



DISSERTATION

# HOW YOU LIKE THAT? THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF K-POP ARTISTS IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

For a long time, the Western music industry was dominated by Western artists. However, in recent years there has been a rapid increase in the popularity and presence of Eastern stars, especially K-Pop artists, breaking through to the West. Thus, the aim of this research is to understand what are the success factors that led to K-Pop's popularity specifically in the West. Factors like reference groups, parasocial relationships, fan communities and user generated content were analyzed in order to understand if these are aspects that have an impact on this increased success. Interviews with 10 fans of this music genre were conducted to gather their perceptions and opinions regarding the topics subject of analysis. Through these interviews it was possible to understand that these fans create a very deep connection not only with their favorite artists but also with fellow fans and that this connection is the main driving force for their consumer behavior and the reason why they choose to support the artist by streaming music, buying albums, and promoting them to others outside of the fan community.

*Keywords:* K-Pop, reference groups, parasocial relationships, community

## RESUMO

Desde a sua origem, a indústria Ocidental da música foi dominada apenas por artistas Ocidentais. No entanto, nos últimos anos, houve um rápido aumento na popularidade e na presença de estrelas Orientais, nomeadamente artistas de música K-Pop no Ocidente. Esta pesquisa visa perceber quais são os fatores de sucesso que levam à popularidade do K-Pop especificamente no Ocidente. Fatores como grupos de referência, relacionamentos parassociais, comunidades de fãs e conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador foram analisados para entender se estes são aspetos que têm impacto nesse aumento de sucesso. Foram realizadas entrevistas com 10 fãs deste género musical para compreender quais as suas perceções e opiniões sobre os temas sujeitos a análise. Através destas entrevistas foi possível perceber que estes fãs criam uma ligação muito profunda, não só com os seus artistas preferidos, mas também com outros fãs e que esta ligação é a principal força motriz do seu comportamento de consumo e a razão pela qual escolhem apoiar o artista através do *streaming* da música, comprando álbuns e promovendo-o perante outros indivíduos fora da comunidade de fãs.

Palavra-chave: K-Pop, grupos de referência, relações parassociais, comunidade

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

IFPI – International Federation of the Phonographic Industry

KRW – South Korean Won

USD – United States dollar

PSI – Parasocial Interaction

PSR – Parasocial Relationship

UGC – User Generated Content



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past, the Western<sup>1</sup> music scene was composed of mainly Western artists some relevant names being those of Adele (Zelner, 2021), Beyoncé (Zelner, 2022), Rihanna (Pascual, 2022) and, more recently, Harry Styles (Dellatto, 2022), who keep on being repeating names within charts across the globe like Apple Music, Spotify and Billboard. For years, artists like these, from the West, topped every chart with foreign acts being mostly left out of the equation. However, in recent years there has been a shift in these dynamics with the South Korean music market having risen to the seventh biggest music market in the world in 2021 (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2022). Here enters the K-Pop genre, which represents South Korean popular music that mixes elements of the Western culture with traditional elements of Korean culture (Kwon, 2017), performed by young adults whose appearance fits into a standardized beauty, these performers epitomize “pop perfectionism” with their catchy songs and addictive dance routines (Lie, 2012). In the last couple of years, two of the biggest K-Pop agencies have seen an increase of worldwide revenue with SM Entertainment registering a growth from 612.23 billion KRW in 2018 to 701.56 billion KRW in 2021 and Hybe growing from 301.37 billion KRW in 2018 to 1,255.93 trillion KRW in 2021 (Statista, 2021).

The current representative for this genre of music is the group BTS who emerged from the Orient and entered the Billboard charts<sup>2</sup> for the first time in 2017 with a debut at number seven on Billboard 200. Since then, the group has climbed higher earning three consecutive number one’s on Billboard’s Hot 100 with the song “Dynamite” and ten number one’s with the song “Butter”. In 2020, the group also became the first act in history to have a predominantly Korean song chart number one on Billboard Hot 100 (Pascual, 2022). After BTS, the gateway for the success of other K-Pop groups in the West was opened, with many more acts following suit and occupying places within Western charts. As reported by Luminate, seven out of the ten best selling CD’s in the US in 2022 were from K-Pop artists such as BTS, TXT, Twice and Blackpink (Caulfield, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the term Western is used in a cultural perspective in reference to countries within Europe and North America as well as the country of Australia which share a set of norms and values (Glück, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The Billboard charts collect data from radio play, physical sales and streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify all over the world, having the Billboard Hot 100, that only counts American data and the Global 200 Excl. US which excludes the United States and counts more than 200 other countries.

In the wake of this increasing success, studies have already been conducted on some topics regarding this genre. Among them, there are studies that dive into the internal factors that make K-Pop successful. These studies focus on factors like production and the casting and training process of K-Pop stars (Kim et al., 2021; Oh, 2013; Shin & Kim, 2013); on distribution, by exploring which channels Korean music agencies choose to diffuse content, and the reasoning behind those decisions (Kim et al., 2021; Lee & Nornes, 2015; Jung, 2014); on the target audience, where K-Pop fans are studied so the industry knows how to direct content to them and what their behavior is like (Sung, 2014; Marinescu & Balica, 2013); and on the product, where the focal point of research is the music and performances produced (Kim et al., 2021; Oh & Lee, 2014).

Other research includes studies about how digital communities build a stronger connection between the fan and the music (Leung, 2012); how the success of the genre has generated a large touristic flow (Oh et al., 2015) as well as the rising popularity of K-Pop with a focus on how it is helping spread the Korean culture worldwide (Li, 2022) and how K-Pop's marketing strategy creates fanaticism by continuously producing content for fans to engage with as a way for them to attach themselves emotionally to these K-Pop artists (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021).

Moreover, previous research on K-Pop has also focused on how this industry evolved when faced with digitalization and the changes that were made that, ultimately, led to the genre becoming more successful globally and establishing certain trademarks that would forever be associated with it and seen as an essential characteristic of K-Pop music (Parc & Kawashima, 2018; Oh & Lee, 2014).

However, as the rise of K-Pop is a relatively new phenomenon, when it comes to the success factors, there seems to be a lack of recent research that is more focused on the consumer perception rather than the logistics of putting a group together. As a result, the aim of this research is to understand what are the success factors that led to K-Pop's popularity specifically in the West. Some aspects this master thesis will be looking into are reference groups, user generated content and parasocial relationships.

Thus, the following research question was developed: What are the factors behind K-Pop artists' increasing success in Western countries?

In order to find an answer to this question and to understand whether these factors (i.e., reference groups, fan communities, user generated content and parasocial

relationships) play a part in the success of the K-Pop genre in the West, this dissertation will resort to interviews of fans living in the Western countries of Germany, Australia, Portugal, United States, Italy, France, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, this dissertation will review some of the literature that has been published regarding topics like reference groups, fan communities, parasocial relationships and user generated content, and present an overview on each topic (see Table 1). These concepts will be explored since they could potentially explain the reason why the K-Pop music genre has seen such success in the Western market in previous years.

### 2.1. Research on K-Pop

The research into K-pop's marketing strategies and effects is not widely extensive, however there have been some studies conducted on this topic, which this dissertation will now review. Some researchers have identified inside traits of the K-Pop industry as being part of the reason why this genre became successful in the West with Kim et al. (2021) highlighting four key factors:

**(i) Producing:** this being the way entertainment agencies have developed and invested money into scouting individuals they see potential in and developing an intensive training stage where the skills of potential K-Pop stars are nurtured and polished (Kim et al., 2021; Oh, 2013; Shin & Kim, 2013).

**(ii) Distribution:** agencies are able to reduce costs and the time for global expansion by using social media and relying on the fans to voluntarily spread the content they consume using various different platforms like Twitter, Facebook and most importantly YouTube, which agencies have recognized as their main distribution channel and, consequently, produce specific content for this platform (Kim et al., 2021; Lee & Nornes, 2015; Jung, 2014).

**(iii) Consumers:** Kim et al., (2021) describe K-Pop fans to be social media and technologically efficient, which facilitates the sharing of opinions online, leading to a quick spread of this genre throughout social media platforms. Moreover, fans are very self-sufficient in the sense that they themselves will organize events such as online fan clubs, dance festivals and workshops if there are no promotions organized by the agencies in their home countries (Sung, 2014; Marinescu & Balica, 2013).

**(iv) Content:** K-Pop music has been able to expand worldwide thanks to the fusion of "Western pop styles with easy melodies that suit the Eastern sentiments" (Kim et al.,

2021, p. 4). Additionally, the grand scale performances with elaborate dance numbers in pair with the ever-changing fashion and styling of the group's members aids in the success of this genre (Kim et al., 2021; Oh & Lee, 2014).

Another aspect brought forward by a different study is fanaticism. Ardhiansyah et al. (2021) concluded that, by continuously engaging in the consumption of content provided by the K-Pop industry, fans find themselves emotionally invested in their favorite groups and start wanting to show support in any way they can. Thus, leading to these fans purchasing albums not only because they need or want it, but also because it's an act that will directly show their support of a K-Pop group since album sales are one of the major factors that dictate success and popularity. Furthermore, attending concerts can also create stronger feelings of fanaticism since the fan is face to face with their favorite artist (Ardhiansyah et al., 2021).

The increasing digitalization of the music industry is another factor that helped in the globalization of K-Pop music. According to a study conducted by Parc and Kawashima (2018), it was concluded that, in comparison with Japanese Pop music, the way the K-Pop industry adapted to new technological advancements and used them in their favor proved vital for their growth overseas and enabled them to surpass other music industries of Asian origin (i.e. Japan). This adaptation consisted in strategies that relied not only on physical album sales but also on digital albums. Seeing as the online community was not only composed of domestic consumers but also of foreign ones, another strategy developed by Korean agencies was to recruit teachers to help singers learn other foreign languages like English and Japanese in order to be able to more easily penetrate those markets. Finally, another strategy highlighted by Parc and Kawashima (2018) was the shift from audio to visual. In contrast with the Japanese industry, which continued using audio as the main support for their music, Korean agencies started developing and solidifying their visual identities by uploading music videos on platforms like YouTube which then led to dancing and intricate choreographies to be one of the most distinguishable characteristics of K-Pop (Oh & Lee, 2014).

## **2.2. Reference Groups**

Throughout the years of literature on this subject there have been various approaches on how to describe and categorize reference groups and, oftentimes, these

categories created by each author overlap with each other taking on very similar definitions. Thus, in order to make a more comprehensive review, this dissertation will work this topic without categorization.

According to Shibutani (1955), the members of a reference group are individuals that share norms and values. These groups allow one to determine the values of a certain community. (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) and are a “point of comparison” someone can look out for (Hyman, 1942; Lin, 2022; Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021). Additionally, reference groups are also explained as being a relevant influence that affects one's behavior, goals, and assessments (Park & Lessig, 1977; Summers & Summers, 2017). Thus, becoming an association in which someone seeks to gain, maintain, or enhance their status and which an individual wants to be integrated in (Merton & Kitt, 1950; Shibutani, 1955).

Dhurup et al. (2013) as cited in Al-Rawabdeh et al. (2021) defined the phenomenon of reference groups at play when the environment they are inserted in significantly influences a person or group's consumer decisions and behaviors. Parts of this environment are one's family, friends, peer groups and work colleagues.

In Park and Lessig's (1977) research, reference groups take place when an individual chooses to associate themselves with a group they deem to be a positive influence for their image, therefore boosting their self-perception. Simultaneously, the individual will choose to detach from groups they deem could have a negative reflection on their image. The groups which an individual chooses to follow the influence of are described as “aspirational groups” and the groups deemed as bad influences can be seen as “non-aspirational groups” (Salmon, 2008). Furthermore, when individuals find themselves inserted in a group, oftentimes they will want to adopt certain outward appearances and behaviors they find represent the group such as hairstyles, clothing, accessories (Groene & Hettinger, 2016).

Moreover, it is through the integration in reference groups that individuals oftentimes derive personal satisfaction and pride (Park & Lessig, 1977). Since the individual is linked to this group their wins are also theirs to feel proud of. One example of this can be the Basking in Reflected Glory effect where a group of fans will feel a bigger connection to their idol following a moment of victory (Cialdini et al., 1976). Bernache-Assollant et al. (2007) illustrate this behavior by analyzing how football fans feel when their favorite team wins a game. What this research discovered is that there is a high percentage of fans that

will see their teams' win as their own and refer to it by using the phrase "we won" instead of "they won", which helps derive the aforementioned pride from association to this group (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Additionally, according to Park and Lessig (1977), for a reference group to have influence over an individual's purchase decisions and, consequently, get them to follow their preferences and expectations, three prerequisites must be met:

- i) The individual recognizes that the group brings compelling "rewards or punishments".
- ii) They believe they will receive recognition and visibility for their behavior.
- iii) They are driven by a desire to receive the reward or avoid the punishment.

When following these preferences, the individual is then shaping their own actions based on the existent expectations of the environment surrounding them (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). According to Beckmann (2021), this conformity is the adaptation of one's personal preferences to those of their peers. One of the factors that heavily impacts the way an individual acts and conforms to an aspirational group's norms and values is the desire to be liked and fit into that grouping (Salmon, 2008) which is rooted in a sense of longing for belonging and acceptance.

In marketing campaigns, aspirational groups are used to appeal to what the consumer wishes to be, which is an image reflected in the form of an actor, singer or athlete when advertising a product. "The purchase and use or consumption of the promoted product are then offered by the marketer as a potential way for the consumer to access the desired social group" (Dimofte et al. 2014, p.416 – 417). It is this desire to achieve what a representative of this aspirational group has achieved (i.e. singer) that makes this form of advertisement effective.

However, seeing their desired self as a reference group's "representative" isn't the only factor that measures into this group's influence and effectiveness. Based on previous research (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; McCall and Simmons, 1978 as cited in Thomas & O'Neill, 2021) the impact of influence these groups have on one's behavior can be explained by two factors:

- i) **Time Invested:** If an individual spends more time being an active member of a group, then it is more likely they will be subjected to a higher degree of influence.
- ii) **Attachment:** The influence of a group on someone's behavior will also be higher, as stated by the authors, if the individual holds their role within the group as a valuable part of their life.

### 2.3. Fan Communities – Fandom

The meaning of fan has been a hard one to define, since it is an ever-changing concept that morphs over time and place (De Kloet et al., 2007). However, one definition is that of Abd-Rahim (2019) who refers to a fan as someone who is passionate about a particular performer, actor, comic book, movie, television show or art. Adding to that, Duffett (2013, p.18) defines fan as:

a person with a relatively deep, positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous, usually expressed through recognition of style or creativity. He/ she is also a person driven to explore and participate in fannish practices. Fans find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked up as fandom.

Furthermore, other research has used terms like “working consumers”, “prosumers” and “brand enthusiasts” to describe those with a passion for a certain type of media content or performer (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Zwick et al., 2008; Ritzer, 2014; Schau et al., 2009 as cited by Fuschillo, 2018, p. 347).

Regarding the term fandom, these are communities that are an “increasingly widespread social and cultural phenomenon infusing many facets of current society and its consumer culture” (Fuschillo, 2018, p. 347). Its members are like-minded individuals connected by a common interest (Hao, 2020 as cited by Edlom & Karlsson, 2021) who actively seek to engage due to their feelings of attachment and loyalty regarding their object of affection - the performer - (Chung et al., 2017; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021) as well as show and reinforce devotion and passion for them through the participation in social practices (Archer, 2021). Due to this nature present in fandoms, in previous research, these behaviors are compared to religious experiences (Löbert, 2012). O'Reilly et al., 2013 as cited by Obiegbu et al., 2019 show that, in regard to music, the investment



and passion fans have for their favored performer, crosses over into their identity in ways that are stronger and more visible than with any other type of brand or product.

Friendship is also a word associated with the concept of fandom seeing as fans will interact with each other through social media channels, nurturing bonds that lead to a deeper emotional connection (Kim & Kim, 2020). Thus, fandoms can quickly become a big part of someone's social circle to the extent of being referred to as extended families for the support and loyalty they provide to members of the same fandom when they are going through severe hardships in their life (Jenkins, 1995).

### **2.3.1. User Generated Content**

User generated Content (UGC) has been described as usually unpaid digital media content created by people who don't work for professional media institutions (Daubs, 2019 as cited in Bolin, 2021) that then proceed to upload it to public social media platforms (Halim et al., 2022). According to previous research, in comparison with sponsored content, UGC has been found to lead to a more favorable brand attitude (Müller & Christandl, 2019) and it is a strategy known for stimulating brand conversation and provide customer insights (Christodoulides et al., 2012). Thus, companies should stimulate users to create content involving the products they are marketing since this will be regarded as more trustworthy by other consumers (Müller & Christandl, 2019).

In previous research, Wang (2020) states that in the digital era it is easy for users, who could also be referred to as fans, to produce and distribute their own content online through social media platforms. The development of digital technologies has supplied fans with a plethora of channels like Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube, in which they are able to engage in content creation, these advances have "fostered the prospect of these creativities within fandom to be spread more easily, quickly and widely than before, potentially reaching more audiences" (Wang, 2020, p. 47) as well as made it easier for fans to interact with each other (Kim & Kim, 2020). However, one downside to UGC is that companies lose the direct control they have over the image of their products and brand as they cannot predict what users will create and can't always moderate this content (Müller & Christandl, 2019).

With UGC enabling the formation of spaces in which fans can be creative and share content with other individuals with similar interests. It opens the possibility for said fans to cultivate a participatory culture. Participatory culture takes place when fans don't

limit themselves to passive receptors, but actively seek out to share and exchange their own creations like art, texts (i.e., fanfiction), or YouTube videos reacting to different forms of content like music videos, or song and dance covers, as well as gathering at physical events like fan conventions (Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). The technological advancements of nowadays, paired with the development of new media channels, have transformed the way media fandoms are created as well as the way they operate. Thus, enabling fans to communicate with one another using different online mediums as well as giving these fandoms an opportunity to grow and expand (Groene & Hettinger, 2016).

## **2.4. Parasocial Relationships**

When research first started being conducted on the relationships an individual has with the celebrities in media, there were two concepts that appeared, Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR), both first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). PSI is characterized as a brief moment in which the audience and the celebrity are in contact and there is a perceived reciprocal social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), for example when an individual is watching an episode of a series on television. Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) add that mutual awareness, attention and adjustment also play a part in PSI by arguing that certain cues like body language, acknowledgement and eye contact from the celebrity to the audience, even if through a screen, can trigger this type of interaction. In other words, PSIs are “a sense of a mutual interaction with the media figure during the media exposure” (Tukachinsky et al., 2020, p. 2).

In contrast, the concept of parasocial relationship derives from a one-sided, intimate relationship a spectator has with a public figure who can be seen as a performer (Yuan et al., 2021), this dynamic is “nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), it is also a long-term attachment that usually starts when a spectator begins consuming media content with a performer and extends beyond the context of media exposure (Dibble et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). In a traditional PSR, the performer is unaware of the spectator’s existence while the latter shows emotional connection, interest and puts in time into this relationship (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

The presence this performer has on one's life will influence how close the individual feels to them and how strong that connection will be (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). If an individual is constantly consuming content in which a specific performer takes part, it is natural that a deeper bond will develop, and the performer will begin to feel more like a friend in the eyes of the spectator (Chung & Cho, 2017; Tukachinsky et al., 2020) since PSRs tend to "mimic real life social relationships in notable ways" (Bond, 2018, p. 3). Even though individuals can be aware that these PSRs are not the same as real life relationship dynamics they have with their peers, they still feel psychologically real and of importance (Derrick et al., 2008). This can be explained by how the brain has a difficulty distinguishing between reality and media (Restak, 1991 as cited in Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Kanazawa, 2002).

Thus, when the spectator starts including the performer in their daily life, a further meaning is given to them since a pattern of intimacy is being created and the spectator truly believes this celebrity is their friend. The "fan" comes to believe that he "knows" the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216). This intimacy is what can lead to a growing attachment to the performer (Thomson, 2006) and the admiration one has for a public figure can even go to the extent that they will try to emulate them by changing the way they dress and behave (Chen, 2014; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Kowert & Daniel, 2021) as well as have an influence on the way they identify themselves, their lifestyle and behavior (Tian & Hoffner, 2010 as cited by Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, parasocial experiences have different effects on the way the fan consumes the content the celebrity is promoting. These relationships often increase the satisfaction the fan gains through the consumption of media content which stars the celebrity (Xiang et al., 2016); they can help the audience member concentrate (Yoo et al., 2016) and additionally, not only make the audience member go back to a certain media content (i.e. a television show), but also get the fan to dedicate more time and spend longer periods of time consuming the celebrity's content (Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016 as cited by Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Nowadays, with the presence of social media, these relationships have evolved to be of a more interactive nature (Chung & Cho, 2017), with spectators being able to have short interactions with the performers through comment sections of livestreaming platforms (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). Social media has also made it easier for PSRs to flourish in the

modern day, since celebrities posting on these platforms could be the foundation that may aid in the development and maintenance of this connection (Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Aw & Chuah, 2021). As voiced by Tukachinsky et al. (2020), "...interactive media that affords an active participation experience rather than mere spectatorship should foster greater involvement with the media figure" (Tukachinsky et al., 2020, p. 7).

Despite these opportunities for interaction, according to previous research, even when the performer fails to reciprocate the attention the spectator gives, the relationship won't be broken and the spectator will still follow their favorite performer (Crawford et al., 2020 as cited in Kowert & Daniel, 2021). This can be explained since PSRs are mostly experiences that occur in the imagination of the fan and can be independent of interactivity given by the celebrity and not suffer much if this type of attention is lacking (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Throughout the existent literature, researchers have found specific aspects that are responsible for fostering a stronger PSR:

- i) **Attractiveness:** Bond (2018) states that PSRs are alike real-life relationships in the fact that someone is more inclined to form a connection to a person they consider attractive. Attractiveness being influenced by perceived social, relational, or physical attributes (Schiappa et al., 2007). A higher level of attractiveness can increase the intensity of the PSR (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011).
- ii) **Similarity:** Schiappa et al. (2007) defines similarity as the acknowledgment of shared, meaningful characteristics between individuals and Bond (2018) states that, in comparison with interactions between individuals with no similarities, interactions between similar individuals can hold a greater personal relevance, which can then result in more satisfaction. More similarity between the celebrity and the audience can lead to a stronger PSR (Yuan and Lou, 2020).
- iii) **Empathy:** Empathy is an emotional reaction triggered when one is faced with someone else's' emotions, generally one would have to feel some sort of connection or identification with another person to feel empathy for them (Zillman, 2006). The more empathetic reactions a fan has towards the

celebrity they like, the higher the positive impact it will have on the PSR (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). In other words, empathy has a crucial role in the development of PSRs (Derrick et al. (2008). The more empathy felt, the stronger the PSR.

- iv) **Low Self-Esteem:** Communication between a fan with low self-esteem and a celebrity can reinforce the PSR when the fan starts feeling confident and comfortable in this interaction, it may even be beneficial in the sense that the fan can “recover their self-esteem” (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, p. 35). Furthermore, individuals that suffer from a low self-esteem may use these PSRs to make up for the lack of inclusion they feel in real life settings (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

These aspects often work in conjunction with each other to form strong PSRs. For example, when an individual with low self-esteem is faced with a celebrity they find to be very similar to their own ideal selves, the empathy they feel towards that celebrity will be stronger, leading them to form a deeper connection (Derrick et al., 2008). Thus, if these aspects are present in the dynamic between fan and celebrity it is likely that a strong PSR has been formed. Consequently, it is also more likely that they will be interested in purchasing the products that this celebrity is launching or promoting (Yuan and Lou, 2020; Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

**Table 1. Topic’s Overview**

Subject	Review
Reference Groups	<p>Individuals who share norms and values (Shibutani, 1955).</p> <p>Allows individuals to determine the values of a certain community (Escalas &amp; Bettman, 2005).</p> <p>“Point of comparison” someone can look out for (Hyman, 1942; Lin, 2022; Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021).</p>

	<p>Relevant influence that affects an individual's behavior, goals and assessments (Park &amp; Lessig, 1977; Summers &amp; Summers, 2017).</p> <p>Association in which someone seeks to gain, maintain, or enhance their status and with which an individual wants to be integrated in (Merton &amp; Kitt, 1950; Shibutani, 1955).</p>
Fan Communities	<p>A fan can be passionate about a particular performer, actor, comic book, movie, television show or art (Abd-Rahim, 2019).</p> <p>Fandoms are communities that are a "social and cultural phenomenon" which encompass various facets of current society and the behavior of the consumer (Fuschillo, 2018, p. 347).</p> <p>Its members are like-minded individuals connected by a common interest (Hao, 2020 as cited by Edlom &amp; Karlsson, 2021).</p> <p>They seek to engage due to their feelings of attachment and loyalty regarding their object of affection - the performer - (Chung et al., 2017; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Edlom &amp; Karlsson, 2021).</p>
User Generated Content	<p>Unpaid digital media content created by people who don't work for professional media institutions (Daubs, 2019 as cited in Bolin, 2021).</p> <p>Technological developments have given fans various channels where they can upload they self-made content to a wider audience (Wang, 2020).</p> <p>Fans don't limit themselves to passive receptors, but actively seek out to share and exchange their own creations (Mohd Jenol &amp; Ahmad Pazil, 2022).</p>
Parasocial Relationships	<p>One-sided, intimate relationship a spectator has with a public figure who can be seen as a performer (Yuan et al., 2021).</p>

	<p>Long-term attachment that starts when a spectator consumes content of a performer that extends beyond the context of media exposure (Dibble et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2020).</p> <p>Individuals can be aware that these PSRs are not the same as real life relationships, yet they still feel psychologically real and of importance (Derrick et al., 2008).</p> <p>The presence the performer has on one's life will influence how close the individual feels to them and how strong their connection will be (Aw &amp; Labrecque, 2020).</p>
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### 3. METHOD

The aim of this research is to understand what are the success factors that led to K-Pop's popularity specifically in the West. The research question to be answered being: "What are the factors behind K-Pop artists' increasing success in Western countries?". Thus, the present chapter will focus on describing the qualitative process of primary data collection chosen and how this data will be analyzed.

As mentioned before, the data that was collected for this dissertation was of qualitative nature which, according to Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p.1-2), allows the researchers to:

"Gain a better understanding of phenomenon through the experiences of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon, recognizing the value of participants' unique viewpoints that can only be fully understood within the context of their experience and worldview. The value of this approach to empirical research is that it provides a richer, deeper understanding of the meanings that people place on actions, events, and relationships."

Regarding the method used to collect data, this was in person and online semi-structured interviews with K-Pop fans located in different Western countries (see full transcription:<https://docs.google.com/document/d/18e1YxGGY2rMMXEYH3ViZY97YiPq1H1DGpitFciVxDY8/edit>) According to Legard et al. (2013) an interview is a form of conversation that, although not very similar to an everyday exchange between two or more individuals, is fluid by nature and emulates an interaction through which knowledge is obtained (Rorty, 1980 as cited by Legard et al., 2013).

The subjects for the interview were 10 K-Pop fans that reside in the countries of the USA, Australia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and France, from the ages of 17 through 27, all of them being of the female gender (see interviewees' data on Appendix 1). Apart from residing in a Western country, the only other requirement was that all of the interviewees were born and raised within the Western culture as to not have any Eastern cultural bias towards K-Pop music. In order to reach out to them and set up the interviews, different social media channels like Twitter, Tiktok and Instagram were used to privately message each fan, explain what the aim of the research was, and ask if they would like to participate by scheduling a meeting to conduct the interview. The interviews with fans from countries outside of Portugal were set up via Zoom meetings and screen-recorded,



while the one with a fan from Portugal was voice recorded for posterior transcription. The method used to transcribe the recordings was the Word dictate tool, which listens to the recordings and transforms them into text.

The questions asked were prepared before the interviews took place and were put forth in a personable and informal manner which allowed each interviewee to freely express their opinions and experiences of being a K-Pop fan in the West (see the interview guide on Table 2). Some additional questions were asked to some of the interviewees when more context or further explanation was needed regarding certain points brought up by the fans. This qualitative data collection method allowed for a more in depth understanding of the topic at hand and to bring to light some success factors that had not been previously considered and could be further explored in the future. The interview guide followed the themes approached previously in the Literature Review such as Reference Groups, Fan Communities, User Generated Content and Parasocial Relationships (see Appendix 2)

Following the transcription of the interviews, the data gathered was organized into different tables, one for examples of the interview content (see Appendix 3) and one for every topic approached during the interview process (see Appendixes 4,5,6,7 and 8). This method aided in the understanding and in the analysis of the experiences and opinions shared by the interviewees.

**Table 2. Interview Guide**

Subject	Questions
<p>Overview of K-Pop’s Success</p>	<p>What are some of your favorite groups?            What do you think of the success K-Pop has gained?            What do you like the most about K-Pop?            In your opinion, what are the things that made K-Pop famous in Western countries?            What are the differences between K-Pop artists and Western artists?            What are the similarities between K-Pop artists and Western artists?            Do you think these differences or similarities help explain their success worldwide?            Can you describe what being a fan means to you?</p>

	<p>How did you become a fan?</p> <p>Can you walk me through what it is like to be a fan of a K-Pop group in a day-to-day basis? i.e. how often do you check in for updates, posts, interact with other fans, etc.</p> <p>Are there any facets of K-Pop you identify with the most?</p>
Reference Groups	<p>How have these artists inspired you or motivated you to pursue new interests?</p> <p>How is your interest in K-Pop affected by your relationship with other people?</p> <p>How does your interest in K-Pop affects your relationship with other people?</p> <p>Can you describe the dynamic between K-Pop fans?</p> <p>How do other fans inspire you?</p> <p>In what way has your interest in K-Pop influenced your relationship with your friends?</p> <p>What does your family think of your interest in this genre?</p> <p>In what way has your interest in K-Pop influenced your relationship with your family?</p> <p>How do you feel about products endorsed and promoted by your favorite groups?</p>
Parasocial Relationships	<p>Can you describe the connection you feel to your favorite K-pop artist?</p> <p>Why do you think that connection exists?</p> <p>Is there any member of the groups you like that you think is very similar to you? In what way?</p> <p>How does that make you feel closer to them?</p> <p>Have the groups you like helped you in any way throughout your life? How?</p> <p>If there were no livestreams, messaging apps and online interactions with a group would you still feel a strong connection? Why?</p> <p>How would you describe your responsibilities as a fan?</p> <p>Is there a “give and take” dynamic within this relationship? If so, why do you think it is important to give back?</p>
Fan Communities	<p>In your opinion, in what way does being part of a fandom add to the experience of being a fan?</p> <p>To you, how important is it belonging to a fan community?</p> <p>How do you think your identity has been shaped or influenced by fellow fans?</p>
UGC	<p>What kind of content do you create on your social media account?</p> <p>Have you ever promoted your favorite artists’ projects online to people that may not be fans? If so, in what way?</p>

	<p>How do you think the exposure to fan content would impact a non-fan?</p> <p>How do you think the connection you feel with your favorite artists would change if you didn't have access to content created by them or other fans?</p>
<p>Additional Information</p>	<p>Do you have anything you would like to add?</p>

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Overview of K-Pop's Success

Regarding the initial, more general questions, the interviewees all had positive feelings regarding the increasing success of K-Pop music in the West, some pointing out how these artists, who have worked and trained for years, deserve to see their craft receive public attention and acclaim and others describing how refreshing it is to see more diversity in the Western scene. When asked what aspects they like the most about this genre, most of them pointed out how, in K-Pop, the focus is not solely on singing, but also on dancing and putting on a performance which, to them, is more interesting to watch. Some interviewees further explained how, in this genre of music, storylines are attributed to each group that follow them throughout their careers and connect their music videos creating a continuous story that is more interesting for them to watch. At this stage, some of the interviewees also mentioned how they were most drawn to the interactivity between K-Pop artists and their fans and explain how that is a trait they value a lot.

When asked why they think this genre became popular in the West, some point to the same aspect of performance in conjunction with singing and dancing mentioned previously, as well as how different the promoting strategies are. According to Liza, they "go on music shows almost every day for a month where they perform their new title track with different outfits and sets, they do reaction videos on YouTube, photoshoots, challenges on TikTok, interviews and other appearances on variety shows," and all this content is what sets them apart from other Western artists. Other interviewees pointed to a bigger "intimacy" with their fans as an explanation of this recent success, explaining that most people don't get into K-Pop because of the music, but instead because of the artists themselves, their personalities, and relationship they have with fans.

In regard to the similarities between Western and K-Pop music, most interviewees, brought up the Western influence the K-Pop genre intrinsically has in its sound, which they described as potentially being a reason as to why it is easy for the Western audience to digest and, in consequence, a factor that could have helped in making K-Pop more popular. Furthermore, when asked about differences between Western and K-Pop artists the answers were similar to the aspects that stick out to the interviewees as their favorite aspects about K-Pop, these being the dynamic between fan and artist, the complexity of

storytelling through music, the engaging personalities of the artists themselves, and the high budget, intricate live performances.

Faced with the question of what it means to be a fan, the interviewees explained that this could mean a plethora of different things. From streaming music, to buying albums and merchandise, to merely enjoying the artists' craft and supporting them with words of encouragement. Additionally, most of the interviewees added that they first became fans of this genre through other friends' recommendations, the rest becoming aware of it through K-Pop videos that appeared on their social media accounts.

Finally, regarding the initial questions, when asked about similarities they see between themselves and the K-Pop genre, most pointed to dancing as being what draws them to it, singing and the fashion being factors that also come into play for some of the fans.

#### **4.2. Reference Groups**

Reference Groups which, as it has been expanded on previously in the Literature Review chapter of this dissertation, are communities composed by individuals who share a set of values and norms (Shibutani, 1955) and who can use each other as a guide on how to behave and assess a situation (Hyman, 1942; Lin, 2022; Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021; Park & Lessig, 1977; Summers & Summers, 2017).

Regarding this category, when asked about the influence that some of these reference groups (i.e. family, friends, peers and fans) exert on the interviewees' interest in the K-Pop genre, the answers were varied. To most of the fans, negative outside opinions do not affect how they feel about K-Pop and their interest for it, Félicie stated "I like what I like and that's my business, it doesn't matter what others say." However, if the outside opinions are from friends that also like this music genre, their opinions have a positive influence on the fans: "By talking to them I feel even more excited about things," explained Jessica. Moreover, most of the interviewees stated that one of the effects K-Pop had in their relationships with others is how they have either been able to meet new people and establish new friendships through this interest, or strengthened some of their already existent friendships, since they now share another passion that bonds them together. As Nathalie stated, "even my non-K-Pop friends have been getting into K-Pop because of what I've shown them, and my coworkers also find it interesting."

Regarding the effect of K-Pop in their family dynamic, there were mixed answers that all generate the same end result. Some fans mentioned how, even though their family

did not understand this interest, this did not affect the relationships they have. Others mentioned how their parents also started listening to K-Pop with them and talking to them about it, but how that didn't influence the relationship they had to begin with. Thus, these answers point to no major influence in the relationship between parents and children derived from the latter's interest in K-Pop.

Moving on to the relationship between fans, all the participants referred to it being mostly a positive and supportive space where they can talk about their love for K-Pop with others which makes them feel more engaged as fans and nurtures a fun environment where they can theorize and be excited about new releases together. However, some mentioned how there can also be a tense relationship between fans of different groups when each party gets defensive over the artists they favor to the point of starting arguments with fans of other artists or shaming those that like a multitude of groups instead of just one. As Sofia explained, "if you like, for example, five different groups, you're called a "multi" and people assume you won't be as loyal and defend your group from hate when it comes down to it. Or in voting for awards, they'll assume you'll have to throw a group under the bus for another one which is kind of sad." When asked if this affects the way they feel about belonging to that fan community or being a fan of that artist, the interviewees stated that despite this negative aspect they didn't have any intentions of stepping away with Jessica saying it may even be an aspect that influences fans to support their favorite artists even more, "obviously, fights are bad and childish, but I also think that aspect of competitiveness between groups and fandoms is what makes us so protective and driven to prove others wrong and achieve more things."

All of the fans interviewed mentioned being inspired and using both the artists they like and their fellow fans as aspirations in their lives: "They've inspired me to become a better dancer myself. I look at their efforts and training schedule and feel more motivated," said Melissa, who then goes on to explain how she organizes events where fans get together and dance along to the choreographies of different groups, she then added that other fans also inspire her to pursue her objectives, "they are very passionate and positive so it's nice to be surrounded by them. And interacting with them constantly inspires me to put my everything into the things I'm also passionate about especially as I said the events that I organize." Other fans mentioned being inspired by characteristics like resilience and hard work of artists and fans alike.

#### 4.1. Fan Communities - Fandoms

In short, fan communities are spaces composed of likeminded individuals who are all connected by an interest they may have in common with one another (Hao, 2020 as cited by Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). Due to these feelings of attachment and loyalty towards their favorite artists, these individuals seek to engage with each other (Chung et al., 2017; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). Thus, fan communities start to form.

Regarding how being involved in fan communities, also known as fandoms, affects the experiences these fans have, they mentioned it brings an additional element of fun since they can share their thoughts and be excited about upcoming releases with similar individuals who also share an interest for the same artists: "When you're inside the fanbase, you get to know the ins and outs, the secrets, the inside jokes, all this stuff that feels really special and exciting," Tanner explained.

When asked about how important it is for each of them to be involved in a fan community there were varied responses. Some talked about how it could be important in the sense that it helps with being up to date on new information while others mention how being in a fanbase is a "support system" (Emma) and an "online family" (Sofia) that makes them feel less alone. Furthermore, according to Jessica, "it's my safe space where I feel like I can trust the people around me and be myself without any restraints.

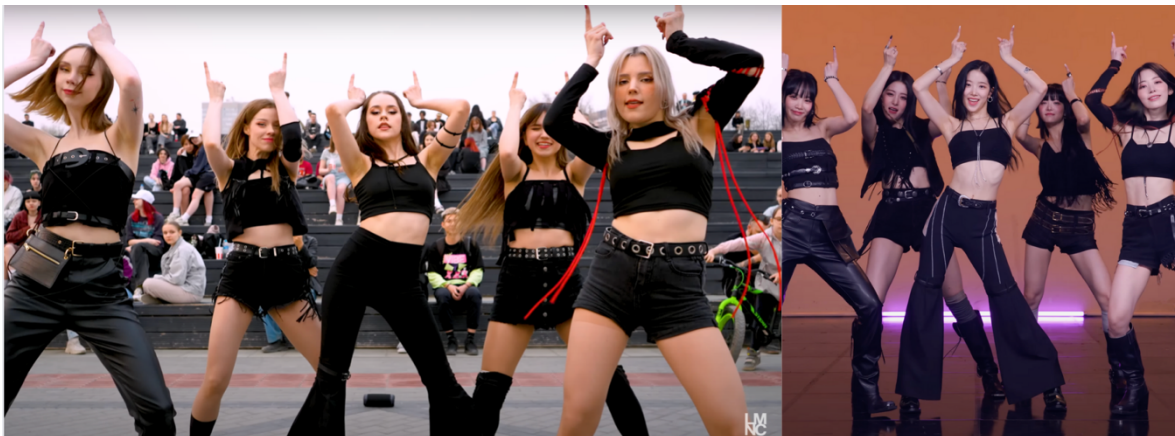
All the interviewees then go on to talk about how their identities have been shaped due to the influence of the fans they surround themselves with. A common theme was that of confidence, with some of the fans explaining how the support they receive from those around them in these fandoms have made them gain a bigger sense of self-esteem and motivated them to step out of their comfort zones. "They've made me become a more open person, I used to be super closed off but by seeing them be so creative and loud about what they like, it's made me want to be more like that as well," said Valentina.

Another common aspect these fans mentioned was how the way they present themselves outwardly has changed because of other fans. "I'm always looking for inspiration in others and I think I've made some changes to how I dress and hairstyles I do based on other fans." (Sofia); "Maybe if you crossed me on the street, you'd be able to tell that I'm a K-Pop fan just by looking at me" (Melissa).

## 4.2. User Generated Content

User Generated Content, which according to Daubs (2019) as cited in Bolin (2021), can be defined as unpaid digital media content created by people who don't work for professional media institutions. This act of content creation is something all the fans interviewed practice in their own respect, some focus on video-based content and create edits to upload onto platforms like TikTok or record their reactions and opinions on everything K-Pop related or even dance cover to K-Pop songs and post them on YouTube (see Image 1). While others use their Twitter accounts to voice their thoughts on recent releases and anything that might be happening within the fanbase.

**Image 1. K-Pop Dance Cover and Original Dance Side by Side**



Source: LUMINANCE on YouTube / M2 on YouTube

When asked if they had ever promoted their favorite K-Pop artists, once again, all the interviewees said that they have either done it unintentionally or intentionally. Unintentionally, the user generated content fans post on social platforms, has the possibility of reaching people that are not fans of K-Pop, but could become interested by having that first contact with the genre through the fans: “Sometimes I get comments of people being like “I don't know how this landed on my *for you page* but I'm not complaining” because they're not a K-Pop fan but then they start asking the name of the person in the edit,” explained Sofia. Worthy of notice is how this interest born out of interacting with fan content is how many of the interviewees became interested in the genre in the first place.



In contrast, there are also intentional initiatives by the fans to bring attention to their favorite artists' projects. Jessica stated how, sometimes, the fanbase collectively tries to garner the attention of music industry professionals: "We tweet at radio stations and try to get them to play K-Pop songs, so they get radio play and place better on charts." Additionally, some of the fans interviewed also explain how they take opportunities such as writing comments promoting an artist's latest release under posts that have gone viral on Twitter in order to get the attention of a bigger audience.

Regarding the consumption of fan content by non-fans, the consensus between these fans is that exposure to this type of content could make others that have never heard of the K-Pop genre become intrigued enough to, subsequently, research more about it and become fans as well, "I think fan content is one of the most important things to capture the attention of other people," said Emma.

Lastly, in regard to whether they would still be as connected and engaged as fans if they were not able to consume fan made content, the general answer was that they would not. They recognize that this connection could still be there in certain cases, but it would not be as strong. Liza stated that, for her, it is the element of community that keeps her engaged: "I think I would be much less involved and present as a fan. By having people to talk to like that, I find myself a lot more engaged." Some of these fans also point out that, without having watched fan content, they would not have become fans in the first place. Thus, there is a strong tie between fan content and being introduced to the K-Pop genre.

#### **4.3. Parasocial Relationships (PSR)**

Briefly, a PSR is formed when a fan starts consuming media content featuring a performer beyond the context of media exposure, which then nurtures the development of a long-term, one-sided connection with said performer (Dibble et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Usually in a PSR, the fan shows an emotional connection, interest and invests time into the relationship, while the performer is not aware of the fan's existence (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). When asked about the connection they feel towards their favorite K-Pop artist the interviewees use "comfort" and "stability" as two words to describe what it offers them. "A connection that brings comfort and happiness into my life," stated Nathalie, while Jessica also mentioned, "it's this feeling of comfort, they bring elements of stability into my life." Additionally, they refer to these artists as people who

appreciate and care about them mutually and genuinely: “Sometimes they’re like friends, even though they don’t know I exist,” stated Beatriz.

When trying to explain the reason for this kind of relationship to be built between them and the artists they are passionate about, the fans point to the intimacy that exists derived from interactivity and add that this relationship exists because there is an effort from both parties, the fan, and the artist. Moreover they, once again, mention how there is a reciprocal gratitude and care between both parties as well as and interest from the artists’ side to build a substantial relationship with their fans.

Regarding similarity, which is one of the factors that helps nurture PSRs, the interviewees stated that there are certain artists they feel closer to because they see similarities between them. Each fan mentioned they either share a personality trait or a life experience that they feel bounds them and their favorite artist together. In contrast, Tanner mentioned that, even though she relates more to one member of her favorite group, her favorite is the one she is least alike: “I feel like I’m not super similar to her. I think that might be why I like her so much because she’s like the total opposite.” When asked how that similarity makes them feel closer to their favorite artist, a few fans, once again, mentioned how it makes them think of them as friends, as someone they can look up to and follow as a role model as well as a person who would understand their struggles and past experiences since they share some similar characteristics. Nathalie added that it makes her feel more protective: it makes me feel a little more protective over him and I always want to be there for him because I know that’s how I’d like others to treat me.”

When talking to these fans concerning the support these artists may have given them throughout their lives, all of them mentioned how their music and general content have been a huge help in getting them through harder periods of time. “If I’m in a dark place mentally and feel really demotivated, I can always count on them to make me feel better, even if it’s just by watching one of their livestreams.” (Sofía); “They have made me feel more comfortable with myself and their content and music has just made me really happy” (Valentina); “I started liking K-Pop in the middle of the pandemic and it was a time where I was very isolated and to have all these groups that post content so often on YouTube and release so many lives and videos it made me feel less alone” (Emma).

In terms of their responsibilities as fans, what exactly these entail differed from fan to fan. Some of the interviewees stated that their responsibility relied on being respectful of

their favorite artists' privacy and boundaries as well as protecting them from online hate and sending out encouraging words of support, while others focused more on how important it is for a fan to vote for awards, stream their music and buy their albums.

They also agree that there is a "give and take" dynamic within the fan-artist relationship by saying that showing support for the work the artists do, balances the relationship. Others stated that, "They work hard to give us a product which we both would enjoy, so we as fans have to acknowledge their effort by engaging with it" (Beatriz); "I think it's a give and take. I think that they give so much that it's necessary for us to give back so they know that we are enjoying what they're doing, and their efforts aren't in vain" (Félicie). This feeling of wanting to repay the artist for the work they put in, was clear throughout all the fans' replies as one of the most important factors as to why they should show so much support.

Lastly for the topic of PSRs, the fans were asked if they would still be as strongly connected to their favorite artists if they were not able to have any sort of online interactions with them. According to the big majority of the interviewees, since it is the interactivity that builds the relationship they have with these artists in the first place, if this ceased to exist, they would not have gotten so attached and that connection would not have grown so strong. Félicie said: "So much of K-Pop has to do with kind of giving this idea that they are our friends, and I know that is what happens but still, I always believe that they are really our friends and they care, so if there weren't these livestreams and stuff I don't think I would feel as strongly because they wouldn't be able to share so much of their lives with us." Jessica echoed the sentiment: "If those things didn't exist, they'd never be able to share half the things they do that make me love them so much." Nathalie was the only one to express the contrary: "I know I would still have a good connections with those groups cause back then we didn't have many of those things anyways and I still was very into those groups."

#### **4.4. Final Thoughts**

Finally, when asked if they had any final thoughts they would like to add regarding the topic talked about during the interview, three of the interviewees had something to share.

Emma and Sofia both explained how others should not judge the K-Pop genre as a whole without first taking the time to explore what it actually entails, “People shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, and they shouldn’t judge K-Pop as a whole based on one or two songs that they’ve heard” (Emma); “If people don’t know what K-Pop is or have never listened to it, they shouldn’t judge it based on their own preconceptions of what it could be. Give it a listen, and you might be surprised you actually find something you like” (Sofia).

Liza, on the other hand, took the opportunity to put forth the name of her favorite group by suggesting other people listen to them when trying to first get into K-Pop, “I think more people should give K-Pop a try, and if they do decide on that, they should listen to Stray Kids, they have music for everybody in their discography.” For clarity, Table 3 summarizes the findings from the interviews.

**Table 3. Findings’ Overview**

Subject	Review
Overview of K-Pop’s Success	The interviewees feel as though this success is deserved and are very supportive of it. The main motivators for the success, in their opinion, are the multidimensional performances, intimacy and interactivity, different strategies and Western influence. While it was difficult for them to name similarities the differences between Western and K-Pop artists were many, from the dynamic between artist and fan, complexity of storytelling in music to the personalities of the artists. To the interviewees, being a fan means supporting the artists both emotionally and financially as well as enjoying their music.
Reference Groups	The negative opinions of people from outside the fan spaces do not have any effect on how fans view K-Pop. However, if the opinions are positive and come from friends, they will have a positive impact. The relationship between fans is a supportive one that builds excitement and allows them to have a group of individuals with whom they can talk about upcoming releases. Even if there are some negative aspects or fights between fans, this does not have any detrimental influence over the support they show to their favorite artist, in some cases it makes them feel even more

	<p>motivated to achieve new goals. There is a lot of inspiration that fans get, not only from each other, but also from the artists, that makes them feel more inclined to constantly try to better themselves.</p>
<p>Fan Communities</p>	<p>Fan communities bring an additional element of fun since fans can share their thoughts on K-Pop releases with like-minded individuals and these communities are valuable to fans since they become an online family and a support system. The individuals in these fandoms also heavily influence each other's identities mainly through the nurturing of self-esteem as well as outward appearance, such as way of dressing and hairstyles.</p>
<p>User Generated Content</p>	<p>All the fans interviewed have promoted their favorite artists in the past through posting and sharing UGC in different social media channels to incite curiosity in non-fans. Some have also participated in activities to try and garner attention and further success for their favorite artists. Furthermore, interacting with UGC is one of the main factors that keeps fans engaged and connected to the K-Pop genre.</p>
<p>Parasocial Relationships</p>	<p>The connection between fan and artist is described as one that brings comfort and stability, the fans see these artists as their own friends. One of the reasons for this, is the interactivity between both parties that makes fans perceive the artist as someone who reciprocates their care and gratitude. Another reason why a PSR builds between fans and artists is the similarities they share, as well as the way an artist and their craft helps the fans throughout their lives. The fans see this relationship as one where they also need to show support to the artist as sign of encouragement and gratefulness for the work they put in.</p>
<p>Final Thoughts</p>	<p>Fans are of the opinion that, before judging K-Pop in its entirety, individuals should first explore the genre and listen to its music and then come to their own, more informed conclusions.</p>

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results that were found through the analysis of the interviews were compared to the previous literature done on its respective subjects in order to highlight what points converge and are in agreement, which go against what has been studied and what additions can be made through this thesis.

### 5.1. Overview of K-Pop's Success

Beginning with the Overview of the Success K-Pop has had in the past years, the results showed that a lot of these fans value the fleshed-out storylines each music video portrays as well as the multidimensional performances K-Pop is known for, which falls in line with previous research conducted by Kim et al. (2021). This can be explained by the shift in strategies proposed by Parc and Kawashima (2018), who state there was a shift from relying mostly on the audio form to a more visual centric approach. Additionally, as the authors Oh and Lee (2014) propose, K-Pop industries started solidifying their visual identities by posting on channels like YouTube, which is when choreography became an essential part of this genre and one of its most well-known characteristics, which explains why it has become one of the most valuable aspects for the interviewees.

In harmony with what the authors Kim et al. (2021) and Oh and Lee (2014) explain, the interviewees highlight the grand scale performances mixed with singing and dancing as one of their favorite facets of K-Pop, as well as acknowledge that the Western influence on this genre is what helps general audiences digest this music more easily. This thesis advances the research on K-Pop by underlining the importance fans give to interactivity between them and the artist as a way to build intimacy.

Moreover, as stated by Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021), and supported by the interviews in the dissertation, the culture of fanaticism built by consistent engagement with the artists' content and the artists themselves is what makes fans want to support them in any way they can. Through the interviews, the dissertation is also able to expand on the positive influence that social media platforms, such as Twitter, have on purchasing behavior and streaming, since fans want their artists to chart well and reach new achievements so their reputations on these platforms do not falter. Furthermore, also stated by Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021), environments like concerts can create stronger feelings of fanaticism since the fan is faced with their favorite artist. Relevant in the support of this idea, is the interviewee

who recalled crying from heightened emotions when attending the concert of her favorite K-Pop group.

## **5.2. Reference Groups**

Regarding Reference Groups, the results of the interviews revealed that, by being in contact with fellow fans, the interviewees feel more engaged and connected to the artists and their projects, which is in line with Dhurup et al. (2013) as cited in Al-Rawabdeh et al. (2021), where the authors explain how being inserted in a reference group has a big influence on one's consumer decisions and behaviors.

In accordance with Park and Lessig's (1977) research, which describes how individuals choose to associate themselves with a group which they deem to be a good influence and can help them boost their self-perception, all the fans interviewed mentioned being inspired to grow or acquire certain qualities because of the other fans they surround themselves with. Thus, playing into this concept of "aspirational groups" mentioned by Salmon (2008), in which individuals follow the lead of those they see as good influences. An example of this are the fans who said they started working out because of the artists they like and see as inspirations, or those that started dancing because they felt influenced by other fans.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, the interviewees also talked about how they started to look at the individuals that surround them that also are interested in K-Pop, for inspiration on how to present themselves in terms of clothing and hairstyles, and how it is likely other fans of the genre would recognize them as fellow fans based on how they look, almost as though they are wearing a uniform or badge that represents this interest. This ideology, mixed with fans taking inspiration from others to start pursuing new hobbies, goes along with Groene and Hettinger's (2016) research that describes how, once inserted in a group, individuals will adopt outward appearances and behaviors that they think represent the group they are in.

Through the Basking in Reflected Glory effect (Cialdini et al., 1976), previous research on Reference Groups also shows that oftentimes individuals derive personal satisfaction and pride in the wins of those they are supporting (Park & Lessig, 1977) which also happens with fans of K-Pop as described by some of the interviewees who mentioned being proud of the fanbase they belong to because of the awards and achievements their

favorite artists have reached. Interestingly, and in addition to the already existent research (Dhurup et al., 2013 as cited in Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021; Park & Lessig, 1977; Summers & Summers, 2017), the interviews with these fans showed that the interaction with members of the fandom can heighten the excitement and engagement these fans feel and, therefore, influence their consumer behavior. On the other hand, the opinions of outsiders don't seem to have much of an impact at all.

In regards to the amount of time invested in the artist and attachment felt toward them as a measure of a group's influence in the consumer, studied by Burke & Reitzes (1991) and McCall and Simmons (1978) as cited in Thomas & O'Neill (2021), the interviewees all spend a considerably high amount of time consuming and interacting with K-Pop content which exposes them to a higher degree of influence since, as stated by the authors, the more time spent in the reference group, the higher the influence. Additionally, the fans also deem being part of this group as an important facet of their lives, which plays into the attachment mentioned by the authors, who state that when the value an individual attributes to their presence in the group is higher, they will feel more attached and, consequently, more influenced. Hence, the high influence fellow fans have in other fans' lives and consumer decisions.

In contrast with previous research by Dimofte et al. (2014), using K-Pop stars as the faces of product advertisements and as representatives of aspirational groups does not always seem to be very effective according to the interviewees. Through the mixed responses, it can be seen that, despite feeling proud of their favorite artists for having the opportunity to partner with a brand, these fans do not always feel compelled to purchase the products they are endorsing due to pricing and inaccessibility.

### **5.3. Fan Communities**

In regard to fan communities, the idea that fans can be seen as "working consumers", "prosumers" and "brand enthusiasts" by Cova and Dallı (2009), Zwick et al. (2008), Ritzer (2014) and Schau et al. (2009) as cited by Fuschillo (2018, p. 347) is corroborated by what the interviewees mentioned not only as their responsibilities – streaming the music on various platforms, buying merchandise and concert tickets – but also the way they advertise their favorite artists on social media out of their own free will simply because they want to see them succeed even further. This passion for the artist also influences the fans and, as seen in the Findings chapter of this dissertation, they start to



take inspiration from their favorite artists in different facets of their lives. This goes hand in hand with the idea that the investment and passion in a musical product – artist – creates a stronger impact on the consumer – fan – than any other type of brand or product (O’Reilly et al., 2013 as cited by Obiegbu et al., 2019).

Furthermore, an essential aspect inside fan communities are the friendships that are created between its members. The interviewees refer to the individuals that make up the community they are inserted in as “online family” and a “support system” as well as the community in general as a place where they can truly be themselves, which supports the ideas of both Kim and Kim (2020) and Jenkins (1995) who explain how, within these communities, fans create deep bonds with each other and become an important support system in one’s life.

In addition to the previous research by Groene & Hettinger (2016), through the interviews that were conducted, it is also possible to state that, not only do fans have an influence on each other regarding their outward appearance, but it is also through this support they give each other that aspects such as confidence and self-esteem can be nurtured and grow stronger in each individual. This, once again, will help bond fans together and make them a valuable asset in each other’s lives that will influence various behaviors but, most importantly for this thesis, their consumer behavior by intensifying their excitement for new releases and launches.

#### **5.4. User Generated Content**

As explained in previous chapters, with the advancements of technological tools, Korean music companies have started to rely heavily on fans as a driving force for global expansion through posting user generated content on different social media platforms, i.e. Twitter and YouTube (Kim et al., 2021; Lee & Nornes, 2015; Jung, 2014). K-Pop fans are described by Sung (2014) and Marinescu and Balica (2013) as technologically savvy and self-sufficient which is in par with what the interviews showed of these fans’ characters. It is also worth noting that all interviewees are from Gen Z, which explains where that comfort with technologies originates from, since that is a generation who has been using different technological tools from a young age (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). They use this dexterity to promote their favorite artists freely across different social media platforms or by creating fan projects to further induce engagement, namely on Twitter, TikTok and YouTube, and actively look for ways to turn other people into fans in order to expand the artist’s success.

Moreover, and in addition to the already existent research by Groene and Hettinger (2016), Kim and Kim (2020), Wang (2020) and Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil (2022), through the study conducted in this dissertation, it is possible to add that user generated content is one of the key factors that lead to individuals becoming fans of K-Pop. Thus, with this knowledge, fans take matters into their own hands and produce content that they know can captivate the attention of individuals who are not yet interested in this music genre, becoming those “working consumers” mentioned previously. Furthermore, the creation of content is also one of the main aspects behind fandom and the building of a community. It is through this fan made content that each fan first connects with others and from then builds a rapport that leads to a deeper relationship. Once again, this deep connection within the community is, in part, what leads fans to have a higher engagement with the content produced.

### **5.5. Parasocial Relationships (PSR)**

In regard to PSRs, much like Dibble et al. (2015) and Tukachinsky et al. (2020) describe, these relationships are long term, with fans being invested and supporting their favorite artists for years; and they begin developing beyond the context of media exposure, meaning the fan not only consumes content made by the artists when it is released, but goes deeper and rewatches this content and gets involved in fan activities. The fans interviewed all showed that they feel an emotional connection to their favorite artists and dedicate their time into this interest however, usually, the performer stays unaware of the fan’s existence, such as what Kowert and Daniel (2021) and Schramm and Hartmann (2008) explain.

Through the descriptions of the interviewees’ daily routines as fans, it is appropriate to state they choose to set aside a considerable amount of time to focus on this passion they have for a performer or group which, according to Chung and Cho (2017) and Tukachinsky et al., (2020), is what nurtures a closer bond and makes the fans think of these artists as friends. Moreover, the findings of this thesis also correspond with those of Horton and Wohl (1956) who describe how this daily inclusion of the artist in the fan’s life, which all the fans interviewed practice, is what builds an intimacy between them. According to Chen (2014), Schramm and Hartmann (2008), and Kowert and Daniel (2021), this attachment is what leads the fan to try and mimic the artist through their appearance and behavior, which is exactly the case for K-Pop fans who look for clothing inspiration in singers or start

changing their lifestyle, i.e. working out more often because of what they have seen their favoured artist do.

Although individuals may be aware of the difference between a PSR and a normal, real-life friendship, they still see this dynamic as important in their lives (Derrick et al., 2008). This author's idea is supported by how the interviewees describe the connection they feel towards the artists they love as comforting and an added stability in their lives, as well as by stating how it has brought them happiness during hard times while, simultaneously, being aware they are not in fact friends, though it feels that way, or even being aware that they are in a PSR but still seeing this dynamic as valuable.

Being in a PSR often heightens the satisfaction the fan gains through consuming media the artist stars in (Xiang et al., 2016) which also explains the intense feelings of connection felt by these fans and that overwhelming happiness mentioned throughout the interviews upon being in contact with the artists either through videos or by attending concerts.

In addition to Kowert and Daniel (2021), Aw and Labrecque (2020), Wellman et al. (2020), and Aw and Chuah's (2021) studies that show how PSR's now have the ability to flourish more easily due to modern technologies such as livestreams and social media posts, this dissertation found that connection through these media platforms is one of the essential factors that establishes this deep bond between fans and artists. This is illustrated by the fans explaining how, without these interactions, they would not have had the opportunity to get to know their favorite K-Pop artists well enough to create a strong connection with them. This contradicts Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) idea that the fan does not suffer from a lack of interaction with the artist.

Most of the interviewees additionally expressed how they feel they are similar to their favorite artists in many different aspects and how this strengthens the connection they feel towards them, which is a concept previously studied by Yuan and Lou (2020). However, and in addition to the literature, the opposite also held true to one fan who feels more deeply connected to an artist that is the complete opposite of her, which perhaps suggests that a total contrast between both parties may spark a deep interest and lead to a strong connection as well. Regarding empathy, which is a factor Hwang and Zhang (2018) and Derrick et al. (2008) consider important to building PSRs, the authors explain how the more empathy felt towards the artists, the stronger the PSR is. These empathetic reactions were

tangible throughout the entirety of the interviews, such as when the fans acknowledge the work the artist has done and want to repay it by giving them their time and resources; through their desire to show emotional support; and through the proactivity they exhibit when rallying together to promote the artists simply because they want to see them succeed. Lastly, in regard to self-esteem, many of the fans mentioned how helpful their favorite K-Pop artists were in making them feel more comfortable and confident in themselves this, according to Hwang and Zhang (2018) is, once again, an aspect that nurtures a PSR.

## 6. CONCLUSION

With the rapid speed at which K-Pop is gaining popularity in the Western market, various studies have been conducted regarding this topic with the objective of understanding the root of this success, however not much had been studied regarding consumer perspective and its influence on K-Pop's popularity. Thus, the aim of this research was to understand what are the success factors that led to K-Pop's popularity specifically in the West, focusing on aspects like reference groups, user generated content, fan communities and parasocial relationships. This dissertation analyzed qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with fans of K-Pop from different Western countries to understand their perspectives and experiences concerning this genre of music and its popularity.

The present study findings suggest that all of the factors subject of analysis (i.e. reference groups, fan communities, user generated content and parasocial relationships) indeed account for some of the success K-Pop has found in the West. When becoming a fan of a K-Pop group, most individuals are exposed to the behavior of other fans which they learn, and later conform to, much like the authors Beckmann (2021), Salmon (2008) and Deutsch and Gerard (1955) explain in their research. Through this study, it is possible to add to the literature that conformity also comes in the form of participating in fan led activities such streaming parties, voting for awards or buying albums, which some of the interviewees referred to as their responsibilities. Moreover, this study converged with that of Hwang and Zhang (2018) in finding that, once inserted in a fan community, an individual bonds with other fans and creates strong relationships that will influence their identity positively which will then make fans see each other as important assets. The present study develops this concept in finding that this trust and comradery, paired with the common passion for K-Pop music, makes fans want to turn to each other to share their thoughts regarding new artists releases in a way that increases their excitement, therefore also changing their consumer behavior positively. It is within fan communities that fans create content regarding their favorite artists and share it through different social media platforms (i.e. Twitter, TikTok, YouTube), just like Groene and Hettinger (2016), Wang (2020) and Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil (2022) suggest in their studies. This initiative is born not only out of the desire fans have to create, share content on a topic they are passionate about and grow the community,

but also, as seen through this study, out of an active desire to see their favorite artists gain more success and visibility. Hence, fans tag radio shows on social media and ask them to play K-Pop songs; trend hashtags to bring attention to an artist's projects; make dance covers or reaction videos and upload them to YouTube; or make video edits with catchy songs to garner the attention of non-fans, which they hope will become interested in K-Pop.

Lastly, it is through the continuous contact and inclusion of the artist in the fan's life that a deep, one-sided connection is nurtured between them, such as what has been described by Yuan et al. (2021). Furthermore, this study adds that interactivity is a characteristic of being a K-Pop fan that is very valuable and a crucial factor that keeps individuals strongly connected to the artist, which diverges from Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) idea that a lack of interaction does not affect the fan. In addition, this study complements the existent research by adding that it is because of this relationship that the fan feels responsible for supporting the music and other projects that the artist releases, and sees their relationship as a "give and take", where they get to repay the love they feel the artist has for them through engaging with their content.

After seeing that these four factors account for some of the success K-Pop has had in the West, this study proposes that music companies and even independent artists in the Western market should also create a product (i.e. music videos, rehearsal videos, vlogs or even variety shows) that allows for open discourse between fans, as well as posterior content creation. This will not only strengthen the relationship between fan and artist, but also expand the reach of the artist with the help of user generated content being posted online. It is also important for companies to highlight to their artists the importance of creating a feeling of intimacy between them and the fans through posting about their daily lives, taking time to do livestreams where they talk to fans in a more personal setting and nurturing the relationship that is being built between them and the fans.

### **6.1. Limitations and Future Research**

Like many studies, this research presents some limitations. Firstly, this study chooses to analyze only four factors that have led to the recent success K-Pop has had in the West, therefore it cannot rule out that other aspects have contributed to the popularity the genre has acquired among Western fans, it can simply provide insights into how these four aspects – reference groups, fan communities, user generated content and parasocial

relationships – have helped the expansion of K-Pop in the Western music scene as seen through the fans' perspectives.

Secondly, since this study only focuses on the nature of K-Pop music and its fans, there is a limitation in regard to comparing its success to, for example, the success of Western Pop music and how fans of that genre interact with those artists. In the future, a comparison between these two types of music and their fan cultures could be developed as to define the differences and similarities behind the success of both genres. The exclusively qualitative nature of this study could also have resulted in some limitations since there was a smaller sample of results to be analyzed. Future research could expand on this study by conducting a focus group where fans are free to discuss their experiences and perspectives in a manner that may lead to further knowledge on the four success factors subject of research or a quantitative data collection with a wider number of participants.

Additionally, time constraints were another limitation that led to some of the topics that the interviewees brought up to not be further studied, such as the difference between cultures and how that characteristic establishes curiosity among fans and a brings out a desire to learn about, in this case, Korean culture. This approximation through difference that also affects consumer behavior is an aspect that could be developed and analyzed in future research. Another suggestion for future research is the benefit of storytelling through music videos that has been mentioned throughout this study, as it seems to be a factor that a lot of the fans connect to and appreciate and something that may contribute to online engagement.

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**APPENDIX**

**Appendix 1. Interviewees' Profiles**

N° OF INTERVIEWS	INTERVIEWEES	RESIDENCE (Country)	GENDER	AGE
E1	Emma	Netherlands	Female	19
E2	Félicie	France	Female	20
E3	Nathalie	USA	Female	27
E4	Liza	Poland	Female	17
E5	Melissa	Germany	Female	22
E6	Jessica	Australia	Female	23
E7	Valentina	Italy	Female	20
E8	Tanner	USA	Female	23
E9	Sofia	Spain	Female	21
E10	Beatriz	Portugal	Female	22

**Appendix 2. Interview Content - Categories**

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CATEGORY DESCRIPTION	CODE
Overview of K-Pop	Thoughts on K-Pop's success Favorite aspects Success Factors Differences and Similarities between K-Pop and Western artists	Opinions regarding K-Pop and their interest for the genre	OV

	Becoming a fan Identifying traits		
Reference Groups	Inspiration from artists Peer’s impact Family’s Impact Friends’ impact Fan dynamic Inspiration from fans Product endorsements	Impact of outside entities on the interest in K-Pop	RG
Parasocial Relationships	Connection with artists Similarities between fan and artist Impact of K-Pop on fans’ lives Connection without interactivity Fan responsibilities Give and take dynamic	Impact of the connection with K-Pop artists on the interest in K-Pop	PSR
Fan Communities	Impact on fan experience Importance of fandom Other fans’ impact on identity	Impact that being integrated in a fan community has on being a fan of K-Pop	FC
User Generated Content	Content creation Online Promotion Exposure to non-fans Connection without UGC	Content Creation techniques and how that impacts fans and non-fans of K-Pop	UGC
Additional Information	Any additional information regarding K-Pop	General perception regarding K-Pop	AI

### Appendix 3. Interview Content - Examples

CODE	EXAMPLES
OV	Félicie, France: “I think that it has every single element to succeed so I think it was just a matter of time and I’m very happy that it's happening now.”  Emma, Netherlands: “I like how they talk a lot to the fans and are very interactive.”

	<p>Sofía, Spain: “I like that more people are discovering all these groups and they are getting the recognition that they deserve.”</p> <p>Jessica, Australia: “And then obviously you have the personal side where you have all these artists with such different qualities to them and they’re very active and engage with their fans very often.”</p>
RG	<p>Melissa, Germany: “I have brought K-Pop into many of my friends’ lives, and it has helped me to bond with other people that also like this type of music and allowed me to make way more friends.”</p> <p>Nathalie, USA: “I try not to let others affect my interest. I’ve been into K-Pop for more than 11 years now, and I’m still into it just as hard as when I first started.”</p> <p>Liza, Poland: “Their dedication to what they are passionate about inspires me.”</p> <p>Valentina, Italy: “It’s fun to watch their dance practice videos and they try to dance along with them.”</p>
PSR	<p>Jessica, Australia: “They show so much gratitude it’s hard not to feel like you’re truly being seen and appreciated.”</p> <p>Emma, Netherlands: “I think that connection just keeps getting stronger all the time and it’s very very nice to share that with an artist. I really feel like they care about me just as much as I care about them.”</p> <p>Tanner, USA: “Because they do give us good music and we have to prove it with the streams, we have to prove it with helping them out too.”</p> <p>Beatriz, Portugal: “It’s kind of funny to admit this, but sometimes they’re like friends, even though they don’t know I exist. When I’m sad I listen to their songs and feel at ease.”</p>
FC	<p>Nathalie, USA: “It definitely makes it more fun to be in a fandom and relate to others that also love your favorite groups as much as you do.”</p> <p>Sofía, Spain: “In so many occasions it has made me feel less alone, it’s like I have an online family rooting for me so it’s something I treasure.”</p> <p>Tanner, USA: “When you’re inside the fanbase, you get to know the ins and outs, the secrets, the inside jokes, all this stuff that feels really special and exciting.”</p> <p>Beatriz, Portugal: “It makes you feel seen and understood, because there’s other people with similar points of view and tastes like you.”</p>

UGC	<p>Valentina, Italy: “It could turn them into a fan if they like whatever they saw, I think it’s one of the ways people start liking K-Pop.”</p> <p>Emma, Netherlands: “In the replies of viral tweets that aren't even about K-Pop we're always kind of trying to promote our groups and talk about them.”</p> <p>Liza, Poland: “Once you see the artists from someone else’s point of view and discover them in a more human light, you are bound to be drawn to them.”</p>
AI	<p>Emma, Netherlands: “People shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and they shouldn't judge K-Pop as a whole based on one or two songs that they've heard.”</p>

#### Appendix 4. Table of Content - Overview of K-Pop's Success (Interviews)

Questions	1. Favorite Group	2. Thoughts on K-Pop's success	3. Favorite Aspects	4. Success Factors	5. Differences
Emma	<p>“My favorite is probably Itzy and then I also really like Twice, I really like BTS and some of the older ones like EXO and Seventeen”</p>	<p>“I think it's really cool that there's more diversity now and there are different styles of music becoming more popular. I think it's nice to have that variety and I think it's also really nice because idols work really hard and they're now finally gaining the success that they deserve.”</p>	<p>“I really like how flashy it is, I like the colors and I really like the concepts that they have. I also love that they dance as well as sing when they're performing which is something that I find really cool and I like how they talk a lot to the fans and are very interactive.”</p>	<p>“I think it's, like I said before, the combination of the things that they do. I think because they dance, their performance gets heightened and it's much more complete than I would say western artists. I also think that it's the way that they talk to fans and are always so available, it's really nice and I think it's something that western artists don't really do.”</p>	<p>“It relies a lot on the interactivity and all the activities that they do to incorporate it. (...) It's just very interactive and they go live a lot to just talk to fans and answer questions and some of them do like different types of lives like dance lives or cooking lives and it's a lot of fun to just hang out with them and I think western artists don't really do that a lot so yeah.”</p>
Félicie	<p>“I think my favorite is called Enhypen and then I also really like TXT.”</p>	<p>“I think it's really cool. It's not very surprising to me, I think that it has every single element to succeed so I think it was just a matter of time and I'm very happy that it's happening now.”</p>	<p>“I like the music I think it's very upbeat and it makes me feel very energized all the time and it makes me feel happy whenever I listen to it and also the idols themselves always make me feel really happy.”</p>	<p>“I think it's how different they are from everything else. I think people sometimes need to be exposed to different cultures for example and that makes them appreciate them more and be more interested in learning about them. I think also it's the music videos that are so high budget and also the way that the idols talk with the fans.”</p>	<p>“One of the things that I like the most about K-Pop artists is how much they give us when they release an album, I used to be a really big fan of western artists and their albums only come with a CD and a little photobook that is only like 5 pages. With K-Pop artists you get an album that has not just a CD, but it has stickers, it has sometimes bookmarks, it has a whole photobook with like 30 pages, it has the photocards that you can collect which I think is very fun.”</p>
Nathalie	<p>“I like some of the older ones like EXO, SHINee, LOONA, SNSD, NCT and tripleS.”</p>	<p>“It's crazy and amazing to see how far K-Pop as come globally. Back then, it wasn't cool at all to listen to K-Pop and now it's more acceptable and there's merch everywhere but I'm still surprised to see it on TV or hear it in a regular basis.”</p>	<p>“The high music quality, the group dynamic each group has, how they get along with each other, the inside jokes they share with us fans and the personality these idols have.”</p>	<p>“I think it was a bit of a chain reaction that began with BTS, people started gaining an interest because they were doing something different, a group of boys dancing and singing on stage and then it went from there.”</p>	<p>“Definitely the way they present themselves and how songs are lyrically and concept wise. K-Pop idols are a lot more clean cut and careful with their image compared to Western artists but at the same they are also more present within the fandom spaces.”</p>

Liza	"I really like Stray Kids, they're my all-time favorites."	"I'm happy that the genre has taken off however, if you actually dissect the genre's success, you will find that there are still a lot of groups that still aren't getting the recognition they deserve so I hope in the future all those group will have their time to shine."	"The choreography and story-based music videos and discography. Everything about the visual aspect of K-Pop is really pleasing to the eye and it's really hard to get bored of it since there's always something new."	"I believe that BTS and Blackpink's sudden increase in popularity is to thank for the rise of K-Pop in the West and they did it by showing this other side of the industry that they also have something to offer in terms of performances that had never been seen before."	"The music videos are complex and meaningful, they have a story from start to finish and they usually keep adding onto that lore throughout their careers. The promotions are much better, there's also many more album inclusions, not just the CD, there's the photocards, the posters, letters from the members, signature and so much more, it depends on the artist."
Melissa	"My most favorite one is called Seventeen and then after them probably Astro, Up10tion and Monsta X are also ones that I really like."	"I think it's very admirable, I'm really supportive of that success and I'm rooting for these groups to achieve new heights and keep expanding their fanbases globally."	"I love how versatile it is. It's so easy sometimes for others to put K-Pop into a box and only see it as one specific thing but there are so many genres within K-Pop you could probably find something for everyone."	"How different it is. Not even necessarily in terms of the sound and music but everything else surrounding it. I think when people talk about K-Pop idols it's never just about their music, it's also about their personalities and how they interact with fans and how friendly and personable they are. That's very important to the genre in my opinion and it's probably what made it stand out so much in comparison to other musicians."	"K-artists are less involved in drama and are role models to their fans that can present as like, someone to look up to and follow the path of unlike western artists, which sing about controversial topics and use explicit or derogatory language in their songs. You won't find that in K-Pop at all."
Jessica	"I prefer the girl groups, my all-time favorite is Mamamoo, I also really enjoy G-Idle and Le Serafim."	"I love how it's becoming more mainstream. These idols work so much and so hard, sometimes I even think more than Western artists, so they deserve all the success they're receiving right now."	"I really like how diverse it is, there are so many groups with so many different concepts and vibes, (...) so if you invest some time in looking into them, you'll definitely find something you enjoy. And then obviously you have the personal side where you have all these artists with such different qualities to them and they're very active and engage with their fans very often."	"I think it's a mix of things. I think it came at a time where there were no big active boybands and I think it's because of how different their music was and how different their way of promoting it is compared to western artists. As I said, there's a whole more personal side, there's more intimacy between a K-Pop artist and their fans than a Western artist."	"Well, that intimacy I would say. I don't think you see a Western artist going live as often as a K-Pop idol (...) and during these livestreams they open up a lot to their fans and share pieces of themselves with us that they wouldn't otherwise. That really makes you start building a rapport with them and then you have everything else that they do. Personally, I think their variety shows really help introduce people to their personalities and then you stick around for the rest."
Valentina	"I like Enhypen and Ateez the most."	"It's very promising to me because I have a lot of people around me that don't understand it so I think it's a good thing and it makes me very excited for the future."	"The way that dancing, singing and performing are combined. That's such a normal thing in the industry, it's very impressive to me because most Western musicians only sing."	"How different they are from everything else, from their styling to their performances, it's something that hasn't existed in the West in a while I think."	"The combination of dancing, singing and performing instead of only singing is probably the main obvious difference and then all the extra content that they do, the appearances and additional shows that they make, the vlogs and also the behind-the-scenes videos they post on their YouTube channels."
Tanner	"I really like Twice, I like Itzy and I like Le Serafim, these are probably my top three."	"I think it's really cool (...) I like that we're able to kind of break some language barriers and still get into music. I think it's really special."	"The community of it all, this sense that we're part of something bigger and obviously the music and the dance as well."	"I feel like they do a really good job of keeping up with current trends and they never fall behind with them so I feel like the second something starts trending they're on it and if it didn't just start trending, they started their own trend and then it comes over here a little bit later."	"I think the way even just the live music of K-Pop is different, it's very different than usual pop music, because I'm a super big pop fan in general but when you go to a K-Pop concert it's a different kind of energy, it's like a better environment, very positive."
Sofia	"I love a lot of them but my favorites right now are Ive and New Jeans."	"I'm very happy about it. I like that more people are discovering all these groups and they are getting the success that they deserve."	"How fun everything is, there's always so much content being put out that you never feel bored. I also love the different concepts each group has"	"Probably how distinct is it especially in terms of performance like the way they dance for example, you could see a Western group and a K-Pop group performing side by	"Definitely the way they interact with fans is very different. I think western artists like I don't know, Harry Styles or Billie Eilish, they don't really talk to fans that much, they have social media but a lot of the times that's

			and their music in general.”	side and you would immediately be able to tell which one is which. I also think that (...) all the content they give fans makes them not get bored and walk away and also helps them build a stronger relationship with fans.”	managed by other people. When it comes to idols, they have not just social media but also other apps like livestreams and <i>bubble</i> which is like a messaging app, where they directly talk to fans. I think to me that’s the main thing that sticks out.”
Beatriz	“Probably NCT, BTS, Tomorrow x Together, Seventeen, and EXO.”	“It’s incredible how so many people fell in love with this genre even though it’s all in Korean. (...) I also think most of this success also came because of their presence on social media and the fans’ dedication. (...) I’m just glad they are getting the attention and love they deserve.”	“I love the music videos (...) Often the groups follow like really intriguing storylines throughout their discography, which make us want to know more and more. The choreographies are also usually are really catchy and fun to learn.”	“The way K-pop agencies do their marketing for every time an artist releases something new is literally perfect. There’s always tons of content to watch (...) people just feel compelled to navigate this whole universe.”	“I feel like the music industry is kind of saturated and there is no imagination to create new things. But K-pop songs have more of a unique color to them and are more experimental. Also, while Western artists go for longer periods of time without updating or releasing music, there’s always something going on in the K-Pop world.”

Questions	6. Similarities	7. Differences and Similarities as explanation	8. Fan meaning	9. Becoming a fan	10. Fan Routine	11. Identifying aspects
Emma	“I think they both put a lot of effort into their music and more and more I think that Western artists are starting to also put more of their budget into their performances and the outfits that they perform in which is fun so yeah I think in terms of their craft they’re very similar.”	“I think that it’s nice to be able to follow someone and feel like they also care about you and are grateful towards the efforts that you put into supporting them so that interactivity really plays a lot into how people feel about these artists and maybe why they are more attached to them than western artists.”	“Being a fan to me means supporting them in every way that I can. So buying their albums and also buying their merch and buying concert tickets and streaming their music videos and their songs. And also being there for them and supporting their choices.”	“I became a fan because of a friend, she was super super obsessed with BTS a couple years ago and she wouldn’t stop talking about them and trying to get me to watch the music videos so I did eventually and I just I just thought they were very different from everything and then it kind of went from there.”	“The first thing that I do when I wake up in the morning is go on Twitter and see from my timeline if there have been any like updates (...) Then throughout the day I usually keep checking Twitter or Instagram to know if there are any updates and also I really like to tweet out certain things and interact with other fans. When I get home from school usually I go on YouTube and I watch their videos.”	“I really like to sing so I’ve always really loved other singers and I appreciated their work so I think it’s really nice to be a fan of people that you are inspired by and they really inspire me in that way.”
Félicie	“I’m not sure there are that many to be honest, besides the fact that they make music I don’t know, I can’t think of any.”	“I think it’s easy to get bored when you’re listening to the same things over and over again so I think it was time that something different came along and that’s why it’s so popular.”	“It means listening to all their songs and getting to know them and supporting them with their music and streaming and also supporting their activities and loving them of course.”	“I was on TikTok and I saw this really funny video of one of the members of TXT and I thought it was hilarious and I wanted to know where that was from (...) I saw people talking about their names and stuff so I then went on YouTube and found out more about that group.”	“Basically whenever I have time (...) I am on TikTok or Instagram and I try to see if there are any news or any new releases, any videos dropping and I try to keep up with them as much as I can because I don’t really want to miss anything.”	“Probably the dancing, I used to do dance when I was little and then seeing these groups it only made me want to start dancing again, so I feel like that’s the most similar thing that we have.”
Nathalie	“K-Pop tends to use Western music trends in their works so definitely the sounds can become very similar between both types of artists.”	“I think the similarities can help K-Pop become more consumable to non-K-Pop fans and the differences help K-Pop stand out as its own powerful genre with very likeable individuals.”	“Being a fan means supporting your idols and not being ashamed of the genre. Enjoying the music to the fullest and just having fun with your favorite groups.”	“My cousins showed me SHINee and SNSD since I was originally more of an anime and J-Pop fan and after that I was sucked into the K-Pop rabbit hole.”	“I usually check Twitter often for any updates and fan content on my favorite groups. (...) And then I just listen to the music on my way to work everyday. Some days I learn dances for my dance crew and I’m also a K-Pop content creator with my wife for Youtube and for conventions.”	“I identify with the dancing, the music, the fashion, honestly every aspect of K-Pop I identify with.”



Liza	"Their obsession over looks and looking "perfect" all the time. That's pretty universal with celebrities of any kind."	"By giving the West something they're familiar with, as opposed to only things they aren't used to, I think it's much easier for them to get through to the western market."	"Being a fan can mean anything, from just listening to the artists' music to buying all of their merchandise and attending their concerts and everything in between."	"I was introduced to K-Pop by one of my friends, and ever since then I've been a fan."	"I do spend most of my time on Twitter and I use that to catch up with new content and things that I've missed throughout the day."	"I would say the way certain groups like Stray Kids for example, are able to make social critiques through their music and be vocal about what they believe in."
Melissa	"The music itself (...) can be very similar since a lot of K-Pop groups work with Western producers."	"How different idols and Western artists are in terms of personality and how they present themselves to fans."	"I really couldn't imagine living without knowing K-Pop and what my life would look like."	"I was just scrolling through my YouTube homepage (...) ever since then I've gotten into other groups and fell in love with the genre."	"Practice their choreographies at home. I organize K-Pop random dances and K-Pop classes in my free time as well which is a lot of work but also fun."	"Definitely dance."
Jessica	"I think there's some Western influence in their music, it's different enough to be its own thing but similar enough to not be a super stark contrast."	"I think since K-Pop creates these relationships and attachments it's easy for people to feel very passionate about this type of music and the idols and stick around and ask for more."	"It means I have a safe space to fall back onto, and people to talk about a special interest of mine with and be excited about things."	"I was scrolling through Tiktok and saw an edit of one of the girls of the group I really like, her name's Hwasa and I wanted to see more of her and then got more and more into it."	"I usually check their social media platforms like in the morning, chat with my mutuals about them on Twitter, look up videos of them if there's a new episode or new videos in general, I'll watch them in my lunch hour, I listen to their music, and post about them."	"Maybe the fashion, I really like how they dress, and their makeup as well."
Valentina	"Doing what they love mainly."	"I think because K-Pop works in a different way than Western music, it intrigues people (...) so it gains more attention from the population in general."	"Supporting the artist for their music and talent by listening to their albums and watching the content they make for us."	"Because of my friends who were into K-Pop, (...) eventually I got curious and searched it up on YouTube."	"I mostly use Twitter to talk to fellow fans of the groups I like (...) I also have Tiktok and spend a lot of my free time watching edits that other fans make on there."	"The singing, I love singing and one of my biggest dreams is to be able to do that as a career."
Tanner	"I think there's a lot of similarities with sound lately (...) they're sort of adapting and making their sound a little more Western."	"I think it being different and something we don't hear a lot has also helped."	"That excitement before every new release (...) staying up (...) for the release hours and (...) supporting them physically by buying the albums and going to the concerts. it's just making sure you're having fun with the music and also the artists."	"I was on Twitter and I saw this video of this girl dancing and I was like "Oh my God who is she?" (...) I found her name and I watched the video over and over and over again and then I realized she was in a group called Itzy so I listened to their music (...) and then from there it didn't stop."	"Always checking Twitter because (...) I wake up to release announcements (...) and then I also sell and trade the photocards, so I check that account in the morning just to see if I've gotten any messages about that."	"I grew up as a competitive dancer so I feel like watching them dance is still super inspiring (...) and I just love to hear some good vocals (...) Also, the fashion (...) definitely inspires me to dress better."
Sofía	"The music itself has a lot of Western influences so that's one similarity. I also think the way they all make art in some way, I like to believe that transcends cultures."	"The Western influence probably makes it easier for people of that culture to be introduced to the music, at least certain songs and then I think the way the idols present themselves makes you want to stick around for more."	"Being a fan means supporting your favorite artist, that could be either by streaming their music an watching their music videos or contributing to other things like sales, or even fundraising for fan projects."	"I was on Tiktok and saw an edit of a member of a group called TXT and I though he was really funny so then I stalked them a little bit and started liking that group and ever since then I started getting into other ones as well."	"The first thing I do after I wake up is check Twitter to see if there were any updates (...) throughout the day I'm pretty active in checking Twitter (...) and then at the end of the day when I get home from work is when I catch up on their YouTube videos and all of that."	"The fashion, I love watching their performances and seeing what they wear so that after I can go on Pinterest and create <i>inspo</i> boards and check stores to see if I can find similar clothes."
Beatriz	"Basically, they sing. I don't think I can compare them in any other way."	"We're always consuming some form of media and K-Pop gives us a lot of addicting and visually appealing content to watch. This content they make, combined	"Being a fan means supporting an artist or a group of artists because I like what they put out and relate to	"I saw BTS performing in 2017 at the AMA's and was so impressed with them. I searched their name on YouTube and started listening to their songs, which then led to wanting to know more	"Usually I check Instagram first, to do a little update on everyone. Throughout the day I hop on Tik Tok and that's where I get most of my information on what is going on with each group. If I need to understand something in	"I used to be a dancer so it's really interesting to hear about the process of creating their choreographies and their struggles. Also, through their livestreams (...)

		with their talent and funny and relatable personalities is the key to their success, in my opinion."	them in some type of way."	things about each member, watching interviews and edits of funny moments."	more detail, I run to Twitter and that's basically it."	some idols are really open about their mental health so hearing about their experiences can be really like comforting and helpful."
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### Appendix 5. Table of Content - Reference Groups (Interviews)

Questions	1. Artists as inspiration	2. Peers' affect	3. Interest's affect on peers	4. Fan dynamic	5. Fans as inspiration
Emma	"See these people that you really like and be like "Oh maybe I can be like that someday and I can reach all these things that they've also reached if I keep working hard." I feel like fashion is a newer (...) but seeing how they dress (...), it made me really interested in also trying to go for that look and aesthetic."	"The friends that I have that also really like K-Pop, they keep me updated as well if there's some things that I missed or something (...) so having that a group of people that also are interested in the same thing that I am interested in really helps me keep updated with everything."	"I think sometimes there's like these stereotypes that people that like K-Pop are like very obsessed with anything that is like Asian or Korean in sort of a fetishizing way so sometimes I'm almost like scared to tell people that I like K-Pop but mostly I don't think it really affects my relationships with other people I think I've met a lot of people that share this interest with and can talk to me about it so I think I've made a lot of friends especially online."	"We're kind of like a family really, and sometimes there are like fan wars where different fans of different groups start arguing with each other (...) there are certain fanbases that just really do not like each other but mostly it's a positive dynamic where we are always supporting each other and even if I tweet something that is personal I know there are certain people that are going to message me and asking if I'm OK or if I need anything, if I need to talk so it's very supportive."	"I think that K-Pop fans are very proactive and they're very organized. There are like fanbases that are always coming up with new events and streaming parties and all those things that I admire quite a lot and inspire me a lot in my day-to-day life to be more organized and to be more proactive as well."
Félicie	"I guess dance is not really new but that's the thing that they inspired me to get back into so that would be it. I also started painting because of one of the members of a group that I like as well."	"I don't think it's very affected at all. I know some people think it's a little cringe but I don't really care, so I just I like what I like and it's my business so it doesn't matter."	"I've definitely tried to get friends into it, and I've been successful with some of them and not so much in others, but I tend to talk about it with friends anyways maybe I think it's made certain friendships closer."	"It's like we're all friends, I think on social media sometimes there's a little bit of a division based on which groups you like the most but in real life we're all friends because we all like the same thing and we know that it's not something that everybody likes, so we kind of feel an instant connection."	"I think, talking about dancing again, sometimes I'm on TikTok and I see other fans dancing or trying to learn new choreographies from K-Pop songs and seeing that makes me really inspired to also try, and motivates me to keep learning and not give up."
Nathalie	"They inspire me to dance and to be my most creative self, whether it be with singing or fashion choices as well. They motivate me to try new things and be more social."	"I try not to let others affect my interest. I've been into K-Pop for more than 11 years now, and I'm still into it just as hard as when I first started."	"Honestly, even my non K-Pop friends have been getting into K-Pop because of what I've shown them and my coworkers also find it interesting so it's mostly positive reactions with my relationship with others when it comes to K-Pop."	"There's positive and negative dynamics. Sometimes fans are very supportive of others and the community really can be sweet and fun to be in. In other aspects, fans can also be very mean and defensive towards certain opinions which makes the community toxic."	"They inspire me to have fun and be more present in the community and give more to K-Pop fans with different content."
Liza	"When I find a lot of similarities between us and then I see what they were able to achieve inspires me to do my best in everything that I try."	"People that don't like it or aren't into it don't really affect me. However when I see other fans like me, it just seem to push me deeper into it."	"I haven't experienced any sort of negative effects because of my interest in K-Pop, but I do believe that it has brought me closer to some of my friends."	"While some of them get along and are very supportive towards their favorite artists and each other, a lot of them get into arguments with others and they can get really negative and toxic with one another as well which is a shame sometimes."	"Their dedication to what they are passionate about inspires me."
Melissa	"They've inspired me to become a better dancer myself. I look at their efforts and training schedule and feel more motivated."	"If my friends like a certain song, even if I don't follow that idol or group I will most likely follow their recommendations and"	"I have brought K-Pop into many of my friends' lives and it has helped me to bond with other people that also like this type of music and allowed me to make way more friends."	"In my experience our community is very friendly and supportive, we're all here because we like the same things so it's very easy for us to bond with each other."	"Interacting with them constantly inspires me to put my everything into the things I'm also passionate about especially as I said the"

		taste and give the song a try.”			events that I organize. (...) they really inspire me to keep going.”
Jessica	“A lot of these women are so dedicated, and they work so hard (...) so they inspire me everyday to focus on my goals and make things happen for myself.”	“It depends, if they are other fans I’d say it’s definitely a positive influence, by talking to them I feel even more excited about things (...) but if it’s people that don’t like or don’t know K-Pop I’d say they don’t affect it too much.”	“It’s helped me make more friends for sure.”	“We’re very interactive with each other and we try to build a supportive community. It’s really only bad when people start getting overly protective of their favorite groups and start comparing and fighting with other fandoms.”	“I think their resilience is quite inspiring, (...) they always stuck by their side so that and their loyalty is quite inspiring to me.”
Valentina	“Besides my interest for singing, I’ve also started trying to learn their choreographies, but I can’t say I’m any good at it. It’s fun to watch their dance practice videos and then try to dance along with them.”	“Sometimes they make me a little insecure about it, especially when they start making jokes, but I try not to take it too seriously, at the end of the day those people have no say in what I can or can’t like.”	“I’ve made friends through it, mostly online which is always fun.”	“Most of us are just happy to find other people to share this interest with, we love creating theories for the next comebacks and talk about any content that gets released. It’s a fun dynamic.”	“To be more open about how I like K-Pop and not be so shy about it. This is a big step for me and something I’m trying to get better at since I might even meet other people that like it as well.”
Tanner	“I feel like seeing their success grow and grow is super inspiring but also, as horrible as it is, they have the best workout <i>inspo</i> ever. It’s specifically Momo from Twice, she definitely inspires me to get in shape.”	“I don’t tell people I like K-Pop unless it’s like brought up (...) When someone asks me what my favorite genre of music is I just say pop (...) If they were like “Oh can I hear some music you listen to?” I would definitely show some pop music and throw in one of those K-Pop songs that definitely could fit the mold of being like just regular pop.”	“I’ve gotten some people into K-Pop so I feel like it’s been kind of fun and I’ve definitely gotten closer to those friends.”	“I feel like with K-Pop it’s kind of tough. When you’re making friends with someone that likes the same group as you, it’s so easy you can just kind of talk about the group and it’s super sweet but I feel like for other groups, like say it was a Blackpink fan and a Twice fan, I feel like they’ll have tension and I think that’s a little unfortunate that we can’t all just kind of get along well.”	“I feel like I’m inspired by a lot of people I am good friends with, some people that own their own little online shops, (...) and I feel like them bringing their art into being a fan is super inspiring and that’s definitely something I want to attempt.”
Sofia	“They’ve inspired me to be more active, (...) since I started liking K-Pop they’ve inspired me to be healthier in that way. And also, they inspire me to chase my dreams, to not give up on what I’m passionate about.”	“They don’t, not at all. I think it’s become a much more mainstream thing as well, so it’s not as shocking.”	“K-Pop has made me meet a lot of new people, through events and meetings for example, I’ve made so many friends.”	“It can be super supportive and we all get along really well and have fun together (...) or it can be more negative when fans of different groups start comparing achievements and getting competitive with each other. There’s also like this stigma about liking more than one group instead of just being a super fan of only one (...) that’s when it starts becoming more of a toxic environment.”	“The way they are so interactive with each other was what inspired me to start attending events and meeting other fans so in a way they’ve inspired me to be more sociable I think.”
Beatriz	“Their work ethic and discipline inspired me to do my work better and to fight for the things that I want to achieve.”	“I started liking this on my own and most people around me don’t really care about it, so I don’t think other people have affected my interest in it.”	“Since this is a topic I’m so interested in, I want to talk about it all the time but back in 2017, no one around me was a fan of it and most of my friends didn’t like it when I tried to get them into it so I was kinda sad because of that.”	“It’s really fun to see how united we can be and how we fight together for some things (...) but this is mostly when we belong to the same fandom. It can be really toxic when we’re talking about separate fandoms, for example, Blinks which are fans of Blackpink and Armys which are fans of BTS commonly hate each other and that’s a known fact in the K-Pop world.”	“Because of the language barrier, some fans make quick translations to update other fans on what is going on (...) These fans have inspired me to learn the language little by little.”

Questions	6. K-Pop's affect on friendships	7. Family's perspective	8. Influence on family dynamic	9. Brand deals
Emma	"I don't think it affected it that much, I think it's just like any other interest just because I like K-Pop doesn't mean my friends are going to see me any differently (...) I have a lot of friends that also really like K-Pop so yeah it makes our relationship even closer."	"They don't really care about it honestly, they don't really get it. They don't really understand why I like music that I can't even understand you know, that's how they think so they don't really care."	"I think maybe it might have like brought us closer a little bit just because I love getting home sometimes and showing them the music videos and making them sit down and watch it with me."	"Usually when that gets announced for example, we trend hashtags on social media to boost the engagement between the group member or the group and the brands (...) I think it's really nice, and it helps them get more visibility and exposure and it's just it's really nice to see that."
Félicie	X	"When I started dancing again because of K-Pop they were very supportive and happy because of that and when I'm in the car with them we always listen to K-Pop albums and they're very chill about it."	"I think we have something to bond over even if it's something that they don't totally understand fully I always spend time with them talking about it and they make jokes to me about that and it's fun."	"I always try to support it by buying those products so it's good, It means that they have demand which also means that they're being successful so is very good."
Nathalie	"Those that eventually managed to get into it have become closer, we used to not be all that close but now I talk to them like everyday about K-Pop things."	"They used to think it was odd but have become more used to it and accepting of it."	"I don't think it changed in any substantial way."	"It's cool to see what they promote but usually everything is way too expensive for me to purchase."
Liza	X	"My father doesn't really care about it and my mother is into it too, we love listening to music together and sometimes I get home from school she shows me some new videos or songs she liked."	"It's made us have something to share and talk about but otherwise not that much, we've always has a good relationship."	"To me, they're exactly like products promoted and endorsed by western celebrities, there's nothing special or revolutionary about them in my opinion."
Melissa	"Some of my friends get super annoyed when I start talking about it but the ones that like it as well get super excited with me so it's cool."	"They are very supportive and love how proactive I've become in organizing events and bringing people together and they also like K-Pop to some extent."	"I'm not too sure it has made any difference in our relationship."	"It really depends on the product, but I do like to buy the products if I can to support the group."
Jessica	"It's had made me get closer to the ones that also like K-Pop, I'm probably the reason they started liking it in the first place because I talked so much about it with them."	"They don't really care, to be honest I don't share all that much with them about it anyway. (...) I can tell they're not very interested in the topic itself."	"I don't think our relationship has changed because of me linking K-Pop."	"I think it's cool they get those opportunities, I try to support them by buying them whenever I can."
Valentina	"It hasn't, they don't like K-Pop but they listen to me when I'm excited about a song or something else but we usually talk about other things we have in common."	"It's the same as my friends, I don't really talk too much about K-Pop with my parents, but when I do they don't really understand what I like about it."	"Our relationship is just like it's always been."	"Some things they promote are cool but it's hard to order it and ship it to Italy so I've never actually gotten to buy anything."
Tanner	X	"So, my mom, I was a diehard One Direction girl and Fifth Harmony girl, she's like "been there done that", now she gets it (...). However, my dad gets it, (...) and he loves the photocard thing, when I get a new album, he says "Oh can I sit with you? I want to see you open it.""	"Yeah, I've always been really close to my family, but I feel like now that that I do the unboxings my dad will also order albums of his favorite musicians and he's like "Oh do you want to see me unboxing?" it's so funny."	"It's super exciting, it's definitely influential, I mean I know that's exactly what it's for and it works. For example, Kazuha, who is from Le Serafim, she just did a makeup collab and instantly I'm going to buy it."
Sofía	"With the ones that don't like K-Pop it hasn't really changed anything but I have converted a couple of them into fans and that has made us closer since we have more things to talk about with each other."	"They don't care too much, I've showed them some songs and there's ones that they like and others they don't but mostly it hasn't changed our relationship."	X	"I think it's cool that they're getting more opportunities (...) It's only because of their success in the West that all these things are possible now."
Beatriz	"Now that have friends to talk to about this topic, I feel a lot happier than when	"My parents don't care at all and have literally zero interest in it. I talk with my sister about it every now and then and she has listened to some	"Not really, I just accept that we don't have similar tastes in music and that's it."	"I don't have really strong feelings about it, it's cool when they have partnerships but I

	I didn't (...) in a way, K-pop made our friendship stronger."	songs per my request and liked some of them."		likely won't buy anything because it's super expensive."
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## Appendix 6. Table of Content - Parasocial Relationships (Interviews)

Questions	1. Connection with artist	2. Reason for connection	3. Similarity with artist	4. Closeness through similarity
Emma	"It's a very strong connection I would say because they are so interactive and because they go live so often, and they have like fan communities (...) I think that connection just keeps getting stronger all the time and it's very very nice to share that with an artist. I really feel like they care about me just as much as I care about them."	"I think it's how interactive they are, how much they talk to us and how many times they say how thankful they are for us, and I really think that it's genuine. I really think that they feel these things because otherwise how would they be constantly talking to us and showing us so much love."	"There's a member in the group Itzy, her name is Ryujin and she's more like a tomboy and I also think I'm more tomboyish, I'm not very girly, and I think that seeing the way that she dresses and the way that she behaves and also her interests are very similar to mine and we also have like the same personality type so yeah I look at her and I almost see myself."	"I think it's almost like having a friend, she reminds me so much of myself that I feel like I can trust her."
Félicie	"It's like this thing that is always there and I know at the end of the day when I get home I can turn on my laptop and watch a video of them (...) it always feels like a bit of an escape from reality."	"I think it's because there is effort from both sides, it's not just the fans that want to be in contact with the idols it's also the idols that want to be in contact with the fans and they make that effort to always talk to us every single day, so we feel like it's mutual."	"There are a lot of members from different groups that I really think are similar but there is this one from TXT that has kind of a similar story to mine where he started dancing when he was little and then he stopped and then he started again."	"It made me feel closer because we share that past and again, he's one of the ones that motivate me the most to keep dancing."
Nathalie	"A very very strong connection, especially with EXO and SHINee. It's hard to describe but to put it shortly, a connection that brings comfort and happiness into my life everyday."	"It exists because of the love for their music as well as them loving their fans and having such long careers. Also I've been with them through their toughest times as a group so being there for them through all of that strengthens my love for them."	"Definitely EXO's Baekhyun, I find myself very similar with in personality and in how much we care for our friends."	"I feel like it does in a way. It makes me feel a little more protective over him and I always want to be there for him because I know that's how I'd like others to treat me."
Liza	"The best way I can put it into words is they are comfort if comfort was a person, or eight in my case. They seem to be very open with what they show their fans, as well as really active in their fan communities which makes them feel sort of like my friends."	"Because they always show us a lot of love when they are active, which as I said is a lot of the time. They tell us about their lives and sometimes open up about their struggles so it's easy to relate to what they go through sometimes."	"Han from Stray Kids. I feel like we have had similar life experiences, we both suffer from anxiety and share the same humor."	"I kind of see him as a friend and someone I can learn with and go through life with specially because of our anxiety. I look at him and think "If he can do it, so can I.""
Melissa	"It's honestly so hard to put it into words, I think at the core I just feel a lot of appreciation for everything that they do and the happiness they bring me."	"Because of the fan service they do, like during lives you could request they do a certain pose for a screenshot, and they'll do it (...) I feel like they are so reliable, and they are always a constant in our lives since they are always putting out so much content for fans."	"I'm not sure we're too similar but I think maybe Joshua, Hoshi or Vernon from Seventeen. I think if I met them I'd actually be able to be friends with them and we'd get along."	"I think because we have similar opinions and reactions to certain things, I can put myself in their shoes more easily."
Jessica	"It's this feeling of comfort, they bring elements of stability into my life. They are people I look up to and think I can learn from, so it's quite a strong feeling."	"Because of the intimacy they build with us, because they share so much of their lives with us and really make us feel like we are such an important part of their lives too, they show so much gratitude it's hard not to feel like you're truly being seen and appreciated."	"I'd like to say I'm similar to Hwasa, the girl I mentioned before. She's very outspoken and confident and that's something that I've taken on as well after following her for a while."	"It makes me feel like I'm not alone, any issues that I've faced she probably has faced too at some point and that's very motivating."
Valentina	"They really make me feel like they care about me and the rest of their fans and are genuinely thankful for our support, they're	"Because they interact with fans in a lot of ways and genuinely are so interested in also getting to know	"I'm not sure, there probably is but I can't think of anyone."	X



	a big source of comfort in my life.”	us as best as they can through fan spaces and posts.”		
Tanner	“So, my favorite of all time is Ryujin from Itzy I love that girl so much. I had seen Itzy in New York in it was very emotional and I felt very stupid for feeling so much, I was crying, I was not close by the way, I was in like the nosebleeds, and I was just so overwhelmed with emotion I was like “Oh it’s crazy, this is like a real human being!”. Because something about K-Pop makes them feel very surreal and I feel like that’s weird because they’re just people but yeah definitely feel very very strongly towards her if that makes sense.”	“I think the K-Pop industry does a really good job kind of programming that parasocial relationship which I’m super aware of but I know some fans just aren’t, and they’re just like “Oh my God no they responded to me on <i>bubble</i> they love me!” you know? It’s like that, it’s very parasocial but it definitely works.”	“If I had to relate to anyone in that group it would probably be Yuna, I feel like I’m a lot like Yuna, she’s super silly, super loud and I feel like that fits my mold more, but I think like Ryujin because she’s so quiet and cool.”	X
Sofía	“It’s like there’s a deep understanding between us which I’m aware sounds so strange, but without even knowing us personally, I feel like they get the essence of who their fans are and because of that they’re able to be there for us, it’s a very comforting relationship.”	“Because of how engaged they are with us. Again, whereas Western artists don’t really get to interact with fans it feels like, it’s part of an idols’ job to do those livestreams and to talk to us frequently so that connection grows quite easily and naturally.”	“Chaeyoung from Twice is probably the one I relate to the most. We have very similar personalities, she’s like that more introverted friend that comes out of her shell when she’s with her friends and I think that’s exactly who I am too.”	“Probably yeah, I’ve always felt more drawn to her and almost see her as who I could be one day you know? She’s like a role model.”
Beatriz	“Sometimes they’re like friends, even though they don’t know I exist. When I’m sad I listen to their songs and feel at ease. When I watch their livestreams, they make me laugh (...) and when they achieve something they really wanted I feel proud of them.”	“I see so much content about them that it makes me feel like I know them. Obviously, it’s all filtered and we only see what they want us to see, but I, just like so many other fans, can’t help but feel a connection with them.”	“Yes, there’s a couple. I feel like we’re all the same person but in different bodies, so I’m more empathetic towards them.”	“Totally, because I truly feel like I understand the things they go through on a special level and they would probably understand my experiences too.”

Questions	5.Help in life	6. Interactivity’s affect on connection	7. Fan responsibilities	8. Give and take
Emma	“I started liking K-Pop in the middle of the pandemic and it was a time where I was very isolated and to have all these groups that post content so often on YouTube and release so many lives and videos it made me feel less alone.”	“I think the interactivity is the reason why a connection is built to begin with so if there weren’t any videos and lives, I don’t think I would feel so strongly about them.”	“My responsibilities are to support them in anything, to be there for them and reassure them whenever they feel more insecure, or they feel like they didn’t perform as well as they could have and to stream their music and their music videos and just make sure I do everything that I can to help them succeed.”	“They spend so much time and so much effort on creating these videos for us to watch and for us to enjoy, so it’s so important that we give that back to them and we put as much effort into loving them and supporting them as we can, so that it’s a balance between everybody.”
Félicie	“Before I started liking K-Pop I was always a little bit self-conscious, and I was really insecure and closed off from people and after I started liking K-Pop I opened up a little bit more (...) so it made me more confident.”	“Realistically I feel like probably not (...) I always believe that they are really our friends and they care, so if there weren’t these livestreams and stuff I don’t think I would feel as strongly because they wouldn’t be able to share so much of their lives with us.”	“I think as fans we have to be there for them, and we have to support their music and support their efforts and vote for them when there are awards so we show that we care for them.”	“I think that they give so much that it’s necessary for us to give back so they know that we are enjoying what they’re doing, and their efforts aren’t in vain and so they can keep going and keep making good music and content and being happy and successful.”
Nathalie	“Yes definitely. They’ve helped me through my worst moments, whenever I felt a little but lost in life I knew they were always people I could count on. They’ve also helped me make amazing friends, and even find my lifelong partner.”	“I know I would still have a good connections with those groups cause back then we didn’t have many of those things anyways and I still was very into those groups.”	“Just to keep supporting and loving my groups and to not be toxic towards others.”	“I’d say so I guess. We’re all very aware of how hard they work (...) so it’s only right for us as fans to be there for them by supporting them.”

Liza	"I think through their music I've managed to get through some of the toughest times in my life."	"I don't think the connection would be as strong because these messaging apps and online interactions are what built that connection in the first place more than their music alone."	"To not throw your group under the bus when it's convenient and defend them when they are being attacked online (...) And then to always support them however I can, whether that means streaming their music or their music videos."	"While fans get free music and content, the artists should also get something in return for their work. This can be support from their fans and also materialistic and financial support from them too like buying their albums and songs."
Melissa	"They have given me a lot of laughter and happy moments with how fun their variety shows are and also through their entertaining personalities and the music they make."	"I don't think so because I wouldn't know them or their personalities which is so important to me when deciding to <i>stan</i> someone or not."	"Just to willingly support them, I don't think there's any rules on how to be a fan of anyone you know?"	"I do think there is a give and take since being a K-Pop idol is a lot of work and often is not rewarded accordingly, which is why fans want to voice their appreciation to help them grow."
Jessica	"They've shown me how to fight for myself countless times and whenever I feel down or defeated."	"I think the connection would be nowhere near as strong as it is. If those things didn't exist, they'd never be able to share half the things they do that make me love them so much."	"To be there for them and support them as much as I can, streaming is a big thing in K-Pop culture so I do try to do that."	"They work extremely hard to film content for us so I can only imagine how disheartening it would be for them if no one supported those efforts. That's why it's so important to support them, to show them that there are people rooting for them."
Valentina	"They have made me feel more comfortable with myself and their content and music has just made me really happy."	"I think there would still be a connection between us, maybe not as strong as it is now but I'd still feel connected I think."	"To respect their privacy and boundaries and to protect them online from people trying to disrespect them."	"It's important to give back because they work super hard for us, they train so long even before debuting, so they deserve to receive that support."
Tanner	"I got into it during the pandemic so it's like I had that source of entertainment where that was all I was consuming because I felt like I ran out of content for everything else I was into. So, I feel like they helped me during the pandemic, I definitely was super entertained."	"I do think the lives and stuff make it what it is, because while there are some western pop artists that also do lives, it's not as frequent. They don't have <i>bubble</i> , they just have Twitter and stuff like that. Wow that's actually a really good thought, maybe I wouldn't. I don't know, I feel like I would still be as into them maybe, but it's definitely that parasocial thing that makes it what it is which is so weird."	"I feel like streaming music is a huge thing, as much as all the charts don't matter that much, it seems that they do on Twitter because that is where every argument starts so you don't want your favorite group to look bad (...) I like feeling like I'm helping with album sales when I'm buying the albums (...) Also defending them from hate online is definitely an issue that I should not be getting involved in, however the second I see Itzy slander I'm ready to step in."	"I guess, because they do give us good music and we have to prove it with the streams, we have to prove it with helping them out too. I feel like it's important just to kind of keep the balance of them being just from fan to artist."
Sofia	"That's something I do a lot when I feel down actually, I go back and watch old lives and it's very comforting because they talk to us like we're friends just hanging out together."	"I've been saying that one of the things I like the most is that interaction so I feel like yeah now that you put it like that I probably wouldn't feel as connected if they weren't as active."	"To be respectful of them and their privacy, that's so important. A lot of people would probably say streaming is a responsibility, I can see it being one but most of all just having fun. Oh, and protecting them from people online because some people can get pretty nasty."	"These people work so hard, for years on end, they practice every single day of their lives to be able to become idols, so I feel like it's important just to show them that we appreciate that and all their hard work."
Beatriz	"When I'm feeling down, watching their content has helped me get distracted from my real-life problems and get in a better mood."	"Probably not, because I wouldn't have easy access to the rest of the content they release, and the language barrier would be more evident. Without social media, K-pop wouldn't have come so far, at least that's my take on it."	"Support the artists by listening to their songs, streaming their music videos, voting for them."	"They work hard to give us a product which we both would enjoy, so we as fans have to acknowledge their effort by engaging with it. I believe it's important to stream their songs and give feedback, so the artists know what aspects they should change or keep on doing."

### Appendix 7. Table of Content - Fandom Community (Interviews)

Questions	1.Fan community inclusion	2. Fan community importance	3. Fan influence on identity
Emma	"It adds the feeling of belonging somewhere and having people that have your back no matter what, and having people that you can be yourself with without having any sort of worries (...) It's very very nice and it makes me personally feel very accepted."	"I think it's quite important I've been part of fan communities my whole life and it offers you like a second support system so it's quite important it's something that means a lot to me and I'm like quite proud of."	"I think I've become a lot more confident and sure of myself (...) and then I think in terms of how I dress it's really influenced me to see other people and their outfits or makeup and it has changed the way I look a little bit but in a very positive way I think."

Félicie	"The fandom is one of those places that I know I can go to when I'm very excited about something that just came out and I can talk all I want about it to people that are going to respond with the same excitement."	"It's not super essential to always be active in the community but to at least be lurking on there and seeing what's going on, I think it's very important because otherwise you're probably going to miss so much stuff."	"I think just like with the idols that, like I said, give me a lot of confidence, other fans also give me that boost. Most of the time I think that they have also made me more confident and they're so supportive, so it makes me feel very good to be around them and to know that they are there for me."
Nathalie	"It definitely makes it more fun to be in a fandom and relate to others that also love your favorite groups as much as you do, that way you have people to talk to whenever new content drops."	"It's not the most important, but again it does make a lot of things more fun to enjoy."	"They've made me more confident, they are people who understand my interests and understand certain jokes in ways others wouldn't and that show me a lot of support."
Liza	"By knowing and interacting with people who share the same interests as you, the whole idea of being a fan becomes even more fun."	"I take a lot of pride in it, we always to our best to give Stray Kids new records and awards so whenever we are able to achieve something I get very proud of all of us."	"I feel like I've become much more open and confident as a result of being friends with other fans."
Melissa	"It adds a lot of fun to it, to be able to share it with so many other people."	"It's not something that I talk about to anyone outside of the fandom but I'm very proud that the fanbase is growing and there's more of us sharing one interest in common."	"Maybe in terms of how I dress and present myself, maybe if you crossed me on the street you'd be able to tell that I'm a K-Pop fan."
Jessica	"It affects it so much (...) now that I am a part of a fandom I feel like I'm always up to date and I engage so much more with other fans, it makes the whole experience more enjoyable."	"It's my safe space where I feel like I can trust the people around me and be myself without any restraints."	"Their support has given me the strength to become more confident, much like the idols themselves."
Valentina	"Interacting with people who like the same groups and just supporting the groups' content really makes me feel good so it adds that aspect of sharing."	"Really important, I love the people I met through it and they bring so much happiness into my life."	"They've made me become a more open person, I used to be super closed off but by seeing them be so creative and loud about what they like it's made me want to be more like that as well."
Tanner	"I definitely feel like it makes it a lot better (...) When you're inside the fanbase, you get to know the ins and outs, the secrets, the inside jokes, all this stuff that feels really special and exciting."	"I do think it's fun to just kind of drop in that you're in that fan base because when I was at a concert a girl was asking me what other groups I liked and I was telling her I was a big Twice fan and she would get excited since she was too and it's cute."	"I feel like a lot of us have certain styles that I feel are really influenced off of each other (...) We'll sit there and we'll mimic each other's like shelving displays and stuff like that so it's funny that we inspire each other. Stylistically, I think it's funny, but I feel like it's super subconscious."
Sofia	"It makes it so much more fun. Why stick to enjoying something alone when you can enjoy it with other people you know? It makes it way way more fun."	"In so many occasions it has made me feel less alone, it's like I have an online family rooting for me so it's something I treasure."	"The way they dress is very influenceable. As I said I really like fashion so I'm always looking for inspiration in others and I think I've made some changes to how I dress and hairstyles I do based on other fans."
Beatriz	"The community is helpful when I want to know more about something, whether it be about their schedules, concert content, photoshoots, translations, so I guess the fandom is what adds most of the content."	"It's also really wholesome when I witness fans online, who even though are complete strangers to each other, decide to help each other just because they belong to the same fandom."	"They might have influenced a bit of my sense of humor, my way of talking and style (...) My style didn't necessarily change, but I have felt inspired by some outfits worn by fans and wanted to do some changes in my closet."

### Appendix 8. Table of Content - User Generated Content (Interviews)

Questions	1.Content created	2.Promotion	3. Exposure to content to non-fans	4. UGC impact on connection
Emma	"I have a fan account where I just talk about the things that are happening in the fandom, I talk about updates, my opinion on them (...) I post like at least 10 tweets a day and interact with other people and put likes and retweets on other things."	"There's this thing online about how annoying K-Pop fans are, because we're always promoting our favorites' music and it's true really, in the replies of viral tweets that aren't even about K-Pop we're always kind of trying to promote our groups and talk about them."	"From what I've heard from other people, they don't become fans of K-Pop because they listen to their music, they become fans because they saw a certain tweet or they saw a certain video they thought was funny (...) so I think fan content is one of the most important things to capture the attention of other people."	"I wouldn't stop liking the group but one of the first things that I do after I watch a video of them or a music video is to go on Twitter and see what other people thought of it and I also really like watching reaction videos from youtubers reacting to the videos and music videos so I definitely think it would have an impact and maybe I wouldn't feel as strong of a connection."



Félicie	"I do little edits of my favorite groups on TikTok, I posts pretty regularly like five times a week or something and yeah it's one of my hobbies."	"Yes, I've replied to certain tweets with things like "oh go stream TXT's new album" and tried to get other people to know my favorite group."	"I think it can get them to like those groups, that's how I became a fan so if that happened to me it means that can happen to other people. There's nothing to lose in trying to post as many things as we can and trying to reach wider group of people."	"I mean, if I didn't have content created by fans, I probably wouldn't be a fan in the first place (...) so I think it would have a big impact. I think if I couldn't watch TikTok edits and read information online about them, I probably would feel very out whack and lost when it came to my favorite groups (...) so I think it would be hard and I think maybe that connection would be a little weaker."
Nathalie	"A couple years ago some friends and I started learning choreographies (...) one day we had the idea of filming ourselves and uploading it on YouTube and Tiktok and then it picked up from there. Besides that, I also do reaction videos on YouTube with my wife."	"Anyone could stumble upon those videos and we do promote our content on social media which also promotes and brings attention to these idols."	"It might pull them into K-Pop. They might see a song that they like or even any other element of a music video or whatever it may be and decide to look more into it."	"Maybe a bit because fan content does help in the connections we have with groups. Without it we wouldn't be able to constantly be in touch with them and with other fans."
Liza	"It's mainly just tweets about how I feel about certain things that are happening related to the group and to other fans."	"I'm always tweeting and posting videos of them, sometimes even in my personal Instagram I recommend their songs to my followers."	"Since there's so many people tweeting and talking about it, I think it probably could impact a lot of people. Once you see the artists from someone else's point of view and discover them in a more human light, you are bound to be drawn to them."	"I think I would be much less involved and present as a fan. By having people to talk to like that, I find myself a lot more engaged."
Melissa	"I post dance covers and also organize K-Pop dance events under K-FUSION ENTERTAINMENT."	"Through the dance covers probably, I'm sure it might have landed on someone's recommended page on YouTube that wasn't a fan of K-Pop necessarily."	"They could like some aspect of what they are seeing and then become intrigued enough to check out more stuff from the group."	"I would start to disconnect for sure. I wouldn't have half as much of the content I do now, and I probably wouldn't have discovered most of the groups that I like currently."
Jessica	"Mostly just tweets about my favorite groups."	"There's also this thing we try to do a lot where we tweet at radio stations and try to get them to play K-Pop songs so they get radio play and place better on charts"	"Our hopes are always that if they listen to a song or see a cool edit, they'll be interested enough to look more into it. I'd say it works because that's how I became a fan."	"There wouldn't be any since I wouldn't have become aware they exist in the first place. But even if I had become a fan any other way, I think it's the fan content that keeps a lot of us engaged."
Valentina	"I have a Twitter account and a Tiktok account where I post either my reactions to music videos or just my opinions on new content."	"On Twitter yes, I'm constantly trying to introduce other people to the groups I like."	"I think it's one of the ways people start liking K-Pop, there's so many Tiktoks that have gone viral that made people start liking different groups."	"I think it would change a bit because fan made content does bring an extra level of interactiveness with the artist and the fandom so that connection could be affected in a negative way."
Tanner	"I stick mostly to photocard trading on TikTok."	"The artists I like are all I talk about so I'm definitely going to ask people to stream them. My Instagram story is definitely probably where I would post the most and then on Twitter I guess I do too."	"I could probably watch someone get into something that I don't really know anything about and I would still be into it just because I know it's making someone else like happy and excited I feel like that's what makes it so fun special."	"I feel like the fans also are huge makeup of what K-Pop is, I feel like the fans kind of define it (...) I wouldn't be here without those edits."
Sofia	"Mainly Tiktok edits and sometimes I also do rankings of stage outfits, I also use Twitter and Instagram a lot."	"I think inadvertently through Tiktok I probably have, sometimes I get comments of people being like "I don't know how this landed on my for you page but I'm not complaining" because they're not a K-Pop fan but then they start asking the name of the person in the edit. That's how I became a fan, so I think that counts as promoting."	"It can turn them into one. I think that's the main way people actually get into K-Pop, it's not even through the music it's through content like edits or pictures posted on social media."	"I definitely wouldn't be as into it because that would take away the whole fandom side of liking K-Pop. It would be very different."
Beatriz	"I have an account where I post edits of my favorite groups."	"Through the edits for sure, some of them have gotten quite some views and reached people that weren't into K-Pop who afterwards said they were"	"I think it would spark a little interest in them and maybe out of curiosity they would do a little more research and eventually become a fan."	"I think it would be a little different, but at the end of the day, the content fans create comes from something the artist already did (...) before social media existed there were"

		curious about the people in the edit."		already fans who went crazy about their favorite artists, so I think I my connection would still remain."
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