Formation, Purpose and Gains: An Exploratory Study of Hallyu Fanclubs in the Philippines

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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to break ground and explore the phenomenon of Hallyu fanclubs in the Philippines. The study focused on the formation and purpose of Hallyu fanclubs. Data included responses to an online survey from administrators of 22 Philippine Hallyu fanclubs. Using a combination of descriptive statistics and content analysis, results revealed that Philippine Hallyu fanclubs are formed by fans with the main purposes of supporting the artist, unifying Filipino fans and marketing the artist. The importance of socialization with other fans emerged as a strong motivator for joining fan clubs. Gains from fanclub formation also emerged in the form of significant charitable activities. The study closed with a series of propositions and future research directions.

Keywords: Korean wave, Hallyu, Fans, Fanclubs

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I am glad to share with you the results of a research I completed on “Formation, Purpose and Gains: An Exploratory Study of Hallyu Fanclubs in the Philippines.” This study is guided by the following objectives. First, I wanted to break ground and explore Hallyu fanclubs in the Philippines. Being a Hallyu fan myself, I observed that there is a vibrant fandom in the Philippines and it would be interesting to document its
development and practices. Second, I wanted to understand the formation and purpose of Hallyu fanclub development in the country. With the many Hallyu fanclubs around, I wanted to discover why these clubs develop and the reasons and purposes behind fanclub development. Finally, as an exploratory study output, I wanted to generate propositions and future research directions to better frame Hallyu fan subculture in the Philippines.

The Hallyu wave or the “Korean Wave” has undoubtedly reached Philippine shores. The researcher Yang (2012) defined Hallyu as both the flow and popularity of Korean popular cultural products, especially media contents, in other Asian countries and beyond, as well as exported Korean popular cultural products themselves. In her paper entitled “Korean Wave: The Great Splash on Philippine Popular Culture and Life,” Prof. Ma. Cristina Flores of the University of the Philippines stated that the Korean wave has splashed on Philippine shores in many forms including popular media, fashion, food, online gaming and others. She expressed that “Western hegemony on popular culture has become a thing of the past. There is now an emerging Asianness flowing through the current of transnational cultures in the region.” The Hallyu wave has indeed inspired academic investigations around the world and it presents an excellent opportunity for research utilizing a variety of perspectives including economic, political, socio-cultural and psychological.

My research focuses on exploring the world of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs. Now, you may ask me the question, why study fans? To quote Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007), experts on fandom studies, fandom is beautiful. Let me share with you four reasons why fandom is a great area of investigation.

First, fandom is a reflection and projection of ourselves. The pioneer in fandom studies (Said, 1979 as cited by Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007) expressed that fans usually get a bad rap and are treated as if they are eccentric or deviant. It is all too common for fans to be dismissed as “Others” but as the literature
on “Others” have frequently showed, the “Other is always a reflection and projection of ourselves. Great fandoms such as the Beatles fandom, the Twilight fandom, the Harry Potter fandom and the Comic fandom do reflect aspects of ourselves including our common and changing tastes and values.

Second, fandom fuels trade. The fan as a specialized yet dedicated consumer has become a centerpiece of media marketing strategies. Fans indeed have a decisive role in propagating culture products through their consumption and this does not end in media products. According to Otmazgin & Lyan (2013), “fans not only consume imported music and the fashions associated with it but also serve as marketers, mediators, translators and localizers of globalized culture.”

The third reason to conduct fan studies is that fandom opens discourse about power. In some studies, Hallyu is described as a form of soft power where changing cultural tastes and tolerance are influenced through popular media and its constituents. There are various perspectives and issues regarding this discourse but rather than seeing fandom as an “oppression”, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington expressed that “the interpretative communities of fandom are actually embedded in the existing economic, social and cultural status quo.”

Fandom studies also provide answers to issues of global modernity. With the realities brought about by globalization, studies of fan audiences contribute to our understanding of how people form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world.

Let me now share with you the exploratory research journey I undertook for this project. I entered the field by attending and observing the past three Philippine K-Pop conventions (2011, 2012, 2013) which inspired me to gather initial data through an open-ended survey among 10 Hallyu fanclubs. Out of the 10 surveys, 6 fanclubs responded. Their responses were used to generate the initial categories which served as an input to the development of the “Philippine K-Pop Fandom Survey” Form.
This online survey contained a mix of close-ended and open-ended questions focusing on the following areas: (1) descriptive information on Philippine Hallyu fanclubs, and (2) Philippine Hallyu fanclub purpose and experiences.

The online survey was sent to the administrators of 70 Philippine Hallyu fanclubs. A total of 22 fanclubs responded. The retrieval rate is at 31%. Although this may be viewed as low retrieval, one must consider the exploratory nature of the study and that not all fanclubs on the sampling frame were still active. Today’s presentation is the initial report resulting from this exploratory research journey.

The main focus areas of this research include descriptive information such as the name, initial formation, founding date and memberships of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs. The second focus area is the purpose and experiences of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs which includes purpose, activities, programs and achievements.

The main data sources include observation, open-ended survey, online survey and documents and archives.

In relation to the formation of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs, majority of the fanclubs surveyed showed that their clubs started from a person’s initiative. Fueled by the passion of one fan, groups of fans gather together to establish the club. The second driver of club formation is the fan forum or discussion forum where fans meet online (usually anonymously) to discuss about their idols. There is a small number of clubs which started due to the artist’s company initiative. These results reveal that fanclubs are formed by the fans themselves. Hallyu fanclubs in the Philippines are not institutionalized or formalized as they are in Korea where the company usually birth official fanclubs for their artists.

One interesting observation I found in relation to fanclub formation was in terms of the launch/founding dates of Philippine fanclubs. I noticed that almost an equal number of
fanclubs surveyed showed that they launched before the artist’s debut and after the artists’ debut. This shows curious behavior since how can fanclubs start when the artists’ has not debuted yet? The explanation may lie in the first mover rule. Local fans fight over official status by competing on who forms the club first. Typically, those who form the group online first claims “first mover advantage” and becomes the “official” local fanclub. One issue with this reality is that fanclubs may be started by persons who are not true fans. This practice contaminates the Hallyu fan subculture with possibly dishonest or opportunistic persons.

About 32% of the fanclubs surveyed revealed that they have more than 2000 members (n=7) and another 32% revealed that they have between 100 to 300 members (n=7). Out of the fanclubs surveyed, a total of 55% (n=12) have more than 500 members while about 45% (n=10) have less than 500 members. This data shows that there is a strong subculture of Hallyu fans in the Philippines.

In terms of membership fees, majority of the clubs do not charge membership fees (86%). Since most are using free online services for their activities, they do not see the immediate need to charge fees. I also hypothesize that many of the clubs are run by young people who may not be adept in the formalities of setting up official organizations. Fanclubs that charge fees are typically those that are bigger, older and managed by more mature administrators. The fees are typically used for the official membership card, which provides discounts and other privileges for members.

So, what is the purpose of the formation of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs? For this next set of data, please note multiple responses were accepted and I analyzed the data based on the frequency of responses which are shown on the bars while the stems reveal the percentage of fanclubs who responded within the category. Results revealed that fanclub formation has three main purposes: (1) to support the K-Pop artist, (2) to unify Filipino fans, and (3) to market the artist.
Consistent with the purposes for club formation, fanclub activities involve those that support, unify and market the artist. The most common fanclub activities involve fan support activities (n=22, 100%) such as mass voting, videos, flash mobs and even keeping an online radio station. This is followed by communal fan gifts like birthday and fan gift packages (n=21, 95%), organizing fan gatherings and events (n=20, 91%) and purchase activities (n=16, 73%).

Asked about their perceptions on the reasons why fans join clubs, fanclub administrators expressed that the primary reason for joining a fanclub is social (n=21, 95%). Majority of the fanclub administrators expressed that fans wish to interact and share their Hallyu passion with others. Artist updates (n=15, 68%) and artist support (n=13, 55%) are also some other reasons for joining clubs. To a lesser extent, fans join to avail of perks and purchase official merchandise. Using a psychological perspective, we can see that those who form and join fanclubs typically have the need to express their affinity. This need propels them to seek others with similar interests. Since KPOP fans form a special subculture, fans tend to seek others who they can identify with. As fans gather together, they naturally wish for more success for their idol thus propelling them to the purpose of marketing the artist. In a study among Israeli and Palestinian Hallyu fans, it was revealed that being part of the K-fan community had a therapeutic effect because K-Pop fans feel socially handicapped in their social circles. Through membership in a fan community, K-Pop fans establish what is called a “social capital”. Social capital is defined as the “sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As stated by Castiglione (2008), “Being part of a community that shares intimacy and emotional depth is synonymous with social capital.”

The top three problems encountered by Philippine Hallyu fanclubs include finance (n=12, 55%), manpower (n=10, 45%)
and conflicts (n=9, 41%). Since majority of the clubs do not charge fees, it is not surprising that finance is a big concern. Also given the social nature of fanclubs, conflicts in the form of infighting and fan wars are inevitable. Other concerns include low and/or inactive members, time management for administrators, difficulty in online management and the artists’ inactivity which affects the activity of the fanclubs.

There are identified gains from fanclub formation in the Philippines.

When asked about what they perceive as their achievements as fanclubs, fanclub administrators cite being officially recognized and affiliated as their achievement. This includes international affiliation and recognition from the artists’ company. This is followed by their ability to mount successful fan gatherings and events. A small number of fanclubs mentioned awards and charity work as achievements which take us to another interesting finding from this study.

It is interesting to observe that fanclubs do not consider charity work as a major achievement of their fanclub given that majority of the fanclubs surveyed (82%) contribute to charity work, which may be considered as a positive societal benefit. Looking deeper, Philippine Hallyu fanclubs have contributed to almost all types of non-profits. Tallying the beneficiaries of their charity contributions revealed that almost all types of charities have benefited although some were only to a minimal extent.

Tallying their reported charity beneficiaries, 64% of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs surveyed contributed to international non-government institutions (NGOs) like Gawad Kalinga, Red Cross and World Vision (n=14, 64%), 41% contributed to animal charities (n=9, 41%), 32% to disaster efforts (n=7, 32%), 27% to special interest charities (n=6, 27%), 9% to environmental charities (n=2, 9%), and 5% to health charities (n=1, 5%). Ironically, none of the surveyed fanclubs has contributed to arts and culture charities.
Before I share my closing statements, let me discuss with you a unique feature of Philippine Hallyu fanclubs which emerged in the form of the Philippine K-Pop Committee, Incorporated or the PKCI.

The PKCI is the first and biggest non-profit KPOP organization in the country which is officially registered in the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Bureau of Internal Revenue. The organization is the umbrella organization of more than 60 Philippine Hallyu fanclubs which organizes the annual Philippine KPOP convention. Being a non-profit organization, the PKCI works towards supporting charity efforts specifically Gawad Kalinga and PAWS. Recently, they also started a scholarship fund. So far, based on my investigation of available literature, this type of organized conglomeration of Hallyu fanclubs can only be seen in the Philippines. With PKCI’s social impact and benefits, this unique feature may be considered as a best practice in the area of organizing Hallyu fandom.

Out of the fanclubs surveyed, 91% expressed that they are members of the PKCI. Asked about the advantages of PKCI membership, they expressed that PKCI helps market their club, provide official affiliation, networks and updates. In terms of disadvantages, only a few statements came out including bias and pressure.

To close, here are some emerging propositions and future research directions.

First, there exists a strong subculture of Hallyu fans in the Philippines. Second, the formation of Hallyu fanclubs is driven by fans themselves. Third, the main purposes of Hallyu fanclub formation include the need to express support for the artist and to socialize with others. Fourth, Fanclub activities are consistent with its support and socialization purposes and finally fandom, managed properly, can produce benefits for the individual fan and society in general.
Future researchers interested in Hallyu fandom and Hallyu studies may consider gathering more data among fanclubs to better understand the phenomena. They may also explore extant literature to generate conceptual and theoretical models that may be tested in the Philippine context. Finally, researchers may consider studying the individual fan experience and how fandom influences related behaviors such as tourism behaviors and advocacy behaviors.

References


