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## **Collective Literacy and K-pop Fandoms**

When I think of fandoms and participatory culture the fandoms that stick out to me the most are K-pop fandoms. I have been part of quite a number of fandoms throughout my life but the amount of engagement and participation K-pop fandoms have is on another level compared to the other fandoms. K-pop or Korean pop has spread across the globe in recent years. K-pop has amassed a global appeal that crosses cultures, languages, and continents because of its catchy tunes, amazing dancing, and polished visuals. K-pop, however, is more than simply music; it is a phenomenon that has influenced society and fostered a strong fandom. So, I feel it's fair to talk about K-pop when it comes to fandoms and participatory culture. In this essay, I will be exploring how K-pop fandoms use digital media to engage in participatory culture and how it reflects Henry Jenkins's idea of collective literacy and community. With that, I will also explore these communities have an impact in political, societal and personal ways.

### **K-pop fandoms, Korean / Hallyu Wave**

K-pop is a part of the larger Korean Wave, which emerged in the late 1990s with the importation of Korean TV dramas by China, Japan, and Taiwan (McLaren, 2021). Hallyu is a Korean pop culture term that originally referred to the export of a few cultural products as a form of soft power diplomacy (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). While K-pop was not a major driver of the first era of the Korean Wave, it was during this period that the K-pop industry was developing (McLaren, 2021). Pioneered by Lee Soo Man, the K-pop industry is an adapted form

of the Japanese idol production industry, with influences from Western musical styles, fashion, and dance (McLaren, 2021). The first wave of K-pop was characterized by boy and girl groups such as Shinhwa, H.O.T, Baby VOX, and S.E.S (McLaren, 2021). The second wave saw male and female soloists including BoA and Rain sweep Asia and gain fan followings further abroad (McLaren, 2021). The third wave marked a return to idol groups with TVXQ, Wonder Girls, and Super Junior, and the fourth wave of groups emerged during the adoption and adaptation of digital media technologies by fans and label companies (McLaren, 2021).

The emergence of the fourth wave of K-pop was largely due to the adoption and adaptation of digital technologies and social media platforms, enabling the spread of Korean pop culture beyond the borders of Korea and neighbouring East Asian countries to diverse audiences in Latin America, Europe, Britain, and North America (McLaren, 2021).

This phenomenon was characterized as Hallyu 2.0, a resurgence in the popularity of Korean pop culture, dominated by products such as K-pop, digital games, and animation that were consumed by a younger, more international audience and supported by more direct government policies (McLaren, 2021).

Modern K-pop is a multi-textual phenomenon that includes catchy music, syncopated choreography, high production-value aesthetics, and performances. It is often used to refer to idol groups that are managed by entertainment companies (McLaren, 2021). The groups typically have more than one member, and they frequently promote themselves using different themes or styles, like BTS's' Love Yourself or EXO's Power era (McLaren, 2021). Music videos frequently have a plot that is similar to a movie and combine story scenes with dance breaks. These traits

are a synthesis of different influences that have been combined and reconfigured through the lens of Korean culture and experience to create hybridized products (McLaren, 2021).

Fans can interact with each other and with idols via a variety of platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and company-specific fandom apps like Lysn, Weverse, and Bubble9 (McLaren, 2021). Music videos, performances, reality shows, documentaries, and concerts are available on YouTube and VLIVE, while live concerts and conventions are taking place in an increasing number of countries around the world (McLaren, 2021). The reason for the success of the Korean wave that has now taken over the world is social media (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). Platforms like YouTube have enabled people from all corners of the world to enjoy the catchy tunes of K-pop and appreciate the other wonders of Korean pop culture (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). PSY's pop music video reached billions of views because of its YouTube popularity (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). Social media has played a significant role in making K-pop a more exciting and popular cultural phenomenon around the world. It has aided in the formation of various communities of K-pop fans who are enthusiastic about the genre and participate in various fan activities (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). These fandoms use social media platforms to connect with one another, share content, and interact with their favourite K-pop idols. The widespread use of social media has allowed K-pop to reach a global audience and has contributed to the development of a vibrant and dedicated fan culture (Ayu Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020).

### **Collective Literacy and collaboration in the K-pop fandom**

Henry Jenkins (2019) in "Art happens not in Isolation, but in Community: The collective literacies of media fandom" defines collective literacy as the ability to understand and interpret

the works of art created by a group of people. He argues that fandoms are a powerful example of collective literacy as fans are able to create works of art that are meaningful and unique. He argues that art is created within the context of a group of people and emphasizes the value of collaboration and community in understanding art (Jenkins, 2019). He claims that fandom can reshape dominant cultural narratives and give fans a platform to engage with media texts in fresh and creative ways while also allowing them to express their creativity (Jenkins, 2019). Fandom can have an impact on the media industries by influencing how media texts are created, distributed, and read (Jenkins, 2019). Just like all other fandoms, K-pop fandoms also have these characteristics. I will be discussing how K-pop fandoms reflect Jenkins's idea of collective literacy and the sense of community and collaboration in the fandom.

Most of the consumers of K-pop do not only consume popular culture, but they also produce new artifacts too. According to a study done by Bangun (2019) on ARMYs (BTS's fandom), the form of participatory culture among fans of BTS is by producing their new artifacts such as dance covers on YouTube, fan fiction on Wattpad, or registering as a member on the official website of their idol. K-pop fans interact with their idols and with one another in various ways through participatory culture. In terms of online content creation and sharing, fans participate with methods such as social media, fan fiction, and team projects where individuals take part (Bangun, 2019). The fans use both individual and group strategies to participate. To show support for their idol, they might, for instance, alter their profile pictures or dress alike (Bangun, 2019). They also write fan fiction, which enables them to use pre-existing characters to explore emotional themes and consider their own lives. Fans who take part in these activities feel proud of themselves and receive feedback and recognition for their efforts (Bangun, 2019). With

the concept of participatory culture, the emphasis is shifted from passively consuming media to actively participating in it and producing new content (Bangun, 2019).

Participatory culture usually involves self-expression, problem-solving collaboration, and affiliation (Bangun, 2019). Affiliation is the formal or informal coordination of oneself in an online community spread across social media. In the K-pop community, fans may join online communities to receive updates about their idols, subscribe to their idols' websites, or participate in a fan café (Bangun, 2019).

Another type of participatory culture is expression, in which individuals use online media to create new forms of creativity (Bangun, 2019). Dance covers, reading and writing fan fiction, and collecting fan art are some of the ways fans express themselves (Bangun, 2019). They express themselves through various online media platforms such as YouTube, Wattpad, Blogspot, Twitter, and AO3. The official BTS website requires membership to access AO3. Some fans also use Vlive, an application that allows them to interact with their idols in real time (Bangun, 2019).

Collaboration to solve problems is a type of participatory culture in which fans work together formally or informally as individuals or groups to solve problems. To show their support for their idols, fans may work together on projects such as birthday celebrations or changing their profile pictures to a favourite colour (Bangun, 2019). Fans also work together to report accounts that criticize their favourite artists (Bangun, 2019). Fan fiction writers appreciate and acknowledge other fans, and they have a supporter of the month to recognize fans who have been extremely helpful in the BTS fandom (Bangun, 2019).

All the activities mentioned above build a community of fans for any K-pop group. Participatory culture is a vital aspect of K-pop fandom, and fans express themselves, collaborate

to solve problems, and affiliate with each other to form a community around their idols (Bangun, 2019).

### **Impact of K-pop Fandom on Political, societal, and personal changes**

Participating in fandoms also has its own impacts. Henry Jenkins (2019) argues that the impact of fandoms extends beyond media culture. Fandoms have the potential to shape larger social and political conversations by challenging dominant cultural narratives (Jenkins,2019). In this part of the essay, I will be discussing the impacts that K-pop fandoms have had on political, societal and personal changes.

It was in 2020 when #WhiteLivesMatter a white supremacist hashtag on Twitter was set to counter the Black Lives Matter movement at the time. But instead resulted in ridicule due to the efforts of K-pop fans or "stans" (McCurry, 2020). These fans flooded Twitter with video clips and memes of their favourite artists, accompanied by anti-racist messages, drowning out the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag (McCurry, 2020). This was supported by the K-pop band, BTS, who condemned racial discrimination and violence and stood with the Black Lives Matter movement (McCurry, 2020).

K-pop fans then used their influence to humiliate Donald Trump during his rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (McCurry, 2020). They registered for tickets but had no intention of attending, leading to a lot of empty space in the arena and a deflated Trump (McCurry, 2020). This shows the power and influence of K-pop fans, who have a significant presence on social media and can use their platform to advocate for social justice causes and influence political events.

Although the online activities of K-pop fans can be annoying, they also foster meaningful and deliberative conversations across different societal groups and allow for the construction of multiple perspectives (Jung, 2012).

Being a part of a K-pop fandom has also helped fans unleash their self-development and talent (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). Being a K-pop fan has enabled people to discover and develop their full potential. K-pop fans are not just passive consumers of media, but also creators of content, which fosters creativity, artistic talent, and organizational skills (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). Through their passion for K-pop, fans can develop their talents, find their path in life, and even make a living from their work, such as creating and selling fan kits or working as video editors or writers (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). Sabrina, who is a BTS fan says, “It can be considered that I found my talent after I become a K-pop fan” (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). She discovered her talent in design as a result of her love of K-pop. She makes BTS fan kits like banners, stickers, posters, and photo cards to sell on her website and at fan events like idol birthdays and group anniversaries (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). K-pop has also helped fans with their mental health. A fan describes the music to be honest and motivational and has even helped fans who were feeling depressed or suicidal (Bangun, 2019). Another fan also admitted how discovering Twice ( a girl group under JYP Entertainment) and being a part of the fandom helped them overcome bullying and feel saved by their fandom (Bangun, 2019).

Further to that, some fans study Korean in order to better understand and translate their idol's content for other fans. Several fans have testified that K-pop gave them the motivation to keep going and gain confidence in public speaking and communication (Bangun, 2019).

## Conclusion

Throughout the essay, we could see how K-pop fandoms function, the community that they build with the help of new-age technologies and the ways they have an impact on politics, society and the personal lives of the people that are a part of the fandom. These characteristics align with Henry Jenkins' idea of collective literacy. According to Jenkins (2019), collective literacy is a term used for the practices of culture and society that have developed in response to widespread access to new media technologies as well as participatory culture. He suggests that collective knowledge is characterized by the active involvement of the individual in creating, disseminating and interpreting media content. One aspect of collective literacy, where people actively create and share media content rather than simply consume it, is participatory culture.

Collective literacy enables individuals to improve their knowledge and skills that are necessary for active citizenship in the age of digitalization, according to Jenkins (2019). Collective literacy is closely associated with community and cooperation. Jenkins (2019) claims that the emergence of online communities which share common interests and values has a significant influence on the development of collective literacy. These communities facilitate collaboration and sharing of knowledge between members which leads to the development of common intelligence (Jenkins, 2019). And these communities have the power to influence the media industry by impacting marketing and consumption and shaping cultural values and meaning. They can also have an impact to shape bigger societal and policy debates in ways that challenge dominant narrative shapes by providing a space for others to express themselves (Jenkins, 2019).



K-pop fandoms foster a huge community of people who like a particular group or idol. People from these communities collaborate together on social media platforms to support their favourite idols by making fan art, fanfics, fan merch, fan accounts/sites etc. resulting in the production of new knowledge and creative work. By doing this it shows how these communities provide a space for members to collaborate and exchange ideas, learn skills and provide feedback. While they do this they have an impact on politics, society as well as their own lives. To conclude, K-pop fandoms reflect the idea of Jenkins' collective literacy.

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## Essay Outline

### 1. Introduction

- Talk about fandoms in general
- Thesis statement

### 2. K-pop fandoms, Korean / Hallyu Wave

- Introduction to K-pop fandom: what it is, who the fans are, and how they interact
- History of Hallyu
- Overview of the digital media platforms and tools that fans use to participate in the fandom (e.g., Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Vlive etc.)

### 2. Collective literacy and collaboration in the K-pop fandom

- Explanation of Henry Jenkins' concept of collective literacy and how it applies to the K-pop fandom
- Examples of how fans collaborate and participate in the fandom through collective literacy practices (e.g., creating fanart, remixing music videos, writing fanfiction, translating content, etc.)
- Discuss how these practices contribute to a sense of community and collective identity among fans

### 3. Impact of K-pop fandom on political, societal, and personal changes

- Discuss how the K-pop fandom's collective literacy practices have influenced political discourse and activism (Trump rally) and how it impacts the society
- Examination of how the fandom has had personal impacts on fans' mental health and well-being
- Fan testimonies

#### 4. Conclusion and implications

- Summary of key points
- Conclude with thesis