Positive Psychosocial Outcomes and Fanship in K-Pop Fans: A Social Identity Theory Perspective.

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Abstract

Korean pop culture (K-Pop) has spread its influence outside of Korea to a worldwide fan audience. The present study investigated the self-categorised K-Pop fandom characteristics that predicted higher levels of K-Pop fanship, and subsequent psychosocial outcomes. Social identity theory was applied as a theoretical framework. In total, 1477 K-Pop fans from 92 predominantly Western countries fully completed an extensive online survey measuring fanship, fandom and psychosocial outcomes (happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness). Results of this study indicated that K-Pop fanship was significantly predicted by a several K-Pop demographic and fandom characteristics. K-Pop fanship was a significant predictor of increased happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness. The study findings advance the application of social identity theory in a K-Pop fan context and the psychological fanship research more broadly.

Keywords: Social identity theory, fanship, fandom, K-Pop, self-categorisation.

Hallyu 2.0

The K-Pop wave, also referred to as the "Hallyu (한류)", is a music cultural phenomenon involving the intentional spread of K-Pop (Korean popular music) outside of Korea to the worldwide audience (Williams & Ho, 2014). Since 2000, K-Pop artists such as *BoA*, *Big Bang*, *SNSD (Girls Generation)* and *SHINee* were at the industry forefront of *the Hallyu wave* and had an evident fandom in many countries outside of Asia (Jin & Yoon, 2016). In the last months of 2012, one of the most notable K-Pop icons *PSY* released the song and accompanying music video: '*Gangnam Style*', which to the present day has amounted to over 3 billion views on YouTube (Kim, Lee, Nam & Song, 2014). According to Billboard (2017), *Gangnam Style* remained in the American music charts for 122 weeks. In recent years, boy band *BTS* (also known as *Bangtan Boys*) dominated the international music scene when their second album *Wings* became the highest US chart-topping and bestselling K-Pop album of all time (Billboard, 2017).

Artists like *PSY*, *BTS* and *Red Velvet* are internationally recognized K-Pop idols who have demonstrated the extent of the popularity of K-Pop culture in Western countries in recent years involving the use of various digital media technologies. More recently, the involvement of emerging digital technologies to *the Hallyu wave* has led to the coining of the new phrase: *Hallyu 2.0* (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Lee & Nornes, 2015). Hallyu 2.0 has been characterized by the growing impact of K-Pop fandom in Western countries, ubiquitous multimedia content, and the significant role of social media in K-Pop content consumption (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Jung & Shim, 2013; Oh & Park, 2012).

With the growing number of K-Pop bands produced and promoted using Internet technologies, it is difficult to accurately determine how many global K-Pop fans exist in the world. Forbes (2019) estimated that *BTS* alone has in excess of ninety million worldwide fans. The scope of K-Pop fanship is therefore significant and worthy of scholarly inspection. In the subsequent sections, fanship and

fandom as psychological phenomena, are evaluated in the context of the social identity of K-Pop fans.

The Social Identity of K-Pop Fans

A psychological conception of a *K-Pop fan* can refer to an individual who is loyal, enthusiastic, and an ardent admirer of K-Pop culture (Schroy, Plante, Reysen, Roberts & Gerbasi, 2016). The social identity of a K-Pop fan is generally made up of their fanship and fandom (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

Fanship can be defined as an individual's psychological attachment to their fan interest (Schroy et al., 2016), whereas fandom can be defined as an individual's psychological attachments to other fans who also share the same fan interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Extensive psychological research into fanship has been examined particularly in a Sport setting (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Hirt & Clarkson, 2011; Hurley, 2018; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) and in various digital media domains such as: celebrity worship (McCutcheon, Gillen, Browne, Murtagh & Collisson, 2016), sports themed video games (Shafer & Carbonara, 2015) and Anime (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts & Gerbasi, 2017). Fanship has been suggested as a *fluctuating* phenomenon (Schroy et al., 2016) in the sense that an individual's fanship intensity can *change* over periods of time. Several psychosocial factors have been suggested as influences of fanship fluctuations: an individual's social identity (Reysen et al., 2015), gender differences (Pentecost & Andrews, 2010; Wann, 1995), social connection (Chadborn et al., 2017), escapism (Wann, 1995) and sexual attraction (Schroy et al., 2016).

Fandom can be a dynamic experience depending on the fan interest. Typically, fandom has been associated with group identification (Ray et al., 2017) and the ubiquity of the fan interest in society

(Reysen et al., 2017). Anime and Manga fans for example have been known to attend and invest in their fan interest at conventions. In a K-Pop context, Kim and Kim (2017) showed that K-Pop fans would regularly engage with other fans in online K-Pop fan websites and groups specific to K-Pop. Fanship and fandom may be distinctively different concepts as stated above, but both concepts comprise as the components of an overall fan identity (Reysen et al., 2015; Schroy et al., 2016), underpinned by self-categorisation and group membership benefits.

It appears that K-Pop fans have a social identity comprising of K-Pop related fanship and fandom. However, the psychological fanship extent of the K-Pop fan identity remains largely unknown and is a fundamental component of the Reysen and Branscombe (2010) fan social identity conception. The K-Pop fan identity can be inspected in the context of an evidence-based psychological construct underlined by how self-concept is influenced by group memberships and affiliations. Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that an individual's identity is made up of a personal and a social self by self-categorization in groups. As a result of self-categorizing in a particular group or set of groups, individuals then experience positive attachments to the in-group of interest and contribute to intragroup morale (Kaye, Carlisle & Griffiths, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals also report a variety of positive psychosocial outcomes such as perceiving fellow group members in a positive manner and fluctuations of self-esteem and self-enhancement, as a result of self-categorisation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT arguably offers possible insights into the development of the K-Pop fan social identity. Taking a SIT perspective, K-Pop fans could consider their personal self with their K-Pop fanship, and their social self with their K-Pop fandom. K-Pop fans have been known to self-categorize by creating, joining and maintaining various online K-Pop fan groups (Kim & Kim, 2017). However, there has not been a substantial effort to investigate the psychosocial extent of the self-categorisation

behaviours that K-Pop fans execute. Contrary to SIT assumptions, qualitative research into the K-Pop fan identity has suggested that a pathological fan type exists called *Sasaengpaen* (Williams & Ho, 2014) who have been known to exhibit *stalker-like* behaviour (e.g. installing CCTV on K-Pop artists' property and writing letters to K-Pop artists in blood) and an excessive fanship level. However this fan type is not representative of K-Pop fans generally (Williams, 2016).

The Present Study

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the extent of K-Pop fanship on attributed psychosocial outcomes using SIT as a theoretical framework. The psychosocial outcomes of happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness were assessed. The research question is stated as follows: To what extent does K-Pop fanship significantly predict psychosocial outcomes attributed to K-Pop fan group membership? Multiple regression statistical approaches have been successful in demonstrating SIT to varying degrees in previous research (e.g. Kalkhoff & Barnum, 2000). Thus, it can be hypothesized that K-Pop fanship will be predicted by various forms of self-categorization, and that K-Pop fanship will predict positive psychosocial outcomes. This study compliments the work of Kim and Kim (2017) by further expanding on the implications of SIT in relation to the extent of K-Pop fan self-categorisations and group membership affiliations.

Method

Design and Participants

The present study employed online questionnaires distributed in various online K-Pop fandom groups such as: the R/K-Pop Reddit fan page, Facebook K-Pop idol fan pages, fan community groups in the Amino Smartphone app, and via Twitter fan group pages. The web link to access the study

questionnaire was also distributed to various Korean/ Asian university societies in Ireland and the United Kingdom via Email.

The participants were K-Pop fans (N = 1477): Females (70.2%, n = 1033), Males (26.7%, n = 393), Non-binary (1.8%, n = 26), Transgender (0.7%, n = 11) and other genders/ preferred not to say (0.6%, n = 6). The average age of a K-Pop fan was 23 years (SD = 5, *Age Range* = 18 - 55 years). K-Pop fans accessed the survey in 92 different countries: United States of America (33.6%, n = 497), United Kingdom (9.3%, n = 137), Philippines (6%, n = 89), Canada (4.9%, n = 72), Ireland (3.2%, n = 47), Germany (3.2%, n = 47) and all other countries collectively (39.8%, n = 588).

K-Pop fans listed to K-Pop everyday (59.4%, n = 877), several times per week (34.1%, n = 503), once a week (3.5%, n = 52), couple of times per month (2.6%, n = 39) and rarely/never (0.3%, n = 4). The most popular K-Pop idol(s)/ groups were: *BTS* (44.8%, n = 661), *TWICE* (9.7%, n = 145), *Big Bang* (3.9%, n = 58), *Red Velvet* (3.5%, n = 52), *EXO* (2.9%, n = 43) and other idol(s)/ groups collectively (35.2%, n = 518). However, many K-Pop fans reported to having multiple favourite or most listened to K-Pop idol(s)/ groups. The length of time participants reported to have been K-Pop fans were: 1-3 years (37.1%, n = 548), 4-7 years (22.6%, n = 334), 1 year (18.1%, n = 268), less than 1 year (18.3%, n = 271), 8-10 years (7.5%, n = 111) and 11+ years (2.8%, n = 41).

Measures

K-Pop fandom demographic questionnaire. Participants were asked about their demographic information regarding age, gender, nationality, favourite K-Pop idol/ band, how long participants have been fans to their favourite K-Pop idol/ band, and how often participants listened to K-Pop music. Participants were asked about the digital technologies (i.e. social media sites, music streaming sites etc.) they use to listen to their favourite K-Pop idol/ band. Participants were asked about the

fandom groups they are members of (i.e. Twitter pages, Facebook private groups etc.), and the sites and sources they get K-Pop news and information from (i.e. Korean media sites, K-Pop idol/ band website etc.). Participants were also asked about the K-Pop related events that were available to them to attend (i.e. concerts, festivals etc.).

Fanship. K-Pop fanship was measured using the Fanship Scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). The Fanship Scale is a unidimensional 11-item self-report scale measuring psychological fanship and was designed to facilitate any kind of fan interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Sample items on the Fanship Scale include: "I would devote all my time to my interest [my favourite/ most listened to K-Pop idol] if I could" and "I want to be friends with people who like my interest [my favorite/ most listened to K-Pop idol]" and all items are self-assessed on a likert scale ranging from one to nine. The scoring procedure for the Fanship Scale involves tallying up the item scores (one item is scored in reverse) and interpreting the final score as a level of fanship. Higher scores are indicative of higher fanship levels. In the present study, the Fanship scale adapted for K-Pop fanship was highly reliable according to a McDonald's Omega reliability computation (11-items, $\omega = 0.88$).

Happiness. Happiness can be conceptualized as a state involving frequent levels of positive emotions, less frequent levels of negative emotions and a degree of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Author, 2016). Happiness was measured using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ; Hills & Argyle, 2002). The OHQ is a 29-item measure of general happiness self-reported on a likert scale. The scoring procedure involves tallying up the item scores and dividing the total by 29. 12 items are scored in reverse (e.g. "I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am") and 17 items are scored normally (e.g. "I find most things amusing"). Higher total scores indicate higher levels of happiness. In this study, the OHQ was highly reliable according to a McDonald's Omega reliability computation (29-items, $\omega = 0.81$).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem can be conceptualized as an individual's evaluation of their own self-worth (Rosenburg, 1965). Global self-esteem was measured using the ten-item Rosenburg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (SES). The SES scored high in internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$) in a recent media related study (Kaye et al., 2019). The scoring procedure of the SES is to sum up the item scores on a four-point likert scale with half of the items scored in reverse (e.g. "At times I think I am no good at all"). Higher total scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. In the present study, the SES was satisfactorily reliable according to a McDonald's Omega reliability computation (10-items, $\omega = 0.79$).

Social connectedness. Social connectedness refers to an individual's subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world as a whole (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Social connectedness was self-assessed using the 20-item Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R: Lee, Draper & Lee, 2001). The SCS-R is made up of ten positively phrased items (e.g. "I feel comfortable in the presence of strangers") and ten negatively phrased items (e.g. "I see myself as a loner") with corresponding standard and reverse scoring. The SCS-R is self-assessed on six-point likert scale and higher scores indicate higher levels of global social connectedness. Permission to use the SCS-R was granted by one of the scale developers. The SCS-R was reliable according to a McDonald's Omega reliability computation (20-items, $\omega = 0.72$).

Procedure

The present study underwent an ethics proposal and a series of pilot testing before the final online survey was made accessible and distributed. The survey link was strategically distributed into online fan community groups, social media fan group pages, and via email to fan groups whereby K-Pop fans could access the study in their own time. K-Pop fans were asked to think about their favorite or most listened to K-Pop idol(s)/ group throughout and did not have to answer any question they did not wish to answer.

Results

K-Pop Fandom Results

K-Pop fans (N = 1477) used a variety of technologies to listen to K-Pop: online video sites (e.g. YouTube: 97.2%, n = 1435), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook: 76.5%, n = 1130) music streaming sites (e.g. Spotify: 76%, n = 1122), CDs/DVDs (41.6%, n = 615), music collection sites (e.g. iTunes: 34.7%, n = 512), K-Pop fan sites (e.g. AllKPop: 33.5%, n = 495), K-Dramas (e.g. Oh My Grace: 22.5%, n = 333) K-Pop digital games (e.g. BTS World: 19.8%, n = 293), artist website (e.g. bts.ibighit.com: 14.7%, n = 217), and K-Pop movies (e.g. Tazza 2: 8.3%, n = 122).

K-Pop fans (N = 1477) participated in several online fandom groups: Reddit (e.g. r/kpop: 83.2%, n = 1229), Twitter fan pages (46.9%, n = 693), Facebook (17.1%, n = 252), artist fan sites (13.9%, n = 206), WhatsApp groups (3.9%, n = 57) and Email groups (0.3%, n = 5).

Most K-Pop fans did not attend any K-Pop related events (56.9%, n = 840). However, some K-Pop fans did report to previously attending K-Pop related events: concerts (34.2%, n = 505), conventions/ conferences (8.5%, n = 126), festivals (6.8%, n = 101), offline meetups (6.4%, n = 95), club parties (4.5%, n = 67), idol remembrances/ memorials (3.8%, n = 56), general themed events (3%, n = 45), workshops (1.6%, n = 23), theatre shows (1.5%, n = 22), and cosplay events (1.6%, n = 17).

K-Pop fans (N = 1477) reported to getting their news and information about K-Pop from several sources: idol/group social media sites (69.7%, n = 1030), web articles (69.3%, n = 935), web forums (54.8%, n = 809), bloggers (22.5%, n = 332), word-of-mouth (21.7%, n = 321), vloggers (15.2%, n = 225), Korean TV (14%, n = 207), Internet chat rooms (13.6%, n = 201), Amino Apps (6.8%, n = 101) and Reddit (6.8%, n = 101).

Demographic and Fandom Predictors of K-Pop Fanship

Multiple linear regressions computed the predictor variables of K-Pop fanship and psychosocial outcomes in the present study. Predictor variables were combinations of dichotomous categorical and continuous variable types. All predictor variables input into the linear regression model scored low on multicollinearity for fanship levels and psychosocial outcomes. Fanship data were found to be normally distributed with a skewness score of - 0.15 (SE = 0.06) and a kurtosis score of - 0.43 (SE = 0.13). Descriptive statistics for fanship data are displayed in Table 1.

Higher levels of K-Pop fanship were significantly predicted (R^2 = 0.306, $F(7, 1434)$ = 90.529, p = .000) when K-Pop fans: were female (β = 3.98, p = .000), listened to K-Pop every day (β = 7.00, p = .000), were younger in age (β = - 0.379, p = .000), reported that BTS were their favorite or most listened to K-Pop group (β = 2.07, p = .005), and were members of up to three online K-Pop fandom groups (β = 1.24, p = .002). Notably, being a K-Pop fan for more than 4 years was not a significant predictor of K-Pop fanship (β = 1.13, p = .120).

K-Pop Fanship as a Predictor of Psychosocial Outcomes

K-Pop fanship was a significant predictor of all three psychosocial outcomes: happiness (R^2 = 0.72, $F(4, 1401)$ = 27.19, p = .000), self-esteem (R^2 = 0.021, $F(4, 1349)$ = 7.60, p = .000), and social connectedness (R^2 = 0.12, $F(4, 1406)$ = 4.39, p = .002). Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics on K-Pop fan psychosocial outcome results. Pearson correlation coefficients between fanship, happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness are displayed in Table 2.

[Insert **Table 1** here]

[Insert **Table 2** here]

Discussion

The aims of this study were to investigate the K-Pop fandom self-categorisations most associated withK-Pop fanship, and the extent of K-Pop fanship on attributed group membership psychosocial benefits. The discussion of results is outlined subsequently in light of the study results as contributory to Kim and Kim (2017) the implications for fanship research more broadly.

Social Identity Theory in Action

The results showed that K-Pop fanship was associated with increased psychosocial benefits. In light of the study results, the findings can be deemed as contributory to Kim and Kim (2017) for the advancement of the implications of applying SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in a K-Pop context. Similarly to Kim and Kim (2017), K-Pop fan self-categorisation was observed in this study. Self-categorisation was evident when participants indicated their self-identification as a K-Pop fan via categorical 'yes/no' options, and when participants indicated the extent of their self-categorisation through their reported K-Pop demographic and fandom characteristics. It is worth noting that this study found that the K-Pop fan individuals who belonged to up to three online K-Pop online groups were indicative of higher fanship levels, yet as a whole, K-Pop fans generally reported a vast array of K-Pop fan groups they belonged to. It could therefore be argued that the process of K-Pop fan categorisation is complex and warrants further research scrutiny.

The results of this study showed that higher K-Pop fanship levels significantly predicted increased levels of psychosocial outcomes (happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness). Happiness in particular appeared to be most extensive predictor of K-Pop fanship compared to self-esteem, which is usually attributed most to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Two potential explanations for this are: (1)

that the benefits of digital technology play a positive psychosocial role across varying media contexts (e.g. digital gaming) whereby SIT is inspected as a theoretical framework (Kaye et al., 2019), and (2) global happiness and self-esteem are constructs that may have overlapping conceptual components. In this study, happiness and self-esteem were unidimensional constructs self-assessed with comprehensive measures.

Possible reasons for why K-Pop fan affiliation is associated with increases across general psychosocial outcomes are: K-Pop may provide individuals with a sense of belongingness in online K-Pop fan community groups (Kim & Kim, 2017), K-Pop may be considered as an alternative to *mainstream* Western pop culture (Jin & Yoon, 2016), and social media technologies (e.g. Reddit) may provide K-Pop fans with a perceived increased sense of accessibility and connectedness to their favourite K-Pop idols. However, exploratory qualitative research could confirm or contest these possibilities. Therefore, it can be argued that the study aim was generally achieved.

Implications for Fanship

The results of this study may have novel implications for fanship research more broadly. Listening to K-Pop music every day was found to be a fandom predictor of fanship, and as such, may provide new insight into the reasons why fanship levels have been known to fluctuate over time. This result may suggest that fanship is not solely determined by *how long* an individual has identified as a fan over long term timeframe (i.e. being a self-categorised fan for a number of years). Rather, this result may suggest that higher fanship levels can be determined by *how often* a fan invests psychologically into their fanship (i.e. listening to K-Pop every day). This suggestion is further supported by a null result in the current study whereby the length of time in years K-Pop fans reported to have been fans was not a predictor of higher fanship levels.

The possibility that shorter term time constructs (i.e. listening to K-Pop music every day, how many hours per day etc.) indicated higher fanship more than longer term time constructs (i.e. being a K-Pop fan for over 4 years) should therefore be further scrutinized in future fanship research. A longitudinal approach measuring K-Pop fanship and its associated factors (Chadborn et al., 2017; Pentecost & Andrews, 2010; Reysen, et al., 2015; Schroy et al., 2016; Wann, 1995) in intervals may confirm this implication. This research therefore demonstrates a novel application of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), particularly in relation to the extent of self-categorisation within online groups. As such, the application of SIT in this study was beneficial for potentially new advances for the study of psychological fanship. Other psychological theoretical approaches may offer additional insight into the processes of K-Pop fan self-categorisation. In this study, K-Pop fan categorisations were shown to be predictors of K-Pop fanship to align with SIT assumptions (i.e. self-categorisation resulting in psychosocial outcomes), however, the reverse (i.e. K-Pop fanship as a predictor of K-Pop fan categorisations) may also be a possibility and compatible with SIT.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

Despite notable strengths such as the use of evidence-based psychosocial measures with strong internal validity and a large sample size inclusive of global K-Pop fans, there are notable limitations worthy of mention. The multiple regression computations are correlational and do not imply causality rendering the statistical ability as indicative, rather than causal. Despite regressions being able to show associations between categorisations and psychosocial outcomes, it is also worth noting that there were other compatible statistical approaches that could have been applied e.g. structural equation modelling (SEM) and mediation-moderation analysis.

The application of SIT as a psychological framework in this study also presents a potential theoretical caveat as the psychological process of *how* a participant became a self-categorised K-Pop fan was not

indicated in this study. Fanship researchers have repeatedly reported this caveat as identifying the difficulties in understanding the dynamics of fanship over periods of time (Ray et al., 2017; Schroy et al., 2016). Additional K-Pop fan categorisation considerations worthy of inspection would be differences between K-Pop fan groups (i.e. *BTS* fans and *EXO* fans) and K-Pop fan identity *types* (i.e. hard-core, casual, and social fans).

In the broader fanship research context, future research investigations into the motivations of fans and the subsequent implications of these fan motivations on fanship, would arguably be a fruitful research direction. Fan motivations may also provide additional insight into why fanship appears to fluctuate over time (Schroy et al., 2016), and could be conveniently included within a variety of research approaches (longitudinal, surveys and interviews etc.) for psychological inquiry.

Conclusion

Fundamental psychological theories (i.e. social identity theory) can offer valuable insight into the psychological aspects of K-Pop fan behavior. This could imply that K-Pop may become a topical avenue of research for psychology researchers. Cyberpsychology, a field devoted to the intersection of psychological thought and the application of digital technologies, may provide additional perspectives into the role of the *Hallyu 2.0* (Jin & Yoon, 2016) and K-Pop fan behaviour more comprehensively. In the meantime, K-Pop continues to embrace all forms of emerging technologies to facilitate its worldwide fandom.

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Tables

Table 1

Mean (M), standard deviation (SD), minimum (Min.) and maximum (Max.) scores on psychosocial

outcomes and fanship.

Psychosocial Outcome	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Happiness (OHQ)	3.16	0.30	2.03	4.07
Self-Esteem (SES)	29.60	2.70	22	40
Social Connectedness (SCS-R)	70.25	6.14	49	96
Fanship (Fanship Scale)	56.73	14.62	18	97

Note. The OHQ stands for the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002), the SES

stands for the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the SCS-R stands for the Social

Connectedness Scale-Revised (Lee et al., 2001).

Table 2

Correlation matrix displaying Pearson correlation coefficients between fanship, happiness, self-

esteem and social connectedness.

	Fanship	Happiness	Self-Esteem	Social Connectedness
Fanship	1	0.52*	0.23*	0.14*
Happiness		1	0.24*	0.35*
Self-Esteem			1	0.33*
Social Connectedness				1

Note. *Denotes significance at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).