

Painting the Scenario of Filipino K-pop Fan Culture

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Abstract

The paper examines aspects of K-Pop Fan culture in the Philippines. Data were gathered from fieldwork and participant observation in various fan events, as well as, online and actual informal discussions with Philippine K-Pop fans. Results support how the K-Pop scene is cultivating a new area of study in Philippine youth culture; one in which cross-cultural ties with Korea and the rest of the world is clearly manifested.

Keywords: K-Pop fan culture, youth culture, online communities

Introduction

In recent years, the K-Pop scene in the Philippines has visibly flourished. It has truly come far from its beginnings in the mid-2000's. Today, the Philippine K-Pop scene has become a full-blown culture on its own.

The main objective of this presentation is to paint a picture of K-Pop fan culture in the Philippines. This is a product of an immersion into the scene – the researcher has attended various activities such as concerts, fan meets and conventions, and has joined and participated in online communities. Research included informal discussions with fans, observations during fieldwork and personal experience.

This presentation is divided into four parts. First is a look into the K-Pop fandom scene and the events that comprise it. Then we'll check out the different ways of K-Pop fandom expression. After that, we will briefly discuss some emerging issues of this phenomenon and to end in a bright note, I will present to you, what in my opinion, are the contributions and/or positive effects of the Philippine K-Pop fandom scene in our society today.

Philippine K-Pop Fandom Scene and Events

Fan Clubs, Online Groups and Text Clans

Like any Hollywood actor or sports idol, K-Pop stars and groups would have their fans club. In the era of internet social networking, it is not surprising that these groups thrive in cyberspace. The internet is the main venue where people of the same fandom meet. They either join existing groups, or in fact create their own. Some are official and highly organized, linked to a real world fan club recognized by the K-Pop stars themselves and their management, and yet some can be very casual, with members joining and leaving when they want, some even change usernames whenever they please, usually bearing the surnames of their idols or “insert idol’s name’s wife”.

Also, there are K-Pop text clans. With cellphone network providers offering unlimited texting promos, fans can always text their fellow fans who are members of their clan.

It is both interesting and important to note that in the Philippines, there is a non-profit K-Pop organization, duly registered in the Securities and Exchange Commission, and recognized by the Korea Tourism Organization and the Korean Cultural Center. The Philippine KPop Committee, Inc. is the first and biggest of its kind and was founded in 2009. It is a conglomerate of 60 different K-Pop fanclubs, two of the biggest being Super Junior United and Cassiopeia PH.

These fan clubs, whether official, real world or online, and text clans, give the fans a sense of community to share their passion with fellow fans or in K-Pop terms, to *spazz*.

Fan Gatherings

The fan clubs or online groups usually organize regular fan gatherings. This is the fans’ opportunity to physically mingle with fellow fans, and *spazz* in the real world. Fan gatherings are usually scheduled to celebrate an idol’s birthday, or debut

anniversary, or any other reason like an upcoming concert or in preparation for a fan project. Fans contribute a certain amount for food and drinks, or for fan projects. They are usually very casual and intimate, with attendees who know each other from previous events or who don't really know each other but become instant friends because they are from the same fandom anyway.

K-Pop Conventions

K-Pop conventions are in effect fan gatherings but of a much bigger scale. They are organized by official organizations or production companies like the Philippine KPop Committee, Inc., KFest Manila Events Management and PULP Live World Production. Unlike fan gatherings that can be done in a small restaurant or in a park, conventions need venues that can accommodate fans by the hundreds. As such, they entail rentals for venue, lights and sound, booths and other logistical concerns. Fans pay an entrance fee.

On stage, there will be various activities like song and dance covers and idol look-a-like contests. In between, there are games and music video viewings. On the floor, there are usually booths for each participating fandom and for merchandise retailers. Korean food and ice cream are sold in the venue. And to complete the vibe, fans wear fandom shirts or even dress up like their favorite idol, or *bias*.

To date, there have already been five K-Pop Conventions and five KFests. Both are done annually. It is interesting to note that the K-Pop conventions have all fandoms represented in one venue, which is not done with other stars of the West.

Fan Meets

On certain occasions, K-Pop idols come to meet their fans for autograph signing or fan interaction. It could be a stand-alone event, or it can happen during a convention or before a concert. The fans get a chance to meet their idols up close and personal. Lucky fans get a handshake, luckier fans a hug and the luckiest

are carried by their idols like a baby. Tickets are usually very pricey, or come when you buy a certain amount at a Korean cosmetic store.

Concerts

The ultimate event for a fan, this is when s/he gets to see his/her idol/s perform live on stage. The fan consummates his/her passion amidst a spectacle of lights and sound. The fan is wowed by the high tech equipment brought in from Korea. The songs and dance routines, costume changes and special effects come together for a total entertainment experience. There is usually a lot of fan interaction and fan service during concerts which give the fans a sense of intimacy with their idols. During the concert, the fans organize a fan project, a cheer banner, a fan chant or special gifts which they take backstage (for those with access), or throw on stage hoping their idols would pick them up and keep them.

Avenues of K-Pop Fandom Expression

Fan Art

Fans with skilled hands love making their idols the subject of their artworks. Some of these artworks are done by hand and others on the computer. There are many examples of these on the Internet; with some having themes that are not for general patronage.

Fan Fic(tion)

Fans who have the talent for writing take their pens and put on paper their fantasies. In the Philippines, an example of a published fan fiction novel is *K-Pop Star and I*, written by J.P. Adrian Dela Cruz.

Memes

Fans also have a sense of humor. Facebook pages like Super Junior Tagalog Memes have been creative enough to juxtapose different pictures of Super Junior and add statements in Tagalog to create funny memes.

Fan Projects

There are different ways of showing your idol that you care – a birthday cake, dried mangoes, a stuffed toy, a scrapbook with messages and Polaroid shots of fans, flowers, and the Korean innovation, a rice wreath. Online communities would post a call for donations for these fan projects and those who would participate deposit an amount of money in a bank or give their donations in a booth during a convention or fan gathering.

Covers

Talented fans sing like their idols, dance like their idols and dress up like their idols. Most, if not all, conventions would always include cover contests in their roster of activities. Actually, this particular K-Pop fandom expression is one aspect that has thrived in the local scene. It has become very popular that there have been events that only showcase cover dance battles and/or K-Pop cosplay. Also, aside from the usual cover artist/s covering his/her/their idol/s of the same gender, there is now what is called “reverse cover” with cover artist/s covering his/he/their idol/s of the opposite gender. It is also interesting to note that although the fans do not mistake the cover artist from their real idols or see them as a replacement, these cover artists also have followers of their own.

Issues on K-Pop Fan Culture

Personal Attachment borderline Obsession

This is not a new issue, as it is shared by all fandoms even when Hollywood was just born. As stated by Samantha Barbas in her book, “Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity” (2001):

“Throughout film history, fans have been accused of a variety of sins. ...They were so infatuated, critics claimed, that they spent hours dreaming about their stars. Perhaps more than anything, they seemed to confuse fantasy and reality.”

Although I have not encountered any definitive study on this matter just yet, there are several small hints on personal attachment when you read fan posts on social networking sites and online groups. The stars make or break their day. As they can be inspirations, they can also be the cause for disappointments and depression.

Fandom Wars

This is not a new issue either. In the Philippines, we have the perfect example – the Nora–Vilma fan war of the 70’s. Fans usually fight over whose idol is better or more handsome. Bashing is not an uncommon activity. After Super Show 5, an EXO fan who wore her fandom shirt during the said concert was swiftly bashed by Super Junior fans calling her disrespectful. Interestingly, there has also been a report about EXO stans bashing the Filipino boy group Chicser.

K-Pop Fandom and Social Status

We can divide this concern into external and internal issues: Externally, K-Pop fans tend to be marginalized by some sectors of society and branded as “jologs”, or of low social status. There was also a joke in Tagalog, “K-Pop, K-Pop-panget” (How ugly!). For those who are knowledgeable of the scene, they should know that this is untrue. In fact, it is the opposite. For a K-Pop fan to keep up with his/her scene – albums, official merchandise, gatherings, conventions, fan meets, concerts both local and abroad, especially in Korea – s/he needs a lot of money.

Inside the scene, there is also a noticeable gap between fans from different social statuses. Some can only afford unofficial merchandise, pirated CD's and DVD's and attend conventions organized in a not-so-popular mall. While some, only buy official merchandise, shipped from Korea, and attend concerts "VIP mode" both locally and abroad. Also, while some fans can be "Team Hotel" or "Team VIP" meaning they will stay in their idol's hotel or have a VIP concert ticket respectively; there are also fans who are "Team Bahay" or those who stayed at home because they do not have money to pay for transportation or tickets.

Gender and Sexuality Issues

With male K-Pop stars defying traditional societal rules on masculinity, does the K-Pop scene provide a safe space for gay fans?

Fans pair up their idols, that is, their male idols. They match them and think they are married or have a relationship. They make fan art of these pairs kissing and making love. On stage, these idols actually kiss each other and the fans are thrilled. I have made an initial investigation on this issue by means of an informal focus group discussion and will be working on further research.

Fangirls, and fanboys, openly announce their lustful desires through their online posts, together with a half naked picture of their idol. They would use phrases like, "I can't even", "why so hot?", or "my ovaries just exploded". Is this online behavior transmitted to the real life of the fangirl or boy? This also calls for further research.

Money Matters

Online groups and fan clubs collect money for membership, ID cards, fan projects, gatherings, etc. Members deposit the money to a private account. If it is payment for merchandise or any clear item, then it is over when you get what you paid for.

But if it is for fan projects, there should at least be a clear report to account for the fund raised and present legitimate liquidation. The fans deserve transparency.

Contributions of K-Pop Fandom to Society

Business / Commerce

Local businessmen import official merchandise or manufacture their own line locally. Whenever there's an event, fans are sure to get t-shirts, bags, light sticks, notebooks, lanyards, button pins and anything with their idol's face or name on it. Most of these stores are online, some with real world stores in malls. The best examples are Fangirlasia and CNA.

K-Pop fandom has created an entire industry: production houses and event management companies; publishers; distributors of Korean ice cream and other food products, fashion and cosmetics; and many other merchandise and service providers.

Community

K-Pop fans find a safe space to *spazz*. They find new people who won't judge their fangirling / fanboying – here, they belong. They can relate with each other's passion. They build lasting relationships with friends to share their lives with, at first K-Pop related and eventually even real life concerns.

Philanthropy / Charity

Most fan projects are philanthropic acts. When the fans send a rice wreath to their idol to congratulate him/her, the rice goes to a charitable institution in Korea. In a recent fan meet during KNation4, K-Pop idol Xander asked his fans to bring donations for victims of typhoon Yolanda instead of a gift for himself.

Proceeds of conventions go to local charity. For example, the Philippine KPop Committee, Inc. gives event proceeds to Gawad

Kalinga and the Philippine Animal Welfare Society. And some fan clubs pool money from their members and donate it to a local charity in their idol's name.

Philippines – Korea Relations

Filipino fans sing in Korean, learning the language in the process, using key words here and there when they speak or post. K-Pop idols learn Filipino words to say, even songs to sing during concerts. But beyond language and music, there is a very important cultural exchange between our two countries which strengthens our ties and promotes mutual cooperation onward to a brighter shared future.

Scholarship

This academic conference is enough proof that K-Pop or the Korean wave in general has not only gathered fans but also scholars from diverse fields and disciplines – humanities and social sciences; communication, sociology and anthropology; cultural studies, diplomacy and tourism, and many others – to develop and generate new perspectives, insights and hopefully, later on, paradigms, that allow us to better understand our own humanity. More specifically, this phenomenon likewise offers a new approach to our understanding of Korea as well as opportunities for research and academic collaboration between Filipino, Korean and international scholars, like our guests from Malaysia and Vietnam who flew all the way to Manila to join this important conference.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Philippine K-Pop fandom scene has truly become a rich aspect of our youth culture. It is both interesting and important to dig deeper into the varied aspects of the local scene and understand how K-Pop is making us Filipinos more internationalized and intercultural in a more and more globalized society.

As one can see from this presentation, there are a lot of areas that need further study. Let this be a call for other scholars, both here and abroad to consider research on these areas and so many other very interesting issues on the phenomenon that is K-Pop, or in the bigger picture, the Korean wave. Let us all work to strengthen Hallyu's place as a legitimate area of Korean Studies and as a vehicle to foster closer relations between Filipinos and Koreans, as what we, the conference organizers, wish to attain in this gathering.

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