

POPPING THE K-POP BUBBLE:  
A STUDY ON THE WORLD OF K-POP FANDOM AS A SUBCULTURE

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DEDICATION

To You

Author of my soul

May every word

Be a song of praise

## ABSTRACT

Pacis, J.C. (2012). *Popping the K-pop Bubble: A Study on the World of K-pop Fandom as a Subculture*, Unpublished Undergraduate Thesis, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.

This study is about the Korean pop (K-pop) music fan culture in the Philippines. It describes how the culture developed, and how the fans interact with one another in the fan community. It elaborates on the nuances of the K-pop fan community and aims to answer the primary research question, *How is power exercised and negotiated in the interactive and productive practices of Filipino K-pop fans?* Through the methods of document analysis and autoethnography, the interactions and relations among K-pop fans were analyzed using Subcultural Theories by Henry Jenkins, John Fiske, and Sarah Thornton, and Jenkins' work on participative fan culture. The researcher was able to come up with three primary conclusions: 1.) that the K-pop fan community is a subculture rich with politics and relations of power; 2.) that media play a significant role in the preservation of this subculture; and that 3.) the Korean government is actively involved in the development of K-pop fandom. The study is expected to foster a deeper understanding of local fan culture and how it relates to the discourse of globalization. Its major implications are on how media texts can be tools for the creation of new communities and the development of subcultures.

*Keywords:* fan culture, subculture, K-pop, globalization

## ABSTRAK

Pacis, J.C. (2012). *Popping the K-pop Bubble: A Study on the World of K-pop Fandom as a Subculture*, Unpublished Undergraduate Thesis, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.

Ito ay isang pag-aaral ukol sa kultura ng *Korean pop (K-pop) music fans* sa Pilipinas. Inilalarawan nito kung papaano umunlad ang naturang kultura at kung papaano nakikisama sa isa't isa ang mga fan. Pinapabulaanan ng pag-aaral na ito ang mga katangian ng komunidad ng *K-pop fans*, at naglalayong tumugon sa katanungang: *Nasaan o na kanino ang kapangyarihan sa mundo ng mga Pilipinong K-pop fans?* Sa pamamagitan ng document analysis at autoethnography, at gamit ang mga teorya nila Henry Jenkins, Sarah Thornton, at John Fiske ukol sa *subculture*, at mga teorya ni Jenkins ukol sa *participative fan culture*, sinuri ng pag-aaral ang mga interaksyon at relasyong pumapalibot sa mundo ng *K-pop*. Humantong ang mananaliksik sa tatlong konklusyon: 1.) na ang komunidad ng *K-pop fans* ay hitik sa mga relasyong pulitikal at ng kapangyarihan, 2.) na malaki ang papel ng midya sa pagpapanatili ng kulturang ito, at 3.) na may papel rin ang gobyerno ng Koreya sa pagpapaunlad ng komunidad na ito. Ang pag-aaral na ito ay inaasahang magpalalim sa pag-unawa ng *fan culture* sa Pilipinas, at kung papaano ito nauugnay sa mas malawak na usapin ng globalisasyon. Bilang resulta, magagamit ang pag-aaral na ito sa paggamit ng midya bilang kasangkapan sa pagbuo ng mga komunidad.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Once upon a time, there was a girl who fell in love. Like all other forms of teenage love, she fell deeply, and she fell hard. But unlike all other forms of teenage love, she fell not for another human being, but for a genre of music. She became a fan. The songs and the artists kept her company and made her feel pleased. But what she gained from her fandom, she was deprived of by her society. She was considered weird. She wasn't like the other girls her age. She listened to a different kind of music, dressed differently, and even spoke in a different language. Eventually, she was negatively labeled, a 'fangirl'.*

The story above is the story of my life. But is also the story of a million other fans who continue to exist in a struggle between empowerment and disempowerment, between independence and adherence to the mainstream. While this may come across as an overgeneralization of fandom, it is a usual experience for fans all over the world to be marginalized and labeled as outcasts. Fandom has long been a subject of interest by scholars of media and culture because of its dynamic character. However, there still remain stereotypes among the general public about fans as “cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers” (Jenkins, 1992). Scholars of fan culture (who often call themselves *aca-fans* or ‘academic fans’) such as Henry Jenkins have made readings that regard fans as active audiences and producers, but the Philippines still lacks such kinds of academic research. This dearth of Filipino fan culture studies is what inspired me to do a thesis on Filipino fans.

## A. Background of the Study

At the turn of the millennium, we have seen the advent of a new milieu in broadcast media wherein the flow of media texts has become boundless and widely globalized; thus the emergence of such trends as Latin *telenovelas*, *Chinovelas*, and even Thai movies. But what is arguably the most phenomenal and impactful of these developments is the boom of K-pop or Korean pop. K-pop music have been making waves worldwide since the 90's, but did not really penetrate into the average Filipino's consciousness until the late 2000's.

This is a study about K-pop fan culture in the Philippines. K-pop entered the Philippines in the mid-2000 along with the proliferation of Korean dramas or 'Koreanovelas' in local television. Although K-pop is only one component of the Hallyu or 'Korean wave' (which also includes Korean movies and TV programs), it elicited the greatest amount of interest among the Filipino audience.

A momentous event in the history of K-pop in the Philippines is the *Pops in Seoul* concert in 2008. *Pops in Seoul* is a Korean music program aired in the cable channel *Arirang TV*. I started to become interested in K-pop because of this particular program. In July 15, 2008, *Pops in Seoul* held an event at the Manila Film Center as part of its 1000<sup>th</sup> episode. This was the first ever fan event in the country that brought different K-pop fans together, and sparked the creation of many associations and fan clubs. And then came *Nobody*. *Nobody* is a song performed by the Wonder Girls, a group of female K-pop performers. The effect of *Nobody* was so tremendous that it became a nationwide phenomenon. What was once a tiny, marginalized group of 'fangirls' grew to several thousands.

Since then, K-pop fandom in the Philippines has grown exponentially, giving birth to countless fan organizations all over the country.

K-pop fans are also remarkably active in textual production. In the Philippines, quite a number of K-pop fan conventions have been held since 2009. As a matter of fact, the 1st Philippine K-pop Convention, which was held on December 5, 2009 was described by allK-pop.com to be “not only the first K-pop convention of the Philippines; this convention is the first of its kind, period”.

The enthusiasm of Filipino fans has also caught the attention of Korean producers themselves. Since 2008, several K-pop artists have already been to the Philippines for concerts and promotions. As of writing, the popular boy group Super Junior, have already held a concert twice at the Araneta Coliseum, gaining an audience of thousands of fans all over the world. Singer and actor Kim Hyun Joong, who was the leader of the now defunct boy group SS501, have also gone to the country twice as of writing. When asked on his second visit what he thinks of his Filipino fans, Kim remarked, “I like going to the Philippines because Filipino fans are so passionate. This is also why my fellow Korean artists like to go to the Philippines” (Kapuso Mo, Jessica Soho interview, aired August 27, 2011).

Filipino K-pop fans have also caught up with the trend of fan production. Most active fans have their own fansites, where they blog about their favorite artists, post ‘fanvids’ or ‘fanart’ which they themselves created, and interact with fellow fans. Several K-pop fans actively participate in K-pop performances and competitions, and have become some sort of celebrities within the fan community themselves. Fan fiction

writing, usually done in fandoms based on fictional texts and characters, is also now applied to K-pop music fandom.

The Korean Wave has struck the Philippines so powerfully that the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Philippines put up the Korean Cultural Center in the Philippines (KCC) in 2009. The KCC currently holds regular K-pop singing and K-pop dancing classes on weekends, as well as other classes in the traditional arts (traditional dance, Korean flute, Korean cuisine).

In the midst of the proliferation of local K-pop fandom, the Philippine K-pop Committee, Inc. (PKCI) was founded. The group, composed of K-pop fans themselves, staged the first ever Philippine K-pop Convention (K-pop Con) in 2009, as well as many other K-pop events such as the 2nd Philippine K-pop Con, the Dream Concert, and the K-pop Ball. Both PKCI and KCC usually include K-pop dancing and singing competitions in their events. Another group, Kfest Manila Events Management, also organize fan gatherings and competitions such as the annual K-pop and Culture Fest, Kfest Idol (June 26, 2011), Kfest Cosplay Con (March 27, 2011), and K-pop Song Fest (November 13, 2010).

## **B. About the Author**

It must be understood that this study is a very personal and emotionally-grounded endeavor for me. I am a K-pop fan myself. I went through high school in the company of my favorite K-pop groups. I survived homesickness during my freshman year by listening to songs from my favorite dramas' OST's (original sound tracks). I met some of my first college friends (who are also K-pop fans) by joining a Korean-Filipino friendship organization. I understand that this can pose questions on the validity and

subjectivity of this research. However, I believe that this also puts me in an advantageous position, given that I have enough prior knowledge on the subject.

This degree of personal involvement was what compelled me to write the study in the first person point of view. I see this thesis as a narrative, a story of the fans. But still, it is a story as *I* see it. Aside from being imperative to the autoethnographic stance of this research, the use of the first person POV is an acknowledgement of imperfection and incompleteness. If there's one important thing I learned from this study, it is that K-pop fandom (and fan culture, in general) is too complex and multifaceted to be wholly captured in one semester's worth of research. This study is an endeavor to contribute in that understanding, and not an attempt to complete it.

### **C. Research Problem and Objectives**

Like the very subject of my research, this study has been through a lot of changes since its conception. Initially, this study was meant to be purely descriptive. The original research question was just "how do Filipino K-pop fans interact with one another and produce their own media texts?" As my research progressed, however, I have come to the realization that no study has been done to explore the discourse of power and empowerment within the Filipino K-pop fan community or the Filipino fan community in general, for that matter. This unexplored aspect is what the current study wants to look into, and '*How is power exercised and negotiated in the interactive and productive practices of Filipino K-pop fans?*' became this research's central problem.

Moreover, a very recent undergraduate thesis, Martinez' *Fandom in Cyberspace: A Case Study on the Culture and Online Behavior of SJ United Philippines* (2011) has provided an excellent take-off point by answering the first level of inquiry of this study:

what is the culture of K-pop fans and how do they interact with each other? Martinez' findings will then be part of my analysis of fandom as a subculture and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5: Results and Discussion. The current study will then attempt to zoom out and delve on the state of K-pop fandom at a macro level—it will study the web of relations and interactions that link the fans to other institutions like the government, the media, and the rest of the public.

In other words, more than being descriptive, the study also aims to unearth the seemingly invisible politics within the community. The term politics, which will be used extensively in this research, will pertain to the complex web of interrelationships, power relations and conflicts that take place within the Philippine K-pop scene. This is also closely related to the questions of power and resistance as Fiske (1992) has described in his description of fandom as 'subversive by design'. According to Sandvoss (2005), however, more than recognizing the fact that fandom is often used by the disempowered and oppressed as a form of resistance, there is also a need to “explore under which circumstances, and against whom, fandom constitutes a form of resistance” (p. 15). These elements are what the current study looks into.

Fandom is viewed by some as a means of empowerment (through resistance). But really, where is the power in the Philippine K-pop community? Is it really in the fans themselves, who not only consume but also, as this study aims to establish, produce media texts of their own? Can we thus consider the productivity of Filipino K-pop fans as a system of resistance and opposition to the dominant culture, or is it merely a form of acceptance under the guise of an 'independent culture'? At this moment when fans have more opportunities than ever to produce their own texts and meanings, the next question



that must be asked is, how do ‘formal’ institutions react to these modes of production? This study, therefore, has a twofold purpose: first, to describe the social and productive (in terms of cultural text production) practices of the Filipino K-pop community as a subculture; and second, to locate the position of power in the context of fan-media producer relations.

To summarize, the specific objectives of this research are:

1. To add to and elaborate on the description of K-pop fan culture as described by Martinez (2011)
2. To verify and describe the status of K-pop fandom as a subculture
3. To locate/ explore the power play:
  - a. Within the fan community,
  - b. Between the fan community and the other institutions linked to it, and
  - c. Among institutions related to the fan community.

#### **D. Significance of the Study**

Fans are the most active and passionate media audiences. Their lives and their culture are excellent reflections of how media texts are translated into everyday practices of consumers and how these texts can actually go beyond the realm of mass media and penetrate other dimensions of culture and politics. But at the same time, it can also be said that fans are the most misunderstood media audiences. The simplistic and negative depiction of fans in the media, as mentioned earlier, has overshadowed the complex culture of fandom which, I believe, is a fertile ground for audience research. The present

study aims to fill this gap in local media scholarship, and open new windows for future research.

Moreover, fandom does not exist in a vacuum; the social actors involved in fandom are people who are also players within the political and economic structures of their society. I believe that this is one aspect that has been left out in the discussion of fan culture in the Philippines; and this is what I think this study can contribute to the scholarship of broadcasting. I also believe that this study will benefit the fans themselves. I hope that this will inspire the fans to assert their own power and facility.

## Chapter 2

### STORIES AND HISTORIES

#### (A Review of Related Literature)

What sparks a research idea? For some it may be a previous scholarly endeavor, or even an emerging social necessity. For me, it was an encounter with Henry Jenkins. During the summer before my senior year in college, I came across an essay written by him called “*Strangers No More, We Sing*”: *Filk Music, Folk Culture, and the Fan Community*. But Jenkins’ article is just one of the many pieces of scholarship related to fandom. This chapter provides a summary of what has been written so far on the topics the current research touches on, namely: fandom, subcultures, and Korean pop culture. In earlier times, studies on pop culture and other related fields such as fandom, music, and subcultural styles were devalued and deemed trivial in the academe. However, as the studies reviewed below will show, the turn of the century, along with the proliferation of several youth subcultures has placed fan studies in the limelight of academic research. Even so, it can be noticed that foreign studies still far outnumber those that were done locally.

#### A. Fan Scholarship

The word fan usually connotes a negative meaning in everyday discourse. As a matter of fact, Jenkins (1992) points out that this kind of connotation has been present ever since the term was coined. This is because the word fan comes from the Latin term *fanaticus*, which means ‘of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee, of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy’ (ibid.). In contemporary media

studies, however, fans are more often seen as the epitome of an active audience—an audience that consumes selectively according to its needs, and actively produces its own meanings out of the media texts it consumes.

Furthermore, it has been established that fan productivity can go beyond the production of meanings at a personal level to a production of entirely new bodies of cultural text. This practice of fan-production is seen by some as a form of empowerment in that it provides fans a creative venue to express their passions, other than just listening to or watching the objects of their fandom. As Paul Willis in *Common Cultures* (1990) states: Young people's interest in music-making and performance invariably begins from their activities as consumers, fans and dancers, and from the aesthetics and pleasures of listening to and liking particular styles of music... The sense of empowerment achieved by being able to play an instrument and reproduce the sounds of a favorite record is a common starting point for young musicians. (p. 79) Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (1992) focused on this aspect of fan culture, rejecting the view of the fan as a passive and irrational consumer. Jenkins was also one of the first to read fan communities as a subculture. Although Jenkins' case studies center on television and science fiction fans, much of his readings and findings about fan-produced texts are still applicable to other fandoms such as popular music.

## **B. Subculture Studies**

The concept of subculture is a much-debated topic in the scholarly world. Immense interest in the topic emerged from theorists from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in the 1970's, during the time when youth cultures started to become more visible and different from the mainstream 'adult culture'. In the introduction to the

first edition of *The Subcultures Reader* (1997), Sarah Thornton defined subcultures as “groups of people that have something in common with each other (i.e. they share a problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups” (p. 1). Subcultures are most often described as emerging from the subordinate and oppressed sectors of society. Much of what has been written about subcultures describes them through their distinctive styles, and how these practices exist in opposition to a dominant cultural ideology of the time.

On the other hand, there are also criticisms on the nature of subcultural studies (i.e. how subculture scholars construct the concept of subcultures). Thornton (1997) pointed out one of the most-contested assumptions of subcultural studies: “that the social groups investigated in the name of ‘subcultures’ are subordinate, subaltern or subterranean” (p.4). Critics of the subculture theory argue that the commonly used definition of a subculture (a form of empowerment/resistance by a group of oppressed people) is an over-appreciation of subcultures and fails to recognize that not all subcultures come from the lower and subordinate social classes. Such a critique of the term ‘subculture’ also exists in local scholarship, with Cataan’s (2011) study as the most recent example. In *World within the world: Jejemon as the other culture* (2011), he refuses to refer to the Jejemon community as a sub-culture because it is, he maintains, another culture in itself.

### C. Musical Practices and Subcultures

In media and cultural scholarship, music is not seen as merely a cultural form or product. Music also plays a significant role in influencing human behavior, and even in the creation of a particular culture. Youth cultures are particularly often associated with musical consumption and the development of lifestyles based on it. Paul Willis (1990) asserts that “musical performance... amounts to an important expression and celebration of sociability enabled through some shared sense of grounded aesthetics. It is inherently a collective activity”(p. 82). In addition, music, like fandom, is also seen as an empowering practice. For instance, Lawrence Grossberg (1986) regards Rock and Roll as ‘affective empowerment’, emphasizing its “potentially oppositional role in American culture”. Grossberg points out that the several attempts—and failures-- to silence Rock and Roll music in America demonstrates that music can be used as an important tool in people’s struggles to voice out oppositions to the dominant culture of the time.

Most of the subcultures that have been described by subculture scholars are rooted in a particular musical genre. The punk subculture, for instance, was used by Dick Hebdige (1979) to illustrate his theory of the homology between music and subcultural resistance. Another facet of music in relation to culture that has been emphasized by Cultural Studies is the role of the star system in promoting consumer culture. Especially in the study of music fandom, it must be kept in mind that fandom isn’t only organized around the music per se, but also around the personalities and icons associated with it. In fact, Frith and Goodwin (1990) state that: in the end, the most important commodities produced by the music industry—as important for the circulation of desire as for the realization of profits—may not be songs or records but stars. Songs work on us and

records sell to us because of our identity with or response to them—an identity and response almost invariably mediated through a performer, a person who stands for what we possess, how we are possessed. (p. 425)

#### **D. Hallyu: The Korean Wave**

The rise in popularity of Korean pop culture (specifically music, TV dramas, and films) is known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave. The Hallyu phenomenon is present and alive not only in the Philippines, but also in other parts of Asia (the Korean Wave is said to first hit Japan), North and Latin America, and even in some parts of Europe. The phenomenon has sparked the interest of several media and culture scholars all over the world. Most of the studies done about the Korean Wave, however, focus on the role of the Internet as the medium and the globalization aspect of the trend, rather than on the massive fanbase that has emerged due to the phenomenon.

Doobo Shim (2006) says that Hallyu was the result of Korea's struggle to protect their culture from the threat of foreign influences at the time when their market was opened to foreign pop cultures (particularly the Japanese) for the first time. Furthermore, Dator and Seo (2004), quoting sociologist Habib Khondker, suggest that the Korean Wave may also be seen as a form of pan-Asianism, a "region-wide reassertion of Asian identity" (p. 33). Mark James Russel (2008), however, contests the very idea of a 'Korean Wave'. According to him, there is nothing Korean about the spreading of Korean pop culture abroad—it is merely a product of globalization, and Korea just happened to be one of the first to adopt the trend. Xiaochang Li (2009) offers an overview of how technology and new media affects the audienceship and fandom of East Asian dramas. With none other than Henry Jenkins as the thesis adviser, Li offers a

description of how online activity and consumption play important roles in the creation and expansion of fandoms based on Korean dramas.

### **E. Philippine Fan Cultures**

Fan studies in the Philippines are primarily concentrated on celebrity fans. Parungao (2007), in his study of Nora Aunor fan organizations, presents a good overview of the culture of fan clubs in the Philippines, tracing it to as early as the 1950's when the popularity of actresses like Gloria Romero and Nida Blanca produced the earliest fan communities. In the same study, Parungao found out that the interaction and social relations taking place among their members are not confined to subjects relating to their fandom. He discovered that more often than not, the relationships built in fan clubs become more personal and less fandom-based with the passing of time.

While numerous readings of fan cultures have been done, the Korean pop music fandom is one that hasn't been studied well yet. This is because the K-pop fan community is fairly new, having emerged in the Philippines only in around 2007. Alanzalon's (2011) unpublished undergraduate thesis *Kpopped!: Understanding the Filipino Teens' Consumption of Korean Popular Music and Videos* is one of the very few available literatures about the K-pop phenomenon. It looked into the reception of K-pop songs and videos by Filipino fans and answered the research question: Why do Filipino teens consume Korean popular music and videos? It is therefore very clear that while the concept of fans as active cultural producers have long been accepted by many members of the international academic community, there is still a significant need for local research projects that espouse that kind of perspective.



Recently, however, another undergraduate thesis was able to explore the realm of K-pop fandom further, by studying the online behaviors of Filipino K-pop fans. The study, entitled *Fandom in Cyberspace: A Case Study of the Super Junior United Philippines* by C.M. Martinez (2011) would be used as a vital document in this current study and would be discussed in detail in Chapter 5: Results and Discussions.

Other literature about Philippine fan culture, like Reside's (1998) study of the formation of TV series' fan clubs and Reyes' (2010) research on the receptive patterns of anime fans, take the same stance of an outsider studying an 'exotic' and 'other' culture. While these research projects are commendable attempts to further the understanding of fan culture in the Philippines, they fail to describe in detail the cultural nuances that operate within the fan community.

## **F. The Politics of Fandom**

Chapter four of Sandvoss' book (*Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*), aptly titled *The Dominant Discourse of Resistance*, provides a good starting point in the study of power relations within fandom. Drawing from earlier theorists such as John Fiske and Michel de Certeau, Sandvoss presents the various arguments on the questions of power and resistance in media consumption. Fiske is arguably the most staunch supporter of the view that fandom is a largely political activity. Quoted in Sandvoss (2005), Fiske described fandom as a system of resistance when he said that "popular culture and the pleasure that fans and viewers derive from it, exist in opposition to official, bourgeois 'high culture'. The consumption of popular culture in fandom thus forms part of the struggle of disempowered groups against the hegemonic culture of the powerful." (p. 12).

Fan production is often seen as a political act. In *The Boy Who Lived Forever*, an article about Harry Potter fan fiction, fan fiction writing is described as a way of “talking back to the culture in its own language” (p. 38) and a means “for people who don’t recognize themselves in the media... of taking those media into their own hands and correcting the picture”. (p. 39)

## **Conclusion**

The collection of literature written about fandom and subcultures come from various academic disciplines—from sociology to media studies and even musicology. But the thread that weaves these pieces together is the importance given to human agency—the belief that there is an inherent drive in humans to gather and socialize with peers who have the same interests; and that humans, as audiences, do not simply receive what is given to them but utilize it in such a way that suits their needs.

I believe that there is a fan inside every soul. We have all, at one point in our lives, invested a part of ourselves in something that fascinates us. This is precisely why scholars of media and culture devoted a great amount of literature on different aspects of fandom and its ties with society. The cornerstone upon which every qualitative research is grounded is the review of previous writings on the present subject. They tell the researcher what is already known, and what is yet to be known and unearthed. Similarly, the retelling of stories and histories that shed light on the phenomenon of fandom is what anchors this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **THE NARRATIVE BLUEPRINT**

#### **(Study Framework)**

Before building a structure, one needs a blueprint. Before embarking on an exploration of a new terrain, a realm of unfamiliar faces and places, one needs a map. Similarly, before exploring the world of K-pop fandom, a framework was plotted out to aid in this research. To start off, it must be understood that this study is not a conventional Broadcast Communication thesis in that it does not focus on a broadcast text, nor on the broadcast medium itself; but rather on a specific cluster of the broadcast audience, the K-pop fans. Given these considerations, the study geared less toward media theories and was instead structured in a Cultural Studies framework. Both subculture and fan culture studies are rooted in Cultural Studies, especially that which was developed in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (commonly known as CCCS). Specifically, the data analysis of this study was guided by Henry Jenkins' participative fan culture framework, a landmark theory in fan studies which interestingly evolved along with fandom's status in public discourse. The development of this framework is discussed in this chapter.

#### **A. Subculture Framework**

In describing and identifying the subcultural nuances of K-pop fan culture, I drew bits of concepts from three subculture and fan culture theorists—Henry Jenkins, John Fiske, and Sarah Thornton—to form my analysis framework.

First, it is imperative to operationalize the definition of the term *subculture*, around which the study will revolve. For the purpose of this research, subculture is used to refer to a generally marginalized group of people with interests or practices in opposition to that of the dominant culture of its time. In this study, the K-pop fan community will be examined as a subculture in the Philippines, following the view of several fan scholars like Dick Hebdige and Henry Jenkins that fandom is a subcultural form.

In “In My Weekend-Only World...: Reconsidering Fandom”, Jenkins (1992) concluded that the “complexity and diversity of fandom as a subcultural community” can be characterized by five levels of activity:

- a.) a particular mode of reception,
- b.) a particular set of critical and interpretive practices,
- c.) consumer activism,
- d.) particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic tradition, and practices, and
- e.) fandom’s function as an alternative social community. (p. 277-281).

I used these levels of activity as a framework in defining and delineating the status of K-pop fandom as a subculture.

Sarah Thornton (1995, in Guins and Cruz), on the other hand, focused on the concept of *subcultural capital* and the role of media in the development of youth subcultures. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s different forms of capital, Thornton identifies ‘hipness’ as a *subcultural capital*. This kind of capital may be embodied or objectified in the form of distinct styles of fashion or slang languages particular to a

subculture. In *The Media Development of Subcultures*, Thornton specified three levels by which media affects the ideologies and even determine the death or expansion of a youth subculture. These levels of media influence are: **Mass Media**, **Micro Media**, and **Niche Media**. In my analysis of how K-pop fandom flourished locally, I applied these levels to explore how the Philippine media's coverage of the K-pop phenomenon affected the progress of the local K-pop fan community as a subculture.

Furthermore, in analyzing the participative practices of K-pop fans, I was guided by John Fiske's work in his classic essay "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" (1992). Here, he enumerated three forms of fan productivity upon which the current study was grounded on:

1. **Semiotic productivity**-construction of meanings at the moment of reception (interior),
2. **Enunciative productivity**- when the meanings made are spoken and are shared within a face-to-face or oral culture (fan talk), and
3. **Textual productivity**- when fans produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture.

### **B. Henry Jenkins' Participative Fan Culture**

The development of Jenkins' thoughts on fan culture is evident in his three books: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), each containing distinct yet consistent theories

on fandom in three different contexts. In addition, the progression of Jenkins' theory in these three books reflect the drastic changes that fandom, in general, has undergone in the past twenty years. I therefore find it apt to discuss all three books and the context by which they were written in detail.

Despite the fact that the state of fan culture (both global and local) has changed dramatically since *Textual Poachers* was written, most of the groundbreaking concepts introduced in the books still ring true today. For one, it introduced the notion of the fandom as a subculture. It is in *Textual Poachers* that Jenkins established that fans are not useless social misfits, but a group of people that functions as an alternative community with its own culture and a distinct set of practices. Jenkins also introduced the view of fan culture as a highly participative culture, stressing that fans not only consume, but also produce their own texts in the form of fan videos, fan fiction, and even 'fanzines' or fan magazines.

Written fourteen years after *Textual Poachers*, *Convergence Culture* takes on the same theme of participatory fan culture, but in an entirely new level. While fan practices were generally done underground in 1992, *Convergence Culture* was written in a period when fan communities and practices have become more visible and ubiquitous than ever, intermingled in a complex web of platforms called cyberspace. *Convergence Culture* zooms out of the realm of fandom and goes on to relate participative culture with politics and globalization in the context of technological innovations. Here, Jenkins introduces his views on the politics of participation, stating that while participation has become easier and more accessible to the general public in the culture of convergence, there still exists a disparity and inequality between the productive capacities possessed by the

masses, and those by the members of powerful institutions. Writing in the context of film reception, Jenkins states that

“..the political economy of media convergence does not map symmetrically around the world; audiences outside “developed economies” often have access only to the films and in some cases, only to the pirated copies that may have scenes missing. Even in more developed economies, because they tap different distribution circuits or because the rights may be acquired by different companies or simply because of different corporate goals and strategies, the parts may move separately and in different sequences—the games or comics following or preceding the films themselves. As information spreads from the film into other media, it creates inequalities of participation within the franchise.” (p. 114-115)

Jenkins’ view on the participative power endowed by convergence and technology is further supported by another book, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*. Although out of the three books, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* is the most recently published, it is actually a collection of essays written in the years between *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture*. Here, Jenkins maps out the changes that occurred in fan scholarship and acknowledges that “participatory culture is anything but fringe or underground today” (p.2).

The current study used Jenkins theories on fandom to determine first, how K-pop fandom qualifies as a subculture; second, how the ‘politics of participation’ operates in the K-pop fan community, and third, how the phenomenon fits within the larger discourse of globalization and convergence.

## Chapter 4

### BEHIND THE SCENES: PENNING THE STORY

#### (Methods and Procedures)

The primary aim of this study is to provide an all-encompassing account of the intricacies and distinct characteristics of the K-pop fan community. To achieve this, I used a combination of qualitative methods and the Grounded Theory Approach as a guide for my research. It is also important to note that this thesis can be divided into two main components: first, the description of fan practices; and second, the analysis of these practices to describe how power is negotiated in the community. The two-pronged nature of this study therefore required me to use not only one, but a combination of different research procedures. Furthermore, adhering to the Grounded Theory Approach, the research involved data construction rather than data gathering.

#### A. Document analysis

My research on K-pop fandom takes off from two earlier undergraduate theses from the College of Mass Communication of the University of the Philippines Diliman. The first study is *Kpopped!: Understanding the Filipino Teens' Consumption of Korean Popular Music and Videos*, conducted by Sarah Alanzalon in 2011. The second one, *Fandom in Cyberspace: A Case Study of the Super Junior United Philippines* was submitted by Chryl Martinez later in the same year. The study described the K-pop fan culture by studying the online behavior of members of a local fan club, Super Junior United Philippines or SJUPH. Through the constant comparative technique of the



Grounded Theory Approach, I integrated the findings of these two theses to formulate a comprehensive overview of how K-pop fandom works.

## **B. Autoethnography**

This study is mainly an autoethnographic account of K-pop fan culture. Unlike the standards of traditional ethnography, autoethnographic research entails a high degree of participation and involvement of the researcher. This research method still remains contested by some, because of questions on subjectivity and the inevitable influence of the researcher's personal emotions. For this study, however, I deem it favorable to use autoethnography as my research tool. Under this general method, I utilized virtual ethnography, in-depth interviews, and personal observation as my research instruments.

### ***1. Virtual ethnography***

I did virtual ethnography in several K-pop fan sites and online fan groups, with a concentration on the Super Junior fandom. First, I want to clarify that the decision to use the Super Junior fandom in this study was made without prior awareness of Martinez' thesis, which used the same case study. I decided to focus on this particular fandom because the male K-pop group Super Junior is considered to have the largest fanbase in the Philippines. I specifically focused on the online sites of Super Junior United Philippines, including their affiliate fan clubs and other fan sites related to the Super Junior fandom. The sites I examined were: SJ United Philippines main website, SJ United Philippines online forum, SJ United Philippines Facebook page, We Request the Truth from ELF Philippines (Facebook page), and other related sites. This was because it was difficult to confine my analysis to only one fan site, for following the online behavior and

interaction of the fans would always lead me to another site. The aforementioned websites were monitored and observed from December 2011 to February 2012. The websites were selected in the basis of their relevance to the Super Junior fandom, and the number of posts and level of activity in the sites during the period of data gathering.

To further aid me in my objective of probing into the power relations present in fan organizations through online and actual ethnography, the following questions served as my guide in my observation and analysis:

1. What kind of language do the group members use in communicating with one another?
2. What kind of language do members use in communicating with forum administrators or fan club heads?
3. What kind of language do the leaders use in communicating with their members?
4. How do fans assert and negotiate their social identity through their online behavior?
5. What do the fan sites tell us about the organization and interpersonal relationships of K-pop fans?
6. What kind of relationship exists between fan organizations and institutions like the Embassy of Korea, record labels, concert and event organizers, etc?

## 2. Interviews

The findings from the first phase of the research (virtual ethnography and document analysis) were further analyzed through interviews with people from different segments of the fan community. I conducted a total of five interview sessions for the study. These include in-person, in-depth interviews with respondents who were selected through convenient sampling. The fans that were interviewed were referred to me by personal acquaintances that are active in the fan community. The interview respondents are:

- 1) *Mai*, an officer and administrator of Super Junior United Philippines (SJUPH),
- 2) *GeeZee*, a member of a K-pop cover group, and
- 3) *Ms. Eren Joy Bautista*, the Program Coordinator for Events of the Korean Cultural Center in the Philippines,
- 4) *Ms. Kring Elenzano*, one of the founders and former chairperson of the Philippine K-pop Committee, Inc., and
- 5) Members of *Mackerz*, a K-pop cover group

With the aid of the constant comparison method of the Grounded Theory Approach, the results of these interviews were then used to support the findings from the document analysis and observation of websites.

### ***3. Personal observations***

I consider myself as one of the earlier Filipino K-pop fans. I have seen it in its rawest, most difficult phase. I witnessed it slowly penetrate mainstream consciousness, and since the conception of this study in 2011, I have been keeping an eye on how it continues to change. Some of the examples used to support the analysis points of this study were from my personal experiences and observations from the past six years of being involved in the fandom. It must be emphasized, however, that these bits of personal observations were interspersed in different parts of the research only to *support* my findings and were not used as the primary data of the study.

## Chapter 5

### THE STORY OF K-POP: RISE OF A SUBCULTURE

#### (Results and Discussion)

For the outsider, the unfamiliar spectator, the K-pop fan community may seem like an arbitrary group of frilly young people. This kind of perception thus opens a need to describe the culture and practices of K-pop fans in the most accurate way possible, from an insider's point of view. The best way, perhaps, to give a justifiable account of its existence is to tell its story. Using the basic elements of a narrative, this chapter presents the results of the current study and an analysis guided by subcultural theory and Henry Jenkins' participative culture framework.

#### A. Prologue: An Overview of K-pop fandom

The first part of this research is a rundown of how K-pop fan culture has been previously described by two pioneering undergraduate theses on K-pop, *Kpopped!: Understanding the Filipino Teens' Consumption of Korean Popular Music and Videos* and *Fandom in Cyberspace: A Case Study of the Super Junior United Philippines*, both done in 2011.

*Kpopped!: Understanding the Filipino Teens' Consumption of Korean Popular Music and Videos* (Alanzalon, 2011) used the Uses and Gratifications Theory to determine what motivates Filipino K-pop fans to consume and patronize Korean pop songs and music videos. By identifying the needs and preferences of 270 respondents, Alanzalon was able to provide a first glimpse into the lives, practices, and the psyche of K-pop fans in the Philippines. Her study established that K-pop music answers to the needs of fans for *information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment*.

*Fandom in Cyberspace: A Case Study of the Super Junior United Philippines* is a very recent study (October 2011) done by Chryl Martinez, also from the Broadcast Communication Department of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman. While Alanzalon focused on the general motivations of Filipino K-pop fans in their media consumption, Martinez zoomed in on one particular fan organization and confined her study to online fan activities. The undergraduate thesis explored the world of K-pop fandom in the Internet. This was done through a case study of Super Junior United Philippines, the biggest Super Junior fan club in the country. Super Junior is an all-male K-pop performing group composed of a total of fifteen members. My own interview with a Korean Cultural Center representative confirmed that Super Junior has the highest fanbase in the Philippines.

Martinez' inquiry was on the online behavior of Super Junior fans (who are officially called ELF's or Everlasting Friends of Super Junior) and how the Internet aided the creation and preservation of their fandom. Through in-depth interviews of sixteen (16) members of SJUPH, Martinez was able to identify several themes regarding the fandom of her respondents, namely: Happiness, Ownership, "Super Junior" Virus, Korean influence to Filipinos, Self-identity, Imagined World, and False Intimacy. These themes are briefly discussed below.

### *Happiness*

Majority of the study's respondents expressed that getting into the Super Junior fandom made them happier and with a more positive outlook in life. Some say that their fan activities help them "accomplish something they haven't done before", while some even say that their becoming a K-pop fan had a "life-changing impact" (p. 26).

### *Ownership*

Martinez claims that Super Junior fans claim ownership of their idols and their cultural products through their consumption and appropriation practices. It was in this section that we are introduced to the abundance not only of consumptive, but also of productive practices evident in K-pop fandom. These include buying albums of their favorite artists and “creating their own products from the existing text.” Examples were cited in which fans design and sell their own fan goods. Another mode of ownership identified was appropriation, which was defined as the “[incorporation] of fan activities into their daily lives”, as embodied in the practices of watching and downloading videos, listening to their idols’ songs and even translating them, using their idols’ names and pictures as part of their cyber identities, and imitating the fashion styles of their idols. (p. 35-36)

### *Super Junior Virus*

The term ‘Super Junior Virus’ was coined to describe the phenomenon of Super Junior fandom in relation to the “certain characteristics in Super Junior and K-pop that incite the interest of the fans” (p. 29). It is under this sub-heading that Martinez identified the different ways through which her respondents were introduced to K-pop and Super Junior fandom.

### *Korean influence to Filipinos*

This section shows that K-pop has helped in promoting Korean culture to the Filipino fans, most of whom have already developed a deep longing to visit Korea.

### *Self-identity*

Here, Martinez reports the sense of unity and belongingness the Super Junior fans feel because of their fandom.

### *Imagined World*

This section describes how the Internet forms groups and relationships between and among fans, which create an ‘imagined world’ for them. However, it was also mentioned how “some fantasies if the online world are brought to the offline world”, as in the case of fans expressing their talent and creativity by joining K-pop cover competitions (p. 42).

### *False Intimacy*

Finally, Martinez explains how fans develop a sense of ‘false intimacy’ with their idols, reaching up to the point that they even feel the same way their idols do. Another point raised was how this sense of “emotional intensity and affection” defines the fans’ perception of a ‘true ELF’ (p. 27)

## **B. Characters: The Fans**

It was a smoldering hot February afternoon. I trudged the staircase of the UP CSWCD (College of Social Work and Community Development) building to meet a group of respondents. They looked like a regular clique of college girls, except that they aren’t. Ezrae, Elaine, Kars, Macky, and Nhage make up a cover group. Calling themselves the *Mackerz*, they usually dress up and dance like the Korean female group *Miss A* in K-pop events and competitions. However, on the day that I met the *Mackerz*, they were about to perform not as group but as back up dancers for one of their members, Macky, who was competing in the solo category of a K-pop cover competition.



Ezrae, Elaine, Kars, Macky, and Nhage are just five of the thousands of K-pop music fans in the Philippines. Ms. Kring Elenzano, former chairperson of the Philippine Kpop Committee, Inc. (PKCI) estimates the current fan population to be around 20,000 to 30,000. Like, Martinez, I believe that the best way to know and understand the story of these fans is to talk to them, so I conducted several in-depth interviews of my own. I interviewed two individual fans, Mai and GeeZee, and a the five members of Mackerz. Furthermore, to aid me in probing into the possible politics and power relations that exist in the community, I interviewed representatives from two of the most influential institutions in the Philippine K-pop scene: the Korean Cultural Center (KCC) and the Philippine Kpop Committee, Inc. (PKCI). The results of the fan interviews mainly echoed Martinez' findings regarding the behavior and motivations of fans; but the main difference is that my interviews focused on the factors that influence the fans' *active* participation in the culture, and how they perceive their relationship with fellow fans.

### ***1. Fan Communities***

Fandom is an inherently collective activity. One doesn't merely become a fan by himself, thus the creation of fan clubs and organizations. K-pop fan clubs are usually established online. Because the K-pop fan population is geographically diverse, fans often start to gather in online forums or form text clans before meeting in person. Online forums are specialized websites wherein registered fans can meet fellow fans and post anything (text, images, video links) related to the fandom. Text clans, on the other hand, are groups of fans who exchange mobile phone numbers and send text messages to each other.

The group Super Junior United Philippines (SJUPH) was formed by uniting four fan groups and forums: Super Junior Philippines, SuJu Pinas, Super Junior Sahoe, and Super Junior Fanatext Philippines Only. These groups existed separately online for a period of time until the current group's core members started planning a merge. According to Mai, one of SJUPH's founding members and its current Sales and Marketing Head, an instrumental incident in SJUPH's creation is the *Pops in Seoul* event in July 25, 2009. It was the first big event that brought Filipino K-pop fans together, and it was where SJUPH's core group met and decided to establish a unified Super Junior fan club.

Today, SJUPH consists not only of the four original fan clubs, but individual fan clubs (iFCs) as well. IFCs are fan clubs dedicated to a particular member of the group. For example, Petals Philippines is a fan club for Super Junior member Heechul, FallingForKyu Philippines is for Kyuhyun, while AllRise Philippines is a fan club dedicated to Eunhyuk. K-pop fans refer to their favorite members as their 'biases'. My favorite Super Junior member is Eunhyuk (Lee Hyukjae), therefore I can say that "Hyukjae is my bias" or "I'm Hyukjae-biased".

SJUPH currently operates in several online platforms. It has its own website ([sjuph.org](http://sjuph.org)), an online forum ([forums.sjuph.org](http://forums.sjuph.org)), a Twitter account ([twitter.com/sjunedph](https://twitter.com/sjunedph)), a Tumblr account ([tumblr.sjuph.org](http://tumblr.sjuph.org)), a public Facebook page ([facebook.com/sjunedph](https://facebook.com/sjunedph)), and a Facebook group ([facebook.com/groups/sjunedphilippines](https://facebook.com/groups/sjunedphilippines)). The difference between the Facebook *page* and the Facebook *group* is that the page is open to the public, and anyone can freely view and post content but to be able to post in the group, one has to request for membership approval from the administrators/ core group members.

The group also functions as a forum for fans to share their personal experiences. In the post shown below, one member shared her experience of being mocked by her classmates for being a K-pop fan. Other members wrote comments on the post, saying that they have experienced similar situations, and encouraged the original poster to just ignore her classmates and carry on with her fandom.

The existence of such kinds of interaction in fan clubs and even in online groups shows that fans treat their fellow fans as belonging to the same community. The post in Figure 1 demonstrates that fans can even share intimate feelings in online groups and confer trust to their fellow members.

Figure 1. *Example of a post in SJ United Philippines' Facebook group*



I want 2 share this lng.. Matagal ko na tong dinadamdam.  
 Alam niyo va yung feeling na sa batch at classroom nio na ikaw lang aNg kpop addict.  
 At alam nila un.? Ako OO. Tuwing mg-ooral ako kht wala naman kinalaman sa kpop  
 aaaabihin nila dahil kpop fan daw ako kaya ganun. For example mgbgy daw ng  
 example ng crab mentality taz ako ung inexample nila kasi adik daw ako sa kpop. Ra  
 nung nagreport ako abt poverty ag sabi nman nila kaya daw my poverty kasi adik daw  
 ako sa kpop.. Nakainis lng.. La nman konek kpop dinadamay nila.. Kayo naranasan  
 nyo rin ba yun?

 Like ·  Comment ·  Follow Post · 17 hours ago near Pampanga, Davao City

[I just want to share this. I've kept this feeling for a long time. Do you know how it feels when you're the only K-pop addict in your class or batch? I know that feeling. Whenever I would recite in class, even though the topic is not K-pop, my classmates would always relate my answer to the fact that I'm a K-pop fan. For example, when we were asked to give an example of crab mentality, they gave me as an example because I'm addicted to K-pop. When I presented a report about poverty, they said that the reason why there's poverty is because I'm addicted to K-pop. It's just so annoying. They always relate K-pop to everything. Have you also experienced that? ]

In fact, Jenkins (1992) claims that one of the subcultural characteristics of fandom is that it creates a sort of alternative, utopian community, as expressed in “the fans’ recognition that fandom offers not so much as an escape from reality whose value may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society” (p. 280). In Figure 1, the Super Junior fan experienced mocking and contempt in the “mundane society” (i.e., her school) and went on to share the experience with the fan community—people who are more likely to understand and relate with her emotions. This element was also described by Martinez’ discussion of the Imagined World, one of the themes she identified in Super Junior fandom.

The sense of community in K-pop fandom is manifested not only within a single fanbase (in this case, the Super Junior fanbase), but also extends to the fans of other K-pop groups and artists. In fact, the local fan community has grown so rapidly that in 2009, the Philippine K-pop Committee was established. The Philippine K-pop Committee, Inc. (PKCI) is the umbrella organization of most, if not all, K-pop fan clubs in the country. It is a non-stock, non-profit organization recognized by both the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR). According to Ms. Kring Elenzano, former PKCI Chairperson, the Committee was officially registered in 2010 but the organization was “established” around August 2009 when different fan clubs started meeting up for the 1<sup>st</sup> Philippine K-pop Convention. The board members or officers of the committee are elected yearly by the heads of the affiliated fan clubs. Through an online interview with Ms. Elenzano, I learned that the PKCI actively coordinates with the KCC, as well as record labels and companies whenever there are K-pop related events like album launches.

Aside from the regular online activities of local K-pop fan clubs, their members also get to meet each other personally in events like concerts, album launches, and fan gatherings. Most fan clubs regularly hold fan gatherings, wherein members assemble and bond together by watching videos of their idols, play games, or even go to a *noraebang* or karaoke place. In our interview, Mai shared that during SJUPH's last fan gathering in 2011, around 300 fans were present. She also said that before, they would meet up at least once a month just to talk about their fandom and share their experiences.

In his original study, Jenkins (1992) argued that the first level of activity that classifies fandom as a subcultural community is 'a particular mode of reception' among fans of a particular text or body of texts. He explained this level by illustrating the intensive and critical manner by which television fans watch their favorite programs. Applying this to the K-pop fandom, K-pop fans have very distinct modes of reception and consumption as opposed to other consumers of K-pop texts (i.e., the non-fans). For one, fans go to great lengths to sustain the consumption of their objects of fandom. They use the Internet to update themselves on the lives of their idols, and share their knowledge with their fellow fans.

Jenkins also said that "they translate the reception process into social interaction with other fans" and went on to explain that this also pertains to what John Fiske (1991) identified as *enunciative productivity*, or "the articulation of meaning through dress, display, and gossip" (p. 278). In this context, this can be explained by the practice of 'spazzing', or expressing deep emotions with fellow fans. Jenkins also stated that the fans' manners of enunciative productivity and semiotic productivity (the construction of meaning at the moment of reception) are often blurred and merged together, as in the

cases of ‘group viewing’ by television fans, wherein fan-talk or gossip usually commences at the moment of reception. Interestingly, although there is a huge difference between the objects of fandom of K-pop fans and the television fans described by Jenkins, the phenomenon of group viewing is also practiced by K-pop fans. As mentioned earlier, in fan club gatherings and anniversary events, members usually come together in a place and watch a video of a concert or performances by their idols.

In addition to events like K-pop gatherings and conventions, fans also plan projects for members of their idol group. According to Mai of SJUPH, fan projects usually involve submitting pictures or messages, which are compiled and sent to the idols. One example of this practice I saw in SJUPH is shown in Figure 2.

Kona Beans is a café founded and managed by the mothers of three Super Junior members (Sungmin, Leeteuk, and Kyuhyun). To express their support for their idols, SJUPH members, particularly the individual fan clubs of the three Super Junior members, sent a potted plant as a sign of good luck. The gift was spotted in a photo of Leeteuk, proving that the plant was indeed given to the idols.

Figure 2. Example of a fan project

 **SJ United Philippines**  
HELLO EVERYONE! /jumps around! ^^  
Congratulatory and Goodluck gift is already at Kona Beans ^^

Along with TeukAngelsPH and FallingforKyuPH, we sent a potted plant to Kona Beans that symbolizes good luck and prosperity for their business. Now they know we all wish good luck for their newly built cafe and support for Sungmin's mother, Leeteuk's mother, and Kyuhyun's mother, and to the 3 members as well.

The message on the card that was sent along with the potted plant says:  
"Good luck to Kona Beans!  
Mothers ~ hwaiting! ㅋㅋ  
From Teuk Angels PH, PumpkinMinPH, FallingforKyuPH (Philippine Fansites)"

Thank you TeukAngelsPH and FallingforKyuPh!  
Special thanks to: 즈카님 for helping us send our gift to Kona Beans (ㄹㄴㄹ)

gogogo!!! :))



**Wall Photos**  
HELLO EVERYONE! /jumps around! ^^  
Congratulatory and Goodluck gift is already at...  
See More  
By: FallingForKyuPH  
Like · Comment · Share · January 23 at 11:06am ·

Because of such a high level of activity, Korean entertainment companies have started expressing interest on the involvement and participation of fans in their promotional efforts. Only recently, the Korean entertainment company Cube Entertainment appointed three Filipino fan sites as *official fan sites* to be used for dissemination of official announcements and information from the company itself.

These kinds of practices can be attributed to the concept of *consumer activism*, another subcultural characteristic of fandom identified by Jenkins. According to Jenkins, “Fandom originates, at least in part, as a response to the relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation”. (p. 279) Because Jenkins’ framework was originally written in the context of television and media fandom, this particular element pertains to the ability of the fans to voice out their desires and appeal to the media producers regarding issues on content. However, this principle can also be applied to K-pop fandom if we take into account that the *products* consumed by the fans aren’t just the songs or albums, but also the Korean personalities themselves. As consumers of their idols, fans are learning to demand more opportunities to be involved in the lives of and interact with their favorite personalities. Thus, fans are coming up with innovative ways (e.g., sending potted plants and other gifts) to make their presence known and express their support for their idols.

## 2. *Fan Practices*

In addition to the role of *fandom as an alternative social community*, a *particular mode of reception*, and *consumer activism*, Jenkins also noted that fandom can be identified as a subculture because it encourages the emergence of particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic tradition, and practices. In K-pop fandom, this is evident in fan practices such as cover performances, and fan fiction writing.

While most K-pop fans primarily confine their participation in joining and posting in online communities, some take their involvement to another level by participating in practices such as cover performances. Cover groups (CGs) are groups of fans who dress



up and perform like their idols during competitions and fan events. Before, fans only used to record their performances on video and upload them online. However, along with the advent of fan events and gatherings in the Philippines came a very potent opportunity for cover groups to perform for an actual audience. Today, cover group performances are a staple part of fan events and even album launches organized by music stores and record companies. One example of a CG is the Mackerz, mentioned earlier in this chapter. GeeZee, a member of another cover group, was also interviewed for this research.

GeeZee is an Interior Design junior student at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She has been a K-pop fan since fifth grade, and is currently an active member of a cover group called Synchron. The short interview was mainly about her fandom history (she started rather early in the fandom, at fifth grade), the cover group she belongs to, and how she derives pleasure and fulfillment from performing. Towards the end of the interview, however, GeeZee revealed to me that she only does the performing 'for fun', and doesn't plan on pursuing it professionally in the future.

Mackerz is an all-female CG which usually covers the songs of the K-pop group *Miss A*. I met Mackerz through Ezrae, one of their members. She is a member of the school organization I used to be part of. Originally a 4-member group, they are now comprised of five female members, namely Ezrae, Elaine, Kars, Macky, and Nhage. The four original members (Ezrae, Kars, Macky, and Nhage) were friends since high school; while the newest addition to their group, Elaine, is a childhood friend of one of the members.

Like GeeZee, the group told me that they are motivated to keep on performing because it's fun and it gives them a channel by which to express their fandom, as well as

their creativity. Unlike GeeZee, however, the group members told me that it is their far-fetched dream to be professional performers in Korea. When asked if they would also be interested to perform professionally in the Philippines, the girls answered a resounding “no”. The greatest difference between the Filipino and Korean music industry, the girls said, was that Korean entertainment companies take utmost care of the idols’ careers through training and career development; thus, it is not “*basta-basta lang*” (haphazardly handled). What I saw among the Mackerz is a genuine bond of friendship and familiarity, perhaps because the girls have known each other for quite a long time. In fact, on the day that I interviewed them, Macky was about to join a cover competition as a solo performer, with the other girls supporting her as back-up dancers.

Moreover, what made that competition different is that Macky did not perform the usual *Miss A* songs. Instead, she covered *O, Before You Go* and *Purple Line*, songs originally performed by TVXQ, a male K-pop group. Apparently, performances like this, commonly known as *reverse-gender covers*, are becoming the new trend in the fan community. Traditionally, a female would cover a female artist, and vice versa. Reverse-gender covers, however, pertain to a trend wherein cover artists or groups portray a K-pop artist opposite their gender (e.g., an all-female group covering Super Junior).

The concept of reverse-gender covers is just one example of oppositional reading practices present in K-pop fandom, much of which is related to gender. Another instance is in the case of *yaoi* or homosexual fan fiction, more commonly known in the West as *slash fiction*. Fan fiction pertains to the practice of writing short stories and literary pieces (known as fanfics) based on a cultural text. This practice is often seen as an act of resistance, because many fan fiction writers engage in the activity to express their own

interpretations of a story or fulfill the endings they wanted to see in a book, movie, or television program, but did not. The term slash fiction, on the other hand, “refers to the convention of employing a stroke or ‘slash’ to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 186).

In the SJUPH online forum there is a section called Writer’s Block, wherein fans can post their works of fiction, short stories, and poems featuring the boys of Super Junior. Some of the works pair the Super Junior members with female K-pop artists, while some use fictional female characters for the lead role. Most of the fanfics posted in the site, however, feature Super Junior members as (homosexual) romantic couples. The fanfics ‘XOXO’ by xoxopam<3 and ‘In Everywhere, There’s You...’ by kimjaeuneung19 feature the KyuMin (Kyuhyun/Sungmin) pairing as the lead characters. There were also several stories that feature different Super Junior pairings like HanChul (Hangeng/Heechul), EunHae (Eunhyuk/Donghae), KyuWook (Kyuhyun/Ryeowook), and many others. Super Junior has fifteen members, after all.

Fan practices such as reverse-gender covers and *yaoi* fan fiction can be categorized into what Jenkins calls ‘a particular set of critical and interpretive practices’, another level of activity that makes fandom a subcultural community. This indicates that fans don’t simply consume the things being fed to them by media producers; they also utilize and re-imagine these things in ways that are more pleasurable to them.

### 3. *The Politics of Participation*

*“Not all participants are created equal. Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media—still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others.”* (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4)

Based on Alanzalon’s and Martinez’ findings and my own observations, I have identified three factors that influence fans’ active participation. Looking at these factors, it can be gleaned that not all fans have an *equal* opportunity to participate. Now, this isn’t to say that K-pop fandom is exclusive. All people have the opportunity to participate, but some are more likely to participate *actively* than others because of these factors:

1. Prior interest to similar things- for most of Martinez’ respondents and also my own, interest in K-pop was influenced by an earlier fondness for things related to East Asian pop culture like J-pop (Japanese pop music), anime, and Korean dramas
2. Access to (and knowledge of) technology- Active participation in the K-pop fandom usually starts from online participation. This factor is even more relevant in the earlier years of K-pop fandom, when the music wasn’t readily accessible in local media. To satisfy and sustain one’s interest in K-pop, one has to frequently go online and visit international sites dedicated to K-pop artists. Before, when there were no fan gatherings and events in the Philippines yet, fans communicate and get in touch with each other through text clans and online forums.

Moreover, in the case of SJUPH, it is also interesting to note that their founding members met each other during the *Pops in Seoul* event in 2008. *Pops in Seoul* was a music show in *Arirang TV*, a cable channel. Therefore, the members’ access to cable television was also a factor in the formation of the organization.

3. Economic capacity- In Martinez' study, she established that K-pop fandom is a financially-demanding activity. Similarly, when I asked Mai, the SJUPH officer on how often they meet, she mentioned that their group doesn't meet as frequently as before because of financial constraints.

*“Dati ano yan, every Saturday. Pero ngayon, mga ano, once a month nalang. Kasi nagtitipid eh. Dami kasing gastos \*laughs\* Diba may mga concert, tapos may album launch, tas may mga merchandise kaya nagtitipid na kami ngayon.”*

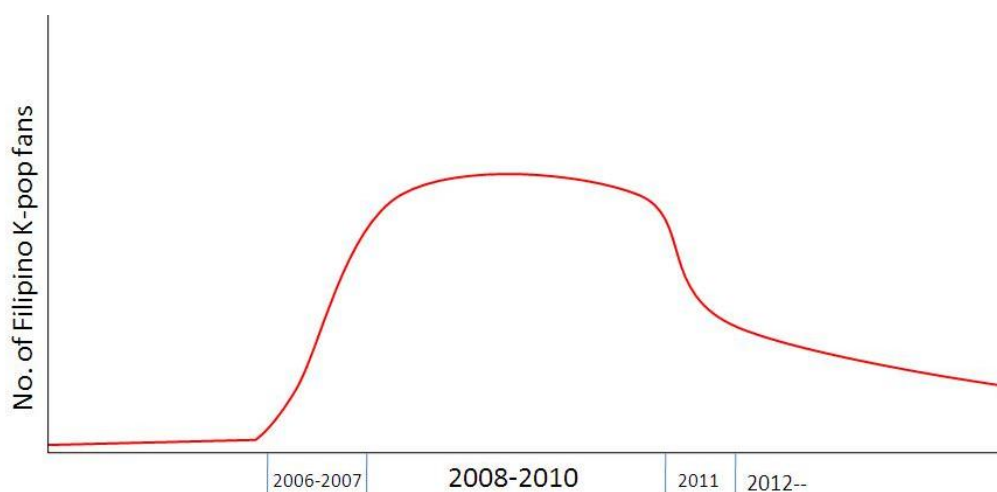
[Before, we meet every Saturday. But nowadays, we only meet once a month. It's because we're trying to save money. There are too many expenses. (laughs) There are concerts, album launches, and K-pop merchandise to spend on, so we're saving money.]

Being involved in cover groups also entails a lot of expenses. Members of *Mackerz*, the cover group I interviewed, told me that they spend around 1,000 pesos per member on costumes and props.

### **C. Plot: Media and the Development of K-pop Fandom**

December 28, 2010. It was the day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Philippine Kpop Convention. A year prior to that, the Filipino K-pop community convened in what is now known as the first fan gathering of its kind. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> Philippine Kpop Convention was very different from the first one, with K-pop seeping deeper into mainstream Filipino media in 2010. In this manner, 2010 was a defining year in K-pop. Its infiltration into mainstream media affected the fandom in a grand way: it entered the average Filipino's consciousness; thus more people became aware of the phenomenon and became fans.

Chart 1. *Development of K-pop fandom in the Philippines*



It must be understood, however, that the number of K-pop fans for the years 2006-present (2012) is not based on actual statistics (for there is none), but on the insight I acquired from Ms. Kring Elenzano of the PKCI regarding the current state and future of K-pop in the country.

Thus, the second Kpop Con was more publicized than the first. That night, in GMA 7's primetime news program *24 Oras*, a two-minute news segment was dedicated to the event. The news reporter, Lei Alviz, described the phenomenon as such:

*“K-pop o Korean pop—subculture mula South Korea na pinauso ng mga artists gaya ni Rain ng Full House at Sandara Park ng 2NE1. Ang musika nito, fusion ng electronica, dance, at RnB.”*

[K-pop or Korean pop—a subculture from South Korea made famous by artists like Rain of Full House and Sandara Park of 2NE1. The music is a fusion of electronica, dance and Rhythm and Blues.]

The news segment reminded me of one of the simplest definitions assigned to the term ‘subculture’. It is that of Sarah Thornton’s (1995), who says that subcultures are those which have been labeled as such by the media. She says that:

This is the most convincing way to account for the fact that some cultural groupings are deemed subcultural while others, whose practices may be equally arcane, are not. Scholars need not embark on long winded attempts to define the indeterminate, nor need to explain subcultures out of existence by referring to class dichotomies. Communications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them (p. 162).

In summary, Thornton argues that the media determines what is a subculture and what is not by the way it labels and describes the practices of certain groups.

Myx, a local music channel, started airing K-pop music videos and *Pop Myx: The K-pop Edition*, a weekly show dedicated to K-pop music was introduced. Local FM radio stations also began to play more K-pop songs. As exposure in the mainstream media increased, the awareness and interest of the Filipino public on K-pop also increased. This brought both positive and negative changes to the fan community. On the favorable side, more people were drawn in to the fandom, and the fan population burgeoned. The negative side was that many people began to view K-pop as ‘detrimental’ to Philippine culture.

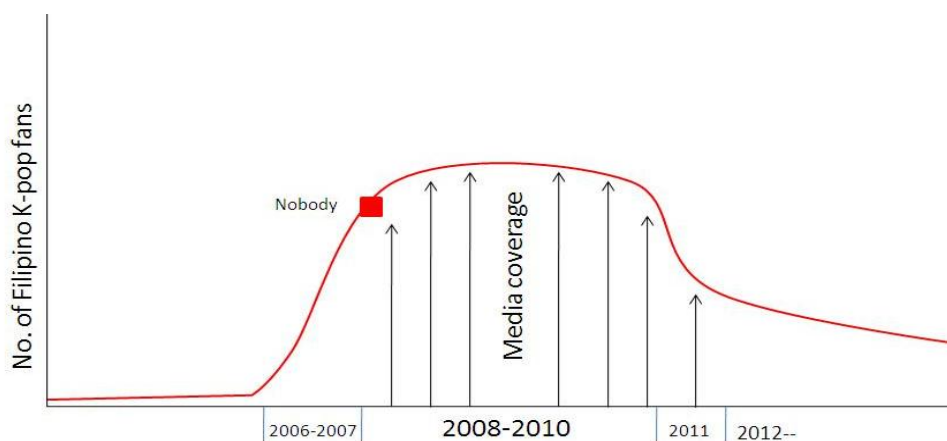
Thornton presented a groundbreaking view on the phenomenon of ‘selling out’, which was seen by earlier theorists as negative and detrimental to the ‘subculture-ness’ of subcultures. ‘Selling out’ is basically the process of the cultural products of a subculture being commercialized or mainstreamed, as what happened in the case of K-pop.

Drawing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Thornton, in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1995) coined the term *subcultural capital*. Earlier scholars of subculture used to see the mass media and subculture as two opposing and conflicting entities. However, Thornton disagrees. She says that media actually *help* create and develop subcultures. According to Thornton, a primary element

that distinguishes cultural capital from Bourdieu's cultural capital is the media's role in circulating subcultural capital. She stresses that the media is "a network crucial to the definition and distribution of knowledge" such that "the difference between being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation, and exposure" (p. 14).

Now, taking into account Thornton's argument that media plays a crucial role in the sustaining subcultural capital, a good question to ask is "what is the Philippine media's role in the development of K-pop fandom?". Bringing the amount of media coverage (and the role played by the song 'Nobody') into the equation, our chart will then look like this:

Chart 2. *Development of K-pop fandom in the Philippines in relation to media coverage*



In *The Media Development of 'Subcultures'*, Thornton (in Guins and Cruz, 2005) also brings to light how consumer magazines affect the development of subcultures. Applying this to our current subject of study, we may take a closer look at the rise of *Sparkling Magazine*. *Sparkling* is the first local magazine dedicated to K-pop fandom. It is currently being published quarterly by the Summit Media group. The interesting thing to note about *Sparkling* is that it's not merely a magazine about K-pop artists. It is also



primarily a publication about the K-pop *lifestyle*. According to Thornton, consumer magazines help construct subcultures because they “categorize social groups, arrange sounds, itemize attire, and label everything. They baptize scenes and generate the self-consciousness required to maintain cultural distinctions” (p. 396); and *Sparkling Magazine* does just that. It categorizes K-pop fans as such. It tells the readers how to dress and put makeup like a K-pop fan, as well as how to behave like a K-pop fan. The current issue as of writing (Winter 2012) even gives instructions on how to *date* a Korean guy.

#### **D. Conflict: The POP (Play of Power) in K-pop**

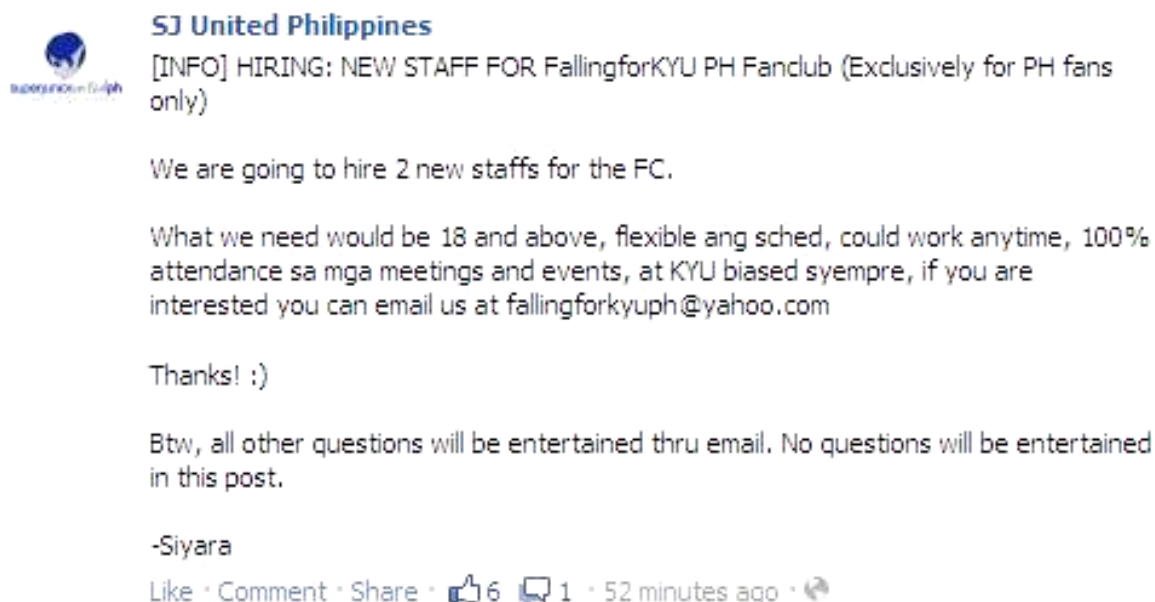
Thornton once remarked that there’s a significant lack of attention in studying the hierarchies that exist *within* popular culture. So now that we have defined K-pop fandom as an alternative social community, it is then imperative to examine the hierarchies and conflicts present in it.

##### ***1. Authority and Control***

While the K-pop fan community clearly fits into Jenkin’s and Thornton’s definition of a subculture, perhaps its trait that is very uncharacteristic of a subculture is the fact that the community is so systematically (and almost bureaucratically) organized. Fans organize themselves into fan clubs, based on the artists and idol groups they support. The members of these fans then select a group of officers (or administrators, in the case of online forums) to oversee and manage the fan club’s ‘operations’. Aside from the officers, most fan clubs also ‘hire’ a team or *staff* of people to do specific tasks like translating news materials, updating the web site, or putting subtitles in video clips.

The screencap shown in Figure 3 (an announcement posted at the SJUPH Facebook page), shows how recruiting these *staff* looks very similar to an actual job posting, wherein the applicant would have to fulfill certain requirements to qualify for the position desired. Note that the poster (the person who posted the announcement) used the exact term ‘hiring’ to refer to the process of selecting or acquiring a new staff member. This only goes to show that fan clubs are not only seen as *just* fan clubs or a casual group of people who gather to talk about their common interests. The use of such concepts as *staff* and *hiring* demonstrate that a fan club is also seen as some sort of a company or formally-organized institution with a clearly defined organizational structure and a hierarchy of functions among its members.

Figure 3. Example of a job posting from the SJ United Philippines Facebook page



The emergence of such a form of hierarchy also introduces into the group a sense of authority and control. These leaders manage the flow of posts in an online group, and they can screen or filter out posts which they deem inappropriate for the forum. These leaders are also those who create a set of rules which all members should follow. An example of such is seen in Figure 4 (group rules of the SJUPH Facebook page):

According to the group's rules, the officers have the right to regulate the comments posted on the website. They also have the capacity to ban or block from the group's webpage anyone who violates the rule. The group officers have complete authority and control of the webpage. As a matter of fact, early in 2012, SJUPH's Facebook group was deleted and a new one was created to minimize the number of irrelevant posts in the page (i.e. eliminate the group members who post spams or insignificant matters).

Figure 4. *Rules of the SJ United Philippines Facebook group*

## Ground Rules !

Super Junior United Philippines Group

**KEEP POSTS SJ RELATED THANK YOU VERY MUCH. YOU CAN TALK ABOUT OTHER ARTISTS ONLY IF RELATED ANG PINAG UUSAPAN SA SUPER JUNIOR! :)**

### 1. WE WONT TOLERATE BASHING:

- This group was made for the fans to interact and make friends. Please do not bash Other artists, May it be international, local or what not. No bashing of other members as well. again who are we? EVERLASTING FRIENDS. FRIENDS DONT PICK UP FIGHTS. this may also result to fandom clashes or fanwars which is really not that nice.

You are entitled to your own opinion we understand that. however you can post your sentiments in your own personal facebook accounts. We want a fun and friendly environment here in this group/page.

**ANTI COMMENTS/ POST/ OR ANYTHING NEGATIVE AGAINST OTHER ARTISTS. or SME... WILL BE DELETED AUTOMATICALLY. - NO MORE WARNINGS. IF WE SEE YOU DO IT OFTEN, YOU WILL BE BANNED.**

### 2. RESPECT:

- We expect you to respect everyone. RESPECT SUJU, OTHER ARTISTS, FELLOW ELF, FELLOW KPOP FANS, FRIENDS, that just means everyone.

### 3. BE RESPONSIBLE OF YOUR WORDS!

4. IF YOU HAVE NOTHING NICE TO SAY? JUST HUSH IT! KEEP IT TO YOURSELF. "LESS WORDS, LESS MISTAKES" that just means that the less words we say the less mistakes we make. less people we can hurt.

**KEEP POSTS SJ RELATED THANK YOU VERY MUCH. YOU CAN TALK ABOUT OTHER ARTISTS ONLY IF RELATED ANG PINAG UUSAPAN SA SUPER JUNIOR! :)**

Pretty much for now that is it. MADADAGDAGAN PA YAN IF EVER.  
Please lang walang pasaway..

### 5. NO TEXT LINGOS please. ><

### 6. NO SPAMMING

**NO SPAMMING ALLOWED. YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO COMMENT 2 OR MORE TIMES CONSECUTIVELY IN ONE POST. KUNG GUSTO MO MAG POST NG COMMENT MAG HINTAY KA MUNA NG IBANG TAO NA MAKAPAG POST NG COMMENT PARANG CONVERSATION LANG YUNG MEDYO SALITAN NAMAN... diba... :) - just a friendly reminder form the core team**

7. NO SELLING OR ADVERTISING UNLESS APPROVED BY THE CORE  
Before posting, please ask permission.

### 8. PLEASE POST YOUR TWITTER AND TUMBLR ACCOUNTS IN THEIR RESPECTIVE DOCUMENTS

If you want to be followed by the others, you may place your account in their respective documents (located at the right side of the screen). Posting it as a new wall post will be considered as spam.

**-IF YOU SEE ANYONE DOING SOMETHING AGAINST THE RULES, PLEASE REPORT TO THE ADMINS OF THIS GROUP.**

In addition, the existence of leader-subordinate relationships within a fan club is evident in the kind of language used by group administrators and members in relation to each other. In the SJUPH Facebook page, for example, the group administrators can post announcements and other matters under the name of SJUPH itself, while the members post using their own personal Facebook accounts. Group administrators also usually post statements that imply their control and authority over other members. Two examples are shown in Figure 5. These statements were posted when on January 2, 2012, while three Super Junior members were in the Philippines to shoot a commercial, one Super Junior fan hugged Kyuhyun, a Super Junior member, and caused the boys to be frightened.

Figure 5 Examples of administrator posts in the SJ United Philippines Facebook page

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**SJ United Philippines**

Tayo tayo na den ang sumuway sa kapwa naten ELF. Like that person na sumugod kay Kyu, alam ko fan ka niya pero utang na loob, wag mo naman dumugin un tao. Sa lahat ng Suju members, kahit ganyan ugali nia, si Kyu ang isa sa mga takot sa group ng fans. Kaya wag nio naman ganunin un tao para di matrauma sa Pinas. D:

 Like · Comment · Share · 5 hours ago via mobile ·

311 people like this.

[View all 37 comments](#) [15 shares](#)



**SJ United Philippines**

Let this be a lesson to all of us. DO NOT BE SELFISH. You are not their ONLY FAN. Be mindful of others, follow the rules and be well-behaved. It will benefit us all if we will show them that Filipino ELF are good fans.

There's no news yet on when and where will the shoot resume. So let us all patiently wait.

 Like · Comment · Share · 3 hours ago via mobile ·

[Christin Alvarez and 347 others like this.](#)

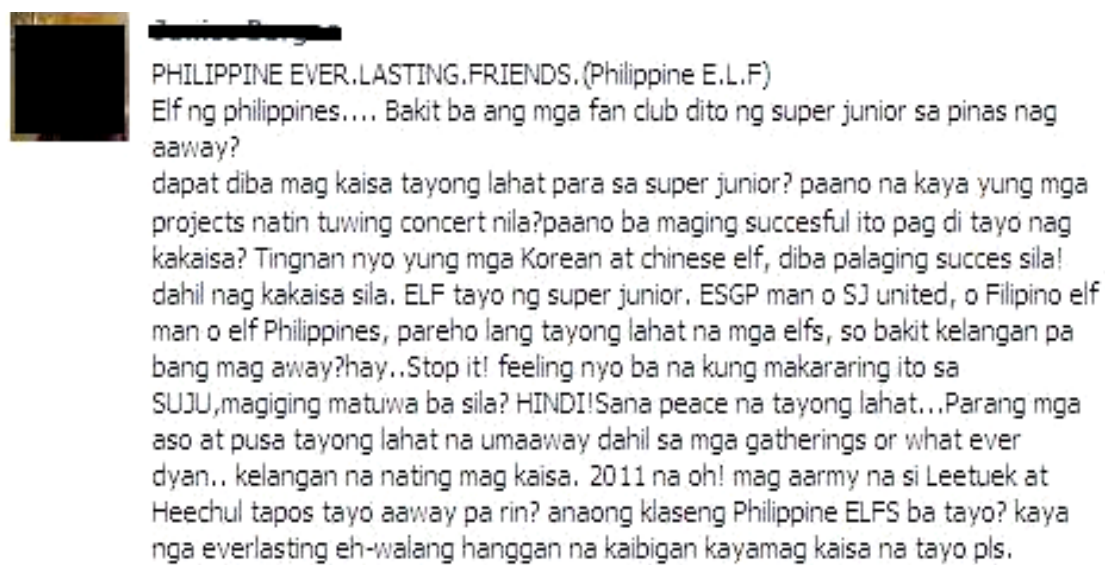
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## 2. *Battle of the ELFs*

In the Super Junior fandom, there is a battle for legitimacy. Unlike in the case of most K-pop groups and artists (where there is only one or two Philippine fan clubs), there are several Super Junior fan clubs in the Philippines, all of them battling for the title of the ‘official’ Philippine SuJu fan club. Because there is really no official Super Junior fan club (one that is duly recognized by the entertainment company managing Super Junior), Filipino fans have the liberty to create as many fan clubs as they want. This liberty, however, only led to conflicts among different Super Junior organizations. The two most conflicting SuJu fan clubs are ELF PH (Ever Lasting Friends Philippines) and SJU PH (Super Junior United Philippines).

The comment shown in Figure 6 illustrates that fans are aware of this conflict, and the fan who posted the comment even has negative views on it. The comment was posted at ‘We Request the Truth from ELF Philippines’, a Facebook page created when ELF PH was involved in a controversy regarding false rumors of a Super Junior concert.

Figure 6. *Facebook comment on the conflict between Super Junior fan clubs*



### 3. *The Battle Between the Early and the New*

Another issue of legitimacy can be observed in the perceptions of the early Korean fans about those who are new to the fandom. GeeZee, one of the cover group artists I interviewed, is one of the early K-pop fans. She was introduced to K-pop when she was just in fifth grade, at the time when even the Korean dramas were just starting to sprout in the local media. It was around 2003, and she came across a performance of K-pop star BoA while watching Animax, a cable channel specializing in anime. When asked why she decided to join a cover group, GeeZee remarked:

*“Ah, kasi diba since elementary, I was a fan and mahilig akong sumayaw so parang ako tsaka yung friend kong kinonvert ko rin into a fan, matagal na naming frustration na sumayaw ng favorite group namin. Kasi yung culture ng old fans sa current fans, it’s different. Parang yung ngayon, yung cover groups ngayon, parang most of them, kasi it’s a trend, so sumusunod nalang sila. They like to dance, but not necessarily they’re a fan. Parang nagiging fan na lang sila after. Pero kami parang, parang fulfilling lang our frustrations during high school na masayaw mo yung gusto mong sayawin in an event.”*

[Since elementary, I was a fan and I was fond of dancing. So me and my friend, who I also converted into a K-pop fan, always had the frustration of dancing to our favorite groups’ songs. The culture of old fans when you compare it to current fans, it’s different. The cover groups today, it’s like most of them do it because it’s a trend they want to follow. They like to dance, not necessarily they’re a fan. They only become fans after [joining a cover group]. Unlike us, we do it to fulfill our frustrations during high school to dance what we wanted to dance in an event.]

Ms. Eren Joy Bautista of the KCC also referred to this difference:

*“I’m one of the early K-pop fans. I think I’ve been a K-pop fan since around 2006. Back then, when we say that ‘I like K-pop’, you’re weird. So there’s only a few people who knows, you know... Back then it’s Dong Bang Shin Gi and then Super Junior when they just started. So then only a few people would know of it.”*

Martinez also mentioned this in her study when she enumerated the ways through which the fandom of her respondents developed. She found out that there is a significant distinction on how the new Super Junior fans were introduced to the fandom, as compared to the earlier fans: “The relatively new members of the fandom or those who has been a fan for less than a year were most likely introduced to Super Junior through the mainstream media such as music channels on TV” (p. 32)

### **E. Setting: K-pop and the Overarching Narrative of Globalization**

#### ***1. Who’s got the power?***

K-pop fans and fan clubs maintain a close working relationship with members of the media industry (record labels and entertainment companies) and even the Korean government itself. This is one of the reasons why unlike other trends that came and left the Philippines, K-pop is the one phenomenon that left a significant impact on our culture. Such relations, however, leaves us with the inevitable question of power. In a culture participated in by so many different sectors and interests, who exercises the most power? Is it the fans who, as we have established, are active participants and producers? Or is it still in the more dominant institutions like the business enterprises and the government?

K-pop’s rise to popularity is often attributed to its creative appeal (musical originality, distinct sense of fashion and style, etc.). Although this is true, it’s also vital to mention that such appeal is part of a larger, conscious effort on the part of the Korean government and entertainment companies to promote the industry.

For one, the appeal of K-pop to foreign (i.e. non-Korean) audiences isn’t so much of a happenstance than it seems. This fact came to light when Lee Soo-man (the man



behind SM Entertainment, one of the Big Three entertainment companies in K-pop music) divulged SM Entertainment's "Cultural Technology Approach", which was even featured in the Harvard Business Review. Lee's CT Approach is a system used by his company to aid in the globalization of their artists.

A primary element of this approach is the 3-step globalization process. According to Lee, "The first level of Hallyu is the exportation of cultural products, which is exemplified by *BoA* and *TVXQ*'s advancement into Japan. The collaboration between *KangTa* and Taiwanese singer *Vanness Wu* is an example of the second level." For the third level, he says that "There's the tag 'made by', such as 'made in Korea.' There is also 'made by SM'. We want to cooperate with people all over the world in order to share and produce good music. Through this process, the Asian market can also produce a star capable of succeeding worldwide. All of this is SM's plan for globalization."

(allkpop.com, June 13, 2011) This means that the artists under SM Entertainment were not introduced to foreign audiences accidentally. They were actually *trained* to become global artists.

## ***2. The Role of the Government***

There are many ways to look at the K-pop boom. For the fans, it signaled the birth of a new community. For the entertainment companies, it was a tool to infiltrate the global market. But for the Korean government, it was a new channel to promote Korean culture abroad. In July 19, 2011, a Korean Cultural Center (KCC) was established in the Philippines. I interviewed Ms. Eren Joy Bautista, the Program Coordinator of the KCC in the KCC office in Taguig. The establishment of the KCC is part of the South Korean government's efforts to promote Korean culture worldwide through K-pop. It was also

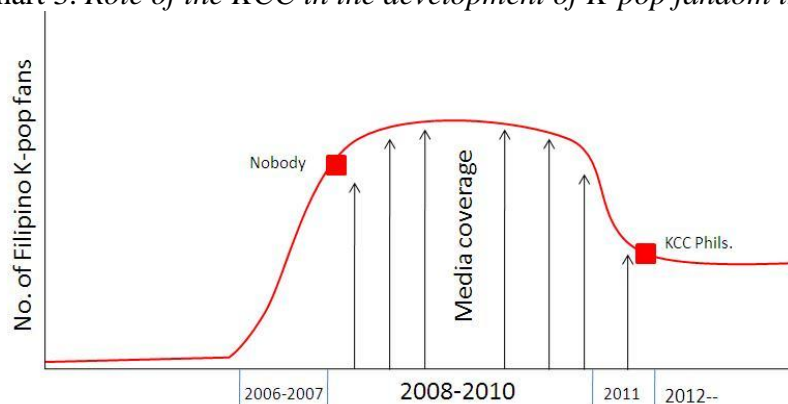
mentioned that although the top positions in the Center are occupied by Korean officials, most of the coordinating staff members are Filipinos who have studied in South Korea.

In my in-depth interview with Ms. Bautista, it was evident how intense the Korean government's efforts are to promote and stabilize K-pop's place in the global market.

Just recently, Karla Mae Carreon, a Filipino teenager, bagged the grand prize in the K-pop World Festival, an international K-pop competition held in Seoul. The contenders in this competition were the winners in the K-pop competition held by their local KCC's. This means that the Korean government's efforts to use K-pop to advance their cultural influence does not apply only in the Philippines, but in other countries, as well.

K-pop fandom doesn't exist only in the realm of popular culture. Along with the creation of KCC's and the Korean government's involvement, it has been valued and *re-valued* as a tool in promoting the more general Korean culture. Going back to our graph earlier, we now see the significance of the KCC in the preservation of K-pop fandom in the country:

Chart 3. *Role of the KCC in the development of K-pop fandom in the Philippines*



This kind of involvement tells us that the Korean government is aiming to cultivate its creative and cultural industries as part of its national development plan, and the strategy seems to be working, judging from how the government is intensifying and expanding its promotional efforts to more countries. As Ms. Bautista told me in the interview,

*“..the Korean government thought that this would be, since the recent Hallyu wave boom, this would be the perfect timing for them to also introduce the other aspects of Korean culture. So, as of now I think we have more than 20 KCC in the whole world. Um, last year they opened a lot. This year, we’re [going to] open four more. I [don’t know], I’m not so sure what country, but last year, together with the Philippines, we opened Indonesia, Australia, and Kazakhstan I think.”*

On top of this, the effects of K-pop extend beyond the sphere of popular culture and media and into economic affairs. Korean businesses and corporations have also capitalized on the Korean Wave to penetrate into foreign markets. In the Philippines, for instance, another trend that came along with K-pop music is the introduction of Korean skin products. Today, Korean cosmetic companies like The Face Shop, Etude House, Nature Republic, and Tony Moly are already household names in the beauty section. These brands often use Korean actors or K-pop artists to endorse their products.

The Korean government has also taken advantage of the *Hallyu* boom to improve their tourism. The sites wherein television dramas like *Winter Sonata* and *Coffee Prince* were shot have been transformed to major tourist spots. Some travel companies have even devised travel packages that focus only on the places in South Korea that are related to K-pop and Korean dramas.

In addition, the Korean government and entertainment companies appear to be marketing K-pop as a symbol of pan-Asianism. Entertainment companies have begun including non-Korean (but Asian) artists to their roster of talents. Many K-pop artists and groups release songs in other languages like Chinese and Japanese to cater to Asian audiences. One K-pop group has even expressed their interest in performing a Filipino song.

Some people see the boom of K-pop as just another passing trend. However, with the kind of involvement being given by the Korean government in its promotion, it is apparent that K-pop is not just a trifling craze. It is being employed as an instrument for the expansion of Korea's cultural, as well as economic influence all over the world.

### **Summary**

Through a variety of methods and analysis techniques, this study was able to touch on the different aspects of the Filipino K-pop fan community, namely: the different factors that influence the active participation of fans, the nuances of Filipino K-pop fan culture as a subculture, how the media affects the development of this particular subculture, and lastly, the Korean government's role in the preservation of the K-pop fan community.

Using the results of Martinez' (2011) study on the online behavior of K-pop fans as well as my own observations through virtual ethnography, I was able to identify the fact that K-pop fans have unequal opportunities to *actively* participate in the fandom. This is because the fans' active participation is determined by three primary factors: prior interest to similar things (other East Asian cultural products), access to and knowledge of technology, and economic capacity.

Next, applying Jenkins' and Fiske's theories on fan participation to my observations, I was able to confirm the fact that K-pop fandom can indeed be considered a youth subculture. Then, utilizing Thornton's theory on the role of media in the propagation of subcultural capital, I described how the local media's coverage of the K-pop phenomenon as well as the creation of *Sparkling Magazine* influenced the maturity of K-pop fandom as a subculture.

After establishing the subcultural status of K-pop fandom, I then explored the politics and hierarchies of power that can be found in the community. The first issue discussed was the existence of bodies of authority and control in the form of fan club core groups and officers; the second issue was the battle for legitimacy and continuing conflict between different Super Junior fan clubs; and the last issue explained was the perceived distinction between early and new K-pop fans.

Finally, the study tried to locate the Philippine K-pop phenomenon in the larger web of global politics and business, by identifying how Korean entertainment companies and even the Korean government itself exert conscious efforts to use K-pops popularity to increase their global influence.

## Chapter 6

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was able to describe in detail the elements that make K-pop fandom a subculture. It also touched on the discourse of politics and power operating among the different sectors involved in K-pop fandom, as well as *within* the fan community itself. Together with the earlier studies of Alanzalon (2011) and Martinez (2011), this study can give the reader a grasp of the complicated world of K-pop fandom and its relation to mass media. It can be of use to media practitioners, for them to more accurately understand the psyche of fans as audiences. One of the findings of this study is the severe involvement of the Korean government in promoting and globalizing their cultural products. Thus, the study may be used by local entertainment and media companies, as well as the local government to evaluate our own policies regarding cultural development, and how we can strengthen our position in the highly-globalized music and entertainment industry.

Furthermore, my greatest hope is for this study to spark the interest of other scholars and encourage them to pursue further studies in the area of fandom and subculture studies. There is still an extensive range of ideas to be explored. Here are some of my recommendations:

1. Is the K-pop fandom gendered?- The same question was actually posed by Martinez (2011) in her study. I wanted to explore the matter but it has little relation to my topic,
2. What happens when fans become the media producers themselves?- Like in the case of the *Sparkling* editorial staff, there is a possibility that fans penetrate the mainstream media to propagate awareness of their culture's ideologies. How do

the prior experiences of these producers as fans affect their decision-making?

How does the public accept such ideologies?

3. How does the media's portrayal of subcultures affect the public's perception of these cultures? – A textual analysis of media coverage, as well as audience research may be done to explore this.
4. How does a globalized entertainment industry affect the local industry? What are the local media companies doing to strengthen the Philippines' performance in the global market? – This may be included in a study on the political economy of fandom.

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins delineated the difference between critical utopianism and critical pessimism, two possible stances one can take in media scholarship. According to him,

The politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of empowerment; the politics of critical pessimism on a politics of victimization. One focuses on what we are doing with media, and the other on what media is doing to us. As with previous revolutions, the media reform movement is gaining momentum at a time when people are starting to feel more empowered, not when they are at their weakest. (p. 248)

In the course of doing this study, I had come to the point of struggling between these two stances. I first embarked on this research to help empower the fans, but the realities I have come to know have made it difficult for me to keep working towards that goal. The result is, in my opinion, a two-faced study. It may be viewed as utopian, and it may be viewed as pessimist. Either way, what I hope to have achieved is to at least contribute to a deeper understanding of fans in the local context.

## Epilogue

*What happened to the girl who fell in love? Yes, she was mocked, and she was marginalized by some. But she found comfort in the fact that she was not alone. Many others before her had fallen in love; and many others had been looked down upon. Together, they went on to pursue their passions and interests.*

*Together, they built a world that sees— a world that understands.*

*Together, they formed a community.*

*And this is the story of that community.*

The End.



## APPENDICES

(See CD for appendices)

Appendix A: Guide questions for interview

Appendix B: Interview transcriptions