SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“I found my talent after I become a K-pop fan”: K-pop participatory culture unleashing talents among Malaysian youth

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Abstract: The Korean wave or Hallyu wave has flourished in many aspects of Malaysian lives, demonstrating Malaysian’s acceptance of Korean popular culture in society. The rapid rise of the Korean wave in Malaysia has also prompted academics to seek a better understanding of this phenomenon. This study is particularly interested in examining how K-pop fans’ participatory culture help unleash an individual’s talent. In this study, a K-pop fan is defined as someone who commits to a one-sided relationship with K-pop idols and develops an intimate attachment to them. They also engage in fan activities as they are members of various K-pop fandoms—communities built around a shared enjoyment and interest towards K-pop groups or idols. Researchers conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview with eight participants to learn about their fan experiences. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to collect the sample for this study. This study demonstrates that fans are part of a participatory culture in which they actively create and produce media content and give them a social role in their respective fandoms.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Sociology of Media; Group Communication

Keywords: Sociology; Social Policy; Sociology of Media; Social Communication; Media; Participation; Creativity; Talent; Malaysia; Youth

1. Introduction

The term “Hallyu” or Korean Wave refers to Korean popular culture products such as drama, music, and movies, as well as food, cosmetics, and animations (Ganghariana & Kanozio, 2020). It started in Malaysia and other Southeast Asia countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam in the late 1990s.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This case study examined K-pop fans’ participatory culture and how it helps to unleash an individual’s talent. In this study, a K-pop fan is defined as someone who commits to a one-sided relationship with K-pop idols and develops an intimate attachment to them. They also engage in fan activities as they are members of various K-pop fandoms—communities built around a shared enjoyment and interest towards K-pop groups or idols. This study demonstrates that fans are part of a participatory culture in which they actively create and produce media content and give them a social role in their respective fandoms. This study adds to the literature on sociological studies on K-pop fandom, participatory culture, and youth development.
(Suh et al., 2010). They also revealed although the entry of the Korean wave to Malaysia is rather late compared to other countries and the initial response was rather unfavourable, Malaysians have accepted the Korean Wave faster, in fact, “more aggressively”, especially in the 2010s. The prevalence of K-pop on various media platforms in Malaysia has made it easy for locals to gain access to this particular genre. Today, BTS—the currently most popular K-pop group, alone contributed 3.6 billion dollars to South Korea’s GDP in 2018 (Suntikul, 2019). The involvement of global fans in the idol industry resulted in K-pop becoming South Korea’s number one cultural export. This success is facilitated by the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy by the Korean government (Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020). Whereas hard power such as military, war, and authoritarian regimes cannot be used to win over people, the Korean government uses soft power through diplomatic means to influence world audiences. The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye who suggests that soft power is the state’s ability to “charm” other participants in the global political process, to demonstrate the attractiveness of its own culture, political values, and foreign policy (Valieva, 2018).

In Malaysia, it seems well established that the Korean or Hallyu wave has flourished in a lot of aspects of Malaysian lives, and this depicted the surging of Malaysian acceptance of Korean popular culture in society. Lee et al. (2020) revealed that one of the prominent themes of Korean Wave discourse on social media in Malaysia is the interest in Korean food in Korean dramas. This is supported by the fact that Korean food chains are gaining popularity in Malaysia, with high interest and demand even among Muslim Malaysians (Buang et al., 2018). Alanzalon (2011) discovered in his research that approximately 80% of Malaysian respondents began learning the Korean language due to a deep interest in Korean culture. Malaysia was also ranked fifth in terms of tourist arrivals in Korea, trailing Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand (Kim & Ryoo, 2007). Aside from that, Malaysian K-pop fans are said to adhere to Korean beauty standards while K-beauty—a term that refers to skincare and cosmetics products that originated in South Korea has grown to become a huge craze among locals (Cheong, 2019). These studies call into question the earlier research conclusion that Confucianism is the most important factor in determining cultural proximity in Korean Wave. As can be seen, the Korean Wave thrives and coexists in Muslim cultures in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This demonstrates that individuals developed not only a local identity based on indigenous tradition but also a global identity based on media exposure to global culture. As a result, Korean popular culture is said to be capable of crossing racial, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. According to Kim et al. (2017), Hallyu is also can be seen as the response to the dominant Western culture such as Americanization. It has not only fostered a sense of “Koreaness” or Han (한) – an “essentialist Korean sociocultural concept widely recognised as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger.” Han is frequently described as being in all Koreans’ blood, and the quality of Korean sorrow as being unlike anything Westerners have experienced or can understand”, among the people of Korea but it has also given Asians around the world a sense of identity (Boman, 2020).

The rapid rise of the Korean wave in Malaysia has prompted academics to seek a better understanding of this phenomenon. As discussed, there has been extensive research into the Korean Wave in the fields such as cultural and political studies, communication, language, and marketing. The earlier researchers are interested in how and why Korean pop culture was received so enthusiastically abroad while the later researchers are interested in how the Korean wave influences people’s decisions, behaviour, and attitude, particularly fans. K-pop fan in this research is someone who commits to a one-sided relationship with K-pop idols and develops an intimate attachment to them. Although the fan-idol relationship is usually seen as one-sided, it is has benefitted the fan in some way. This study saw fans as active producers and content creators and not as passive entities. K-pop fans are also members of fandom, which is a community built around a shared enjoyment and interest in a subject and engages in fan activities. Jenkins (2006, p. 3) defines fan activities as a participatory culture that includes:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
(2) Strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others
(3) Some type of informal mentorship in which the most experienced members pass along their knowledge to novices
(4) Members who believe their contributions matter

Jenkins’ work involves interacting with fans in order to analyse fan culture as a response to mass media. As a media scholar, the majority of his concerns about fans have been associated with fan interactions in media texts. However, this study is a sociological research that emphasizes more on fan experiences, views, values as well as interactions. It is also important to highlight that the fan interactions in this study are not limited to the media text but also with other fellow fans. Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture is seen as opposed to the culture industry theory, which claims that popular culture prioritises profit and is a form of hegemony used to spread dominant ideologies (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991). Media scholars counter this by suggesting that the audience is not a passive entity. Fans can be seen as active producers rather than “cultural dupes, social misfits, or mindless consumers” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). Fans as an audience, are active producers and part of the participatory culture.

Although there is no clear definition of what it is to be a fan, Kloet and Zoonen (2007) revealed that the word “fan” is an abbreviation of fanatic and historically it tends to be related with remarks like obsessive, worshipper, and devotee. The notion of fanaticism is also was believed to stem from these religious connotations. Around the late 19th century, the word fan began to be used concerning sports enthusiasts, separating the term from its association with religion. In contemporary days, its usage has been extended to describe followers or devotees of popular culture such as pop singers, music genres, TV series, movies, or even comic characters (Rahim, 2019). Science fiction fans in particular have been forming clubs and holding conventions to discuss their common interest since the early to mid-twentieth century. The World Science Fiction Convention, also known as Worldcon, was one of the first conventions and has been held annually since 1939. No other popular culture phenomenon has been said to have demonstrated the depth and breadth of fan activity. Aside from attending such conventions, fans also produced the first Star Trek zine, Spockanalia, a fan-made magazine, in 1967 (Jindra, 2017). This demonstrated that being a fan is more than just consuming. Fans, on the other hand, interact with the media as well as other fans. Other fan activities include writing fan fiction (fanfic) based on their favourite characters, publishing fan magazines (fanzines), writing lyrics to popular songs (filking), and cosplaying at fan conventions.

Thus, being a fan is not merely a leisure activity but also creates a new form of culture called participatory culture. Participatory culture explains that fans not only consume media by listening to and watching it, but they also use selected media content to recreate and reproduce their content. Traditionally, fans communicated by exchanging and sharing physical text or art, as well as by gathering at fan conventions and fan meetings. In this age, the majority of fan interaction takes place via the internet (Groene & Hettinger, 2016). As technology continues to evolve, fan communities are increasingly prevalent across nationality and ethnicity. Fans actively create videos on platforms such as YouTube to demonstrate their interest in specific media products such as book reviews, music video reactions, songs, and dance covers, which are referred to as “fanworks.” These fanworks show how fans can virtually come together to share their passions. Most recognised fan groups are usually rooted in a specific music genre, such as punk, heavy metal, indie, or jazz. These fan subcultures are perfect examples of how exposure to a music genre such as K-pop has influenced the creation of identity among fans. As society progresses from the post-industrial to the postmodern era, a broader range of subcultural groups emerge, such as the K-pop fan community. As a result, researchers became interested in learning more about the impact of being a K-pop fan on an individual. However, previous studies failed to determine the impact of being a K-pop fan on an individual’s self-development through their social experiences and interactions. Therefore, the primary goal of this study was to answer the question of how
K-pop fans’ participatory culture unleashes one’s self-development or talent among Malaysian youth? To what extent engaging in the participatory culture in the fandom constructs their identity in the K-pop fan community?

2. Method

2.1. Participants
This study regards fans as a unit of analysis in which researchers delve into each of their experiences, perspectives, values, and lifestyles as a K-pop fan. Purposive sampling was used in this study because the objective required researchers’ judgment in selecting members of the population to participate in the study. Purposive sampling is one of the most common sampling techniques in which the researchers pre-select a group of participants based on relevant criteria related to the research subject (Newman, 2013). Snowball sampling was also used as there were a few participants who were introduced by other participants. This research study’s sample size was eight K-pop fans. This sample was purposefully composed of female participants from 20 to 24 years old, which the National Youth Council (2019) classifies as young adults. The goal of focusing on one group of participants who are similar in age and sex is to obtain representative findings for this group.

Table 1 depicts the demographic profile of the participants in detail. To maintain confidentiality, the names of participants were given pseudonyms.

2.2. Data collection
A semi-structured in-depth interview was used to collect data for this research study. It began in February 2020 and ended in the middle of March 2020. Each interview session lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, intending to obtain a specific and critical perspective in order to achieve research objectives. Interviewing selected individuals is a vital method that qualitative researchers frequently employ. The goal is to learn what is on the participant’s mind, what they are thinking, and how they feel about certain issues (Newman, 2013).

Participants in this study were chosen based on K-pop-related content on their Instagram public social media accounts. Researchers contacted them via direct message, and once they confirmed their willingness to participate, the location and time of the meeting were set. Most of the interviews were conducted in public places, such as at K-pop fan events because they preferred the sense of security and comfort that comes with being in public. However, due to practical constraints, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted over the phone. Concerning the ethical considerations regarding fans who partook in the research, researchers obtained their informed consent before audiotaping interviews. Participants were also given the option of skipping or refusing to answer questions, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The audios that were recorded are kept private and will be destroyed after five years of research. Some questions were prepared based on the literature to answer the research objectives, but a few additional questions were asked during the interviews that are relevant to the findings.

3. Results and discussion
Being a K-pop fan has enabled people to discover and develop their full potential. It gives fans a way to express themselves, particularly about their fan identity, through the creation of arts and content (Jenol, 2020). As previously stated, fans not only consume media by listening and watching but they also use media content, most notably that pertaining to their favourite K-pop groups or idols, to create and produce their content. It is a common practice among K-pop fans. The fanworks demonstrate that being a fan can foster creativity, artistic talent, and organisational skills, particularly in young fans (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). The interaction of fans with media figures like idols eventually becomes a social activity that provides fans with a role and identity in the K-pop fandom. Simply creating works and sharing them with fellow social media followers is
enough for some fan artists. However, some fans even make a living or at least gain extra money from their work. Several fan artists, including one of the participants, Sabrina, accept commissions via social media and set up a booth or store.

**SABRINA:** It can be considered that I found my talent after I become a K-pop fan. Sometimes you never know what you’re capable of. Prior to this, I had no idea what my passion was or which paths I wanted to take. But with this kind of passion, I’ve got to improve myself and find the path that’s right for me. It gives me the drive to keep going.

| Name   | Age | Sex   | Ethnicity   | Relationship status |
|--------|-----|-------|-------------|---------------------|
| Athirah| 24  | Female| Malay       | Single              |
| Mimi   | 24  | Female| Orang Asli  | Single              |
| Lana   | 23  | Female| Malay       | In a relationship   |
| Sabrina| 23  | Female| Malay       | In a relationship   |
| Sonia  | 23  | Female| Malay       | Single              |
| Gina   | 24  | Female| Malay       | Married             |
| Alyani | 24  | Female| Malay       | Single              |
| Candy  | 24  | Female| Chinese     | Single              |

Figure 1.
According to the quote above, Sabrina discovered her talent in design as a result of her passion for K-pop. She is actively creating BTS fan kits such as banners, stickers, posters, and photo cards to sell on her online shop and at fan events such as idol birthdays and group anniversaries. Moreover, the interview session with Sabrina was also held at one of the fan events at KL Sentral, where she sold her fan kit. Figure 1 below is an example of a fan kit designed and sold by Sabrina during the event.

Researchers also noticed that 5 other participants in this study demonstrated their ability to create K-pop-related arts and media content. For example, Athirah is currently editing and compiling videos of P.O from Block B appearing in variety shows. She aspires to be a fan-made video editor as well. Sonia, another participant, is one of the admins in charge of organising important fan events. She stated that participating in such fan activities has helped her gain the confidence to speak and communicate in public. While another participant, Gina, works as a writer/journalist for a living, she frequently posts K-pop song covers on social media. Candy, a computer science student, occasionally creates VR photo cards of K-pop idols for distribution at concerts. A participant in this study is also a social media influencer who posts photos and videos primarily to promote idol-related content.

Some fans learn the Korean language because of their obsession and love for K-pop. Fans with a higher level of Korean proficiency may set up a translation account on social media. They can use those accounts to post translations and romanizations of their idol's contents. This ranges from translating simple social media posts to concert speeches and even to livestream translations. By doing so, not only will other fans be able to enjoy and understand it better, but it will also strengthen the K-pop fan community and fan role as the translator in the fandom. As K-pop is well-known for its popularity on the international level and massive fan base, a significant number of K-pop fans consist of non-native Korean speakers. However, the Korean language is consistently used by fans. K-pop fans have developed and incorporated their ways of redefining and using
Korean vocabulary also language practices (Crow, 2019). This phenomenon is similar to the local K-pop fans including participants in this research. These Korean language practices help K-pop fans interact with each other about their fan content as well as idols. When researchers asked the participants if they could understand Korean, we discovered that all of them could at least understand Korean words. Furthermore, the majority of the participants can read Korean writing, known as Hangul. It is easier for them to learn words from the Korean vocabulary because they watch their idols on music shows, variety shows, K-dramas, live streaming, and other fan content on a daily basis. Most of the participants have self-taught themselves Korean, and a few are interested in enrolling in a formal class. Athirah and Gina, in particular, stated:

**ATHIRAH:** At my university, I only took Korean - Level 1. I don't have time to continue with the next level because I'm in my final year. Because I already have a basic understanding of the Korean language, I plan to learn on my own in the future.

**GINA:** I have already signed up for a class starting in April. I want to learn Korean as part of my job. It is advantageous for me as a writer if I am fluent in more than one language.

According to these two participants, researchers conclude that fans may learn Korean for a variety of reasons. Aside from their obsession and love for K-pop, fans learn the Korean language in order to learn more about other cultures and, more specifically, to be multilingual. They also believe that learning Korean will help them do what they love, whether it is art or content creation.

Besides that, K-pop fans are also very attentive when it comes to idols, especially their outfits. Fans’ admiration for their idols inspires them to try to imitate them. They would purchase or seek inspiration from exact replicas of what their idols wore. As a result, fans feel more connected to their idols (Dewanti et al., 2014). Interestingly, there is a community of K-pop fashion obsessives who track down the idols’ outfits while they are on stage, at the airport, or even during practises.
(Agbeni, 2019). They would look up every detail of the outfit, such as the brand, colours, and prices, in order to document it on social media. It works like a catalogue for fans that are willing and wanted to copy their idols’ style. Similarly, Dewanti et al. (2014) have examined how one of the K-pop groups, SNSD’s fans, or what they prefer to call themselves, SONE in Tegal, Indonesia used fashion as a means of expression in order to show the public that they were members of SONE. Participants in this study are no exception, as the majority of them reported that K-pop influences how they dress, particularly based on their idols’ group preferences. Athirah elaborated:

**ATHIRAH:** When SNSD promoted their hit song, Gee, the colourful skinny jeans became popular. I also purchased several pairs of those jeans.

Based on the quote above, Athirah shared how SNSD was so huge back then in 2009 with their hit song, Gee. In the music video, SNSD wore colourful skinny jeans that instantly become a trend. Athirah was one of the K-pop fans who did not miss out on purchasing a few pairs of those jeans as a gesture of love for these K-pop stars at the time. Researchers discovered a few significant and similar characteristics when participants described the type of style K-pop fans would wear. Hoodies or baggy shirts, hats like bucket hats or berets, skinny pants, knitted wear, and tucked-in shirts were among the clothing that they mentioned. These styles are more visible and apparent at certain events, such as concerts or fan meetings. Furthermore, fans would, to some extent, paint group names or pictures on their faces in order to express their love for these idols. This allows fans to be creative and make statements about themselves through the use of clothing, accessories, or other physical items. It allows fans to visually communicate who they are and what kind of group they are a part of (Kratz & Reimer, 1998).

Participating in such events, as well as interacting and socialising with other K-pop fans, fosters bonds between K-pop fans. Typically, fans would share information about their idols from commercials, dramas, musicals, world tour concerts, comeback season interviews, and variety shows. Some participants, such as Sabrina and Sonia, have more distinct and visible performativity as fans. Most fan clubs hold fan events regularly, where members gather and bond by watching videos of their idols, playing games, dancing covers, and celebrating idols’ events. Figures 2 and 3

| Participant | Occupation       | Role in fandom | Fanworks                                                                 |
|-------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sabrina     | Student          | Designer       | Designing BTS fan kits (banners, stickers, poster, and photocards) for sale online and occasionally during fan events like celebrating idols’ birthday or group anniversary |
| Athirah     | Student          | Video editor   | Editing and compiling videos of P.O from Block B in variety shows        |
| Sonia       | Student          | Admin          | Organizing fan events                                                   |
| Gina        | Writer/Journalist| Singer         | Posting K-pop song covers on social media                               |
| Candy       | Graduate         | Editor         | Making idols’ VR photocards to distribute for fans during the concert day |
| Alyani      | Student          | Social media influencer | Promoting idol-related content by posting edited photos and videos |
show some of the photos from the fan event held in KL Sentral during the data collection to celebrate idols' birthdays.

Sabrina has demonstrated her role within the K-pop fan community as a fanart maker, whereas Sonia is an admin in charge of organising fan events. They revealed:

**SABRINA:** Back at school, I have a group of friends who are also into K-pop. But now that we've grown apart, it's mostly just me and my sister. I don't have a lot of friends. Although, I do have a lot of online friends but not really in real life. We make and sell a fan kit. There is a group for that, an online group. We created something based on our interest in K-pop. I design all of this (showing us her collection of fan kits). By the way, I'm still learning.

**SONIA:** Usually, if got comeback, mass streaming. The music videos. Those who can afford would buy their albums, to help with its sales. That is like a task as a fangirl. The usual events every weekend, such as now (referring to the current event during the interview), are usually due to a birthday or other special occasion. Today's event is to celebrate the birthday of one of the Stray Kidz members. So, the process is like doing a 'kenduri kahwin'. We need to reserve a spot a few months in advance, then start designing the banner ... the cup sleeve. We will hire a group like an organizer to handle it. Spread info about the event online on Twitter. Usually, because of events like this, fellow fans who mostly know each other online can meet and sit together.

Fans with social capital receive recognition from other fans because of their influence just like Sabrina and Sonia. During the interview session, researchers began to recognise some of the popular fans. There are fanart makers who sell their self-made banners, photocards, and drawings while waiting for the concert to start. Some even give their stuff for free. Besides that, there was also a group of fans in which most of them are dancers, filming and performing their dance cover outside of the stadium before the concert. The following is a list of participants, as well as their creative fanworks as a K-pop fan:

Based on Table 2, it is significant to highlight that participants may have a certain role in their real-life while at the same time carrying another role exclusively as a K-pop fan. This finding in my research also has illustrated the idea about participatory culture as has been claimed by Jenkins (1992). K-pop fans acting not only as consumers but also as producers and creators for some form of creative media. This is proved by 6 out of 8 participants in this research. Based on the interview, researchers also noted that being fans have caused them to discover new talent. They have no idea what they are capable of until they become K-pop fans. Some participants also mentioned that even if they are not talented enough, they still enjoy their time making something for their fellow fans in the fandom. Hellekson (2009) and Turk (2014) have found that fans' gift economy gives them satisfaction when their gifts or fan works are accepted in the form of being read, watched, appreciated, and valued within the community, which is consistent with this finding.

These findings have led us to believe that being a K-pop fan is a way for someone to express themselves and discover their talent. Fans perform their identity through investment in cultural capital, socialising or sharing, and social capital (Rahim, 2019). This performativity leads fans to know their talent, especially in expressive arts and making content. Applying the work of Jenkins (1992) regarding participatory culture, this study discovered that K-pop fans also actively create and produce their content from the media. Participants in this study contributed fan fiction, fan art, dance covers, song covers, fan-made videos, and even fan events within the fandom. It is also important to note that these fan activities have resulted in them gaining a position or role in their respective K-pop fandom.

4. Conclusion
This study is in agreement with Jenkins's (1992) notion that the audience is not a passive entity. It demonstrates that fans, as audiences, are part of a participatory culture actively
create and produce their media content and give them a social role and identity within their fandom. In other words, being a K-pop fan is one of the ways for an individual to express oneself and discover new talent. These findings have contributed to the body of literature on fan studies, specifically the K-pop fan community. Furthermore, this study will serve as a theoretical or methodological model for future studies of a similar nature. More sociological studies on Hallyu fans are encouraged by researchers, as the community has grown significantly worldwide over the years and Korean culture has become so familiar among local youths. This study is expected to motivate participants and the K-pop fan community to not only pursue their interest in Korean entertainment, but also to discover or sharpen their talent, skills, creativity, and artistry. It is critical to comprehend the nuances of youth participatory culture centred on popular music such as K-pop. Exposure to such global diverseness and heterogeneity is an eye-opener and enlightenment for youth, who are important assets to any country. In fact, it could be advantageous in terms of youth diplomacy. Thus, this study is expected to provide guidance to relevant local institutions such as Malaysia’s Ministry of Youth and Sports on how youth participation in communities such as K-pop fandom allows them to engage in social activities while also honing their social and interpersonal skills. As fans are also involved in fan or creative labour, it is critical to regard them as potential legitimate creative labour which may help to grow the local creative industries.

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