Popers also come up with a lot of in-jokes and phrases referring to, for example, what an idol said, that ordinary, inexperienced person would not be able to understand – ‘You got no jams’, ‘Chicken is not my style’, *etc.* They

29 Seventeen fandom’s name.

30 Quote from Seventeen’s song meaning “very nice.”

31 *Oppa* – literally older brother, but can also be used for older male friends of a woman, often used by fans when referring to idols; *aegyo* means acting cute; *rookie* is a word used for someone who is still a trainee at the entertainment company, but is already known or has just started working or debuted; *bias* is a fan’s favorite member; and *maknae* is the youngest member in the group. Interestingly, content analysis showed that Facebook groups use more categories that are not present or very rarely used on other platforms like Tumblr, such as, for example, *semi bias*, which is the second favorite member from a relevant group or a favorite member from an irrelevant group.

are used rather naturally, when a specific situation requires them or in relevant discussions (for example, hardly anybody calls their colleague 'oppa!' – it looks too unnatural for us to use it every day). [W₂₄]

Although some of the aforementioned phrases might be used by people who are, for example, K-drama fans and the others by the members of other fandoms, it is true that in the K-Pop fandom they carry very specific meaning that would differ from the understanding in the other fandoms.

Most of the fans agree that there are specific words, phrases or the so-called “inside jokes”, but there is no specific language that fans use; though that might change in the future with growing proficiency in foreign languages, and because of the fact that the Polish K-Pop fans use or have contact with three languages almost every day. It is more likely to happen if Polish fandom would somehow be forced to communicate with other fandoms and use English as its main language.

There were also some behaviors mentioned that, according to fans, were typical for the Polish K-Pop fandom and might be misunderstood by others, with stamping during the concerts being a prime example. The Polish K-Pop fans do not only clap and cheer for their idols during concerts; they also stamp their feet, an action which was noted before by K-Pop idols themselves as something quite impressive and giving them more energy during the event. Hoya from Infinite, when asked about the most touching fan-related memories recalled: “For me, the fans in Poland were not just screaming, but stomping the ground so the whole venue was shaking like it was an earthquake. It was amazing” (Benjamin, 2016).

Although fans do not see many obstacles in communication in form of technical problems or language barriers, their answer to the question whether it is possible for fandom members to express their opinions freely was not so clear. Many of them said that it is possible, but their further explanation proved that it may not be as simple. It can be seen in Mops' opinion, where she claimed that “Yes [opinion can be expressed freely], but it depends where. There are groups which are typically open for debate, in which expressing a sentiment is much safer than, for example, in the groups like K-Pop Spam.” She did not provide further explanation, but it seems that posting controversial opinions, or maybe just ones which differ from the norm, can be risky in some of the groups.

Uru also shared that “there are topics that some may find inappropriate, while, in fact, they are not. If someone wants to raise a topic that we know might be inappropriate for someone, then it is better to think about it ten times before posting it on the forum.” Another administrator also added that “unfortunately, the fandom quite often has a significant problem to accept someone’s different opinion on a subject, even if it has been expressed in a polite way. In such cases, there is little to keep the discussion from mere slinging mud at someone” [W₂₄]. Ninilova also shared her opinion on whether it is possible to express one’s opinions freely:

Unfortunately, I do not think so. There is a difference in characters and many people get too emotional towards others who have a different opinion than they do. Discussions are needed, but it is as necessary to understand that not everyone has the same ideas and opinions as you. I often say that K-Pop teaches respect for other cultures, but not everyone is learning about personal culture. Different skin color is okay, but a different opinion is not. We are anonymous on the Internet, so there is more freedom on the one hand, but there are also more senseless negative comments (‘hate’³²) on the other, which is not expressing your views, just plain, insolent insults.

Another administrator also shared her experiences that would require further research, but content analysis seemed to confirm that partly:

I mean, as I said, it is such a diverse environment, that it is hard to say, it really depends on the time, the hour and on which recipients you meet. (...) ...and from the first comment. The first comment is very important. It is scary how people do not have their own opinion. If the first comment is positive, there is a positive wave, maybe one in a million will be negative. If it is negative, it will start a hate wave. People do not have their own opinions. [W₂₃]

Lexie went even further in her opinion about the topic, as she said that “maybe I am old, but there are too many children and people with whom there is no discussion, because I think their intellectual level is too low...” In general, it seems that the Polish K-Pop fandom does not face many communication barriers, but still has some problems with rational discussion. Content analysis proved that fandom conversations are often

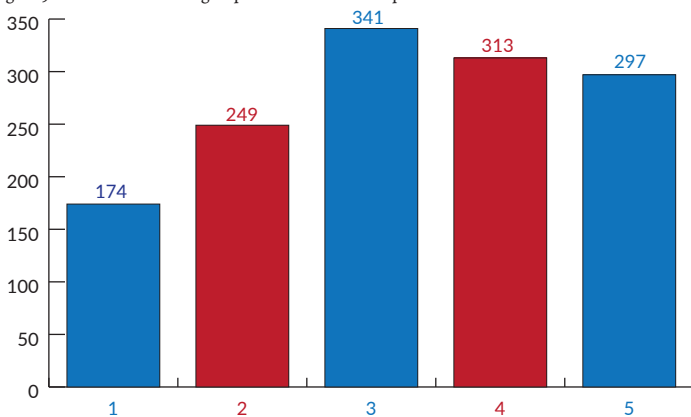
32 There is a word in Polish – *hejt* – which is a phonetically written English *hate* and is usually used when talking about hate speech and unreasonable, emotional arguments on the Internet.

very emotional and fans tend to think of certain arguments as personal attacks towards them, which is rarely true, but this kind of thinking triggers others, which, in return, leads to taking sides; such a situation very quickly can escalate into a heated argument. What is interesting is that, although such situations happen quite often (especially or almost solely in multifandom groups), fans seem to be used to them already and do not see them as a crucial problem in communication, but rather as a nuisance.

4.6. Fans as a link in the entertainment industry

Another analyzed issue was the role of the Polish K-Pop fans as consumers and as a link in the entertainment industry. Fans were asked about their willingness to buy official merchandise and how they see their relations not only with idol group members, but also with the entertainment companies. Figure 36. shows how the Polish K-Pop fans saw the possibility to reach idol group members. Although social media provide a platform for such a contact, it is reasonable to assume that not everyone gets a chance to talk to their favorite artists, not to mention meeting them in a real-life situation.

Figure 36. "Contact with idol groups' members seems impossible to me."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Many fans found it hard to answer this question, as 24.8% did not know, but the rest was rather agreeing with the sentence, claiming that contact with idol groups' members is almost impossible: 22.8% rather agreed, 21.6% strongly agreed, while 18.1% rather and 12.7% strongly disagreed. Fandom members were also asked about their opinion on a very controversial issue in the K-Pop industry which is the relation between entertainment companies and their artists. Although this is mainly an argument from the people who criticize the Korean Wave, it seems that some of the fandom members share the opinion that the Korean idols are often nothing more than just a product of the Korean entertainment industry – they are talented, skilled and well trained, but it has been all made by a company and not achieved by them on their own. The survey proved that Polish K-Pop fandom does not have one opinion on this topic as, when presented with the sentence “It seems to me that the idol group members are totally dependent on the entertainment company decisions”, the fans agreed and disagreed to a similar degree: 30.7% of them were not sure or did not have an opinion, 27.1% rather agreed, 22.4% rather disagreed, 10.8% strongly agreed and 9% strongly disagreed. The results are quite interesting, since experts believe that BTS' tremendous popularity was partly caused by the way they approached fans via social media and how they let ARMY into their everyday life, a strategy which was not seen before in K-Pop industry. Idols these days are also more open to share information via platforms such as Instagram, not only on their official, group and entertainment-managed profiles, but mostly on their private accounts; they also share off-stage photos or dance practices in sweatshirts and loose pants. Nevertheless, some fans still believe that this is all just a facade, as it can be seen in one of the administrator's statement:

K-Pop in general, the idols, they are products and, no joke – they can beat me, they can kill me, but I will always say that these are the products, the products to be sold, simply, without a soul. Well, maybe that is an exaggeration – “without a soul”, but there is something in it. (...) When it comes to K-Pop, it is not just music; after all, idols play in dramas – everything can be sold. An idol is not a singer. [W23]

The administrator, being a musician herself, thought that there is little to no artistic expression in K-Pop idols' music, and that the main role of an

idol was not making music, but entertainment. This is, however, one of the most surprising opinions, especially considering that it was presented by a person who devotes a lot of her free time to manage a Facebook fandom group of an idol group. Overall conclusion is that the Polish K-Pop fandom perceives idol-entertainment company relations as strong, even though to a varying degree; they also seem to be aware of how this state of being affects their idols' lives, but at the same time there are people who have a very rational approach to this issue and see it only as a business. For them, it is not a problem if K-Pop is a product, as long as it is a high-quality product.

Fans were also asked about the fans-idols-entertainment companies relations, and they mostly agreed that the best relation is the one between fans and idols, sometimes even in opposition to the companies – as one of the interviewees explained, “fans are usually focused on the group's well-being and are upset with entertainment companies that they are promoting a given group poorly or do not allow them for a quick comeback” [W22]. Mops also added:

It looks different with each group. However, most bands that I love have a wonderful relationship with fans and it is really charming. You can see that they are truly grateful to them. (...) It is known that some are more scared because of the situation with *sasaeng*, but the regular fans always seem to be in a good position in the eyes of the idols. The entertainment companies do what they can. It is obvious that they are trying to protect the good name of the bands, and so sometimes they use prohibitions and bans on fans – but it is only when they do something wrong. I have not encountered any situation that an entertainment company would treat the fans badly. [Mops]

The fans added that the bigger the company, the more difficult the contact with its artists is. They also shared their opinion that there are numerous problems on the fans' side, which shows that they are rather self-aware. The most significant issue they recalled was invading the idols' private space, and fans believe that the entertainment companies and the fandoms should work together on improving that situation in the future. Ninilova shared her mixed opinions about fans-entertainment relations:

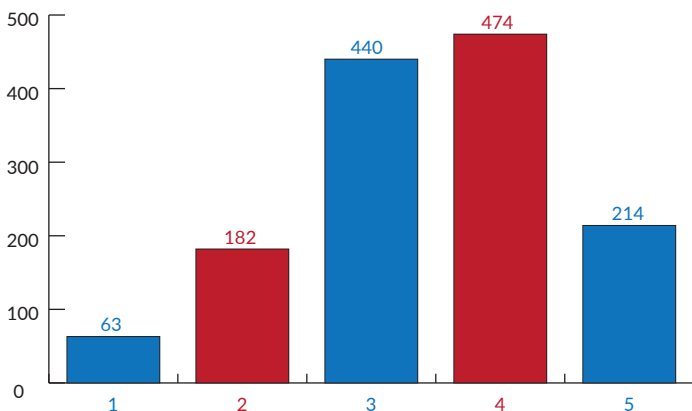
...on the one hand, fandoms are a very strong player in influencing the shape and the future of the group that the companies care for. On the other hand, looking at a few events, I cannot say unequivocally that the relationships are good. They are dry. Often fans do not understand the companies' decisions, and companies are not eager to explain them. As a fan, I would like to have support in the company and I would like my favorite artist to get support (...).

She explains that she would like to be sure about companies' sincerity and truthfulness, and that her voice is being heard and taken into consideration. She also added that she cannot understand why idols who have just debuted very often have a ban on using their private social media accounts, as using social media is a "privilege" which comes with the group experience and the certainty from the entertainment company that the group will not do anything unexpected. She added that:

groups show their love and gratitude in the form of hard work and better performances, but I still think that the greater the clout, the better the satisfaction in the fans' hearts, and encouraging new fans is a matter of 'the real face of the artist', which comes out more in reality TV programs, or V live. [Ninilova]

The administrator also shared a negative view on idol-entertainment company relations underlining the tremendous stress, the expectations to become flawless and overwhelming control of their lives as the three biggest problems. Ninilova believed, however, that one can see some changes in this regard, unfortunately connected with some sad incidents such as group disbandments, members leaving the bands, mental illnesses, *etc.* Companies seem to start to understand that they have to change their approach if they want to think about long-term business strategies and relations with both the idols and the fans. Surprisingly, fans also notice the positive sides of such a strong control over artists, as they believe that it might provide more safety for the idols, and that bigger companies, which are known for controlling almost every aspect of their idol's life, are also facing less problems with privacy intrusion incidents. Although this issue should be further researched in order to confirm its verity, it shows that fans have multiple thoughts on the topic, and they seem to analyze this kind of problems as well instead of just "buying products" (which is the term some of the fans use themselves).

Figure 37. "I believe that the entertainment companies follow the activities of the international fans, and fandoms' activities have an impact on their decisions."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Figure 37. shows that the international fans in general rather feel like their opinion is taken into consideration by the entertainment companies, and that the companies follow fandom's activities. 30.7% did not know if they can agree with that sentence, but 50.1% agreed (34.5% rather and 15.5% strongly) with it. 13.3% rather and 4.6% strongly disagreed.

Fans as consumers also seem quite conscious. As it was proved in the basic demographics section, the Polish K-Pop fans mostly feel like their financial situation is rather good, but it does not mean that they spend their money recklessly on K-Pop-related goods. The administrators were asked whether they buy K-Pop related products, and the majority of them admitted that yes, at least when it comes to buying CDs, but also other products, such as lightsticks³³, photocards, clothing and so on. Most of them admit, however, that the prices are very high and they cannot afford everything they would like to have because of the price. One of the administrators, who now lives in Japan, shared her thought

33 Most of the K-Pop idol groups have their own lightsticks, which are used by fans during concerts and emit light in the official fandom color, or can be even remotely controlled by Bluetooth to create special effects like the EXO's lightstick. Some of them have their own names, like the Seventeen's lightstick which is called "Carat Bong."

that she probably would not have bought at least half of the things she owns if she had lived in Poland, because of the prices and availability.

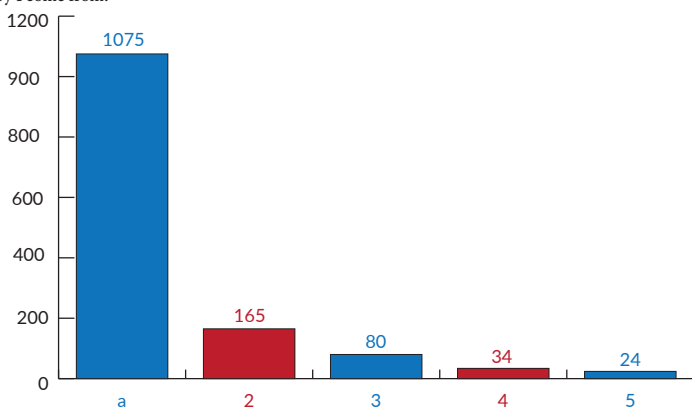
The Polish K-Pop fandom seems to be quite critical towards entertainment industry in Korea and the relations between the idols, the companies and themselves. They see the influence companies have on their favorite artists and they see advantages and disadvantages of such a situation. Moreover, they provide thoughts on the topic, as well as possible solutions and strategies the companies might introduce to their activities in order to improve overall satisfaction of fans, but also issues like the idols' safety. When it comes to being consumers, the Polish fans are mostly eager to have some products related to their idol, not only CDs; however, they do complain about expenses of buying it in Poland or ordering from abroad. Although they are generally quite satisfied with their financial situation, they feel like spending too much on this topic would be unreasonable and refrain from doing so.

4.7. K-Pop fans and nationalism

The last of the analyzed issues was inspired by the aforementioned Chen's book on the K-Pop fandom in China and Japan and its evident struggles connected to the Anti-Hallyu movement. There are not many stereotypes about Koreans in Poland, as there is not much contact with this country whatsoever, but most certainly there are some stereotypes about Asians in our society. Moreover, Polish homogenous society often faces many problems when it comes to accepting otherness, as might be observed in the recent local news reports. With K-Pop fandom being almost a synonym of diversity, colorfulness and otherness, it is important to find out whether Polish K-Pop fans face any problems based on their object of interest.

The fans were asked about their opinion on being interested in another countries' culture, but also about the reaction of other people to their interest in K-Pop. Figure 38. shows their response to the statement claiming that being interested in the culture of another country might be harmful for the country from which the fans originate, and the results show clearly that fans strongly disagreed with this sentence (78%). 12% of fans rather disagreed, 5.8% did not know, 2.5% rather agreed and 1.7% strongly agreed with such a thought.

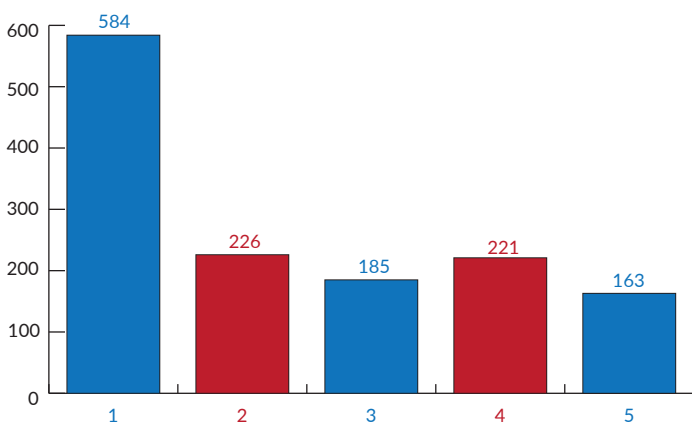
Figure 38. "I believe that being interested in the culture of another country is not good for the country I come from."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

When it comes to reactions of other people, fans mostly did not hear that they should not be interested in K-Pop, because they cannot understand it like the Koreans do. That being said, some fans still have experienced such situations, as 16% rather and 11.8% strongly agreed with the presented sentence.

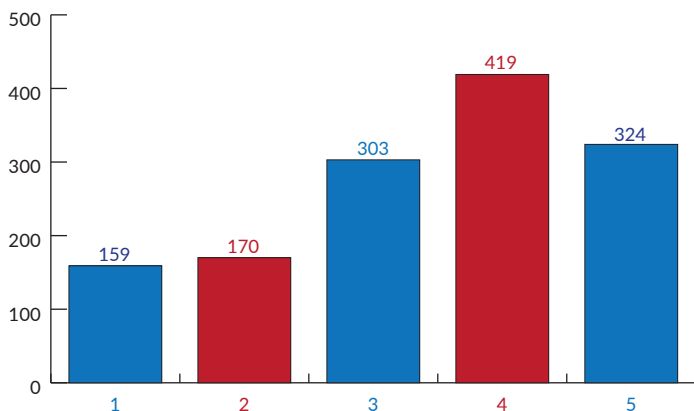
Figure 39. "I often hear that I should not be interested in K-Pop because I cannot understand it like the Koreans."



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree.. Source: Author.

Similar results were seen with the sentence “I often hear from others that I should be interested in the culture of my country, or at least from the Western civilization (Europe, North America).” 43.6% strongly disagreed, 16% rather agreed, 14.5% strongly agreed, 13% rather disagreed, and 12.8% were not sure how to respond.

Figure 4o. “I often feel that not being a fan from Korea, I cannot fully participate in the fandom activities as a whole, and sometimes I feel excluded for some reason.”



Categories: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – I do not know/ I do not have an opinion, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. Source: Author.

Fans were also asked if they feel that not being Korean can make them feel excluded, and the majority agreed that there were such situations (30.5% rather and 23.6% strongly). 2.4% disagreed with this sentence and 22% were not sure. This shows that not being Korean is a quite significant factor influencing K-Pop fandom activities and, although it is not a regular occurrence, it happens to fans that people do not understand their object of interest or comment on it in a way that may make them feel uncomfortable. There are also moments in which both the fact that K-Pop comes from Asia and the style of it can be criticized, like in one of the administrator’s experiences, when she was asked whether she listens to “those Chinese guys with make-up.” Others also shared some unpleasant situations that prove that their interest was not understood by their friends, although it was difficult to define what was the biggest problem for the others.

I remember two situations like this [negative ones]. First – I posted a photo of a Korean idol on Facebook, and one of my friends wrote in the comments a couple unfavorable things about him. Second – I was with a friend (who also listens to K-Pop) at a friend's house on New Year's Eve, and during the party we played some K-Pop songs and danced to them; after some time, we learned that the rest of the people thought that "this was too much" and that we "went too far" (whatever that meant...). [W24]

One of the fans also shared in the survey that:

K-Pop is often considered by other people who heard it once, or not even once, as something pathetic and worse. K-Pop is getting more and more popular and there are fewer people saying that, but there is still a stereotype that Korean music is worse.

What is saddening is that many fans consider it quite obvious that people might make fun of K-Pop and that "it just happens", like it is a part of being in the fandom and having this kind of object of interest. Manida said that "a lot of people do not understand my fascination with K-Pop. They often make fun of it, thinking that it will not hurt me. Many think it is just weird." Nevertheless, as the charts with fan's satisfaction show, thankfully it does not influence their everyday life in the fandom.

The Polish K-Pop fandom is a very young, mostly feminine fandom, whose interest started just a few years ago. Undoubtedly, it will evolve in the following years, but it is already a diverse, colorful group. Fans shared how they feel about being a part of a group, how they define themselves and how they define this group – where do they draw borders between "us" and "them." They explained how active they are and what their communication strategies are both in terms of getting information as well as contacting other fans. They also explain why do they like K-Pop, how do they see it, and how in their opinion both the fandom and the industry will change. They prove to have many similarities with other fandoms, while also retaining some unique features. Finally, they share certain views on the negative sides of K-Pop, their experiences as a K-Pop fan, how they can be seen by the others and where do they see themselves in relation to idols and entertainment companies. It seems that Polish K-Pop fandom is just beginning to grow and change, and it will most certainly be even more important in the future.

Conclusions

Being probably the first research on the Polish K-Pop fandom, the project brought many answers, but also many new issues that will require further analysis. It tried not only to find the answers for the research questions, but also to briefly show the most important issues in this group in general. As it was presented in the chapter four, it is a very young fandom, whose members mostly joined the group in the past few months or years. This means that not only the fans are very often at the age of still shaping their own opinions and identities, but also that they might only be starting to get to know each other as a group, and to get to know K-Pop. There are fans who became K-Pop fans 10 years ago or more, but one of the most popular groups these days in Polish (and not only) fandom is BTS' fan community – the idol group that debuted only five years ago, and their popularity started to rise around 2015, with 2017 being a sort of international recognition turning point. This shows that K-Pop is still gaining popularity, and many fans in the Polish fandom have just joined and, as it was also seen, for many of them it is the first ever fandom they are a part of, which means that what can be observed now is most probably going to evolve in the following years. The fans themselves predict further popularity spread, and it is possible that Polish K-Pop fandom will also grow in number as the present member count changed significantly even during the course of this research.

Although the “Polish K-Pop fandom” was used in the text many times, it is worth repeating that there is no such thing as a single Polish K-Pop fandom, because not only can it be understood in many ways, but also it would be harmful to say that all of the fans behave in the exact same way. In this publication it was mostly used to describe the Polish fans of K-Pop who use Facebook groups as their main tool for communication and information sharing; however, as it was already explained, the name can refer to various phenomena – it can mean the K-Pop fans using Polish, the K-Pop fans who are Poles, or the K-Pop fans who use Polish sources. Some of those fans may not even feel as a part of the Polish fandom, but rather as a part of the international K-Pop fandom, and yet another subset of the fans may also not feel the need to be a part of the community in general, being satisfied with getting information on their favorite idols on their own. Moreover, one person admitted that she changed her survey answers completely once she started to think about “the living fandom”, meaning people who she meets every day in real life instead of the online community. In this work, the only aim in this sense was to stress that there are many definitions of what the Polish K-Pop fandom is and that even fans themselves sometimes mix those categories. Nevertheless, there is a sense of belonging to a community, and most of the fans that filled the survey express their satisfaction in this regard.

The K-Pop fandom is also interesting from the point of view of political science, not only because of the notion of leadership in the group and hierarchy based on symbolic power, but also because fans can be seen as the recipients of South Korea’s public diplomacy strategies, and it can be further analyzed as a way of using the country’s soft power. What should be stressed here is that the real influence of such strategies will probably be seen in a few years, when those fans become voters, start working and their political opinions may have measurable effects. In the discussed groups young people also learn how to make their own rules and how to obey or enforce them. Moreover, the research project showed part of circulation of media and pop culture – a topic that will be increasingly more important in the following years.

The research project allowed to obtain basic information in many spheres of the fandom life. Starting with basic information, the Polish

K-Pop fandom members in general said that they are mostly just following information and not sharing their opinions, but they are also posting, entering discussions, *etc.* This might be the first difference with regard to other media fandoms, although it might also be caused by the fact that the Polish K-Pop fandom is unbelievably active. The posts on the most active groups appear every 15–20 minutes at times, with fans sharing almost any group-related content they can find online. This means that even if someone writes a comment every now and then, it feels like “almost nothing” compared to the overall activity on the group. Another cause of such conviction might be the fact that there are many new fans who are only starting to get into K-Pop, and they might feel too overwhelmed to comment on their own. Nevertheless, this might very soon change.

Fans also explained how they organize their community and, although from the very beginning they were stressing that everyone is equal, this democratic approach does not really reflect in Facebook group management and organization. Administrators and moderators have a very strong influence over group members in terms of deciding what can be posted and what cannot; just like GOT7 Poland’s rule states, “Every comment or post can be deleted if the administration says so.” Although it was undoubtedly written in the rules in order to keep the discussion organized and polite, the rules do not provide any further explanation of what should not be posted if someone wanted to avoid their post or comment being deleted. Other rules mention insulting the idol group’s and the fandom group’s members or posting unrelated content, but it still gives a significant room for interpretation. Moreover, there is no way to make an administrator quit if a group member thought that the person is not fit for this job. Granted, the only consequence an administrator could exercise towards a member of a group is banning them, but then again if someone wanted to participate actively in the Polish K-Pop fandom this seems like a rather grave measure, since each idol group usually has only one Polish Facebook group (one official for all of the information and many side groups that serve for selling or exchanging products, random conversations, the particular members groups, *etc.*). The notion of leadership also seems to be a problematic issue for the Polish K-Pop fans. Many answers stress that providing information and managing the group is just administrative work, but at the same time

there are voices saying that, in order to do it effectively, one needs to be respected and needs the freedom to make decisions on, for example, what can be posted and what cannot. As long as this is true, it seems that fans do not see that such a person has power over them in terms of deciding what they can say and what they cannot and, although such cases are probably rare, they would also be able to remove them from a group, while the regular members could not do almost anything to make that person give up this kind of power. The administrators are also undoubtedly opinion leaders in Lazarsfeld and Katz's meaning.

The Polish K-Pop fans were also asked about their motivation to become fans of a non-mainstream music genre. Many of them could not provide just one answer and often shared stories of how they became interested instead. Some answers could be found in other questions as well. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned Wann's scale was partly true for this fandom as well. K-Pop, just like sports, can provide its fans with a kind of sensorial stimulation they need (eustress factor), as well as self-esteem, which in sports fandom was related to the feeling of accomplishment and success when the supported team wins, can be seen in music programs and idol groups competition. Escape from reality, entertainment and aesthetic motivations were also observed, but the most important was probably group affiliation, which is undoubtedly very strong in the K-Pop fandom. Although fans in the surveys agreed that K-Pop being a kind of niche in our country is not a motivation; in the interviews, the fans said that the difference from the Western music was the significant issue. K-Pop was also proved to be a identity-building factor for some of the fans, as it can provide not only visual and life-style-related elements, but also Confucian-rooted values that Polish fans seem to admire, such as hardworking and collectivity. This last part was a sentiment that seemed to be present for Polish fans in many of their answers. The fact that idols are like families to each other and they are so close very often allured fans in a way that made a person reading those sentences wonder if there is a bigger phenomenon of not experiencing the feeling of sense of community among Polish youth, as they often seemed to be nostalgic towards this notion, but also used quite strong categories when asked about loyalty towards other fandom members, *etc.*

Besides collecting the general information on the Polish K-Pop fandom, the research project focused on three main spheres that were researched: the fandom structure, the communication and the media usage. Media-wise, fans undoubtedly proved their technical skills, as no one mentioned technical problems as a communication barrier. Social media are an obvious tool for everyday communication and information gathering for them, and they seem to know exactly where to look for the information they want to get and how to share it. There were not, however, any mentions that might have suggested a media usage which would exceed the capacities of other users the fans' age. The only issue that was mentioned by the administrators is rather unclear as to whether it was also true for other fans, was fact-checking, often mentioned as an important activity before sharing a piece of news. This indicates that the administrators know about fake news or rumors that can be spread easily. In this sense it can be said that the Polish K-Pop fans prove to be rather well media-educated. Another interesting issue was the use of Twitter in their everyday life activities. Again, this was mostly mentioned by the administrators who look for the information in English to quickly share it with other fandom members. Twitter is believed to be a professional tool in Poland, used mostly by politicians and journalists. Other than that, not many groups use Twitter every day, but this platform not only allows for fast information searching, but also for voting in many K-Pop contests and, therefore, K-Pop fans (or fans in general) might actually be the third group that uses Twitter in Poland the most. Moreover, the main reasons for information sharing that Polish fans mentioned were quite similar to those that news media outlets use, such as timeliness, accuracy and fairness.

Structure-wise, it was interesting to find out if there was any particular hierarchy in the Polish K-Pop fandom and if yes, then whether its construction was based on the knowledge of individual users. It would mean that the knowledge-oriented fans would be more popular and their opinions would be more important for the rest of the group if they proved to possess more knowledge on the topic. It seems that knowledge is a substantial factor, but not the only one, as online activity seems more relevant. Fans also mention fan art as a possible way to advance in

the hierarchy, and the administrators explain that their personality traits helped them to become popular. What is worth stressing, however, is that popularity is almost a synonym with having high status in the Polish K-Pop fandom structure. Popular fandom members seem to have more symbolic power and influence, but it does not necessarily mean that fans who have more extensive knowledge are popular only because of their capacity for information. It must be further underlined that Polish K-Pop fandom faces many obstacles in terms of providing information and expanding knowledge. It is evident that not many Polish fans have the opportunity to get any information from the entertainment companies or the idols themselves – the vast majority of Polish fans have the exact same access to information because they find it on the Internet, and the only difference are foreign language skills and the amount of time someone is willing or able to spend on looking for those information.

Social media are undoubtedly crucial for communication both within the Polish and the international structures, thus overcoming geographical barriers. The Polish K-Pop fandom uses social media every day and it can be said that it is social media-based, considering as most of the fan groups are functioning on Facebook or other social media platforms. Fans themselves agree that the fandom would not be able to exist in its present form without the Internet. The hypothesis was thus fully confirmed when it comes to in-group communication within the Polish K-Pop fandom, but not necessarily with the international fandom. The analysis of Facebook groups' activities shows that the Polish fans who use them are closed communities. All of the groups have "closed" status and the new fans have to be accepted by the ones who are already members. It usually happens without much waiting, but sometimes one has to prove their knowledge on the topic and answer a few questions first (mostly checking basic knowledge about the given group such as the members' names, their debut date, the roles of the particular members³⁴, *etc.*). These groups are also using Polish language and therefore are not easily accessible for people from

34 Although K-Pop groups appear to be able to perfectly sing and dance at the same time, there are usually members who are responsible specifically for vocals, rapping, dancers or the so-called visuals. There are also positions of the leader (few years ago it was always the oldest member, but now it is usually the most outspoken one) and the *maknae* – the youngest member.

abroad. Then again, Polish fans do not seem particularly eager to contact people from other countries, and if they do, they do not use Facebook for that. The Polish K-Pop fandom considers itself as a part of larger, international K-Pop fandom, but it does not always feel the need to contact other groups from other countries, not to mention the Korean fans, who have a rather negative image in Polish fans' perception. It leads to questions about the fandom's future as a whole – whether the differences will only get more significant, or if foreign language skills improvement and changes in social media functioning will allow for a greater international fandom communication, as fans from outside of Asia seem to have similar patterns of activity (although this hypothesis should also be checked using comparative analysis). It would be also interesting to find out in which cases do the Poles feel more as a part of international fandom, and in which they identify specifically as the Polish fandom. There are situations suggesting the existence of certain factors that affect this identification, such as the case with attending Korea-related festivals in Poland and feeling more like a part of the Polish fandom than the international one.

The main reason to keep researching the communities is, however, not the eventual change that is bound to happen in the years to come. The Polish K-Pop fandom is already an interesting group with fans who, although often quite young, have their own refined opinions and critical views on many topics, the K-Pop fandom being only one of them. What seems very important in such an environment is that young people learn how to work as a part of a community not only with their peers at school, but also in this kind of an online group with people from different parts of Poland (or the world if they choose to be a part of the international fandom), coming from different backgrounds and having different life experiences, which they will use when they form other communities in the future, be it larger fandoms, or the society in general. The fans often learn about other cultures in this way, even if, in the beginning, this knowledge might be only pop culture-oriented. Taking that into account, such an analysis of the fandoms could also lead to a greater understanding of how those groups work, and what are the motivations of people who choose to be a part of them.

Moreover, the research project may be seen as a part of transcultural or transnational (since, as Jenkins points out, this word better reflects

uneven nature of media content and culture flows than the word *global*) fandom studies – a new area that is still developing. Very often, research on this topic is related more closely to anthropology or critical culture studies, which, while interesting, is at the same time, at least at this point, difficult to compare to other works, as both the interest subject and the fans are not related to an English-speaking country or the United States, where most of the works on the fans was published. This research also tackles the issue of what Hills described as “transcultural homology” – the fact that “fan identity is prioritized over national identity” (2002). B. Chin and L. H. Marimoto argue that:

this concept frees fandom from the constraints of national belonging, reinforcing our contention that fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are produced, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin (Chin, Marimoto, 2013).

The authors argue that this does not mean that the state and the nation are not important, but rather that they are just one of the factors that should be taken into consideration instead of being the most crucial part. Taking that into consideration when thinking about the Polish K-Pop fandom, we should focus on fans’ motivations and interest in the music itself instead of overly paying attention to its country of origin; much like the fanfiction writers describing K-Pop idols’ adventures in the Harry Potter universe cannot be seen as making an attempt to translate the Korean pop culture into the British one. The issue is much more complex and should be analyzed carefully in order to avoid defaulting to easy answers. It is also true that fan cultures often borrow categories from each other, as exemplified by many Japanese words related to manga and anime present in K-Pop fandom, the international one in particular, which makes the issue of transnationality even more complicated.

The research project also encountered many disruptive processes in the Polish K-Pop fandom, such as fandom wars³⁵ that are also present in the international fandom, or problems with open discussion and ex-

35 Fandom wars in K-Pop mean not only being mean towards the other, hated group online, but also activities that are meant to ridicule the other party in the eyes of others in the real life.

pressing opinion. Some of the interviewees even expressed their concern about new, younger fans knowing the world only via social media, with contacting others and forming relationships exclusively online, instead of participating in offline meetings. Being a fan is always related to expressing emotions, but the Korean Wave cultural products seem to, by design, be even more effective in evoking emotional responses. The entertainment companies are well aware of this, as they prohibit their artists to date, in fear of the fans reacting with hysteria after finding out that one's favorite idol has a girlfriend, and turning into their anti-fans; a situation that has already happened in the past. This significant emotional factor combined with the fans' generally young age often leads to completely contradictory situations. For example, some of the largest K-Pop fandoms are usually both in the top three of the best fandom rankings, as well as the top 3 of the worst fandom rankings. This is partially caused by the fact that the larger the group, the larger the statistical chance for it to include more radical members, who improve the visibility of said group, but that is not the only case here. One of the administrators shared her experience in this regard: "It is just that the K-Pop society is very... It is ridiculous... it is absurd, because they are so full of hate and so full of love, that it is really difficult to combine" [W₂₃]. She gave a few examples, such as dance covers, which often easily hated, and have to be performed perfectly if one wants to get praise for them; while in the case of singing, one can receive positive feedback even if they perform poorly. The administrator also mentioned that people are usually hateful towards each other online, but when they meet, they are "one big K-Pop family." Many sentences from the survey and interview also prove this to be true: very much depends on a situation and a person, and a change of opinion can be radical. Similarly, fans were able to provide contradictory answers when talking about the idols – on the one hand, they seem to be regarded as manufactured products, on the other their "real side" is one of the most significant motivations for the fans to participate in the K-Pop fandom. The tremendous amount of emotions in the Polish K-Pop fandom was also expressed in creating the Facebook group called "Warzone³⁶" which

36 The group's name is sometimes read as in English war zone, but also as a Polish word warzone, which means *brewed*.

was meant to be a group with no rules, created solely with the purpose of expressing hate. But hate is just another part of the fandom, as the same administrator added:

...of course, fandoms have a lot of advantages, because you can really get a lot of support from them, you can. For example, I always say that I treat them as a family. I really feel that way. I really got so close with them. I remember – I get up... This is ridiculous... I get up – I look at the group, check what is happening, add information. I go to sleep – I look at the group, add information. And it is just, and it is for me ... It is not tiring. It is just a routine of the day. This is an inseparable part of my life for this moment [W₂₃].

This was also reflected in a quote from the online survey:

Thanks to this survey I understood that the K-Pop community of fans is really connected with each other, even if we do not know each other, we can always count on mutual help. It is much easier for me to make friends in general and make friends with another K-Poper than with a person who does not listen to K-Pop. In a word, K-pop fandom is the best and greatest fandom I have ever been a part of and I am proud of it! <3

The Polish K-Pop fandom will most probably be raise many new aca-fans, as the interviewed fans have already shared information about writing their bachelor and master's thesis on K-Pop related topics. The happiness about someone being interested scientifically in their community is very much present, which proves that the Polish K-Pop fandom is a self-reflective group that sees being a fan as an opportunity to broaden one's own perspective and "become a better and generally happier person."

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