Online Fandom: Social Identity and Social Hierarchy of Hallyu Fans

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ABSTRACT

Hallyu fans are people who are dedicated to popular culture in South Korea, including music, drama and film. This study focuses on fans of Korean pop music, which is known as K-pop. Developments in digital communication technology have given rise to media such as forums, websites, video channels, and fan sites that are consumed by K-pop fans. Fans participate in multiple fandoms because these websites are easily accessed by public audiences. However, problems arise when fans start to compete, using their knowledge to help validate their existence and to help the perception of authentic identities within fan communities. This paper is based on virtual ethnographic fieldwork that identified fans' constructions of their own identities and the building of a social hierarchy through various online practices. The research findings are based on four months of fieldwork with two online *Hallyu* fandoms; *ELF* (Ever Lasting Friends) and *A.R.M.Y* (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). The findings reveal that conflicts exist in certain fandoms which aid in defining fan identities and, at the same time, fans undertake positive socialising actions which contribute to the fandom itself. Interactions between fandoms also need to be recognised, since online fandoms can be seen as borderless.

Keywords: Hallyu, online fandom, social identity, social hierarchy, virtual ethnography

Most people are fans of something. If not, they are bound to know someone who is. (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 1)

The word 'fan' refers to serious enthusiasts of particular performers, actors, comic books, movies, television and arts. The word 'fan' comes from the adjective 'fanatic', which in turn comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, which originally meant 'a temple', but came to refer to a person with an excessive passion, or who was filled with the form of enthusiasm associated with religious devotion (Cashmore 2006; Milgram 1977; Shuker 2010). In contemporary days, its usage has been extended to describe followers or devotees of certain popular cultural forms, for example, *Beatles* fans or *Harry Potter* fans (Cashmore 2006; Milgram 1977).

Fans tacitly recognise the rules of their fan culture. They build up different types of fan skills, knowledge, dress codes, and distinctions and have their own vocabularies that are only understood by members of a fan community (Gooch 2008). They constantly struggle to find the energy and passion from the object of fandom and to construct a stable identity within the fan community (Grossberg 1992). Fans, as Fiske (1992) describes, have their "own systems of production and distribution that forms what [he calls] a 'shadow cultural economy' that lies outside that of the cultural industries yet shares features with them" (30).

The fandom, or fan club, provides a site and medium to engage and communicate with other fans who have shared interests. Fandom is an important mediating factor in the relationships between fans and the object fans their fanaticism, and between individual fans themselves. Through the fandom, normally, they are constituted into "isolated groups of individuals with a particularly strong attachment to an individual celebrity or media text" (Théberge 2010, 186). In the present context, with the emergence of both offline and online communities, fandoms operate in a more complex structure than some groups of fans who have been associated with the pre-digital fandom were accustomed to. (Théberge 2010). With the rise of digital technology, fans participate in a variety of online discussions related to their interests, form groups devoted to specific music genres and individual stars, and encourage daily interactions within the fandom, and between fans and the music industry. This series of consistent and sustained engagements with their practices over time reflect the notion of a 'community' on the Internet (Bury 2003).

Among *Hallyu* fans, fandom also becomes a platform to engage and communicate with each other. *Hallyu*, or Korean wave, is a global phenomenon which signifies the spread of Korean popular culture by distributing South Korean pop music, dramas and films through the power of social media (Leung 2012). In this study, I focus on Korean pop music fans, who are known as 'K-pop fans'. Otmazgin and Lyan (2013) state that K-pop fans tend to develop a special interest in other elements of Korean culture, too. Despite participating in online forums and fan gatherings, some also choose to study the Korean language, history and culture in schools or in their town. Similarly, Leung (2012) refers K-pop fans as the most enthusiastic fans in the world. She gives an example of concert tickets in Paris that sold out in less than fifteen minutes on April 26, 2011. French fans gathered in the square outside of the Louvre, cheering, singing and dancing to demand another concert date from SM Entertainment (a powerful independent Korean record label and talent agency). Leung (2012) further explains that "a couple of weeks later, SM Entertainment put on a sold-out SM Town Live concert at Madison Square Garden" featuring popular idol groups of *TVXQ, BoA, Super Junior, Girls' Generation, SHINee* and *f(x)* (7). Lie (2012) adds that K-pop is now being accepted across the world because of its universal music and presentation of images of "a world that suggests nothing of inner-city poverty and violence" which is something that can be accepted by either "Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians" (355).

Between Fan and Fandom

In the literature on fan culture, the use of the terms 'fan' and 'fandom' have not been consistent between studies, and the meanings of the two words have often overlapped. Jenkins (2006) argues that when a fan makes an intense emotional investment in the object of fandom, it does not make the individual become a part of a larger fandom. Fandom often refers to shared and collective fan activities and creative practices, but sometimes it can be the actions of a fan *per se* (Jenkins 2006). This could happen because of different understandings and interpretations of what constitutes a fan in defining their identities and their contributions to the fandom, thus sometimes it creates conflicts within the fandom. Hills (2002) also argues that most fan studies examine the practices and creations of a specific subculture, rather than individual fans. Jenkins (2006) suggests that the definition of fans and fandom should reflect the kinds of activities fans engage in. The discourse of fan activities in the fandom can be multidimensional, contradictory, diachronic and limited in the ways it has been "historically represented in media and popular culture" (Bennett 2016, 1). Jenkins (2006) suggests that there is a need to reflect on how fans portray their practices by differentiating between fans of a specific subject of interest, fans who define themselves as a fan *per se* and fans who are the members of a fandom. Therefore, in this study, I analysed the differences between how fans define their identities and practises within a fandom.

Authenticity, Identity and Hierarchy in Fandom

Within fan communities, social hierarchy can be perceived in the form of capital. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) has characterised economic capital, social capital and cultural or symbolic capital as social differences and accumulated prestige that are unequally distributed among social classes. One must accumulate and invest to acquire an advantageous placement and power in a chosen field. It means that "one must possess at least the minimum amount of knowledge, or skill or 'talent' to be accepted as a legitimate player" and "derive maximum benefit or 'profit' from participation" (Bourdieu 1993, 8). In fandom, fans struggle for dominance, and they rely on various forms of social and cultural capital to establish themselves within fan communities.

Bourdieu (1986) states that becoming a member of a group or fandom needs social capital which provides "a 'credential' which entitles them to credit" (51). The social capital possessed by an individual is dependent on the connections that the individual can establish, and thus, it creates "a web of social influence and association" in their interactions (Miles 2010, 20). In fan studies, Jenkins's (1992) work on 'textual poachers' shows that fans reproduce cultural works from official works – say, fanfiction and videos – without any profit as a way to get recognition within fan communities. Investing in cultural capital by obtaining the knowledge and skills to reproduce these cultural works can develop a fan's reputation within fan communities. They become the person who is "worthy of being known ('I know him well'), they do not need to 'make the acquaintance' of all their 'acquaintances', they are known to more people than they know, and their work of sociability, when it is exerted, is highly productive" (Bourdieu 1986, 52-53). This is a basic practice in the existence of the members of any fandom to represent their group, to speak and acts in its name, and to exercise power within the fandom.

In fan communities, McCudden (2011) emphasises that performing roles as a fan serves to "understand and categorise people in relation to their fandom" (30) through cultural capital and social capital. It means that fans define the social hierarchy within and between their fandoms by "drawing distinctions between fans and non-fans, as well as within fan communities based on authenticity" (McCudden, 2011, 22). In a number of fandoms, Mitchell (2003) asserts that "a fanatically-held belief system based on authenticity, skills and notions of value which distinguish 'keeping it real' from what is considered 'wack' (trite and inauthentic')" (3). Therefore, investment in the object of fandoms, such as consuming official goods and adhering to the 'right' dress code, having knowledge of their fandom, establishing a relationship with

the important persons in the fandom, and exerting effort and enthusiasm are important factors to identify oneself as a fan (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002).

Internet as a Platform of Fan Activities

Since the emergence of the Internet, online interaction now extends to the use of images, audio, video and linear texts that give more comprehensive and "personal use of screen space for the presentation of self, knowledge and work" (Haythornthwaite 2009, 1). The Internet has extended "both fandom and the prospects of engaging in fan activities into multiple pockets of everyday life" that would "bring fan objects out with their users to the subway, the street and even in the classroom" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 7). These ongoing flows of information on the Internet provide "trans-border flows of cultural, symbolic and material objects" so that many audiences around the world can experience and reconstruct the notion of self-identity in online spaces (Black 2009, 397). This phenomenon is also illustrated by Appadurai (1996) as the emergence of blurred lines between life in online spaces and in the real world, although they are comparatively different. Online spaces are likely to construct "imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world" (Appadurai 1996, 35). The emergence of diverse popular culture in borderless online spaces has reconstructed online identities, and their online archives have been extended within communities that have shared interests.

Problems arise when fans start to contend with one another, attempting to use their knowledge to legitimate their existence and present an authentic image. Fandoms on Internet can no longer be seen as utopian, or as having "no established hierarchy" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 41), but "a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom and status" (Hills 2002, 46). Similarly, Pullen (2000) posits that the Internet has not eradicated fan conflicts over differing interpretations of the objects of their fandom and thus, it has not created "a single, unified fan position or practice" (60) within fan communities.

In the circulation of the object of a fandom, Tulloch (1995) argues that most senior and powerful fans have control over the norms and practices of fellow fans to ensure the authenticity of a fandom remains stable. This way of enforcing a specific narrative on an online fandom looks similar to the youth subcultures studied by the Birmingham School, such as "teddy boys, mods and rockers, bikers, skinheads, soccer hooligans and rastas" (Mitchell 2003, 2), that often value the idea of authenticity in their groups. Therefore, fans choose to struggle for the acknowledgement of other fans, to have the credibility to control a fandom's object, and to have their efforts increase their cultural and social capital in the fandom.

Methodology

> "Live with yourselves in a context of others".
> (Goodall 2000, 22)

This study is primarily an analysis the fandoms of the K-pop boy groups *Super Junior* and *BTS*, which call themselves *ELF (Ever Lasting Friends)* and *A.R.M.Y (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth),* respectively. Both fandoms are very active online but relatively limited in offline engagement, especially for the fans who do not reside in South Korea. This constraint encourages 'international fans' to publicly participate and immerse themselves in online forums, websites, video channels and fan sites as an alternative.

I chose four main websites as field sites for my virtual ethnographic work. These were two Korean entertainment news sites - Allkpop.com and Soompi.com – as well as a Facebook group owned by one of the *ELF* fans called *Leeteuk is the BEST Leader of the BEST Group~ Super Junior.* Lastly, I analysed Twitter posts with the hashtag 'ARMY'. Allkpop.com and Soompi.com publish their news in English for worldwide readers and also can be accessed on Facebook. These two news sites are familiar to K-pop fans as sources of recent news. I accessed these news sites every day to check the latest news,

but I only read the articles written about *Super Junior* and *BTS*. I also read the comment section of the articles, which is an important reflection of fans' views regarding the news; the same was true for Facebook and Twitter sites. These four websites served as my participant observation sites, where I collected data on fans regarding their current issues in the fandom. Basically, both Allkpop.com and Soompi.com distributed similar news, and then the Facebook and Twitter sites shared and reacted to the news. The contents of these news sites were alike, with various reactions from fans on Facebook and Twitter, and at the comment sections of the news articles, respectively.

The data was collected between January 25th and May 29th of 2016. A short period of virtual ethnographic work is considered, because I have also been a part of the *ELF* fandom for the last seven years, which means visiting these sites is part of my everyday routine. It was a taken-for-granted routine until I engaged this topic as a subject of research. As an insider, it was possible for me to develop and refine a better understanding of the meaning-making practices of online fan communities. Because of my familiarity with the practices of fans in the fandom, my position as both researcher and fan positions me to be both a comfortable and trustworthy individual for the participants to share their honest experiences with. Knowing that I am also within their community, the participants did not hesitate to become involved with my questioning and encouraged me to write about the fandom. Some participants tried to test me with jargon, but seeing that I understood and responded well, they accepted my dynamic role as a researcher and a fan who would be able to use academic writing to present a perspective that they could agree with.

After the content analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews on Facebook's Messenger to gather fans' views on the construction of their own identities and the building of social hierarchy in the fandom. I interviewed eight *ELF* fans, three *ARMY* fans and two multi-fandom fans whom I made contact through Facebook. I selected participants based on two criteria: they needed to be active fans who could clearly identify the interests and preferences of

fandom they belong to. The questions asked during interviews included how they became a fan, what types of the activities they engaged with and their perceptions of other fans within their and other fandoms. Other than interviews, it was easy to track their activities online, as they posted several thoughts about their fandom and official merchandise they bought. In order to preserve the confidentiality of informants, pseudonyms are used and their account names are not stated.

The process of virtual ethnographic work maintains the traditions of ethnography; while reformulating some of these to better apply to research on the Internet, it is not a distinctive form of ethnography (Domínguez et. al 2007; Hine 2000, 2015). The standard ethnographic processes of identifying a field site, interviewing key informants, conducting observation, recording activities and archiving documents still apply within virtual ethnography. However, different modes and methodologies are needed as the ethnographer cannot directly "spend time with people, to interact with them and live amongst them and to develop a first-hand understanding of their way of life" (Hine 2015, 2). Ethnographers in online spaces should use the vast information on the Internet to build a holistic understanding of the study. Similar to a traditional ethnography, that looks through documents and observes events in the field to have a depth of focus and to generate 'thick description', virtual ethnographers depend on internet access to observe the complex pattern of interactions in online spaces. Relying on one medium - for instance, interviewing informants through Facebook's Messenger – could be problematic. Hine (2015) argues that it is challenging to "make sense of situations as a unified whole" because "its users weave together highly individualised and complex patterns of meaning out of these publicly observable threads of interaction" (3). In this situation, Hine (2015) explains that virtual ethnography "must get used to what has been missed and [attempt] to build interpretations of events based on sketchy evidence" (4) and accept the limitations of the online world to building a detailed understanding. This study challenged me to develop reliable insights into the K-pop fandom, because of the nature of change often takes place in online spaces. The

behaviour of fans tends to change with the passage of time, and the representation of fans in this study may be different in the future, as I only captured them within a given period of the fieldwork. The data of any ethnography would not be a perfect representation of the culture it studies in the future, as change is inherent to all culture, but it does not mean that a detailed snapshot provided by my study on K-pop fandom is not valuable for future references. In this sense, embracing the complexity of a website (Hine 2015) provides me with a robust understanding of the different interpretations of each fandom.

Results: Authentic ELFs and their Communities

ELF is a fandom, or fan club name, of the popular Korean boy group, *Super Junior*. It is a name that *Super Junior* members called their fans. *ELF* is an acronym of 'Ever Lasting Friends', which is also written as *E.L.F.* or *elf*. After explaining in more detail what *ELF* is and why it is so popular, I then discuss three key themes of *ELF* fandom; authenticity and social identity of *Hallyu* fans, investment as a fan in fan communities, as well as the degree of fandom between fan communities.

ELF means they are not *Super Junior's* fans, but everlasting friends. '*Super Junior's* fans eventually leave the fandom as time passes, or sometimes become antis (individuals whose opposition to an object of fandom mirrors the intense love of fans. Anti-fans sometimes carry out hostile actions against idol groups), but '*Super Junior's* ELFs are devoted to fandom. *ELFs* are *Super Junior's* friends, who are always together in every moment, through both in good and challenging situations. The official fandom colour is pearl sapphire blue, and the fandom was officially established on June 2nd, 2007, in South Korea. It is one of the biggest fandoms, with many fans around the world. *ELF* is also among the most recognized fandoms in the world; both *Super Junior* and their fans had grabbed the top spot in Teen Choice Award in 2015. One of the informants, Jasmine, told me that this fandom's name was given by *Super Junior's* leader, Park Jeong-su (also known by his stage name, Lee Teuk) and she quoted some of his words, which can also be found in a meme circulated by fans:

When we are just debuted, in a concert with all other groups, we saw, there were some sapphire blue colours between all other colours of all other fandoms. Day by day … those sapphire blue colours are getting big and so many. We realised that those sapphire blue colours are the source of our spirit and our happiness, and our strength. As we know from the legend, *ELF* is a beautiful creature like a fairy. They are beautiful, and always give happiness, like they spell it. I realised those creatures we see now, that always make a sapphire blue ocean is the most beautiful thing, are like *ELF* in the legend. They are so beautiful, always give happiness to us, and always protect us. So, I named them, *ELF*. Now those creatures are so many and make so big sapphire blue oceans which are so beautiful; the most beautiful thing. Even though we don't know all of them, but we know they are always there whenever we go, and I love them. Those creatures are *ELF*, our everlasting friends.

What is the difference between *ELF* and other fandoms that has caused them to grow to such prominence worldwide? One informant, Shera, emphasised that relationships between both *ELF* and *Super Junior*, and within fandom itself, are the essence of the popularity of both the fandom and the band itself:

I envy of the relationship *ELFs* have with Super Junior and other *ELFs*. I've never seen a fandom so close before until I made friends with some *ELFs* on Twitter. They talk to each other like they are best friends, even though they haven't met each other in real life before. And they are so close with *Super Junior*. They do everything together and they seem just like a family. On April Fools, they trolled each other, and the leader of *Super Junior*, Lee Teuk, posted out his real number on Twitter. Seeing them have so much fun together make me jealous. They seem so bonded, and I can really see they love each other so much. I want my fandom to be like that too, but sadly,

it isn't happening. My idol probably doesn't even care about us half as much as *Super Junior* does for *ELF*. I want to join the *ELF* fandom. I can't say this on my personal blog because my fandom hates *ELF* and *Super Junior.*

Authenticity and Social Identity of *Hallyu* Fans

Social identity and authenticity are relevant concepts through which to analyse the nature of fan behaviours that create a social hierarchy within fan communities. I identified three types of fans: true fans, multi-fans and successful fans.

Firstly, a true fan. Several fans used this term in discussing issues that are tied to authenticity and loyalty to the fandom. Taleha used markers of knowledge and passion when discussing the qualities of a true fan, as she said:

> Regardless of age, a true fan should have the right knowledge about their idols and makes an effort to search the information on websites. Since this is the internet era, there is no excuse to say that you don't know anything. Also, if news comes out, it is the right action for a true fan to check whether it is the right news before you circulate it in your SNS (social networking sites) to avoid misunderstanding among other fans. I even check to see if I have the right information.

Malimi referred to true fans as those who 'search and dig' for old videos of their idols, especially rare videos: "I know all the recent videos and variety shows of *Super Junior*, but I find it gives me a memorable feeling if I can share old or rare videos with other *ELFs*." Jasmine mentioned that a true fan follows an idol group from their first debut, and should be unified in building up the fandom's name to compete with other fandoms, rather than just loving the group once they become popular.

> I know many *ELFs* love *Super Junior* after the 'Sorry Sorry' era. I consider myself lucky, because I knew them since the 'Twins' era back in 2005, and they were not popular yet. People would look at me weird if I mentioned *Super Junior* since they are not American singers.

Taleha, Malimi and Jasmine are senior fans, and they followed *Super Junior* at least from before 'Sorry Sorry' golden era in 2009. However, there are some fans who became an *ELF* after the 'Sorry Sorry' era. According to Carolina, the moment one becomes a true fan is not important if she or he can fulfil the criteria of a good fan. Following all of *Super Junior*'s activities is fundamental to being a true fan. If not all, fans may opt to follow their favourite members of *Super Junior*. This type of fan is often referred as 'shipper', a short of 'relationshipper' (McCudden, 2011). Carolina said, "I really love *Super Junior* after I watched the 'Sorry Sorry' music video. After that, I follow each of their comebacks. My bias is Kyuhyun. I also 'ship' Eunhae couple [*ELFs* use the portmanteau 'Eunhae' or sometimes 'Eunhae couple', to refer to two members of *Super Junior*, Eunhyuk and Donghae, who are known for having the closest friendship]. I think they are so comfortable with each other."

Katy offered that a true fan should make an effort in terms of their time and money. She clarified that this is the most obvious ways to see how big a fan he or she is towards the idol group.

> I searched and downloaded all *Super Junior*'s videos, even though I had to buy extra prepaid phone credit. Lately, I love to watch an online stream on Vlive, especially the recent comeback of *Super Junior* and maknae's comeback [which in K-pop refers to when an artist releases new material, which is often announced by its performance on a music TV show]. I watched Ryeowook live streaming on Vlive and I felt so good to listen to my sweetheart's songs. It's so nice! Also, I don't understand certain fans who claim to be an *ELF* but kept asking me for the recent videos of *Super Junior*. I bought the reload, waited until the video was '100% downloaded'; my eyes were always swollen in the next morning because I was awake at night. It's the only time I can download, and they want the videos from me? If they trade something, I will give them. If not, I'm sorry.

True fans often have a 'common knowledge' within fan communities, and make an effort to seek hidden information, as described by Taleha and Malimi, who love to search for old videos. True fans are also thought of as those who invest their time and pocket money in one idol group all the time. McCudden (2011, 49) proposes a differentiation between the terms 'true' fan and 'big' fan, in which a 'true' fan can be described in binary terms; either one is a true fan, or one is not. However, 'big fan' can be placed on a dynamic scale in which "it is possible to be a big fan, a 'bigger' fan, and even a 'big huge psycho' fan, indicating that 'big' can be modified to represent placement on a continuum". Alternatively, McCudden (2011) believes that "if fans conceptualise a scale upon which a wider range of fandom levels can reside, it may be more palatable to express a judgement about those who would take that scale to its most extreme end" (49).

The second category of fans are called multi-fans. A fun phrase used to refer to multi-fans is jeolsae, which means 'migratory bird' (Harmoniar 2016), as this fan will join many fandoms at the same time. In addition, there are other words, such as da-faen or 'all fan' to refer to multi-fans. In explaining the identity of multi-fans and their practices, Aliya mentioned,

> I am an *ELF*, and at the same time a *Baby* (Korean boy group, *BAP's* fandom's name) and an *A.R.M.Y* (Korean boy group *BTS's* fan club name). But I never miss any *Super Junior*'s activities, official albums, or even their concerts. I also bought *BAP* and *BTS* albums, and I love their music. However, my priority is Super Junior since it is my first favourite.

This is the dilemma of many fans, especially when many new groups have debuted with different styles of music from *Super Junior*. I read a thread of conversation on Facebook; some fans criticised others who used the profile picture of one fandom, but also circulated the news of other fandoms. Thus, are they only *ELFs* (for example), or multi-fans? This question is quite debatable when it comes to websites, especially when fans present misleading profile pictures as their identity profile. The presentation of identity online is important to connect fans to certain fandoms. There are also some fans who have declared themselves outright as multi-fans instead of tying themselves to one fandom to avoid any misunderstanding. Shera is a multi-fan who wrote on her Facebook,

> I am a multi-fan, so I support different fandoms and idol groups. The reason is, I want to enjoy my Korean entertainment without any restrictions. I enjoy Running Man, Korean dramas, *Super Junior* and also many idol groups. The one I am into nowadays is *Day6* [a new idol group]. Just to let you know my status.

In Aliya's case, I believe she can afford official goods of many idol groups. Thus, her involvement in many fandoms was tolerated, while at the same time raising her status in the social hierarchy because of her investment in the fandoms. However, Shera is still a student and cannot afford much idol group merchandise. Therefore, she preferred to enjoy free access to Korean entertainment shows without the burden of involving herself too much in particular fandom.

Lastly, a successful fan is a popular term used to refer to a fan with the highest position in the social hierarchy. However, there are several opinions regarding this group of fans. It may refer to those who have the highest cultural and social capital within fandom (Bourdieu 1986; Jenkins 1992; Miles 2010), and a fan who gains financial and interpersonal success through fangirling or fanboying (Harmonicar 2016). Harmonicar explains that successful fans are able to build a personal relationship with their idols through work or romance. This could come through entering the Korean entertainment business and working with their idols on TV shows. In other words, these fans may have adored their idols in school and wished to become one in the future. Many rookie idols who profess to be inspired by senior idols successfully fulfill their ambition, and may even work together with their favourite idols in their career. For instance, *BTOB*'s Sungjae could not hide his excitement when he was working with one of the *Super Junior*'s members as a host of the variety show, *A Song for You*. Successful fans can also be

those who work at the same events as their idols, and who have a chance to meet and interact with them personally (Harmonicar 2016). This type of fan has high social capital because they have a close relationship or connection to their idol. These fans may get a free concert ticket or a free pass to meet an idol personally backstage. Other fans are required to queue up in the early morning to buy the tickets, or compete with other fans to buy online tickets. Thus, it has become a trend among fans to work closely with their idols, especially as a make-up artist, coordinator artist, producer (PD nim), a writer for events, or as staff for the idols. Fans often joke that they would even work as a cleaner in their idol's company building if they had a chance to meet the idol face-to-face. Moreover, it may go beyond a simply professional relationship to become a working-romantic relationship (Harmonicar 2016). The best example of this is Hani, a member of the girl group *EXID*, who dated *JYJ*'s Junsu after being his fan since high school (but they broke up their relationship). This is certainly a successful fan, and many fans wish to be like her.

Investment as a Fan in Fan Communities

Fans define the common degree of social identity and social hierarchy within the fandom through investment in cultural capital, socialising and sharing, and social capital. One of the main methods of being recognised in a fandom is to invest in cultural capital. Fans consume official fandom goods for their own needs and want to be recognised by other fans for this while they were interacting. The albums, official goods, concerts, fan meets and internet bills are the most common of fans' investment. Aina explained,

> I spent half of my salary to buy *Super Junior* albums. The album cost an estimated a RM60-RM80 [around 20 US dollars]. However, for *Super Junior*'s comeback, the company did not only release an [official] album, but also a repackaged album [usually, this means the addition of another two or three songs] and also an individual cover album [this refers to a special-edition album where the cover art highlights one of the ten *Super Junior* members –

see the "Mr Simple" album of *Super Junior*] which you may choose your favourite member for that album. Imagine if you had two or three favourite members. This would not include if they had world tour concerts, which cost around RM130 [33 US dollars] for the cheapest seat and around RM700 [175 US dollars)] for the rock zone. They could also release a Japanese album, which would be double the price of a Korean album. I want to cry.

Surprisingly, most fans are willing to spend their money on albums; even though they are expensive, most fans manage to buy them. Figures 1 & 2 show a few of *Super Junior*'s albums. Nowadays, fans prefer to buy songs digitally through online music sites such as iTunes, MelOn, Synnara and Soribada, which are normally cheaper than buying a physical album. They spend on each album released because they want their idols to be at the top of music shows and weekly charts such as M! Countdown (MNET), The Show (SBS), Show Champion (MBC) and Simply Kpop (ARIRANG TV). The music shows tally the sales of albums and digital music, website votes, mass searches on Google and NAVER, and the number of views on Youtube and Tudou videos, and crown the highest-grossing idol group as the champion of the week. Sometimes, the idol groups are able to enter an international chart, such as the Billboard Chart. Through these activities, fans can prove their power, and cooperate in their fandom. Fans also post and circulate tutorials on social media that explain how to increase the vote. They share their vote accounts within fan communities and they watch music videos on Youtube several times to increase its views, and watch streams on Genie and NAVER (popular sites in Korea) to create awareness of their idol's comeback. The success of the idol with the general public is an indicator of the popularity of both artist and fandom.

Other than their comeback season, an idol's company also offers fans their official merchandise. In March 2016, *Super Junior*'s company, SM Entertainment (SME), opened a new convenience store in their company building at ground level, selling food and snacks such as instant noodle (ramen), popcorn, cereal,

ice cream, candy, chocolate, jelly, jam, etc. (Figure 3). They are all released under a brand name, PL, which is jointly owned by E-Mart and SME (Kang 2016). The price, of course, is almost double that of normal convenience store items, but Allkpop.com (2016) reported that *Super Junior* Habanero Ramen (5 packs) was one of the top two most sold SM SUM Market products in terms of sale price. Nevertheless, Shereen argued that for fans who consume expensive merchandise, 'loyalty means investing':

> People need to understand that merchandise is expensive. And SM [SME] isn't very fair with prices when it comes to these special products. International fans are always like "omg new merchandise I'm broke!" Now imagine being a fan in Korea with actual access to all of it. It's hard to keep up. Not everybody can afford it, and of course, SM or any company will do whatever it takes to squeeze as much as possible from fans. That's the whole point of selling merchandise. And saying things like "then don't buy it"? Listen, if you had that store near you, you would do anything to buy at least one thing in there. Kfans [Korean fans] are greedy and believe in loyalty, loyalty means investing in your idols whatever you can. But then again, this is SM, of course, this would be their main goal, to drain us of money.

For fans, the degree of one's fandom is directly related to the cost of investment and the ability to ensure they can compete with other fandoms for their idols' fame. Supporting their idols is necessary, and some Korean fans help to buy the goods and retail food for international fans.

Figures 1 and 2: Official album (Author's albums collection)

Furthermore, when investing in cultural capital, the capability of acquiring knowledge and skills through socialisation is essential for indicating how well-informed fans are toward their objects of fandom. The most common expression of this kind of investment is referred to as 'poaching' (Jenkins 1992), in which fans create works such as fanfiction, fan art, memes, mashups, and remixes, which they upload and circulate on websites. *ELFs* love to create fanfiction in which *Super Junior*'s members are cast as their favourite fictional characters. Fans who have talent in writing put their skills in various fantasy and romance stories. Nonetheless, *ELFs* prefer the narratives to involve their idol group members only, and often keeps away using female artists as their supporting characters. That said, it is an option in their narrative, and the content of a story depends on the preferences and imagination of an author to fulfil their desired stories. This kind of romantic fanfiction is also known as a 'shipper' story. The most popular kind of 'shipper' in a fanfiction is between Lee Donghae and Lee Hyukjae, who are collectively given the nickname, 'Eunhae'. They have been very close to each other since the group's inception, and they even debuted as a group unit called *Super Junior D&E*. The term 'romance story' does not necessarily carry the connotation of its subjects being partners, or having a gay relationship. In *ELF's* context, a 'romance story' focuses on both members have a close relationship and have similar interests in terms of music and lifestyle. In addition, fans with skilled hands love to make their idols the subject of their artwork. Some of this art is done by hand, and other instances, by computer programme or in smartphone apps. The most popular fanart is done in cartoon form. Memes have also become popular on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The second investment a fan can make is in socialising and sharing. Socialising creates bonds between fans when they converse and interact together, either about their object of fandom or not (McCudden 2011). *ELFs* share information related to *Super Junior* activities, such as commercial films (CF), dramas, musicals, world tour concerts in different countries which are usually not covered by the mainstream news, interviews during comeback season, and variety shows, most of which are

products of the Korean, Chinese and Japanese media. Fans not only share this information, but also translate or sub videos for those who do not understand the Korean language. Even though Hangul [the Korean alphabet] is mainly understood by Koreans, certain fans take an initiative to learn it (Leung, 2012), and they help other fans by translating videos, which they upload onto Youtube or other fan sites. The different languages uploaded on these websites reflect *Super Junior*'s popularity around the world. The efforts fans make to translate the raw video into different languages are greatly appreciated by many others, who desperately need subtitles to understand a video properly. Fans who do these translations normally do not make any profits from their hard work, instead doing it for the credentials they gain in the fandom.

ELFs also demonstrates a sense of primary group belonging through developing a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Even though *ELF* is a K-pop fandom, *ELFs* define themselves differently from other K-pop fandoms, especially through the colour of the fandom. Most K-pop fandoms have 'ownership' of a certain colour, the choice of which is officially made by the company representing the idol groups. The colour should be unique, and the company staff meticulously choose the right colour to avoid any argument between the fandoms. However, some fandoms do not have their own colour. As mentioned earlier, *ELF* owns the sapphire blue colour; the colour is very significant to *ELF* and *Super Junior* because it unites them. In a Super Junior concert or fandom gathering, it is prohibited to hold other colours of light stick, or balloons that belong to another fandom, or to wear a shirt on which another fandom's name is written. The risk is that an individual could be seen as a stranger in the *ELF* fandom, and if their picture were snapped by somebody, it could destroy their reputation. Everyone must follow the rules, especially in their choice of colour, to keep a sense of belonging within the fandom. Creating a sense of 'us' and 'them' is very important for *ELF* to keep together as a fandom, either in an online or offline context.

The last investment a fan can make is in social capital. Fans with social capital receive recognition from other fans because of their

Figure 3: Super Junior's gourmet popcorn (Author's picture collection)

influence on websites. During my observation of the *ELF* fandom, I began to recognise some of the popular *ELFs*. When they posted about *Super Junior* or updated their vacations, other *ELFs* would make comments like, "*Unnie* [a term used by a younger girl to refer to an older girl], I saw you at the airport. I want to greet you but you did not look at me", or, "I saw you at the shopping mall, but I was unsure if it is you". I use the term "*ELF* celebrity" or "fan-celebrity" to refer to these fans; they are known within the fandom in both online and offline contexts as *ELFs* who are worthy of respect. For the degree of connections, some international *ELFs* believe that the Korean *ELFs* have the highest social capital because they can meet the idol members on tour without having to take the long journey to South Korea. The Korean *ELFs* are able to go to shows being recorded for television broadcasts during comeback seasons; they can go to concerts and fan meetings, which happen most often in Korea, and sometimes they can visit an idol group's place of residence. These are rare opportunities for international *ELFs* unless they are going to Korea.

The Degree of Fandom Between Fan Communities

With the emergence of online fandom, it is common for fans to engage and communicate with many fandoms because of the flow of information on the Internet. Sometimes, fans may be drawn to younger groups, who are closer to them in age and offer different styles of music and performance. These are the common reasons given by fans who engage with multiple fandoms at one time. Nonetheless, some *ELFs* love to engage with other fandoms. Therefore, to explore this trend, I had to become involved with another fandom to get the gist of the experience between fan communities. I chose the *A.R.M.Y* (Adorable Representative M.C for Youth) fandom. *A.R.M.Y* is a new fandom of a new boy group called *BTS*, or in English, Bangtan Boys. *BTS* debuted on June 12, 2013, and the *A.R.M.Y* fandom was established on July 9, 2013.

When experiencing interactions between fan communities, I paid particular attention to the individual behaviours within the *A.R.M.Y* fandom. *BTS* had gained popularity internationally in 2015 by rising to the top of the Billboard Album Chart, and their concert DVDs were sold out. Their popularity made the fandom grow bigger, and more new fans joined. However, the conditions in the fandom became unpleasant because some immature fans began to behave poorly by criticising and comparing other idol groups to *BTS* in unsophisticated ways. An *A.R.M.Y* made an effort to write an apologetic letter to various fandoms on behalf of the whole fandom. (Allkpop.com, 2016). One of the *A.R.M.Y* fans, Maya, complained that the popularity of *BTS* has attracted many immature fans and they circulated pointless information about the fandom and *BTS*,

> I remember when we in *A.R.M.Y* were the best fan base, around two years ago. I'm still the biggest fan of *BTS*, and have been loyal to them for years now, but the fandom is getting a little out of hand now. This happens to every fandom once they hit stardom, and, due to the members' young ages, they attract younger fans. Please don't go around saying shit about *A.R.M.Y*, because they are some people's family.

Kira also whined about the immature fans; she said,

> Yeah, back then our fandom was one of the best thought of fandom, but ever since *BTS* gained popularity, young, vulgar kids have been corrupting our *A.R.M.Y* base. My love for our boys will never die, though. I just hope that the immaturity of the newer, younger fans will die soon.

On the other hand, Lorena wished that the *A.R.M.Y* fandom would get better soon and become as good a fandom as it was before,

> If you really love them and care for them, why would you embarrass them to the point where they have to apologise on behalf of you? To be a fan is to care for their well-being, for them to be happy and not to make others hate them because of your immaturity. To all the respectful *BTS* fans I salute you and glad to call you *BTS* family. We got to show the young immature fans the way we are supposed to act so we can be a proud united group!

The most interesting thing I found about interactions between fandoms was a good relationship between both *ELF* and *A.R.M.Y.* It was in a *BTS* concert, "Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa On Stage: Epilogue", held on May 7 and 8, 2016, at the Olympic Gymnastic Arena in Seoul. Before the concert, anti-fans threatened *A.R.M.Y* on Twitter, saying that they would attack BTS members after the concert. *BTS* became the top 10 worldwide trending subject on Twitter; it was the first time an idol group had dominated Twitter's top 10 trending category. One of the fandoms that tried to back up and protect *A.R.M.Y* was *ELF*, through the use of the hashtag of #ELF_WITH_ARMY. *ELF* has encountered a lot of challenges in their fandom, and they understood *A.R.M.Y's* situation when facing many anti-fans. In another situation, on May 24, 2016, one of *Super Junior* members, Kangin, was the subject of significant news. He crashed into a streetlight pole as he was driving his car in Gangnam, Seoul, and then drove away. His blood alcohol level would later test high enough for license suspension (Aspera, 2016; ipetitions.com 2016). The next morning, he

turned himself in to the police. However, on May 25, 2016, 'Super Junior fans' posted a petition for Kangin to leave the group through a post on DC Inside (a Korean internet forum site), as they saw this series of acts (Kangin also previously punished for a hit and run drunk driving incident in 2009) as having been detrimental Super Junior's image and career (Do, 2016). In response, ELFs from all over the world decided to write a counter-petition (ipetitions.com 2016). As I mentioned earlier, 'Super Junior's fans' are those who eventually leave the fandom as times goes or sometimes become 'antis', but 'Super Junior's ELFs continue to support the fandom under any circumstances. ELF faced a hard week due to this infighting, but the A.R.M.Y fandom kept on supporting them with the hashtag #ARMY_WITH_ELF on Twitter. It was a goal of each fandom to keep giving back and to be supportive toward each other.

Conclusion

Changes in communication technology have shaped various elements of popular culture in online spaces. The construction of online identities provides fans with the opportunity to share common interests with each other. However, the possibility of possessing certain knowledge and skills to get recognition from others has led fans to struggle for dominance in online spaces. This can be illustrated by Bordieu's (1984, 1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, in which fans must possess a minimum of knowledge, effort and skill to verify the construction of their identities within fan communities. By identifying the identity, fans accrue various forms of capital to acquire an advantageous placement and dominance within a fandom.

In studying K-pop fans, their identities and statuses in the social hierarchy of a fandom are important to help them validate their existence within fan communities. Various practices carried out by fans determine their place and assert a certain status within fan communities. The meanings of being a fan are presented to identify themselves and other fans either as true fans, multi-fans or successful fans. I have presented a multidimensional analysis of fans in K-pop fandoms based on their practices to reflect how the complexity of their activities

may be best represented as an act of a fan per se, and cannot be completely or accurately represented as a fandom's practices (Jenkins 2006). Therefore, I presented several definitions of what constitutes being a fan and offered examples of various fans' practices to indicate their multiple efforts and contributions in the fandom itself.

In the Internet era, it is impossible to study an online fandom without engaging with other fandoms. I managed to engage with two fandoms, ELF (Super Junior's fans) and A.R.M.Y (BTS's fans), as a way to experience the gist of fan relationships between fandoms. The interactions between other fandoms are possible because these websites are easily accessed by public audiences. Despite the fans' practices within the fandom, engagement with another fandom provides a variety of opportunities to expand fans' connections within a larger fandom itself; in this case, in a K-pop fandom.

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