

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

**MASTER THESIS**

**DIGITAL COMMUNITY, FAN SPACE AND GENDERED  
EMOTIONS: AN ANALYSIS ON KOREAN POP MUSIC  
(K-POP) FANDOM IN TURKEY**

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**THESIS SUPERVISOR: ASST. PROF. NURSEM KESKİN AKSAY**

**ISTANBUL, 2020**

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**by**

**BETÜL TOZLU**

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Sociology**

**THESIS SUPERVISOR: ASST. PROF. NURSEM KESKİN  
AKSAY**

**ISTANBUL, 2020**

APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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This is to confirm that this thesis complies with all the standards set by the School of Graduate Studies of Ibn Haldun University.

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## ACADEMIC HONESTY ATTESTATION

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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Signature:



## ÖZ

# DİJİTAL TOPLULUKLAR, FAN ALANLARI VE CİNSİYETLENDİRİLMİŞ DUYGULAR: TÜRKİYE'DEKİ KORE POP MÜZİĞİ FANDOMU ÜZERİNE BİR ANALİZ

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Bu çalışma Türkiye’de yaşayan Kore Pop müziği (K-Pop) fanlarının deneyimlerini analiz etmeyi amaçlar. Son yıllarda Türkiye’deki K-Pop tartışmalarının toplumsal cinsiyet ekseninde yapıyor olmaları, K-Pop’un aile yapısı ve var olan cinsiyet kodlarına karşı bir tehlike olarak yansıtılması çalışmanın ortaya çıkmasında en büyük etkenlerden biridir. Çalışma, hem anti K-Pop olarak isimlendirilebilecek bu söylemi, hem de özellikle sosyal medya üzerinde süren fan deneyimlerini birlikte inceleyerek toplumsal cinsiyet konusunun nasıl anlamlandırıldığını analiz etmeyi amaçlar. Bu doğrultuda fanlarla derinlemesine görüşmeler, odak grupları, etnografi, dijital etnografi, söylem analizi ve katılımcı gözlem gibi birden fazla veri toplama yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen verilen toplumsal cinsiyet olgusunun popüler kültür temsillerinin yanında, paylaşılan alan ve bu alanda dolaşımda olan duygular ile büyük ölçüde ilgili olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Katılımcılarla yapılan görüşmelerin analizleri özellikle maskülenlik olgusu ve ideal erkek tanımlarının negatif duygular ve baskıcı/tehditkar davranışlar üzerinden anlamlandırılırken, feminenlik olgusunun pozitif duygular ve daha yumuşak davranışlar ile ilişkilendirildiğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Çalışma var olan toplumsal cinsiyet tanımlamalarının özellikle duyguları ifade etme konusunda hem kadın hem de erkek için kısıtlayıcı ve sınırlandırıcı olduğunu öne sürer. Bu bağlamda K-Pop idolleri aracılığıyla gösterilen farklı toplumsal cinsiyet temsillerinin, anti K-Pop söyleminin iddia ettiğinin aksine ‘feminen’ görünümüleri sebebiyle değil, feminenliğe atfedilmiş yumuşak davranış kalıpları ve pozitif duyguları ifade etme konusundaki özgürlükleri nedeni ile ilgi gördüğünü öne sürer. Bunun yanında hegemonik maskülenite kalıplarından ayrılıyor olmaları sebebiyle bu ‘daha feminen’ maskülenite temsiline daha güvenli ve daha

güvenilir olarak algılandığını gösterir. Çalışma var olan toplumsal cinsiyet tanımlamalarındaki sorunlara dikkat çekerken, duygusal bağ ve dijital alan kullanımının toplumsal cinsiyeti anlamlandırma üzerindeki etkilerini gösterir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** popüler kültür, kültür endüstrisi, toplumsal cinsiyet, dijital alan, duygu

## ABSTRACT

### DIGITAL COMMUNITY, FAN SPACE AND GENDERED EMOTIONS: AN ANALYSIS ON KOREAN POP MUSIC FANDOM IN TURKEY

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This study aims to analyze the experiences of Korean Pop music (K-Pop) fans in Turkey. In recent years, K-Pop has been discussed together with gender norms in the context of Turkey, claiming that K-Pop is a danger for family structure and existing gender codes. This study intends to investigate both on this discourse, which can be named as anti K-Pop discourse; and on fan experience, which mainly exist on digital space, to be able to see how gender is understood. With this aim, I have used multiple data collection techniques such as; in-depth interviews and focus groups with fans, ethnography, digital ethnography, discourse analysis and participant observation. According to the data obtained, the concept of gender is highly related with space and emotions as well as popular culture representations. Analyses of the interviews revealed that especially the concept of masculinity can be understood more with its attachments to negative emotions and oppressing/threatening behaviors, while femininity has attachments like positive emotions and softer behaviors. This study shows that existing definitions on gender representations are too limiting and oppressive especially when expressing various emotions both for men and women. In this context, different gender representations shown by K-Pop idols, unlike the claims of anti K-Pop discourses, raised interest not because of their 'feminine' appearances but because of their softer behaviors and freedom in emotional expressions which are socially constructed as femininity. Together with this, the study shows that these 'more feminine' masculinity representations are perceived as more secure and reliable because of their distance from hegemonic masculinity representations. While pointing to the problems of existing definitions for gender norms, this study reveals the impact of emotional connection and digital space on understanding gender norms.

**Keywords:** popular culture, culture industry, gender, digital space, emotions

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In groups called K-pop, which are a chaos that biological sex is eliminated, they act in groups of completely ungendered boys and girls. They attract attention with their clothing styles and with their attitudes towards each other, that they show on the stage. The target audience in particular is the conservative community, ages 12-18. It is stated by the experts that their actions are aimed to create a new culture in order to create a sexual chaos by demonstrating it as innocence.

(Firat Online Newspaper)<sup>1</sup>

This quote is from one of the news which would appear on an online search if you search for ‘what is K-Pop’ on the internet, in Turkey. It is just one example of many news about warnings in the news for parents of the ‘dangers of K-Pop’. Today K-Pop, which refers to South Korean popular music sector, has become an important topic of discussions about gender and youth in Turkey. As is also shown in the quote, K-Pop groups, especially male groups, are perceived as ‘genderless’ or ‘gender neutral’ and criticized for their clothing style, make-up and behaviors by many journalists, thinkers, and psychologist on television channels, on social media, and in newspapers. In this thesis, my aim is to take this current situation, together with general K-Pop experience in Turkey, to discuss the complex relationship of popular culture, gender norms and morality.

After seeing many discussions about this issue, before the fieldwork, my main aim for this study was to look at the relationship between popular culture and its effect on the concept of gender, since gender was the first concept rising from these discussions. I tried to understand how internalizing a popular culture stream can be

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<sup>1</sup> Dursun, Songül. "Tehlike Ciddi ve Tehdit Hızla Yayılıyor!" *Elazığ Fırat*, February 15, 2019. <https://www.elazigfirat.com/soylu-tehlike-ciddi-ve-tehdit-hizla-yayiliyor/>

effective on norm making in the specificity of looking at gender norms. K-Pop carries a specific kind of culture including high usage of technology, staying in touch with fans around the world through social media and efficient use of emotions to create strong bonds and devotion of its followers. Interviews with fans and fieldwork showed that these characteristics of the K-Pop sector are very important to consider in any discussion about the sector. Thus, my focus shifted slightly to the relation between emotions and emotional spaces by focusing on experiences of K-Pop fans living in Turkey.

I argue that this sector's ability to connect people with emotions and successful usage of social media space has an important impact on fans' gender understandings and with this study I hope to give an understanding of gender and how it can be related to concepts of space and emotions. Also, I want to give an understanding about K-Pop sector which is highly popular and effective among especially young people in Turkey right now but, I believe, reasons behind this popularity and effectiveness are unclear for outsiders, and it causes some misinterpretations for the people who problematize this popularity. As someone who has been familiar with K-Pop for years it is funny for me to see statements like 'In groups called K-Pop',<sup>2</sup> since none of the K-Pop groups are known as 'K-Pop', and it does not make much sense to refer to them as 'groups of completely ungendered boys and girls'.<sup>3</sup> In such articles and in often used discourses there are so many misinterpretations and a lack of knowledge that it makes it hard for critics to come up with actual useful criticisms about the K-Pop sector or analyses about gender and youth. These misunderstandings and the hardships of giving meaning to fan behaviors by outsiders, leads me to do ethnography to be able to see the situation from the fans' point of view, which raised the importance of two other concepts: emotions and space. They are both such sensuous concepts as well as hard to understand from the outside. Thus, I also aim to give a better understanding of the K-Pop sector by analyzing fans' experiences with interviews and participant observations.

It is evident that K-Pop provides distinct gender representations with the fashion they spread, for example, different make-up styles for men and women celebrities, as well

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<sup>2</sup> In the newspaper article given at the beginning stated as 'K-Pop olarak adlandırılan gruplar' in Turkish.

<sup>3</sup> In the same article in Turkish, 'tamamen cinsiyetsizleştirilmiş erkeklerden ve kızlardan oluşan gruplar'.

as different behaviors they attached to femininity and masculinity. The issue of gender and relating it to space and emotions came from my fieldwork and from the words of my study's interlocutors. In fact, my first aim was to focus on the emotional bonds fans obtain through social media and to look at the changing beauty standards through popular culture, but the current discussions in Turkey and in the field impelled me to other concepts. Fieldwork showed me that fans have a different discourse than has been used in media and although concerns about K-Pop have some correct and important points, the topic has many sides and is more complex than being just a music genre or being an evil plan the 'targeting conservative community'.<sup>4</sup>

There are two main reasons for me to choose this topic, and see it as important field to study: First is; as far as I see in my environment and people around me, K-Pop is becoming more widespread every day and becoming even more common especially in young generation's everyday lives. I perceive this as a kind of power, to shape world views of people, especially youth, by enabling them to engage with something that is actually very unfamiliar to the community they have been born in, thus enabling the producers of these popular culture streams a very effective influence on the audience's world views and definitions. Popular culture products have the ability to attach to on the everyday life and become part of one's 'normal' way of understanding the world, which makes it, for me, crucial to understand because it can easily become dangerous for the existing norms and values of the society, thus shouldn't be underestimated.

The second reason, which probably is the reason why I noticed the first point above, is my own experience of enjoying K-Pop from a very young age. Through my early-teenage years, I have been interested in different pop culture streams from different countries because the ones we produce in Turkey did not appeal to me. They all affected me for short periods, but the popular culture of South Korea held me longer than any of them. For me it was sincerity, moral values, and highlighting the importance of concepts like family, friendship, and innocence that made it easier to be attached to this sector than others did. Through the study, I have realized that

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<sup>4</sup> In the same article in Turkish: 'muhafazakar camia'.

almost every interlocutor I interviewed had gone through a similar process with similar thoughts like I had. This made me more convinced to believe that it might be different for an insider to study on this issue than someone who is completely an outsider to the field.

Friends and family who knew my long term interest for the K-Pop sector were sending me all these articles and videos from everywhere about the ‘danger of K-Pop’ saying ‘look, your Koreans (*senin Koreliler*) are on news!’. This situation was of course a golden one for me as a sociology master’s student, so I decided to study it. For years I was looking for some news on television, subtitles in Turkish, any attention from media to K-Pop or Korean culture. It was important for my teen self to see other people too were interested in it, but there was nothing on common channels of media. Instead it was growing quietly in other parts of internet and social media. In roughly, we can say, 2019 it suddenly became a ‘huge danger’ for the future of youth in Turkey especially in terms of gender understandings represented by K-Pop idols, which shocked many parents who had no idea about it before. Previously, it was so unfamiliar for people around me that whenever they saw something related to Korea they were calling me immediately, saying ‘Look! Your Koreans!’ and treating me as the unofficial representative of the country just because I was watching their dramas instead of watching local ones. Together with studying the experiences and reasons of people who are interested in K-Pop, I think it can be interesting to look at the reactions of people who are complete strangers to this sector and who are horrified to see how common it is and it already was among their own children. This discussion is leading us to the question of how virtual or digital spaces have an effect on society and how the conflict of generations is gaining a completely different meaning with social media space. The conflict becomes something related to different common spaces instead of just the age gap between people; thus, it can occur even between people who are same age.

Therefore, together with the contribution to the growing literature about Korean popular culture and by focusing fans’ experience and showing the effects of audience in Turkey; this thesis will be a contribution to studies about digital space. Further, it will take up the discussion of the relationship between gender understandings and emotions. This study follows emotions, which are able to pass from digital space

with the effect of popular culture and questions how they became very effective in shaping gender norms. Therefore my main question of this thesis will be ‘how K-Pop culture experiences among fans in Turkey are affecting their gender norms considering space and emotions?’.

My aim in this study is not to defend or blame K-Pop and fans nor to directly criticize or support the criticisms towards K-Pop and Korean pop culture in general. I will not be focusing only on the history of the emergence on K-Pop since it has been studied deeply by many researchers but will be slightly touching the issue to give an understanding of the context. Also, I am not specifically aiming to show the economic or political benefits K-Pop has brought to Korea since it also has been discussed in many studies before. My aim is rather, to give a wholesome picture of the dedicated fans, intellectuals who became worried because of the changing gender norms in youth and gender understandings being reproduced and reshaped with strong emotional attachments through virtual spaces. Discussing the issue in this way is I believe, more beneficial than underestimating or harshly criticizing the effect of popular culture without understanding it clearly.

Thus, to be able to give a meaningful discussion, in this chapter I will first give a brief definition of K-Pop and its current situation in the world. After, I will give the context of Turkey. Then I will discuss the existing literature around the world and from Turkey, and lastly give my methodology and the main findings of this study. In the second chapter I will give more data about the fieldwork and will try to explain the K-Pop practices as a culture and the importance of space, especially digital space, for this culture and for fan interactions. I will elaborate on the emotional connection and the causes behind it by focusing on K-Pop sector’s tactics and Turkish fans’ experience before getting into the gender discussion because I believe this is the main point that has an impact on gender norms. In last the chapter I will discuss gender and especially representations of masculinity in K-Pop idol groups. Although representations of femininity in this sector are also important, since both fans and criticisms are focusing on and problematizing the discussion of masculinity to a greater extent, this study is including more discussions on masculinity than femininity. In this chapter, I will be taking gender as a concept that is continuously constructed by the society and I will argue that interest in different gender

representations is a consequence of the resistance to hegemonic masculinity and a quest for a way to change existing representations.

### 1.1. Understanding the K-Pop

Before discussing the K-Pop sector or K-Pop fans we should first make clear what does the word ‘K-Pop’ stands for. The main misunderstanding about K-Pop is that it cannot necessarily be considered a music genre. It is a genre in a way because it refers to a specific culture, which was mostly a subculture before it recently became part of the mainstream music industry, but it also is not only a genre since it includes many different types of music. Defining it as the popular music of South Korea also would be an incomplete definition since looking at popular song charts of Korea we often see ballads, or different songs (which are not considered K-Pop) that have higher rankings than K-Pop songs. Many of the interlocutors in this study were following a lot of different music genres sung in Korean, from indie<sup>5</sup> music to trot.<sup>6</sup> Most interlocutors defined K-Pop as music from Korea or music made by Koreans. Many of them had trouble while trying to express that it can’t be defined only in musical terms but the definition should be wider. Also references to K-Pop groups’ personal characteristics and behaviors were constantly mentioned by interlocutors in their definitions of the word.

In this thesis I will not be considering ballad or indie music sectors, and will not include just any type of music coming from Korea or in Korean language; but the K-Pop, and fans, I will be looking at is ‘idol music’. We can define idol as “a type of entertainer whose image is manufactured to cultivate a dedicated consumer fan following... Unlike other celebrities, idols are commercialized through merchandise and endorsements by talent agencies, while maintaining an emotional connection with a passionate consumer fan base.”<sup>7</sup> Many musicians in the K-Pop sector produce

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<sup>5</sup> Independent music from small companies or groups/individuals who are not part of bigger companies. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indie>

<sup>6</sup> Popular music genre of Korea. Originated in Korea during Japan’s colonial period starting from 1910s. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Trot (music),” (accessed August 15, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trot\\_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trot_(music))

<sup>7</sup> Definition for Japanese idol on wikipedia. I used this definition because it gives the meaning more detailed than ‘Korean idol’ article also because idol system of Korea has originally taken from Japan’s idol sector. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Japanese Idol,” (accessed August 25, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese\\_idol](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_idol)

their own music and choreographies and also can take part in image planning of the group or product designs of the official goods. Still I will be considering them too as part of idol music and K-Pop idols, since they too are educated in and advertised by talent agencies, have image manufacturing, and have a consumer fan base with emotional connection. Here it should be considered that 'idol music' is not only in or does not only belong to Korea, but is also found in countries like Japan, China, America or England. These countries are also highly dependent on idol music in their entertainment sectors considering the previous definition. Thus fieldwork and findings of this study can be used in studies about different countries and pop cultures too.

To discuss and understand K-Pop we should know the roots and main aims of this sector during its birth. The aim of the first chapter of this thesis is devoted to the historical background of the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu* as most of the academic articles prefer to refer to it. Briefly, *Hallyu* is the name for the Korean wave given by Chinese media. Using together the Chinese characters 'han' and 'lyu' it means sudden cold wave. It is used to refer to the sudden and unexpected popularity of Korean cultural products including dramas, pop stars, and music in China in 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Many scholars use the term Korean wave for the spread of Korean popular culture around the world because it usually enters a country with dramas and is followed by many different segments of the entertainment sector like music, reality shows, fashion, and the cosmetic sector. All these sectors help people to become more open to Korean products as well as makes them interested in traditions, history and moral understandings of Korea. So both the Korean wave and the word *Hallyu* refers this continuity of rising interest in Korea starting with the popular culture of the country and ends up with anything related with Korea and Korean people. Consequently this situation is turning Korea as a country into a brand, by putting 'K' in front of different words like K-Pop, K-Drama, K-Fashion, K-Beauty it refers to be 'Korean-like' in various fields.<sup>9</sup> Each field becomes a strong soft power<sup>10</sup> source for the

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<sup>8</sup> Kim, Milim. "The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry: Some Observations From Korea's Experience" *Keio Communication Review*, no.33 (2011): 166.

<sup>9</sup> Lie, John. "What Is the K in K-Pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity." *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 359.

<sup>10</sup> Soft power is a term coined by American political scientist, Joseph Nye. It means effecting the fondness of others by image and attractiveness. It involves culture, foreign policies and political values and seen as effective as hard power which is mainly military power. For more detailed

country and changes the perception of Koreans as well as all Asian looking people in other parts of the world.

As Adorno describes,<sup>11</sup> popular culture overall, is something produced, and industrialized to entertain society while regulating and standardizing it, which includes music, cinema, television, advertisements, fashion, arts, literature, sports, humor, technology, and almost every kind of leisure activity. The part ‘industrialized ’made me think that the K-Pop sector as a whole, fitting in his popular culture and culture industry definitions very well to the point that K-Pop is like a living theatre to describe what the culture industry is. Although the ‘idol sector’ around the world has many different examples, we don’t often see as detailed structure as the K-Pop sector has. Since the very first steps of the sector the songs, shows, people and behaviors they were showing were often produced by experts in the entertainment sector, considering fan groups, audience reaction, and fitting concepts for the time and place. The education system idols go through not only teaches them how to sing but it also teaches them how to behave from a very young age. There are certain accepted behavior norms that they should follow, and they mostly depend on Korean and Confucian values with a touch of modern life. Thus there is a regulation and standardization process of pop idols who are in a sector which has been supported by the government since the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2. A New Kind of Foreign Wave in Turkey

For a long time the word ‘foreign ’used to identify American or British originated productions for Turkish people. The ‘Do you listen foreign music? ’question is

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knowledge about soft power see, Joseph S. Nye. “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–171.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., and J. M. Bernstein. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Different politicians in Korea often engaged with the sector. They use the popularity of K-Pop in political relations and government often bring on the agenda of the importance of K-Pop for their country to the point that they offered the discussion to the parliament for boy group BTS to be exempt from military service.

”BTS: What will military service mean for their future?” *BBC*, November 22, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-50515696>.

Also government choose boy group Exo ‘officially ’as Nation’s Idols in 2018. See, <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/korean-government-called-exo-nations-pick/>.

Nationalism and nationalistic feelings often comes up together with K-Pop in Korea, which interestingly seems like partially spreading Korean nationalism among the fans between the non-Koreans around the world.

actually usually asking if you listen music in English language, ‘I watch foreign series rather than Turkish ones ’means watching American or British series, in other words series in the English language. The word ‘foreign’ for cultural products became a name which meant English language products. Because almost all non-Turkish products coming from outside were coming in the English language. This, for sure, made people more familiar with the English language and gave them an idea about what life is like in America or in England. Many people liked and copied the styles of famous people, memorized English song lyrics, and wished to go places they saw in movies or shows. This stream of western pop culture is still continuing today but especially in the last 5-6 years there is another kind of ‘foreign ’originated products which are affecting Turkey. But no one uses the word ‘foreign ’for them because they are not in the English language but Korean.

Although the mainstream media and general public have acknowledged the popularity of Hallyu products in last 5-6 years or maybe even less, Korean dramas, and K-Pop have been gaining popularity on internet since before the 2010s. It is not easy to give a certain date for the internet popularity, but if we look at when the first Korean television series started to air on Turkish TV channels, starting with the national channel TRT, on 2006 with the drama ‘Emperor of the Sea’. Other dramas on the same channel like ‘Jewel in Palace’ and ‘Princess Hours’ gained popularity. Multiple interlocutors in this study mentioned these two dramas as their first encounter with Hallyu products, which led them to internet space to find more dramas like them. All interlocutors who have been following Korean popular culture more than 7 years got involved in it with dramas like ‘Playful Kiss’ and ‘Boys Over Flowers’. K-Pop songs used in dramas and idols who acted in dramas led them to look into K-Pop and different groups and reality shows of K-Pop idols. The general discourse for fans in Turkey is that they were looking for an alternative popular culture instead of an American one. Either they wanted to see more morally concerned dramas and famous people (innocent and less complicated dramas about relationships, people wearing less revealing clothes, idols showing a respectful and clean image in front of camera) or they wanted to see different concepts and get involved with a different popular culture than the mainstream one.

Music Bank İstanbul<sup>13</sup> in 2013 and ABU TV Song Festival<sup>14</sup> in 2015 can be considered as the biggest two event related to K-Pop that have happened in Turkey. All interlocutors who were fans at that time told me similar stories about the airport where fans gathered to say their first welcome to K-Pop idols, who came for a concert. According to the interlocutors in both events, things went out of control at the airport because security teams hadn't heard of K-Pop before and didn't take the fan crowds seriously, which ended up in big stampedes at airport. These two events were the early times when the general public and the media met with the K-Pop fan groups in Turkey and were highly surprised by them.

The worldwide fame of groups like EXO<sup>15</sup>, BTS<sup>16</sup> and Blackpink<sup>17</sup> has reflected to audiences in Turkey too and with this popularity these groups and K-Pop in general started to be researched by outsiders, gained more attention by media, and also the anti K-Pop and anti-Hallyu discourses increasingly started to appear on social media and television channels. The first moment I decided to write my thesis on this topic was when I started to see this topic in newspapers and television channels as 'the K-Pop danger with a concerned discourse. Starting from January 2019 and <sup>18</sup>, continuing until today especially in newspapers in Turkey. Additionally, some TV news, were suddenly full of K-Pop with varying headlines from worried ones to racist ones towards Korea.

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<sup>13</sup> Popular weekly music show on South Korean national channel KBS. Since 2011 they started making yearly special concerts in different countries with different K-Pop groups, called Music Bank World Tour. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Music Bank World Tour," (accessed July 8, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_Bank\\_World\\_Tour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_Bank_World_Tour)

<sup>14</sup> A non-competitive gala showcase of songs, based on the Eurovision Song Contest, and is organised by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). K-Pop group C.N Blue performed and gained the biggest attention from the audience in the program. For Abu Tv Song Festival *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "ABU TV Song Festival," (accessed July 8, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ABU\\_TV\\_Song\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ABU_TV_Song_Festival)

<sup>15</sup> Currently a nine member boy group formed by SM Entertainment, debuted in 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Also known as Bangtan Boys, a seven member boy group formed by Big Hit Entertainment and debuted in 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Four member girl group, formed by YG Entertainment and debuted in 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Uç, Hakan. "K-Pop Tehlikesi" *Sabah*, December 4, 2019.

<https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/gunaydin/hakan-uc/2019/12/04/k-pop-tehlikesi>.

It could be said, the first major move that showed the worry and bewilderment towards K-Pop was Mehmet Ali Önel and Murat Akan's mention of the famous K-Pop group BTS in Beyaz Tv<sup>19</sup> program *Her Açıdan*. It did not awaken a wide response from people who are not familiar with *Hallyu* but got an enormous amount of reaction from fans of K-Pop especially fans of the group BTS, who were shown in the program during the talk. The announcer's words for describing them as 'not like women not like man but something in between, you think they are man but then you realize they look like women 'and Önel's referring to them as 'a devil plan 'was perceived as hate towards the group BTS by fans, whom fans consider as 'family or a close friend'.<sup>20</sup> What they were discussing in the program was actually more close to the existing consumption culture and the danger of and fear from giving so much power to an outside source. But the chosen words and their unfamiliarity of the *Hallyu* culture as well as social media culture caused a big and unexpected negative reaction from fans on social media which made them even more surprised and worried. This can be considered as the starting point of the *anti-Hallyu* movement in Turkey, and it was followed by many other journalists, writers, and social media experts, taking gender and K-Pop together and seeing the change in gender norms as the biggest threat for the future of the society in Turkey. The social media expert and author Said Ercan, whom considered as the leader of the anti K-Pop movements according to fans, at this point the reaction from fans was so strong that it turned into a *social media lynching* for anyone who talked negatively about K-Pop on their social media accounts, and many journalists just gave up on writing about this issue. Said Ercan, instead, continued to talk about dangers and dark side of K-Pop and tried to inform people about this on his Instagram account.

Ercan shared dozens of examples from the messages sent to him by fans, saying things like 'I want to stop following K-Pop but I can't please help me' or 'I never received love from my family and friends as much as I received love from them(*idols*)'.<sup>21</sup> From the way of texts and from my observations on social media I

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<sup>19</sup> See the part of the video and angry comments from a fan's YouTube channel: BTS ARMY, "Beyaz TV BTS'e nötr cinsiyet dedi!", January 23, 2019. YouTube video, 4:19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euuqKSlatf4>

<sup>20</sup> Many of the interlocutors of this study were fans of the group and this was the way they describe how they feel towards group members.

<sup>21</sup> See highlights in Ercan's personal instagram page for all messages; Ercan, Said. Instagram account. <https://www.instagram.com/saidercan/>

assume messages like the first one are from fans at very young ages like 9-12 (Ercan also shares some with their ages) and messages like the latter are from teen fans ages around 13-16. He also made multiple live streams on instagram open to different fans to join and all of them who joined and talked were between 13-18. By looking at the audience he encountered and interlocutors I interviewed, we can say that there are roughly two sides of K-Pop audience in Turkey. Older fans, between ages 20 and above, (the oldest interlocutor who defined herself as a fan was 42 and the oldest K-Pop fan I met on social media was 46) mostly started to watch Korean dramas at younger ages and almost grew up with K-Pop idols who made K-Pop culture a part of their lives in the previous 6 to 12 years ; and younger fans (the youngest interlocutor for this study was 16, according to Ercan he has been getting messages about 7-8 years old fans) who encountered K-Pop with idols' global popularity after multiple American music shows and have been identifying themselves as fan since 2-5 years. The two different age groups have different discourses and understandings and experiences about the sector and gender norms, which will be discussed broadly in second and third chapters of this study.

With Ercan's multiple posts on social media, news about K-Pop became more gender related and relatively more aggressive towards idol behaviors. Some of the headlines which can summarize in the process were 'The Project of Freak Youth: BTS, and <sup>22</sup>' 'Warning About Fagots Called BTS Whom Widespread in Turkey!'.<sup>23</sup> In almost all articles K-Pop and interest towards Korea was defined as 'poison', 'danger', or a 'trap'.<sup>24</sup> The more criticism K-Pop and especially the boy group BTS got about 'neutral gender' the more fans of K-Pop became defensive and showed their reaction and disagreements on social media. The amount of defensive comments and messages on social media showed how much the widespread K-Pop and Hallyu wave

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<sup>22</sup> Özay, Mahmut. "Ucube Gençlik Projesi: BTS" *Türkiye*, February 16, 2019. <https://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/egitim/604973.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> "Türkiye'de de yaygınlaşan BTS denen ibneler hakkında uyarı!" *Haber Nida*, January 29, 2019. <http://habernida.com/turkiyede-de-yayginlasan-bts-denen-ibneler-hakkinda-uyari/>

<sup>24</sup> See more articles about K-Pop;

Paksoy, Murat. "Uzak Doğu'dan Yayılan K-Pop Tehlikesi" *Anadolu Ajansı*, February 14, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/yasam/uzak-dogudan-yayilan-k-pop-tehlikesi/1392110> April 20

Kirazlı, Halime. "Kızlara Kore Tuzağı" *Gerçek Hayat*, December 16, 2019. <http://www.gercek hayat.com.tr/kapak/kizlara-kore-tuzagi/>. April 20

Ağ, Gülден. "K-Pop Gençleri Zehirliyor" *Halkın Habercisi*, March 6, 2019. <http://www.halkinhabercisi.com/k-pop-gencleri-zehirliyor>. April 20

in Turkey had attracted the interest of other people especially journalists and thinkers who describe themselves as Islamists. This 'digital fight' between fans of K-Pop and Islamist journalists/thinkers is also an example for the clash of different spaces in social media that were unaware of each other before. This was not because of the difference between generations since both sides include both young and adult people, but it shows the existence of a big cultural difference between people who might physically be sharing the same places but differ in their virtual spaces that they use and are impacted by on a daily basis. It really made them struggle to communicate with each other.

Another thing that shaped and strengthened anti Hallyu movements in Turkey was the increasing missionary activities held by young Korean Christians. It is claimed that groups from Korea acknowledged the rising interest in Turkey for Korean people and trying to misuse it. The interview published in the Korea Times newspaper given by a Korean woman, who worked in a popular Korean cafe Cheong Do in Istanbul, quickly spread among fans and raised attention.<sup>25</sup> According to the 29 years old woman Seo, a Christian group called Shincheonji<sup>26</sup> based in Korea is sending young groups of people to Turkey. She says in interview; "Since Turkish people have such a good image of Korea compared to other countries, the recruiters tried to take advantage of it by using Korean culture as a means to approach the locals... For the introductory level, they used a cafe specializing in holding K-pop fan meetings, to lure in vulnerable fans. The cafe was mostly booming with fans of Korean boy bands EXO and BTS... Sometimes, fans wrote letters to stars. We pretended that we could deliver them to the stars." She quit and went back to Korea after the group forced her to marry a Turkish man. One of the interlocutors, Ebru (36) opened this topic in our interview and claimed that this cafe took 60 young women to Korea for free in the name of language classes, and it got it got fans' attention that the Christian group's actions were not as innocent as they looked. She and her sixteen year old daughter also told me about many different cases where they met young people who converted to Christianity just to be able to meet Korean people.

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<sup>25</sup> Kang, Aa-Yong. "Victim breaks silence about SCJ's deceptive tactics to recruit overseas members, inhumane treatment of its members" *The Korea Times*, February 2, 2019. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2019/02/135\\_263104.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2019/02/135_263104.html)

<sup>26</sup> Full name from the Korea Times article; Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (SCJ)

This year a famous Korean YouTuber who has been living in Turkey since his childhood Chaby Han, shared a post on twitter as a warning to young people who love Korea, saying be careful for people who are trying to misuse your love for Korea.<sup>27</sup> He also shared a mail he got from a fan talking about how they met with Koreans who tried to teach them about the Bible but couldn't understand the situation, and added that such people are causing problems in Korea too and are not representative at all. Many comments under his tweet were also talking about similar cases people encountered in different cities of the Turkey.

By looking at their experiences we see the positive emotions towards Korean idols and actors has the ability to change the country's image as it did in other parts of the world with Hallyu Wave. Here in Turkey it also may lead young people to believe that any Korean individual would have the positive characteristics that the idols and actors show, thus make them trustable. This situation can give us an idea how strong popular culture can be for shaping norms and values of large groups, and it doesn't need to be direct all the time. The general picture I saw from interviews and observations is that many fans are conscious of such activities and also continuously informing and warning each other on social media when they face similar situations. Still, as interlocutor Ebru and miss Seo on the interview also mentioned, there are fans of a young age who might be open to anything coming from Korea with the power of popular culture.

There are around 30 adaptation series from Korean dramas shown on Turkish televisions so far. More than 30 Korean dramas have been released on Turkish televisions starting with 'Emperor of the Sea 'in 2006. On kanal7 television alone there were five Korean dramas in summer 2018.<sup>28</sup> More of them are planning to be released in the future. Songs in the Korean language can be heard when you go to a cafe or shop. There are many Korean products selling in stores like Watsons, Gratis, and there are stores in almost every big shopping mall that are selling only Korean and other Asian products like *Miniso*, *Mumuso* and *Yoyoso*. Cafes and restaurants, like *Sopung* in Fatih, Beşiktaş, Başakşehir and Kadıköy, *Cheongdo* and *Kore Köy* in

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<sup>27</sup> Han, Chaby. Twitter Post. Jan 7, 2020, 10:47 PM.  
<https://twitter.com/chabyhan/status/1214634593661456384>

<sup>28</sup> For the list of shows in some tv channels see; kanal7: <https://www.kanal7.com/dizi>, TRT: <https://filmdizihaber.com/trtde-yayinlanan-eski-yeni-kore-dizileri-ve-konulari/>, meltem tv: <http://www.meltemtv.com.tr/?pages,1831/kore-dizileri>

Kadıköy, *Bom Kore Cafe* in Ümraniye, *Sonamu* in Mecidiyeköy, which are selling Korean food, are in high demand and increasing in number.<sup>29</sup> They are only the ones in İstanbul, and I had to review and renew this list again and again because they were mounting up so quickly. There were two Korean Language and Literature departments at the University of Ankara and the University of Kayseri.<sup>30</sup> In 2016 the University of Istanbul also opened the Korean Language and Literature department.<sup>31</sup> In 2018 The Ministry of National Education added Korean language to the foreign language selection taught in schools..<sup>32</sup> According to one survey Turkey is the 9th country which yearly spends most money on the K-Pop sector while Japan is listed as 10th.<sup>33</sup> By looking at this situation we can say that these are all part of globalization, of course, but we cannot ignore that there is also an interest specifically in Korean products and culture coming from people in Turkey, in the same way as such an interest exists in many other parts of the world.

### 1.3. Main Academic Works About Hallyu Wave

Most of the literature about the Korean wave examines the issue of *Hallyu* bringing a big change to South Korea. The literature varies from topics like the production part of the sector and the impact of the government actions on it,<sup>34</sup> the economic benefits<sup>35</sup> and the soft power role of *Hallyu*,<sup>36</sup> . Many researchers use the Korean

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<sup>29</sup> All cafe/restaurants mentioned here were visited multiple times as part of the fieldwork during 2019-2020. They also mentioned by interlocutors often and some were chosen as the place for interviews by interlocutors.

<sup>30</sup> See websites of both universities: <http://www.dtcf.ankara.edu.tr/dogu-dilleri-ve-edebiyatlaribolumu/kore-dili-ve-edebiyati-anabilim-dali/>, <https://edebiyat.erciyes.edu.tr/Program/Kore-Dili-ve-Edebiyat/Edebiyat-Fakultesi/0/64/1163>

<sup>31</sup> See university's website: <https://koredili-edebiyat.istanbul.edu.tr/tr/>

<sup>32</sup> Ülkar, Esra. "Okullara Yeni Yabancı Diller: Korece ve Farsça" *Hürriyet*, January 23, 2018. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/egitim/okullara-yeni-yabanci-diller-korece-ve-farsca-40719550>

<sup>33</sup> Original source; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107598/south-korea-monthly-spending-on-kpop-by-country/>.

English article; <https://www.koreaboo.com/lists/top-10-countries-spend-money-kpop/>.

<sup>34</sup> See; Kim, "South Korean Culture Goes Global: K-Pop and the Korean Wave."; Kim, "The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry: Some Observations from Korea's Experience."; Lie, "K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea"; Jang and Paik, "Korean Wave as Tool for Korea's New Cultural Diplomacy"

<sup>35</sup> See; Lie, "K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea"; Jin, "New Korean Wave The Power of the Nation-state amid Neo-liberal Reform : Shifting Cultural Politics in the New Korean Wave."

<sup>36</sup> See; Desideri, "Bubble Pop : An Analysis of Asian Pop Culture and Soft Power Potential Bubble Pop : An Analysis of Asian Pop Culture and Soft Power Potential"; Joo, "Transnationalization of Korean Popular Culture and the Rise of "Pop Nationalism" in Korea"

wave as a way to analyze globalization.<sup>37</sup> Also a striking amount of the studies are about the audience of the *Hallyu* and K-Pop focusing on; identity production and the meaning of being a fan,<sup>38</sup> digital side of *Hallyu* and the importance of effective usage of internet and social media.<sup>39</sup> Most of these studies that I perceive as more general literature, do not depend on ethnography since their focus is more on the bigger picture and questioning how popular culture works or how it can effect different aspects of a country. The authors of these studies are from many different disciplines from economics to political science or musicology. They mostly highlight how important *Hallyu* and K-Pop is to the image of Korea and have a more positive perception of the *Hallyu*. The changing Asian image in the west and rising interest in Korean culture and values is seen as the result of the success of the Korean wave.

In addition to this literature, there are also many different ethnographic studies focusing on different countries or parts of the world. While older ethnographies of *Hallyu* are mostly about the countries in which it became popular first, like Japan, China,<sup>40</sup> and East Asian countries,<sup>41</sup> after 2012 there is a visible rise of studies about *Hallyu* in different countries like Romania<sup>42</sup>, Australia<sup>43</sup>, Canada<sup>44</sup>, Brazil<sup>45</sup>, Peru<sup>46</sup>, Sweden<sup>47</sup>, Israel<sup>48</sup> Palestine<sup>49</sup> and the ‘Middle East’ in general<sup>50</sup> as well as many

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<sup>37</sup> See; Yang, “Globalization, Nationalism, and Regionalization: The Case of Korean Popular Culture.”; Jung, “Korean Popular Culture and Transcultural Consumption: Globalized Desires between ‘Ours and Others.’”; Yoon, “Global Imagination of K-Pop: Pop Music Fans’ Lived Experiences of Cultural Hybridity.”; Shin, “Have you ever seen the Rain? And who’ll stop the Rain?: The globalizing project of Korean pop (K-pop).”

<sup>38</sup> See; Yoon, “Transnational fandom in the making: K-pop fans in Vancouver”; Park, “Manufacturing Creativity: Production, Performance, and Dissemination of K-pop”

<sup>39</sup> See; Ahn, “Korean pop takes off! Social media strategy of Korean entertainment industry.”

<sup>40</sup> See; Conolly, “Catching up to hallyu? The Japanese and Chinese response to south Korean soft power”; Pease, “Korean pop music in China: Nationalism, authenticity, and gender”; Chen, “The emergence of the anti-Hallyu movement in China. *Media, Culture and Society*, 39(3).”

<sup>41</sup> See; Sung, “Constructing a New Image. *Hallyu* in Taiwan”; Shin, “Reconsidering Transnational Cultural Flows of Popular Music in East Asia: Transbordering Musicians in Japan and Korea Searching for “Asia””; Nam, “The Cultural Political Economy of the Korean Wave in East Asia: Implications for Cultural Globalization Theories”

<sup>42</sup> See; Marinescu, “Korean Cultural Products in Eastern Europe: A Case Study of the K-Pop Impact in Romania”

<sup>43</sup> See; Sung, “K-pop Reception and Participatory Fan Culture in Austria.”

<sup>44</sup> See; Yoon, “Cultural translation of K-pop among Asian Canadian fans”

<sup>45</sup> See; Regatieri, “Development and Dream: On the Dynamics of K-Pop in Brazil”

<sup>46</sup> See; Ko, “The Korean Wave *Hallyu* in looking at Escapism in Peruvian society.”

<sup>47</sup> See; Hübinette, “The reception and consumption of *Hallyu* in Sweden: Preliminary Findings and Reflections.”

<sup>48</sup> See; Otmazgin, “Fandom, Agency, and the Marketing of *Hallyu* in Israel”

others about the US and different European countries. I believe this rise of academic interest is related with the popularity of the Korean song Gangnam Style<sup>51</sup> which was released in 2012 and got lot of attention from Western media. Studies in different countries question how a foreign culture can achieve such positive image in their country so quickly. We see each country and culture has taken this same popular culture in their way and gave meaning accordingly. In Turkey too different age groups or ideological backgrounded fans have different ways of giving meaning to and different reasons for feeling attachment to it.

Although androgynous looking male bodies in the K-Pop sector often become a topic for newspaper articles<sup>52</sup>, for academic literature sources are not equally wide. They are mostly questioning the interest towards ‘soft masculinity’ in *Hallyu*,<sup>53</sup> or examining it as a new representation of masculinity<sup>54</sup> also there are some studies about femininity and representations of women<sup>55</sup> in K-Pop. Few studies are focusing on the queer aspect of K-Pop<sup>56</sup> and how it is blurring the lines between femininity and masculinity.<sup>57</sup> As I mentioned previously, in the context of Turkey the main topic that is discussed together with K-Pop is gender and especially representations of masculinity. In the second chapter of this study I will discuss how this gender related discussions of K-Pop fans are actually related with search for an agency of

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<sup>49</sup> See; Otmazgin, “Hallyu across the Desert: K-pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine”; Oh, “Islam and Local Culture: The Peril of State Violence and Hallyu Fandom in Indonesia (With Reference to Palestine).”

<sup>50</sup> See; Elaskary, “The Korean Wave in the Middle East: Past and Present”

<sup>51</sup> Song by Korean musician Psy, released on 2012 and became popular worldwide in a month. Song has influenced popular culture worldwide and became the most liked video on Youtube in a month at the time. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Gangnam Style,” (accessed June 26, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangnam\\_Style](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangnam_Style)

<sup>52</sup> See an example from BBC; “Flowerboys and the appeal of ‘soft masculinity’ in South Korea” *BBC*, September 5, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42499809>

<sup>53</sup> See; Iryanti, “The Construction of Fathers New Masculinity in South Korea Variety Show Superman is Back.”

<sup>54</sup> See; Jung, “Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption”; Heryanto, “K-Pop and Gendered Asianization”

<sup>55</sup> See; Kim, “K-pop female idols Culture industry , neoliberal social policy , and governmentality in Korea”; Kim, “K-pop Female Idols as Cultural Genre of Patriarchal Neoliberalism”; Epstein, “Girls ’ Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment, and K-pop.”

<sup>56</sup> See; Sinnott, “Korean-Pop, Tom Gay Kings, Les Queens and the Capitalist Transformation of Sex/Gender Categories in Thailand.”; Kang, “Surfing the Korean Wave: Wonder Gays and the Crisis of Thai Masculinity.”

<sup>57</sup> See; Oh, “Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing”

young women, agreeing with Heryanto's example from Indonesia.<sup>58</sup> I will add his thoughts to the dimension of space. I also will discuss Oh's hybridized male femininity<sup>59</sup> by looking at idol bodies as identity production spaces. In chapter 3, I will refer to Jung's different definitions of Korean masculinities<sup>60</sup> together with rethinking the concept of hegemonic masculinity<sup>61</sup> and with the discussion of gendered emotions.

When we come to literature for the Turkish context, there are nine academic theses about Korean popular culture which can be found on YÖK TEZ<sup>62</sup> all except one are focusing on the economic benefits and the general situation of soft power of Korean popular culture in Turkey, without stressing mainly on gender discussions. They are mostly questioning the perception of Korea as a country in Turkey and relating popular culture with soft power discussions<sup>63</sup>, or aim to take Hallyu as an example for the development of the country and seeking similar strategies for Turkey.<sup>64</sup> They agree that there is a rise of interest in anything Korean in Turkey, from language to food, and the biggest reason for this is seen as the positive image given by popular culture. The only thesis that has included the issue of gender in a more comprehensive way<sup>65</sup> is from the sociology of religion department, which is focusing only on İmam Hatip high school students and the impact of Korean dramas; questioning why *Hallyu* became popular among young Muslim people around the world despite of its un-Islamic aspects from the perspective of the sociology of religion field.

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<sup>58</sup> Heryanto, K-Pop and Gendered Asianization.

<sup>59</sup> Oh, Queering spectatorship in K-pop: The androgynous male dancing body and western female fandom.

<sup>60</sup> Jung, Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption.

<sup>61</sup> Connell, Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept, *Gender and Society* 19, no:6 (2005).

<sup>62</sup> Council of Higher Education National Thesis Centre: <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>

<sup>63</sup> See; Feride Melis ÖZSÖZ "Güney Kore'nin Markalaşma Sürecinde Yumuşak Güç Kullanımının Türkiye'deki Yaygın Medya Üzerinden Analizi" Kocaeli Üniversitesi, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> See; Müftüoğlu, Merve. "Remodelling of the Korean Wave: Is It Possible for Turkey to Create the Turkish Wave?" Işık University, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Sümeyye Asa, "A field study on the impact of South Korean popular culture (*Hallyu*) on imam hatip high school students." (Master Thesis, Uludağ University, 2019)

I also found one thesis from Leiden University<sup>66</sup> which focuses on Korean drama fans in Turkey and their patriarchy understandings. Yıldız compares the patriarchy understandings in Korea and Turkey and argues that spending a lot of time watching Korean dramas has changed the perception of patriarchy of women in Turkey. Her thesis aims to show that the interactions caused by popular culture of a different society can transform patriarchal societies or at least provide them a form of resistance to it.<sup>67</sup> She suggests studying about K-Pop for a better understanding on patriarchy and gender understandings at the end, since her study's focus is only on dramas. We see even though there are not so many, some studies started to include a gender dimension. All of the academic literature from the Turkish context are focusing on Korean dramas or taking Hallyu in general so far without paying much attention to K-Pop, which is very popular and has much more dedicated fans in comparison to dramas. Also distinct gender representations in K-Pop has not been analyzed in Turkish context yet. In this thesis I will do this analyzing by taking the fan experience as the centre and do the discussion from the perspective of space and the impact of emotions since these two concepts were the main findings from in-depth interviews.

In addition to multiple academic theses, two books written by academicians in Turkey are focusing on the impact of Korean Popular culture in Turkey. The first comprehensive study about Hallyu in Turkey was Macit's<sup>68</sup> book written in 2018.<sup>69</sup> After he saw that many of his students are interested in Korean culture he decided to write the book, *Korean Wave: Globalized Popular Culture Phenomenon Hallyu/Korean Dramas*. He is focusing on the impact of Korean dramas only and not mentioning about K-Pop and the digital side of the sector. With the findings coming from his focus group interviews with students, his interpretation can be summarize as; Korea was really successful in mixing cultures and they have mixed different cultures so well that it did not seem as a patchwork like often happens in the modernization period of a country but more like a puzzle which looks good together

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<sup>66</sup> Buket Yıldız, "*K-Wave experience in Turkey Handling subjugation in a patriarchal society.*" (Master Thesis, Leiden University, 2017)

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Mustafa Macit is a theology professor in Erzurum Atatürk University.

<sup>69</sup> Macit, Mustafa. *Kore Dalgası: Küresel Popüler Kültür Fenomeni Hallyu/Kore Dizileri*. İstanbul: Bir Yayıncılık, 2018.

with different shaped pieces. And this is the secret of their success according to him because in today's world what people are looking for is technology and comfort of a global modern world together with the comfort of older traditions and values.<sup>70</sup> He slightly touches on the gender issue by analyzing audiences interest on the feminine characteristics of Korean drama characters<sup>71</sup> and I will be applying some of his analyses in the last chapter of this thesis.

The author of the other book *Kültürel Diplomasi ve Kore Dalgası "Hallyu": Güney Kore'de Sinema Endüstrisi, K-Dramalar ve K-Pop*,<sup>72</sup> Mutlu Binark<sup>73</sup> uses *Hallyu* as an example for explaining how cultural production can happen in a country by pop culture contents, with government support. With this aim she looks at cinema, drama and music sectors of Korea and how were they popularized and tries to give an understanding for how to create sustainable cultural policies in Turkey with the perspective of cultural studies. Her fieldwork in Korea, Japan and China for the study and interviews with Korean Culture Centre in Turkey, Ankara makes her study a strong source for any research about *Hallyu* in Turkey.

Other academic works includes articles of Oh,<sup>74</sup> who gave a look from outside for the impact of *Hallyu* in Turkey; and Fırat,<sup>75</sup> who gave a general view of the Korean wave in Turkey. The rise of academic literature is showing the importance of the topic and almost all scholars are suggesting a deeper research about various areas that *Hallyu* is touching. The fact that there are many studies about the Korean wave being a soft power for the country and bringing lots of benefits especially economic ones, is also proving how effective it is and how big an impact it has on its followers

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<sup>70</sup> Macit, *Kore Dalgası*, 188-194.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 135-140.

<sup>72</sup> Binark, Mutlu. *Kültürel Diplomasi ve Kore Dalgası "Hallyu": Güney Kore'de Sinema Endüstrisi, K-Dramalar ve K-Pop*. Ankara: Siyasal Yayınevi, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Professor at the Department of Radio-Television and Cinema in Hacettepe University.

<sup>74</sup> Oh, Chong-jin, and Young-gil Chae. "Constructing Culturally Proximate Spaces through Social Network Services: The Case of Hallyu (Korean Wave) in Turkey." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 10, no. 38 (2013): 76–99.

<sup>75</sup> Fırat, Demet. "Küresel Yönde Ters Akış : Asya 'Dan Doğan Alternatif Bir Popüler Kültür Counter Flow in Global Aspect : An Alternative Popular Culture Arising from Asia Giriş Güney Kore Dalgası Nedir ?" *Abant Kültürel Araştırmalar Dergisi* 2, no. 3 (2017): 67–74.

to the point that changing the whole image of a country, not only a country but whole image of the Asian looking people.<sup>76</sup>

#### **1.4. Digital Space as a New Field: Stepping in to the ‘Fan Space’**

The unofficial fieldwork and observations about this topic for me started during my undergrad sociology years. It was the first time I had encountered the field of cultural studies and impact of popular culture, and my previous interest towards the topic made me want to give a more critical look with the perspective of sociology. Seeing the reactions and misunderstandings towards K-Pop by many on social media and television, was the main thing effecting the methodology used in this study. From the beginning it was clear for me that this kind of study has to involve ethnography and in-depth interviews with fans to be able to see the field and problems as they are. The two dimensional position of mine as both insider and outsider of the field made ethnography more fruitful. While being a fan and being part of the field for years made me an insider, becoming a researcher in the field, and also the limits of my past experience made me an outsider. This “understanding the complementariness and paradoxes of the dual role helped me to identify knowledge gaps and contest commonsense knowledge in search of critical knowledge and theoretical insights.”<sup>77</sup>

Because of the recent context in Turkey, and because of the general perception of K-Pop fans as 'inane obsessive group of people at too young ages to understand the world', it was not very easy to find interlocutors or gain their trust. My half-insider position was helpful step into the fan space, and to get involved with fans in digital space. In interviews, I started with my own experience with K-Pop and *Hallyu* to comfort interlocutors about this study and to show that the study is not aiming to criticize but to understand. Almost every interlocutor I have talked to said that they accepted my interview request because they are unhappy with the othering discourse towards K-Pop fans, especially after all news about anti-K-Pop movement. As I mentioned before, my interlocutors were the ones who are older in age, and spent

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<sup>76</sup> Kloet, Jeroen de, and Jaap Kooijman. “Karaoke Americanism Gangnam Style.” *Unpopular Culture*, May 2020 (2018): 125-26.

<sup>77</sup> Yeo and Dopson, "Getting lost to be found: the insider–outsider paradoxes in relational ethnography”, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* 13, no 4 (2018): 333.

more years in the field thus many of them found it meaningless to get involved with the anti K-Pop discussions going on in the media although they were highly critic about them. Some tried giving interviews to news programs on television channels or tried to answer online comments for a while but realized television interviewers openly telling them to overdramatize their experience<sup>78</sup> and on digital space they are more likely to be excluded.

The main thing which was common in most interviews was the amazement of interlocutors for being interviewed for such topic. I could observe their contentment for being taken seriously. Many expressed that this is the first time someone is really paying attention to their ‘fan life’ with a serious approach and they were happy to be able to talk about K-Pop freely. Also interestingly many had a hard time talking about K-Pop and expressing their thoughts about it although they had no problem with speaking about themselves or about other topics. For most probably this was also related with the fact that every kind of communication about K-Pop were made on social media mostly in the text structure and with the language of social media. And especially the ones who are not active in the fan community except in a digital space described that talking about K-Pop out loud is weird for them. Many suggested to me to make interviews in written form instead of face-to-face saying people would express their feelings about this issue a lot easier with writing instead of talking. Fans who joined Said Ercan’s live streams on Instagram, that has been mentioned before, too showed similar sentiments. He has been sharing multiple messages he got from fans on his account and the ability of explaining themselves was much better in texts. But young women who joined live streams had struggles to explain their thoughts in the form of speech, which again caused big criticisms from the audience and raised the claims of K-Pop fans as an uneducated group. I believe this situation is telling a lot about the difference in communication styles on different spaces and showing how digital space changing one’s way of expressions which might be interpreted as spending too much time on digital space can cause bigger

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<sup>78</sup> From the words of a fan who is a fan page admin and invited from a tv channel to give interview about the boy group BTS together with other members of the fan group. She told that their interviews cut by the channel consciously to make them sound like obsessive fans and during the interview they openly direct the talk in this way while saying other parts are unnecessary and we will not show them on news anyways. Said Ercan who is one of the most active anti K-Pop supporter, also interviewed on the same program, mentioned his words and explanations distorted by the channel.

problems for people when they need to adopt face to face communications in the future.

I didn't want to put any age or gender limitations to be able to see the variety in the field but I tried to choose older interlocutors. The reason for this is first because they are more likely to have spent more years as 'fans', more than half of them were in the field since 8-10 years. Second, I believe the current popularity of K-Pop on the global stage and in the US is making it more appealing for younger fans who want to be included in the main stream likes and tastes. Thus as it was mentioned earlier it causes two different types of fans on the field; fans who wanted an alternative for mainstream popular culture with western norms and values, and fans who started to find it more appealing because of the amount of westernization has increased with the globalization of Korean popular culture. With only this limitation of experience, I have made 32 in-depth interviews in around one year including in focus groups. Five of them were through Skype and all the remaining were face-to-face. All were in Turkey, Istanbul with people who have been living here for a long time. Interviews included note taking and voice records with the permission of the participants. Most of the recordings are transcribed to be use in the study. All interviews held in Turkish and translated to English by me with the aim of keeping their originality. Since more than half of the interlocutors wanted me to not to include their full names or surnames in the study, I preferred to use nicknames for all interlocutors in order to protect their privacy.

The main source for me was ethnography and the main field for K-Pop is digital space. Thus it changes ethnography to the digital ethnography which will be much more common in the social sciences in near future. The main difference is the distinctness of the space, each digital ethnography is founded and conceptualized according to its unique relation with the digital space, theory and the interlocutors.<sup>79</sup> Interlocutors' ability to give meaning to digital space and their technological facilities need to be considered for analyses.<sup>80</sup> This point which made by Pink, is important for understanding the anti K-Pop movement mentioned before. It needs to

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<sup>79</sup> Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. *Digital Ethnography Principles and Practice Sarah*. Edited by Jai Seaman. London: Sage Publications, (2016), 23.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

be understood that the way fans and opponents give meaning to social media usage, relations and space is very different. Another distinctive side is “digital ethnography is a collaborative process.”<sup>81</sup> Researcher can’t be completely invisible nor predominantly manage the research as a single person, but we are part of the collective knowledge production. This different kind of collaboration is apart from the aspects of time and place because of the nature of the digital. Although I reached the number of interviews I wanted to conduct at the beginning, the digital ethnography side is an unending process. With also the help of the interlocutors, every day there is a new hashtag, widespread topic, or a big discussion appears on social media. Within this study I tried my best to consider the most recent ones but still, time is running much faster in the digital space.

With the highlight of the digital, the concept of space became important during the fieldwork while I was trying to find interlocutors. I had two more main spaces to find interlocutors for in-depth interviews other than digital space of social media; Korean cafe/restaurants and fan gatherings. Each space was also a chance for me for participant observation and each of these spaces had their own dynamics and relationships which made me decide to relate this topic with space more. K-Pop consisted mostly of groups and affected by a highly group-oriented side of the Korean culture. This reflects on the fan side of the sector too and usually producers are leading people to come together and experience this as groups. They are using the ‘warmth radiating from the crowd’<sup>82</sup> successfully as Baudrillard refers for Disneyland’s success. Being in a group of people, being part of something instead of enjoying it alone makes it easier to spread also easier to keep people inside by giving them the comfort of being together with others. Thus this group oriented identity of fan communities makes space important in this study, as something to use for dispersing mechanism of emotions. Also group identity is making it easier for individuals to accept and internalize new norms with more confidence coming from the trust in and the ‘warmth of the crowd’.

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulakrlar ve Simülasyon*, trans. Oğuz Adanır (İstanbul: Doğubatı Yayınları, 1998), 28.

Even though my main topic is discussing gender norms I believe space and emotions are highly effective for this perspective thus through the study they will be the main concepts as part of the discussion. I conceptualize emotions as something that connects people to things and to each other like Sara Ahmed interprets.<sup>83</sup> And will relate them with space as she also partly does saying; “what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place.”<sup>84</sup> Only in this case, it is not the physical place that we held and are attached to by emotions but the fictional ‘fan space’ becomes a dwelling place where fans try to stay in by keeping the connection between each other. And the attachment then, “takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others...Emotions, then, are bound up with how we inhabit the world ‘with ’others.”<sup>85</sup> And this inhabitation in digital space becomes highly depended on the acknowledgement of others sharing the same space as well as collective emotions of one’s existence in the space without their physical body. Also I take emotion as a powerful source to shape norms “in terms of ideals and values, that is as judgements about things.”<sup>86</sup> Feeling of love, attachment, familiarity all leads to judgements about people, about things or norms and values represented by them.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This study aims to see the relationship between newly rising popular culture stream of K-Pop and gender norms. The fieldwork showed that in the case of K-Pop, the main things which become effective in the spread and normalize different gender understandings are emotional bonds and fictional space. Fictional spaces are often seen in the digital space of social media. The fact that individuals exist in digital space without physical bodies is giving them a sense of limitlessness in terms of visual perceptions, one can look as anyone and anything as long as they can dream of it. I will question gender fluidity discussions on the space dimension, because by looking at the fieldwork I see it increases the fluidity in gender norms as well as all other aspects of individual identity. In the second and third chapters the distinction of

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<sup>83</sup> Ahmed, “Collective Feelings : Or, the Impressions Left by Others,” *Theory Culture Society* 21, no. 25 (April 2004): 27.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Schmitz, and Ahmed. “Affect / Emotion : Orientation Matters,” 2014, 99.

the mind and body will be discussed together with the gender norms and fluid identity in the digital space. Together with gender, study also touches on the issue of new and deeper version of capitalist consumer behavior through entertainment sector. This will be discussed in the third chapter.

Mainly this study has found and will discuss that: The controversy about K-Pop and gender should be taken differently, and more deeply than they are doing today in Turkey. Although there were some serious worries for K-Pop increase homosexuality in youth, most of the interlocutors said it is not about changing male and female roles but about giving characteristics and mainly about the existing social constructions of femininity and masculinity. Many of them insisted that popular culture in Turkey is highlighting negative emotions (melancholy, anger, violence, smugness, toughness), while popular culture in Korea is highlighting positive emotions (sincerity, achievement, family, warmth, modesty, softness) and that is why they have become interested in Hallyu at the first place. Also almost all of them were trying to find a morally more close alternative for western popular culture for their existing values, when they first became interested in K-Pop, which makes me think there has to be more serious discussions and criticisms towards popular culture in Turkish media. Together with these on the other side we see the impact of digital space. Collective emotions circulating in digital space makes the acceptance of given norms easier also the structure of this space change one's perception of the identity and self-representation by separating mind and body. Group ideology, need for connection and feeling of family are very effective and related with gender norms.

This study shows that gender is a much wider concept than physical appearance and producing gender norms is very related with emotions and morality. Also given masculine and feminine characteristics which are strictly defined by society are causing confusions in especially the young generations and the lack of culture industry products in our society is one of the most important reasons why this confusion is easily abused by different hegemonic powers. This situation is making cultural norms and values of our society vulnerable to vanishing in the era of globalization and fluidity. In the next chapter, I will discuss the roots of Hallyu and how to produce idols together with the government's involvement. In the second chapter I will focus on emotions in fan spaces and how fans give meaning to them.

The last chapter will be about the production of the gender norms and fans' way of understanding them.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **BEFORE AND AFTER THE K-POP**

The main aim of this chapter is to describe the structure of K-Pop sector and fan culture together with discussing how it appeared in the first place and how it was supported by successful government policies. We will see that Hallyu is a political production of the Korean government since the 90s, and this production today is reflecting to Turkey too, as it has reflections in many other countries, with the globalized popularity of the sector and dissemination process. This project used as a culture creation a strong ideological state apparatus inside Korea and turned it into soft power and cultural hegemony in other countries. I will explain fan culture and fan experiences in Turkey to discuss how this production has been experienced in locally.

My fieldwork shows that apart from all the produced and structured side of Hallyu as a product, with the increasing use of the digital space, it turned from top-to-down policy to a more complex production, which does not only belong to producers but also turns audiences too into producers and gives them agency in this process. The fictionalized world of Hallyu and K-Pop, thus edited characteristics of idols and represented norms, including gender, can be perceived by fans in a more complex way with the addition of space and emotions into this fictional world. I saw that relationships between fans and idols, and fans with other fans have a decisive influence on the cultural norms K-Pop represents. Thus I believe before going into the discussions about space and gender in the second and third chapters of this study, there has to be more information about how the sector was born and how it is working today.

As Adorno describes; popular culture overall, is something produced, and industrialized to entertain society while regulating and standardizing it, which includes music, cinema, television, advertisements, fashion, arts, literature, sports, humor, technology, and almost

every kind of leisure activity.<sup>87</sup> The part 'industrialized' made me think that the K-Pop sector as a whole, fits into his popular culture and culture industry definitions very well to the point that K-Pop is like a living theatre to describe what culture industry is. Since the very first steps of the sector; songs, shows, people and behaviors they are showing were often produced by experts of the entertainment sector, considering fan groups, audience, and fitting concepts for the time and place. The education system idols went through is not only teaching them how to sing but also teaching them how to behave from a very young age. There are certain accepted behavior norms that they should follow, and they are mostly depending on Korean and Confucian values with a touch of modern life. Thus there is a regulation and standardization process through pop idols, who are in a sector supported by the government from the start and who are still highly supported by it.<sup>88</sup>

The word *Hallyu* has given by Chinese media as it was mentioned before, it has similar effects in every country it enters and especially television dramas are playing the role of 'Trojan horse' for it.<sup>89</sup> The story of the name *Hallyu* is starting with the release of South Korean drama named *What is Love?* on Chinese television, and it had a high rating success. The drama had %16,6 ratings at the time when it featured on Chinese national television and this is the highest number of any foreign television series ever featured on Chinese television.<sup>90</sup> This raised a huge interest and sympathy towards Korean life style and Korea as a country. Thus China was one of the first countries, together with Japan, that was affected by the popularity of Korean pop culture in their society. Considering political tension in the region it was surprising and worrisome to watch the spread of 'Korean attractiveness' for China and Japan. For many scholars who had been studying on this issue the sustainability and the success of *Hallyu* depends on its attractiveness.<sup>91</sup> Starting with China and

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<sup>87</sup> Theodor W., Adorno and J. M. Bernstein. *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture.* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>88</sup> Politicians today too are engaged with the sector. They use the popularity of K-Pop in political relations and government often bring on the agenda of the importance of K-Pop for their country to the point that they offered the discussion to the parliament for boy group BTS to be exempt from military service. See details in; <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-50515696>. Also government choose boy group Exo 'officially' as Nation's Idols in 2018. See, <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/korean-government-called-exo-nations-pick/>. Nationalism and nationalistic feelings often comes up together with K-Pop, in Korea which interestingly seems like partially spreading Korean nationalism among the fans around the world.

<sup>89</sup> Mustafa Macit, *Kore Dalgası* (Istanbul: Bir Yayıncılık, 2018), 11-13.

<sup>90</sup> Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 1.

Bok-rae, Kim. "Past, Present and Future of Hallyu (Korean Wave)." *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5, no. 5 (2015): 159.

Japan, the general aim of all *Hallyu* products, including cinema, TV shows, dramas, music, online games, phone applications and other products included in *Hallyu* was to show perfection, attractiveness and to touch and hold people's attention, with the help of emotions which makes it part of capitalist consumption culture.

The Korean wave has been highly affected by Korean culture and the 5000 years of Korean history, which can be seen as the main reason behind the 'success' of *Hallyu*. For example, it is claimed that music and dance were always popular in Korean culture since back in its history, and it is the source of Korean pop music and dance.<sup>92</sup> Also ideas from Confucianism that highly influenced Korean culture can be observed in Korean pop culture. Music itself was a religious and moral act in the early history of Korea, and that evolved to classical Korean music which fed today's music sector of Korea.<sup>93</sup> Together with it, Korea has been strongly influenced by foreign cultures throughout its history. Traditional Korean culture that depends on the 5000 years of Korean history, has internalized Buddhism, teachings of Confucius, Chinese lettering and traditions.<sup>94</sup> Also the country was colonized by Japan for more than thirty years and impacted by American culture in political, economic and cultural ways because of the military aid from 1945 to 1948.<sup>95</sup> Korean society had many experiences of being influenced by other cultures and learned how to internalize them through these experiences. As it has been mentioned before this ability of mixing cultures and modernity with tradition has been crucial for their success in spreading their pop culture. With this, we can say that there are both similarities and differences between traditional and popular Korean cultures. The popular one was created with media and used a mix of traditional culture with global ones. It is both the reflection of traditional culture and reshaping of it.<sup>96</sup> It is both deeply Korean and completely foreign to Korean.

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<sup>91</sup> Sang-bae, Kim. "The Attractiveness of Hallyu and East Asian Cultural Network," *Journal of World Politics*, 28, n.1, Spring (2007), pp. 208-212.

<sup>92</sup> Jang & Paik, *Korean Wave as Tool for Korea's New Cultural Diplomacy*, 199.

<sup>93</sup> Music and performances from that era are lot more conservative with serious faces and still bodies of performers and they mostly focused on topics like morality and family. See article; Lie, John. "What Is the K in K-Pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity." *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 342-345.

<sup>94</sup> Lee, Sue Jin. "The Korean Wave: The Seoul of Asia." *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 2, no. 1 (2011): 17-18.

<sup>95</sup> Kim, Milim. "The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry: Some Observations from Korea's Experience." *Keio Communication Review* 33, no. 33 (2011): 164.

<sup>96</sup> Macit, *Kore Dalgasi*, 38.

Kim Bok-Rae categorizes Hallyu in four stages for exporting abroad as; “hallyu 1.0 (K-drama), hallyu 2.0 (K-pop music), hallyu 3.0 (K-culture) and hallyu 4.0 (K-style)”<sup>97</sup>, taking his categorization K-Pop spreads after Korean dramas, thus it is very much related with them, and is considered as the preparatory stage for the dissemination of the Korean culture. Hallyu 2.0 also known as ‘K-Pop boom’ started with idols’ popularity in Japan in mid 2000s.<sup>98</sup> Starting with Japan, K-Pop idols started to become popular outside the Asian countries and reached Europe and America with the help of internet. This time, in contrast to dramas and actors, idols as real individuals became popular with reality shows and the true characteristics which I believe, created a stronger bond than dramas did. Although K-Pop entered Turkey during this era too, in late 2000. The real K-Pop boom as it happened in Japan seems to have happened in the mid-2010s after concerts like Music Bank. Hallyu 3.0’s “aim is to expand Korean traditional culture around the world. Since the early 2010, hallyu has not been limited to K-dramas or K- pop music, but included all genres of Korean culture.”<sup>99</sup> We can say that Turkey entered the hallyu 3.0 in last 2-3 years, with the popularity of Korean beauty products among the general public, the appearance of K-Pop songs on radios and mainstream TV music programs instead of online spaces used only by fans, and the awareness of the hallyu by general public both on the internet and media with both positive and negative reactions.

Although ‘K’ stands for Korea and works as a brand for the country, we should consider the mixed and hybrid nature of *Hallyu*. Therefore K-culture/Korean culture here is not traditional Korean culture which developed from the history of the Korean society but much more modern, global and related with mainstream pop culture than traditional Korean culture is. It would not be just to take the given culture here as completely related with modernity but it is also the ‘main agent of East Asian popular culture’ newly developed in the post-war era and is parallel with ‘Western oriented popular culture’.<sup>100</sup> According to this; Hallyu 1.0 (dramas) was for an Asian audience, Hallyu 2.0 (K-Pop) saw the popularity among Europe and Middle East and aimed at global popularity by including traditional Korean culture like

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<sup>97</sup> Kim, Past , Present and Future of Hallyu ( Korean Wave ), 154.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

hanbok (traditional Korean cloth), hangul (Korean alphabet), or hansik (Korean food). Hallyu 3.0 (K-culture) realized the power of this popularity and aimed to not only spread but to globalize the K-culture and life-style and Hallyu 4.0 (K-style), which is on its way to be developed for Kim,<sup>101</sup> depends on how to used benefit from the image of Korean pop stars, since it is realized that what fans truly love and are attached to is not pure music but their images and identities of K-Pop stars. Fans adore and imitate the style of Korean pop stars. Thus, the highest step Hallyu can reach would be publicizing and controlling these images.<sup>102</sup>

If we look at discussions of Baudrillard in this context, he believes in the death of the reality and that it is replaced by a simulation of it or as he calls it *hyperreality*.<sup>103</sup> Thorough hyperreality it is possible to impose ideas and norms that have no connection with reality but creations that depends on the signifiers of the reality.<sup>104</sup> K-Pop is a sector that is able to get in every part of one's life; the audience can reach their favorite artist whenever they want and producers purposely making this communication as sincere and intimate as possible as if they are living together or part of a friend group. This situation I believe is creating a kind of a simulation as Baudrillard gives in the example of Disneyland.<sup>105</sup> The relationships, and the world given by the K-Pop sector are not real nor fake but they are simulations of real emotions and real relationships which gives one comfort and makes fans forget that the real events of these simulations do not exist in their daily lives. In the context of K-Pop the simulation is created by social media instead of Disneyland, and thus it has some differences caused by the space that is being used. I will discuss this with more details and examples from the field in the second chapter of this thesis.

## 2.1 The Impact of the 'K' in K-Pop

Hallyu and K-Pop have been highly impacted by Korean state policies through their history. It is important to mention the hand of the Korean government in all the

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>103</sup> Önder Kulak, *Theodore Adorno: Kültür Endüstrisinin Kıskacında Kültür* (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları, 2017), 56.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 18-21.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 28-29

processes being discussed here. After the colonial period (1910-1945), Korea was faced with the Korean War and after that it faced separation. After the war South Korea had to start almost everything scratch. To be able to reach other countries, which were already developed in economic and cultural areas, South Korea had to rebuild the basics of the country's politics, economy and social organizations. Thus South Korea started a nation building process in all these areas.<sup>106</sup> Between the 60s and the 90s authoritarianism in the country was very effective on media. Foreign products were forbidden — until 2000s — and the government was using the media to shape and change the structure of the public.<sup>107</sup> With the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games pressure reduced and the South Korean government became slightly more flexible towards Hollywood movies and American pop music in the country. This harmed Korean culture and the Korean culture industry which was relatively less impacted by mainstream pop culture before this time. Awareness of this harm caused a political interest in it.<sup>108</sup> The transition of Korea from autocracy to a modern democracy is considered to have happened in 1998 with the election of Kim Dae-jung.<sup>109</sup> According to Mutlu Binark, the breaking point for cultural production policies was this shift in Korean politics.<sup>110</sup>

In the 1990s the country's economy was better than before and the government implemented policies to encourage the development of the broadcasting industry.<sup>111</sup> The biggest reason for this change in policies was the realization of the importance of the culture industry in terms of the economy. Doobo Shim, identifies this realization as “The Jurassic Park Factor”.<sup>112</sup> In 1994 the Presidential Science and Technology Advisory Board prepared a report on “A Hollywood movie *Jurassic Park*, earns equal money with 1,5 million Hyundai brand automobiles. Why South Korea don't use this way for gaining economic benefits?” and argued how the culture industry can be beneficial to a country's economy. This report has led to the

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<sup>106</sup> Lee, *The Korean Wave*, 17-18.

<sup>107</sup> Kim, *The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry*, 170-72.

<sup>108</sup> Jang & Paik, *Korean Wave as Tool for Korea's New Cultural Diplomacy*, 199-200.

<sup>109</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “South Korea,” (accessed August 15, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Korea#Contemporary\\_South\\_Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea#Contemporary_South_Korea)

<sup>110</sup> Mutlu Binark, “Kore Dalgası/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS'in Cazibesi” (seminar, organized by Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Korean Culture Centre, June 19, 2020). \*organization turned into webinar due to Covid19 outbreak.

<sup>111</sup> Kim, *The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry*, 170.

<sup>112</sup> Shim, Doobo. “South Korean Media Industry in the 1990s and the Economic Crisis.” *Prometheus (United Kingdom)* 20, no. 4 (2002): 337–50.

establishment of the Bureau of Culture Industry. In 1995, The Law on Encouragement of Cinema was prepared, which provided for screening of more South Korean movies in cinemas. According to this law, the government will provide tax support to attract corporate capital to film production and the film industry.<sup>113</sup> This could be taken as the first official step for *Hallyu* since cinema was the beginning of the wave in Asia.

After this first step in Kim Yong-Sam's presidency (1993-1998), in each presidential era Hallyu gains more attention by presidents. In Kim Dae Jung's era (1998-2003) important actors that established Hallyu cultural products started to appear and gained importance.<sup>114</sup> In 1998, president Kim declared himself as the "President of Culture", and said that he would devote himself and his country to make this country a leader of 21<sup>st</sup> century's culture industry. This raised media's quality and popularity increasingly.<sup>115</sup> At the end of the 1990s America's influence in the Asia region was decreasing while Korea's influence was increasing. Another point that gave more power to Korean culture's spread in Asia was Asian Economic Crisis in 1997.<sup>116</sup> Korea used this crisis and turned it to an opportunity to sell its products to the people who are in depression and wanted to unwind. Until that time there was the Japanese wave in Asia, but the Japanese media products were too expensive for these bankrupt countries. South Korea was one of them, and it was selling its product so much cheaper than Japanese ones. The drama 'What is Love?' also started to feature on Chinese televisions in this era.<sup>117</sup> The culture industry coming from Korea offered depressed Asian people, as it is mentioned in article, a way to escape from the

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 339.

<sup>114</sup> Mutlu Binark, "Kore Dalgasi/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS'in Cazibesi" (seminar, organized by Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Korean Culture Centre, June 19, 2020). \*organization turned into webinar due to Covid19 outbreak.

<sup>115</sup> "Korea is probably one of the only countries in the world that has a Ministry of Culture (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to be exact). A division of the ministry, the Popular Culture Industry Division, focuses on Korean pop music, fashion, mass entertainment, comic books, cartoons and other key products ... Its budget is a staggering USD 500 million, with the aim to build a USD 10 billion cultural industry export industry by 2019. Additionally, the Korean government sponsors 20-30% of a USD 1 billion investment fund earmarked to nurture and export popular culture. The remaining funds comes from investment banks and private companies and are managed by the Korean Venture Investment Corporation." Roll, Martin. "Korean Wave (Hallyu) – The Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture" *Martin Roll*, January, 2018. <https://martinroll.com/resources/articles/asia/korean-wave-hallyu-the-rise-of-koreas-cultural-economy-pop-culture/>

<sup>116</sup> Jonghoe, Yang. "Globalization, Nationalism, and Regionalization: The Case of Korean Popular Culture Author(S):" *Development and Society* 36, no. 2 (2007): 177–99.

<sup>117</sup> Macit, *Kore Dalgasi*, 42-46.

reality of life with dramas and television shows with pop idols of Korea. This led them to become more tolerant toward Korea and Korean culture.

By looking at this, Adorno's theory helps us to give meaning to the Hallyu export and the cultural industry of Korea one more time. He says; "Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again."<sup>118</sup> Hallyu was an escape from mechanized labor of capitalism for those people at the very beginning of its history, and this power of Hallyu as a culture industry which "passes the whole world through its filter"<sup>119</sup> is still there and it is one explanation for why many different age groups are following it devotedly.

After its popularity in Asian countries, in Roo Moo Hyun's era (2003-2008), Hallyu 2.0 (K-Pop) appeared according to Kim Bok Rae's categorization mentioned previously. His era was accepted as the era when the culture industry became industrialized,<sup>120</sup> and it is the production era and the first steps of K-Pop. The era of Lee Myun Bak (2008-2013) was when country started branding Korea as the 'K'; and in Park Geun Hye's era government policy reserves a special place for K-Pop, turning K-Pop idols into ambassadors for the brand Korea.<sup>121</sup> Lastly the current president Moon Jae In (since 2017) describes the Korean wave as 'kind Hallyu', which is in communication and cooperation with different countries and different cultures.<sup>122</sup> After this point, we see a rising cooperation of K-Pop idols with foreign singers, from Japanese to Spanish or American ones, which rises K-Pop's global popularity one step ahead.

Today K-Pop is taking the lead of Hallyu by looking at the power idol groups hold. Binark gives the example of 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. The boy group Exo performed in the closing ceremony of the Olympics and on twitter, hashtags of Exo-L (fan group of Exo) were in higher ranking than the Olympics hashtags during

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<sup>118</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic Of Enlightenment* , 109.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>120</sup> Binark, "Kore Dalgası/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS'in Cazibesi"

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*.

the day. According to Binark this is a huge step for Korea in terms of cultural diplomacy and proving the amount of the soft power the country held.<sup>123</sup> Even though at the beginning the K-Pop sector gained the attention and popularity with the hybrid characteristics carrying both Korean and westernized culture and was perceived as a subculture with small existence on the global stage, today the situation has changed. K-Pop now can be considered as having joined mainstream pop culture globally and is ready to bring cultural aspects of Korean local culture to the main stream.

To be able to speak about the government's impact justly here we need to go one step back, again to the anti Hallyu movements and their discourse of danger of gender-neutral, controlled and produced nature of K-Pop idols. Apart from religious worries about family structure and child education there is also one more aspect of hate/anti movements towards K-Pop, not only in Turkey but generally in non-Asian countries, which I believe is much more unconscious than others. To explain it I will refer to the term "techno-orientalism"<sup>124</sup> which first appeared in David Morley and Kevin Robins's book '*Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries*' in 1995. This term is important to understand the western and non-Asian societies' perception of the new Asian representation in global popular culture and culture industry production. "Techno-Orientalist discourse constructs Asians as mere simulacra and maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor, the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism."<sup>125</sup> With this definition it is argued that; although orientalism does not clearly distinguish between "Middle East" and "Far East"<sup>126</sup> reasons for orientalism in the two regions actually differs. Orientalism we see in east Asia is relatively newer than it is in west Asia. It comes after east Asian countries like India, Japan and China started to gain economic power again, after colonization period of European countries slowed down in the region. Especially car production in Japan impacted the American economy adversely and

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> An expansion and update for Edward Said's term orientalism. See his work; Edward W. Said *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>125</sup> ROH, DAVID S., BETSY HUANG, and GRETA A. NIU. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. (Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>126</sup> Since both terms are political and geographically becomes eurocentric, west asia and east asia will be used following this.

people, primarily white men in America, started to blame Asian people for ‘taking their jobs’ with the technological developments of the country.<sup>127</sup>

This differs from simple racism and sprinkles the seeds for a new perception of Asian people. The dehumanizing aspect of orientalism is still here but this time with the attachments of factory machine, referencing the automatons which replaced them in work places thus this idea painted a new image of Asian people; unfeeling, efficient, inhuman.<sup>128</sup> This perception came from lost economic power, and power in general that is often associated with the masculinity, of western/American men. Thus there arises a need to reclaim their personhood, subjectivity and masculinity. According to the way of techno-orientalist thinking, the reason why Asian countries especially China, Japan and Korea are developing in technology is because they are unthinking and inhuman machines from which comes to the assumption of ‘robotic Asians’ who lack of agency.

Therefore, considering the K-Pop and Korean entertainment industry as a complete factory like industry and idols as inhuman machines whom lack agency and are used by the sector without any individuality, would be a wrong way of criticizing K-Pop. The Korean pop sector is as capitalist and as immoral as it is in America or in Turkey or any other country in the world. This criticisms towards the sector often leads to thinking that fans of K-Pop also lack the ability to think and condemning the wrong behaviors happening in the sector or in idol lives, even though these types of criticisms were common in fan spaces and came out in each interview even as I mentioned before. Interestingly such unconscious way of thinking can give a way to put fans of western entertainment sectors hierarchically higher than fans of asian entertainment sectors. K-Pop fans are often perceived, in both western media and Turkish media, as dumb or too naive to analyze the ‘devil industry of K-Pop’ mostly because they consist of people who are young and women thus considered as too emotional to analyze or see ‘the dark truth’ behind the industry. Many of the criticisms for it being a ‘factory like sector’ towards K-Pop are partially true from overworking idols to slave contracts. But together with this, which often could be encountered in any country’s entertainment and music sector with a less structured

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

version, the main reason why fans feel like their favorite idol is inseparable part of their life is because of the agency idols show.

Thus if criticisms towards K-Pop are made to the point that views K-Pop as even more controlled and more evil than other popular culture streams coming from the west or any other country, there is a higher chance to fall into the trap of techno-orientalism. As Adorno points out; “The more opaque and complicated modern life becomes, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to cliches which seem to bring some order into the otherwise un-understandable. Thus, people may not only lose true insight into reality but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles.”<sup>129</sup> Instead of over focusing on the one single stream, critics would be more appropriate if they look for the systematic problems behind, that allows a specific entertainment sector to become like this and also the reasons behind why people choose to follow these instead of making false assumptions about the evil plan of the culture industry.

I find it meaningful to put K-Pop into culture industry discussions. It has a strong relationship with capitalist consumption politics. But I argue that it should be discussed more carefully because of two reasons. One is techno-orientalism, as it has just been mentioned, perceiving all of the sector and also fans with a dehumanized ideology while otherising them because of the remaining false perception towards Asian societies and thus ignoring the other side of the K-Pop. Second is the existence of this other side which is fan involvement and the appearance of an almost civil society kind of free space with the social media usage.

## **2.2 K-Pop as a Culture**

Binark, defines K-Pop as ‘increased entertainment’ considering its successful engagement to global capitalism, and different strategies of idol production by different companies.<sup>130</sup> Thus the structured and well analyzed production part

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<sup>129</sup> Theodore Adorno, ‘How to Look at Television’. *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, 8(3), (1954) 229-30.

<sup>130</sup> Binark, “Kore Dalgası/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS’in Cazibesi”

becomes distinctive in K-Pop sector. In this section I will elaborate on the creation on an idol group and creation of the fan processes. We can mention two stages of production: production of the idol and production of the fandom. Although the two stages often use different strategies and tactics, one of the distinctive things the K-Pop sector has is often the intertwining these two productions.

### **2.2.1 Production of an Idol**

For this stage the main actor becomes various entertainment companies working to produce and advertise entertainers in different fields from music to modeling. Companies are on the foreground especially for the K-Pop sector in which they produce all-round entertainers that are called *idol*. To become an idol young people, between age 10 – 18 on average, attend auditions held by entertainment companies, and if they are accepted they become *trainee* in that company. Major companies are accepted as the rulers of the sector known as the ‘big three’ referring to the three biggest entertainment companies; SM, YG and JYP. Currently, with the spectacular amount of fame gained by the boy group BTS, their company Big Hit is also involved in this ‘rulers’ list considering the annual earnings and the increase in the demand of young people wanting to become part of the company as an idol. Most of the worldwide K-Pop idols also belong to these four companies, thus they have the ability of controlling the K-Pop sector globally by setting the standards and inventing the baseline of the culture.

The company system in the entertainment sector can be found in different countries too. The thing that makes Korean companies distinct is that, in many aspects, companies are working like schools, and thus they are more effective on idols’ lives than companies in other countries. Children or trainees who pass through auditions, become part of the agency and go to the company after their school ends and attend many classes there about singing, dancing, acting, performing, etiquette or foreign languages. The training period is, on average, six months to a year. Trainees are supposed to sign a contract with their agency for a determined period and when it comes to an end, they can either re-sign or leave the company. The same thing goes with idols and idol groups too. Also both idols and parents are fully aware of how

the sector works, from long work hours and long years of training to loss of privacy and financial uncertainty.<sup>131</sup> The ‘slave contract’ which comes with almost all news about the ‘dark side of the K-Pop’ is partially true but can’t be generalized to all of the sector. The number of trainees, around 5 for small companies, can go up to 20-30 for bigger companies. The company absorbs almost all of the expenses of their trainees including dorms, food, and lessons and also possible advertisements before the trainee’s debut which costs around 27.000 USD per month, and debuting a K-Pop group cost almost 2 million USD for the company.<sup>132</sup> Groups, after their debut, start to pay their trainee debts similarly to paying off a student loans while working as a newly graduated person, but in this case for many groups they don’t get any payment until all of the debt is payed, while their basic expenses continue to be absorbed by the company.

Companies also take students for dance and singing classes with payment, this is only for education and those students are not considered as part of the company in the way trainees are. Many of trainees also stay in dorms together with other trainees in accordance to company’s decisions and planned strategy for the upcoming group. When they are considered as ‘ready ’by their company, they are usually put in a group and debut with a song that the company has chosen for them. Investments of time and money rise accord to the company’s economic power, and it can reach to enormous numbers, thus nothing is left to chance. Companies mostly decide everything for idols from their song concepts and hair color to how each group member will behave on television shows according to the created image, and they decide these characteristics by considering fans ’wishes. This continues in the first few years until the group gains a stable popularity with the public and starts to bring income to company. After this, they usually gain more freedom and also experience in their work as interlocutors explained. Each year around 300 idol groups from different companies are training to debut, about 50 of them manage to actually debut and often 2 or 3 groups from debuted ones gain popularity.<sup>133</sup> The high competition

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<sup>131</sup> Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The Impossible Country*. (China: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 246-247.

<sup>132</sup> Hong, C. "How Much Does It Cost To Debut A K-Pop Group?" *Soompi*, August 4, 2016. <https://www.soompi.com/article/883639wpp/much-cost-debut-k-pop-group>

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

in the sector forces producers and insiders to continuously become better and come up with more interesting concepts to keep attracting attention.

For many groups, all these processes before debuting and the hardships the group went through becomes part of the show. Not at the end of the process, but after the success of the group and from the very first steps of becoming an idol group the whole process often turns into a reality show, enabling fans to develop attachment to idols even before they become idols, and thus they pass the time together. All success the idols achieve becomes a collective achievement, and fans grow up with idols, which makes the attachment and devotedness deeper. Looking at a K-Pop performance together with the striking choreographies, catchy songs, and impeccable visuality there is also a storytelling process for the fans who have stored up treasured memories since the beginning. Binark defines this as a ‘carnival like sophisticated show that structured as to make forget the notion of time’.<sup>134</sup>

In interviews maybe the most used word was ‘kusursuzluk/impeccability’. For all layers and aspects of K-Pop, definitions of interlocutors often start and end with this word. Some expressed that it made them uncomfortable at first, that they are too perfect, but with the behind the scene and reality show sides and seeing the humane side of idols this ‘hard worked perfection’ made them feel connected to the idols. The duality of a K-Pop group, being perfect and unreachable on the stage and showing the vulnerable/humane sides while being easily reachable for fans behind the scenes, is also a part of the storytelling. It can be meaningful to refer Guy Debord here, in Debord’s book<sup>135</sup> his discussion was about ‘the celebrity’. He understands the notion of celebrity as "the spectacular representation of a living human being".<sup>136</sup> He calls them agents of the spectacle which can be interpret as, the body of the celebrity is carrying the spectacle within themselves. All kinds of celebrities are forms of production for him, they are carrying spectacle as a role and as life style. They appear on the stage as the opposite of ordinary individuals, which is almost like being the ‘enemy’ of the individual. "Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify

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<sup>134</sup> Binark, “Kore Dalgası/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS’in Cazibesi”, translated from Turkish.

<sup>135</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things".<sup>137</sup> K-Pop idols, as a new kind of a celebrity figure, on the other side do not renounce their autonomous qualities but highlight them at backstage as a continuity of the show, and thus in this case, K-Pop shows actually do not have an ending but continue as an unending show while filtering a whole other aspect of life as a true example of the culture industry.<sup>138</sup> Thus they don't represent the spectacle but they themselves become the spectacle.

Idols are produced from people with very diverse characters, as many interlocutors mentioned with approval. They put many different appearances and characteristics with the assumption that everyone can find something they would like in this group. Considering the moral characteristics idols often show, like dramas, K-Pop too, carries Asian emotions with modern visuals.<sup>139</sup> The dynamics inside the group depends on the respect and close friendship. Young members treat older ones with respect while older ones taking care of the needs of young as if they are a family. Each member shows a role as a music group member as well as member of a family or friend group. They also often show their close relationships with their real family and thus highlight concepts like importance of family and respectful relationships within a close friend group, which are happily welcomed by most of the audience raised in traditional societies. Also idols are strictly forbidden to have romantic relationship and behave extra carefully with their relations with opposite sex in front of the camera. All these adding an extra positive layer to their emotional bond with fans in especially those countries by showing a morally acceptable and relatable image. The diversity of celebrity characters is in truth a unity of their adherence to presuppositions of their culture about a successful way of living according to Debord.<sup>140</sup> Also he talks about how the rapid replacement of consumer products reveals the illusionary nature of the society of spectacle which again becomes accurate for K-Pop sector.

Rojek considers the production of celebrity as an individual or collective abstract desire.<sup>141</sup> This idea actually represents how idols or other celebrities are products just

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>138</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic Of Enlightenment*, 99.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 95-96.

<sup>140</sup> Debord, *Society of Spectacle*.

<sup>141</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 186-187.

like they are produced in the capitalist factory. Products sell through their attached meanings, they are mostly sold by using the desires of people, mixing them reshaping and recreating them is what leads people to consume more. The consumption is not the final desire actually, but we consume because there are some values, some non-material desires we want to reach as human beings and materials, idols and celebrities in this case, are just in-betweens and tools we use because we think that only by using these tools can we reach certain things like different and mixed kinds of emotions one has not experienced before such as acceptance by society, feelings of family or just simple happiness. Idols are almost used like 'living drugs' who are not consumed in as short time as a pill can be consumed, but eventually they come to an end too as human beings. When they are physically and emotionally 'sold-out' their image is capable of being replaced by another person. This higher level of consumption style is changing so many things about human labor too. The entertainment sector was always led by celebrities singers, dancers and artist but the point we have come to today is consuming directly a person's character, with his or her vulnerabilities, personal information, family life, daily life behaviors and emotions felt by them. Everything about them but not much of their job or art. This becomes alarming when we think about it together with Bauman's discussion about consumerism. According to him a life built only on the value of consumerism continues without norms and what directs such a life would only be the constantly increasing desires and demands without a goal.<sup>142</sup> Such a way of understanding emotions and values would be the biggest damage left by capitalism to the society.

In K-Pop, mostly because of the aim of emotional attachment, this situation is more serious than it is in other entertainment sectors. Thus with the consciousness of staying away from techno-orientalist approach, the 'dark side of the K-Pop' as something that is fatigue of young people as idols, suicides and mistreatments in sector is something that has to be mentioned. Especially in companies that are relatively less successful than others and therefore poorer, it is well known that idols and trainees are often in poor situations which has also been mentioned and criticized many times in interviews. Considering the position of the K-Pop sector as producers

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<sup>142</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 122.

of a new type of celebrity, this ‘danger of K-Pop’ is coming from its capitalist aspects and the capitalist structure of global entertainment sector.

For Rojek too these abstract desires behind our consumption behaviors, are rooted in capitalism, where consumers develop a desire for commodities on the basis of media representations. Marshall argues that the audience builds a relationship with a celebrity through a tension between the possibility and the impossibility of knowing the authentic individual:

The various mediated constructions of the film celebrity ensure that whatever intimacy is permitted between the audience and the star is purely at the discursive level. Desire and pleasure are derived from this clear separation of the material reality of the star as living being from the fragments of identity that are manifested in films, interviews, magazines, pinup posters, autographs and so on.<sup>143</sup>

While audiences, and fans in particular, consume the spectacle of celebrity on screen or in other media, fans themselves are part of this spectacle—and thus make it real—by producing stories, fantasies, images and as such, the star himself. Besides magazines, other media—visual and aural, moving and still—are responsible for the construction of familiarity and affect as well.<sup>144</sup>

The desire to support their idol can easily turn into direct consumption of one as a human being which shows the big change and future danger in capitalist behavior. Consumption of emotions already had a crooked impact on human feelings and the meaning of emotions. Turning a human being, someone who has a past and present, likes and dislikes, with future dreams or fears, with his/her environment and family life, should not be considered capitalist consumption of labor but rather a new level of capitalism that has started with the entertainment sector. And I argue that the K-Pop sector is used as the first step of this change in capitalist behavior. The popularity of sector’s structure had an impact on celebrities in other countries too,

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<sup>143</sup> P. David Marshall. Cinematic Apparatus and the Film Celebrity. In *The Film Cultures Reader*. (London and New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 228-240.

<sup>144</sup> Roos Gerritsen. “Intimacy on Display: Movie Stars, Images and Everyday Life in South India.” *Visual Anthropology* 29 (2016): 382–405.

and many realized the power of emotional attachment through showing more personal and sincere sides of a celebrity's life.

The thing which enables people to engage in this high level of consumption is mostly provided by new media. The Internet and social media was the last big jump for *Hallyu* 0.1(K-dramas), in Kim's categorization, before everything started to change for Korea. It became so much bigger than before, that this growth changed it.<sup>145</sup> The jump from *Hallyu* 0.2 (K-Pop) to *Hallyu* 0.3 (K-culture) was really quick and with blurry lines. The change made by internet and social media made *Hallyu* something much different and even foreign for Korean people too, the more it met with different cultures the more it adapted them. Now fans were becoming as effective as producers and the efficacy became two sided. Kim perceives the popularity of *Hallyu* as an entirely different thing from cultural imperialism. According to him because of this two sided efficacy it turned into a 'world wave' that is harmoniously works with all kinds of cultures in global field.<sup>146</sup>

### **2.2.2. Production of the Fandom**

Instead of using the technique of creating the idol first and the fandom next, in K-Pop sector simultaneous creation of idol and fandom is more common. It enables deeper bonds, stronger connection, and the feeling of growing up together with the idol. Fandom is a subculture consisting of fans and characterized by the feeling of empathy with others who share common interest.<sup>147</sup> For K-Pop fans it is usually described as 'family' and many fans on social media call each other as 'fam', abbreviation for family. As it can be understood from this, fandom production includes creating an intense bond between idols and fans as well as fans with other fans to ensure they behave collectively and become a powerful economic and emotional source for idols. While production of idols focuses on the perfect looks and performances, the production of the fandom stage focuses on emotional devotion, identification and empathy with idols.

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<sup>145</sup> Lee, *The Korean Wave*, 38-51.

<sup>146</sup> Kim, Past , Present and Future of Hallyu ( Korean Wave ), 160.

<sup>147</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Fandom," (accessed August 25, 2020), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fandom>

Lee Soo Man, founder of the SM Entertainment which can be consider the first and biggest entertainment company in Korea, built most parts of the sector. He was the one who capitalized the sector and started artist producing industry. He built the production system of idols, and he also built notion of 'fan 'for the K-Pop sector. His main idea was to build a culture for them to make them feel like part of the idol group they support, and also part of a community who share similar taste with the idols. Lee, said in his speech at Stanford University:

Europe and America in the past followed the idea of economy first, culture next. This became stronger and as they became world leading countries their cultures spread and became known to the rest of the world. However I believe that could change. What I set forth was the idea of culture first, economy next.<sup>148</sup>

His idea seems to have worked maybe even better than Europe and America's way. People use Korean products with love or they can even choose to use a product only because it's Korean branded. First of all, he gave a name to each fan group who supports different idols. This made their fan identity more visible. *Fancafes* (social media platforms special to each fan group with a paid membership), and many different kinds of original products containing the symbol of the group, are other things which reproduces the group identity and the feeling of being part of a community.

The two most visible things in a random K-Pop concert are *lightsticks* and *fanchants*. Lightsticks are different shaped little sticks which has the specific logo of the group it belongs. Its shape and the color of the light varies accordingly. Mostly, they have Bluetooth connection controlled by organizers in the concert halls to give an aesthetic ambience, and to make fans feel more like part of the creators of this ambience. In the concert, and in activities like *fanmeetings*, fans wave the lightsticks together in time with the music and *fanchants*. Fanchants are the parts where fans sing in the idol's song. Every song has its own fanchant made by the group, and it includes the lyrics of the song also supporting words towards idols. In concerts thousands of fans sing those parts together while shaking their lightsticks, which

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<sup>148</sup> Chandler, Michele. "Lee Soo Man: Taking Korean Pop Culture Global" *Stanford Business*, April 1, 2011. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/lee-soo-man-taking-korean-pop-culture-global>

harmoniously change color and these two things make a K-Pop concert very similar to a tribal religious ritual, an effective and almost spiritual kind of bonding experience for the audience. The concerts, and the usage of lightsticks and fanchants give fans the feeling of unification with thousands of others in the concert hall; they strengthen their identity and reproduce it.

According to Kim, although there is obviously the hand of the government on hallyu 1.0 (K-Drama), since hallyu 2.0 (K-Pop) step, fans took the lead for spreading hallyu culture in their own societies. The basic structure of being part of a fan group as an identity has been produced by the sector but internet enabled fans to become self-producers leading the advertisement part of the sector with fan labor. We see it in the context of Turkey too. Since there was a language barrier from the beginning, fans were using a serious amount of time and labor for translation of each and everything from drama subtitles to social media posts of idols. More than half of the interlocutors were able to understand Korean on different levels, many of them are involved in the translation process of different K-Pop products both from English and Korean languages. Not only translation but they also do many voluntary advertisement activities from making public dance events in which they do K-Pop group dances in central-crowded places of cities, to various charity organizations with the name of idols.<sup>149</sup> This proves fans and fan groups became very important at this stage which shows that it is important to understand fan culture to give meaning to this cultural production.

Binark, mentions the importance of ‘platform capitalism’<sup>150</sup> about today’s fan impact on K-Pop. Different social media platforms like Youtube, twitter, Instagram, facebook, vLive, weverse etc. become gathering spaces for fans and becomes the main spaces where daily life for a fan goes on, and thus the main spaces for norm

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<sup>149</sup> As example see a video from 2016 which fans of solo idol Rain, Turkish Clouds made multiple charity events including sending supplies to a school in small village in Turkey. One of the little students says ‘thank you Rain uncle’ at the end of the video which made fans very happy for being able to devote their charity works to their idol as a gift.

turkishclouds, "Rain - Turkish Clouds Charity Work in Rain's honour", February 23, 2016. YouTube video, 2:46.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x7a-Pp06is&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0H3GZ10B7hwj0p\\_fS-\\_fMDHjHK4AQDwHjxuYGGGuCrtNW2ZljDv9nAxvc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x7a-Pp06is&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0H3GZ10B7hwj0p_fS-_fMDHjHK4AQDwHjxuYGGGuCrtNW2ZljDv9nAxvc)

<sup>150</sup> Term coined by Srnicek. See; Nick Srnicek. Platform capitalism. (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

and value production and reproduction. In the second chapter, platforms and their importance will be discussed in detail together with emotions and how they turn into stages where the unending K-Pop show continues after the concert stage.

Production of the fandom mainly involves letting people feel like they are part of the process of the idol's success. This point leads fans to believe that given norms and values in the sector are not foreign but as if they are produced together with fans and idols; this is another reason why fans easily accept and defend most of the norms coming from K-Pop idols, like gender definitions, because the identification with idols is much higher than other popular culture streams. Online voting in music shows and award shows, increasing the number of views of music videos, tweeting and sharing things about their idols on social media to be able to get them in the 'trendings' and being part of a *fandom*, with other people who are aiming the same things with them make fans identify themselves with their idol and fandom. Interestingly, but not very surprisingly, in many ways fandoms work like *tribes*. Tribes in the meaning of connectedness, devotion, and extensive perception of family. This connectedness turns into "super-national fandom" as Kim refers to it,<sup>151</sup> when it is combined with social media.

We can refer as one single tribe for global K-Pop fandom but also the localized aspect of K-Pop needs to be considered. Behaviors such as wearing the traditional cloth of different countries idols go, or stopping the concert during the call to prayer in Muslim countries, or choosing more covered clothes to wear at concerts in Muslim countries gains high approval and deeper trust from fans. Such behaviors gives the opportunity of sharing some special memories to the local fan groups that fans from other cultures would not understand. These shared memories, language, and similar culture in different countries and societies creates smaller cultural groups that are influencing each other within the K-Pop community. Therefore, it can be perceived as multiple small tribes with local aspects under one big subcultural tribe.

We see that although K-Pop has this kind of two sided production process including both idols and fans, with new media technologies company production evolves into fan production, and fans gain agency by being a fan on the digital space and that there can be another dimension of this culture industry. I will discuss this in the next

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<sup>151</sup> Kim, Past, Present and Future of Hallyu ( Korean Wave ), 158.

section with the example of boy group BTS, who are at the centre of ‘gender-neutral’ criticisms by the anti K-Pop discourse in Turkey. Also they have the biggest fandom impact, and are mentioned by interlocutors of this study continuously in every interview.

### 2.3 BTS and the Rest

Considering the striking amount of popularity among other K-Pop groups the seven member boyband BTS has their own history of rising within and beyond the K-Pop phenomena. The anti K-Pop movement in Turkey was mostly focused on BTS both because their high popularity in the country and because they found the group’s physical appearance unusual. Also many interlocutors of this study were dedicated fans of this group. In every interview the group’s name was mentioned at least once and fans highlighted their importance in the history of K-Pop. The group’s global popularity also has an effect on the Korean economy. According to article of Forbes magazine, the group is producing \$4.65 billion of gross domestic product, which is important because it means it is “in the same economic league as Samsung and other top conglomerates.”<sup>152</sup> In 2018, the Korean government decided to give the award of Best Artist to Introduce and Spread the Hallyu.<sup>153</sup> Therefore their impact on the popular culture is important both for this study and following studies about the Hallyu wave.

According to the KOFICE Hallyu report of 2018<sup>154</sup> the popularity of the group points to a shift in the global cultural hegemony of the past:

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<sup>152</sup> Pesek, William. "BTS Can't Save South Korea, Though Its \$4.7 Billion GDP Boost Sounds Good" *Forbes*, October 10, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williampesek/2019/10/10/bts-cant-save-south-korea-though-its-47-billion-gdp-boost-sounds-good/#1f82db922412>

<sup>153</sup> Binark, “*Kore Dalgasi/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS in Cazibesi*”

<sup>154</sup> Korea Foundation of International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE), is an institute under the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. KOFICE aims to connect Korea with the world through culture. With this aim they publish annual Hallyu reports with detailed analyzations of academics and important names from the sector. See official the website, <http://eng.kofice.or.kr>

The penetration and acceptance of American culture around the world after World War II. American culture has dominated popular culture worldwide to the extent that global culture has been equated with American culture. This pattern of unidirectional cultural distribution has been cracked by BTS. Group emerged on this global stage and succeeded in adding qualitative metamorphosis to quantitative growth and began to be enthusiastically accepted in every corner of the world, occupying the position of the representative of the 21st century global culture.<sup>155</sup>

With BTS we can say this globalization came faster than ever because of group's popularity in American and on the European stage. The group's popularity is often compared to the famous British rock band the Beatles, but it is the very first example of a group singing in a non-English language, Korean. The band consists of 7 members and only one of them is fluent in English. Yet they are seen in many music award shows and entertainment programs of western popular culture. Although there were examples of different K-Pop groups becoming recognized by western media, none of them had the impact BTS did. This is important for this study too because it had an effect on the demographics of global K-Pop community.

“What I can say is that BTS’ success in the U.S. market was achieved by a formula different from the American mainstream formula. Loyalty built through direct contact with fans had a lot to do with that,” says the group’s producer Bang Si-Hyuk in an interview with Time magazine.<sup>156</sup> He followed a relatively more liberal trainee system than other K-Pop companies did, which he describes as ‘more school-like, with mentorship and a coaching system, and opportunities for students to work together.’<sup>157</sup> This led the group to use social media more often than other idols, and thus connect with local and global fans at the early years of their career.

According to Binark, the group changed the image of fabricated idol by adding sincerity and uniqueness.<sup>158</sup> The sincerity aspect was gained by successful adaptation to new media usage and increasing the ‘showing the behind the scenes’ tactic of K-

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<sup>155</sup> Sejong Kim, “Universality and particularity of K-Pop as a glocal culture,” from annual rapport of KOFICE, *Hallyu White Paper* (2018): 77-78.

<sup>156</sup> Bruner, Raisa. "The Mastermind Behind BTS Opens Up About Making a K-Pop Juggernaut" *Time*, October 8, 2019. <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/>

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Binark, “Kore Dalgası/Hallyu ve K-POP: BTS’in Cazibesi”

Pop to the maximum, and the uniqueness gained by letting the group have more freedom than usual K-Pop stars by their company, Bir Hit Entertainment. Thus their production was slightly different than the common mainstream idol culture; so the economic and social benefit the group brought to company, made their way of being an idol to be taken as an example by other companies and idol groups too. The communication between idols and fans increased and more often than ever. Also, instead of being appealing to the eyes of young audience they aimed to guide them with discourses like self-love, mental health and happiness, which is often mentioned by interlocutors as the reason why they always feel 'proud' to be an A.R.M.Y. (fandom name of the group. Stands for, Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). Other commonly used expressions about the group are, as they are mentioned by anti K-Pop discourse too are, 'I grew up with them', 'I learned to love myself from them', 'They are the only people bring happiness to my life'. When I asked why is BTS has become so popular around the world, a 21 year old fan, Melike, who has been an ARMY since the first day of the group answered in the following way:

Nowadays young people do not have any goals in their life, they are so depressed/melancholic people. It starts at 10 years old. It's not like 'I'm gonna cut myself 'kind of depression, but I mean they don't think. They are people who think nothing, who has no purpose. BTS was like a wake up call for them. They criticize education system, they say 'find a goal for yourself', and before everything they say 'love yourself'. This, of course, makes them different than others (*other K-Pop groups*). Of course this is a huge responsibility for them and the ones who are saying 'find a goal for your life 'are people who haven't seen their 30s yet. Oldest one is 28, they are also struggling like us.<sup>159</sup>

We see from this quote that maybe the biggest reason why people become attached to the group is because they see a life goal that they can devote themselves to. The young age of idols and their inexperience in life, makes them more relatable for fans. Thus their struggles as well as their success, achievements and suggestions are internalized by fans much more easily. The satisfaction of being part of a large

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<sup>159</sup> Translated from Turkish; " günümüzde gençlerin çocukların hiçbir hedefleri yok. Bunalımlı tipler hep. 10 yaşından başlıyorlar...Bu bunalım derken böyle oramı buramı keseyim gibi şeyler değil, yani düşünmediklerini kastediyorum. Düşünmeyen hayatta bir amacı olmayanlar bunlar...Bts bu tiplere bir uyanma çağrısı gibi geliyor. Eğitim sistemi eleştiriyorlar, adamlar git kendine bir amaç bul ot gibi yaşama diyor. Herseyde önce de kendini sev diyorlar. Bu tabii ki onları diğerlerinden biraz ayırıyor... Büyük sorumluluk bu tabii, bi de böyle hayattaki amacını bul falan diyenler de daha 30larını görmemiş adamlar. En büyüğü 28 yaşında, yani onlarda bizim kadar zorlanıyor."

community such as fandom and acting collectively for both supporting the group and also for many different charity aims and social events give fans a sense of self-worth, belonging, and also life with a purpose.

The impact of K-Pop fans on the ongoing protest against racism and police brutality in America, and their ally with the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement made me believe that although K-Pop can be an example and approval of Adorno’s culture industry, it can also be a proof that the culture industry he theorized has reached to another level with social media, and what we have today is much different and even more complex than it was.

Following the outbreak of protests in the US, sparked by **the death of black man George Floyd**, the Dallas Police Department asked people to share videos of "illegal activity protests" through the iWatch Dallas app. K-pop fans worldwide responded by inundating it with fan-recorded videos, known as *fancams*, and memes of various K-pop artists, in an effort to prevent police from tracking protesters' actions. Barely a day later, the app was reported to be experiencing technical difficulties though Dallas Police would not say if it was due to the *fancams*.<sup>160</sup>

As this newspaper article summarizes, K-Pop fans, with the first move coming from BTS fans, as fans on social media highlight, became effective in a political movement in an unusual way. Fans globally used social media (where they most often gather) and idol videos (which they are most engaged with) as tools to protest racism and police brutality. On social media and by the protesters, K-Pop fans were seen as ‘the valued allies of the protestors’.<sup>161</sup> They also spammed hashtags like #WhitelivesMatter, that were opened to oppose the Black Lives Matter movement by again sharing huge amount of idol *fancams* and making it impossible for opposers to use these hashtags to deliver their thoughts.

Until this point there were no official support or denial from Korean idols but the whole ‘online protest’ was started and continued by the collective behavior of K-Pop fans. I believe their behavior influenced idols, and they start to give reactions for the movement one following another. BTS announced a 1 million dollars donation and

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<sup>160</sup> Reddy, Shreyas. "K-pop fans emerge as a powerful force in US protests" *BBC*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52996705>

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

right after that day without an official call, their fan group ARMY<sup>162</sup> aimed to donate the same amount among themselves and managed to match the donation in less than 24 hours.<sup>163</sup> Other protestors and supporters of the movement express their amazement towards how K-Pop fans who are accepted as unimportant and childish became an effective group in a political movement. For fans and people who are familiar with the K-Pop community previously, it was already natural to see fans' organization through social media accounts and having a political impact.<sup>164</sup>

The aim of the culture industry was to placate the masses and keep them unengaged in the social and political milieu<sup>165</sup> and through this chapter I tried to discuss how the K-Pop sector is very much related with the culture industry and its produced and consumer focused system, which makes it highly capitalist. But by looking at these examples can we really consider K-Pop fans as slaves of the capitalist economy? In a way we can. We see all the impact of government; we see the production and the reproduction inside the sector; we see through social media it is able to touch and leave an impact on every part of fans' daily lives, and most importantly we see the materialization and consumption of emotions which all prove Adorno's point about the culture industry. But together with these there is also this collective behavior and the will to leave an impact, which I believe appeared after adaption to life with social media. Today it wouldn't be completely true to think that people are only following news blindly as it was in television societies. Social media gives individuals a chance to contribute to all kinds of popular culture and culture industries as well as to combine them with the political and social events of the day. In K-Pop this chance is greater than other sectors since they are using social media much more successfully than these others. And the discourse of BTS as an idol group is not just aimed at entertainment but also to move and to change their fans. This enables fans to gain

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<sup>162</sup> From the account @OneInAnArmy and supported by many different global fan pages of the group.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Before too, K-Pop fans did have an impact on different country's political and social issues with the power of global fans' co-organization and use of social media. See an example which K-Pop fans pranking on American president Trump's election campaign according to New York Times article; Lorenz, Taylor. "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally" *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html#click=https://t.co/vrbtgSa27T>

<sup>165</sup> Adorno. *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, 132-138

agency through being part of the fandom and BTS itself becoming a subculture which is influencing K-Pop culture.

Fans are aware of the impact of their collectivity and the power it holds. One of the interlocutors expressed that K-Pop fans are very well aware of how social media platforms work and how to use their algorithms for their own benefit since they often work for increasing music video views or do voting through social media. She said ‘we put out hearts on these, thus we become professionals when it comes to spread something or get in trends in twitter’. The ‘us’ language came out in almost every interview while expressing that there is a power coming not from the idol or sector itself but from the emotion based collectivity built on social media. Therefore apart from the matching parts with culture industry, there is also an identity building and expressing authenticity that goes further than being only entertainment based consumption matter. It was highlighted by interlocutors that it wouldn’t be just to consider what fans do as just a consumption. As I see from interviews they often perceive it as becoming a subject with agency through being a fan and being part of a community.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has summarized the production and spread of the K-Pop sector and the impact of fans in this process. There was and still is an aim to produce new a kind of culture with K-Pop and Hallyu which, so far, has contributed to the Korean economy and worked as a strong soft power for the country. With the social media when these popular culture products get in the global circulation it becomes more effective and turns into something else than it was before by the impact of fandoms. We cannot reduce this to being only the impact of capitalism or Korean government but fans often want to get out of the global capitalism understanding with K-Pop. From the fans’ view what they do while supporting an idol is something more than entertainment or consumption. Instead, it is a matter of having deep connections with others and the emotional bonds. Since space and emotions become very important at this point, the second chapter will be focusing on fan experience on

digital space and the impact of existing and building relationships in a non-physical space.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **DIGITAL COMMUNITY AND FAN SPACES**

In this chapter I will argue that spaces are crucial carriers of emotions, and emotions carried in different spaces can be the most important thing which shapes one's norms and beliefs. For this study there are three different main spaces that were important to understand as it mentioned in previous chapter (social media, Korean cafe/restaurants, fan gatherings/events). With the containment of other two spaces, digital space will be the main field for me both because it is the main gathering space for fans and all other spaces are connected to digital space; also because it is interesting to see how norms and identities are shaping in non-physical space, without a mind-body connection. I argue that being in digital space normalize existing in a social space without a physical body; thus giving an understanding of identity which is separated from any material connections of body. And I believe this kind of understanding would impact gender norms in first place. It is possible to think that emotional connections built on digital space could create misconceptions of gender, especially for the ones who are socializing in digital space more than their daily face-to-face interactions.

My question is as follows; does being able to use social media every day and everywhere with the same people in particular spaces have the ability to change the understanding of daily life norms for fans? And what is the role of emotions in this? To be able to answer this, and see its relation with my main concern gender norms, I will discuss the structure and the impact of different spaces used by fans, with the focus on the digital space. Main sources of this chapter will be the digital ethnography and in-depth interviews to be able to see these spaces from fans view. I saw in field that emotional bonds between fans with idols and fans with other fans are mainly built on the shown characteristics of idols and are highly approved and also envied by fans. Some characteristics were mentioned in every interview, and they are often the reason why fans don't just become interested in idols but they

appear as strong role models for them. I believe highlighting moral characteristics in this sector makes connection on digital space much stronger.

Thus in this chapter I will be focusing on fan behaviors on social media and effects of social media on this emotional, complex and non-place groups with the goal of understanding how a genre of popular culture is effective on gender understandings, while also combining and comparing the analysis with the data from in-depth interviews. Here, I want to look at how building relationships through social media is affecting people and giving meanings to gender, and also how they develop deep emotions without having any face to face interactions, together with how they develop and produce bonds between other people in the space of social media.

To explain fan behaviors clearly, in this chapter I will discuss how K-Pop, with the help of digital space, is turning into an agency for the ones who are unable to feel self-worth and belonging in their everyday lives. I argue that by being a fan, self-authenticity and subjectivity are highlighted, which puts the K-Pop sector in a different place than being a pure culture industry. I will first explain how the concept of space has emerged in the field, then elaborate on how I am using space as ‘fan space’ and discuss why it becomes an important identity building mechanism and source of agency. Then, I will discuss the approved moral characteristics of K-Pop idols, which makes them different than pop stars in Turkey or other western countries, and how these characteristics are important in the emotional connection of K-Pop fans and give them the feeling of a family. Lastly, I will explain how these shared emotions in fan spaces turns into a different kind of collectivity and enables the appearance of new arguments different than mainstream understandings.

### **3.1 The Appearance of the ‘Space’ in the Field**

After getting into the fieldwork it was obvious for me that a study about K-Pop fandom cannot be made without involving digital ethnography, since for fans who are not living in Korea the internet is the main space they come together with idols and other fans. The first problem I faced after deciding the subject of this thesis was figuring out how and more importantly where to find participants. Even though I was

also engaged with K-Pop for years I had never joined any K-Pop related activities or really communicated with other fans in Turkey. So I was unaware of the extent of this field and also did not have the network. That is why I started from social media, where K-Pop community mostly comes together, to find participants. Online communities for K-Pop are growing fast and the people behind them are communicating with each other and know each other very well. So finding people from social media was the easiest way for me at the beginning. This made me interested in digital space, and I saw the importance of it for this topic. Fans on twitter and facebook seemed a lot more dedicated and familiar with the culture. But they are mostly using fake accounts, which is called “fan accounts”<sup>166</sup> among fans, and it made it harder to build trust relations to meet with them face to face. Thus I focused more on instagram at least to be able to see their faces and also to make them see my photo to convince them that I am not lying about my identity. Twitter and instagram, together with other social media platforms like vLive and Youtube, became my digital ethnography fields, and I started to spend more time for participant observations on those platforms.

Social media space is important in two ways for this study; first, it is the main source of K-Pop and often used by producers and consumers. The second important feature is the factor of anonymity on social media that makes it much easier for people to talk and discuss the issue of gender, which is very related with morality and seen as a sensitive topic. Fans seem to hesitate less on social media to talk about gender norms and their views on it, Therefore, together with in-depth interviews I took it as a reliable source for fans’ views on gender. As I mentioned before idols and other famous people in the sector, from choreographers to idol group managers, are using social media and the internet very effectively as a source to reach non-Korean / international fans. They also encourage fans to use it effectively, and this creates strong and very active fan communities on the internet not only in Korea but all over the world; in an instant these communities can communicate with each other. During the pandemic period of COVID19, which affected all countries to different

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<sup>166</sup> *fan account* is a social media account used by fans mostly without including their own names or faces but with a photo and a name which are showing one’s interest or expressing their fan identity. Most of the interlocutors corrected me when I referred them as fake accounts. They explained to me as they are not ‘fake’ because people are not necessarily acting as a different person in their fan account but just showing a different side of their character in a more free space. This will be discussed more in the upcoming chapter.

degrees, this high level of being in touch became even more important. While most of the entertainment sectors around the world are damaged from the pandemic, the K-Pop sector was very active on social media space, and this period may have even helped many idols to gain more popularity.<sup>167</sup> All literature related with K-Pop highlights the successful use of social media space and the importance of fans' free labor in this success. We see that the used space has changed the way to consume. Mainly, because of the high usage of digital space today fans — of anything — are the “new consumer model of the digital age.”<sup>168</sup>

To arrange interviews, I started by sending direct messages (dm) through Instagram to people who seemed interested in K-Pop from their profiles or people who are following K-Pop fan pages. I might have sent dm's to more than a hundred people. Most of them did not reply. Some of them claimed they are not fans even though I saw them following multiple fan pages. Some of them stalled me for weeks and then decided they did not want to be interviewed after all. Some of them openly said they cannot trust someone they meet online. Many of them did not want to meet but were very willing to help and said you can ask questions from here (instagram). Many of them were not living in İstanbul, so even though they wanted to meet we couldn't but I had Skype interviews with some of them instead.

This situation of being unable to reach interlocutors even though I can observe them on social media made the first half of the fieldwork stressful. After reaching some people who are more active on social media than others, it became much easier because from that point everyone I made an interview with were part of a different fan community — like social media pages or groups, dance crews or friend groups who have met on social media — and each one of them were leading me to their other friends, which caused my sample selection to become a snowball sampling

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<sup>167</sup> In addition to being constantly active on social media, many different K-Pop groups met with their fans with online fan meetings in which they spoke with fans through video calls for a limited time. The online concert of BTS called Bang Bang Con was watched by 756.000 real time ticketed audience on 14 June 2020. This is equal to 15 concerts held in 50.000 capacity stadium. The group's company stated that they had audiences from 107 different countries and the official fan club gained 10.000 new fans after the concert. Frater, Patrick. "BTS' 'Bang Bang Con: The Live 'Claims Record Viewership for Online Concert" *Variety*, Jun 14, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/digital/asia/bts-big-bang-con-the-live-record-online-concert-1234635003/>

<sup>168</sup> Sejong Kim, “Universality and particularity of K-Pop as a glocal culture,” 85.

spontaneously. It built a trust relationship and made interlocutors talk more freely and openly with me. At this point I realized how connected those small groups are. Many interlocutors had different friend groups whom they met online and after a long time of being online friends they started to meet outside, or organize events together. Interlocutors who are part of this kind of groups were much more confident while talking about K-Pop and why they like being part of a community. In contrast, interlocutors who follow the sector individually were much more hesitant of being judged and were kept highlighting that they are not ‘crazy fans’.

I found my first interlocutor for thesis interviews from the followers of a Korean cafe. Korean cafes in Turkey are mostly visited by K-Pop or K-Drama fans and their position is like a gathering space for fans outside the social media platforms. All Korean cafe/restaurants in Istanbul were including K-Pop songs in the background, idols photos are on menus or on walls, and K-Pop related goods are sold. The feeling of familiarity spreading from customers can be the first thing when you enter a Korean cafe. Although not everyone is personally know each other and usually visit the place with their own friends, they do know that people who are there have the similar tastes with them not for food but for their love of K-Pop and Hallyu. So the space in a Korean cafe/restaurant has is often different than a regular foreign food restaurant in Istanbul. The existence of multiple fans, the shared cultural background makes them connected somehow and is making the cafe part of a different space.

### **3.2 Lost and Found in the Digital Space**

My first interlocutor’s sister was the one I contacted, but she said she was not very interested in K-Pop but that I should talk to her little sister. Later I learned that she was the reason why her sister started to listen K-Pop because she was and she still is very interested in Korean dramas, which was a common story I heard from different interlocutors. One of the interesting things in the interview was Merve (22, little sister) also said that she is “not that much fan” but I should be talking with her roommate because “she is ‘fan top fan’ (fan üzeri fan)” .But we couldn’t because the roommate was living in Kars and even though we talked to make a Skype interview she decided late she did not want to do it. I heard similar things from other

interlocutors about how they are not that much of a fan but I should go talk with the other people who are big fans, hardcore fans or crazy fans. I assume they feel a need to explain they enjoy following this culture but not as much as the people who are 'crazy fans' and this need is coming from the recent anti-K-Pop movement. They might also be afraid to be seen as 'teenage fans' or being looked down on in society. Also the confession of being a 'fan' of something, not necessarily K-Pop but anything, actually means showing one's bond towards someone or something thus is intimate and private and also can easily be perceived as vulnerability for showing affect towards a 'thing' openly, thus not every 'fan' I interviewed was happy with calling themselves as fan.

Such reasons are making many fans stay away from 'fan spaces', both in terms of places like K-Pop events or Korean cafes and in terms of their bodily space. While some fans were carrying names or faces of their favorite idols on their phone cases or accessories, many expressed that they wouldn't want to show their interest for K-Pop publicly because they don't want to be labeled as an 'obsessive teenage girl who likes K-Pop'. One of the interlocutors who owns a big social media page selling K-Pop related goods said, they are now trying to find goods that are not showing K-Pop idol's face or group's name explicitly because selling such things is getting harder. Instead they, and most of the other K-Pop online shops<sup>169</sup> she said, are trying to find stuff that has a small symbol which would resemble the idol or the group because fans do not want to be recognized as K-Pop fan by the general public, but they still want to be recognized by other fans in the public space, she said.

This recognition of the other is what creates the 'fan space'. Possible explanation of what fan space is; a space which mostly consists of the combination of many different social media platforms, and is a place for people with similar likes to come together to discuss and share their feelings about their likes without giving importance to one's gender, race, religion, language, or any other characteristics other than their love for the shared object. This object can be an online game, a car brand, a sport team, a fame figure or a music sector like K-Pop is. Although it is

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<sup>169</sup> There are multiple online pages as well as website that are bringing K-Pop related goods from Korea and selling them in Turkey. These pages often start with individuals who are able to order from Korea for themselves and get bigger in time. Fanpage of different idol groups also often organizing bulk orders from Korea and help fans who want to buy albums or official goods of the group.

mainly built on social media platforms, fan space can appear in physical world with gatherings of fans, as it happens in Korean cafe/restaurants and fan meeting events for K-Pop fans. There are many different fan spaces on social media platforms, which are not often touching each other and usually unaware of other's existence. Therefore, they cause the formation of many small subculture communities, closed to outsiders, bond with each other and often without having any contact outside the digital space. These are social spaces that are not completely public nor private but together with being open for everyone they come into prominence by including aspects of private spaces because they carry intimate feelings and by being windows to users homes and private lives. Also, they belong to platform capitalism<sup>170</sup> and are not completely free spaces and some extent are under the control of the platform owners like Facebook or google. What makes K-Pop fan space different than other spaces is it is partially structured by the producers, and the devotion of fans to those spaces is much higher because the idols themselves often exist in and contribute to fan spaces.

Taking their feature of being a space where individuals (both fans and idols) are able to share their private lives, I prefer to take fan spaces as private spheres within digital public. They are part of and open to the general used spaces of social media, but they are also closed by being used only by members who share the similar pop culture knowledge and background. Being more close to the private sphere than the public, gives these spaces a family like atmosphere. Fans share the feeling of 'being safe' with the comfort of not having to worry about judgements from outside and the feeling of acceptance for their identity from their peers by encouragements or criticisms.

Together with the arguments of anti K-Pop such as, 'K-Pop is the loss of youth', or 'we are losing our youth in the digital space/social media'; the discourse used by fans who are active on social media platforms were usually as 'I found myself here', 'this is a place where I can finally behave as who am I', or 'I learned about myself after I met them (idol group) and my friends there (fan space on social media)'. Instead of the attempt to not reveal their fan identity in public, on fan spaces they become much

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<sup>170</sup> Nick Srnicek, Platform capitalism. (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

more comfortable to share their likes and thoughts. Thus we see social media and especially ‘fan spaces’ in social media become very important for building an identity for individuals. People who are claimed to have lost themselves or their identity in digital space are saying that they found who they are with their existence in fan spaces. How should we interpret this situation? On digital ethnography one can see exactly the same sentences as ‘they thought me to love myself’ or ‘I found myself thanks to them / I found myself here’ from fans about their idols over and over in the comment sections of every criticism towards K-Pop. I believe some of them are younger fans who keep saying the same sentences that are common in their community. Also ‘find yourself, love yourself’ are often used slogans of popular boy group BTS thus they keep being repeated by their fans on social media. But we should also consider that many of K-Pop fans in Turkey are women and between ages 12- 25. Not being taken serious in the society is not a rare thing for young women and fan spaces are giving them the agency and also the interest about their opinions from other members of the fan community. It is understandable that young women who are forced to fit standards and unable to express their ideas in their daily lives, are finding social media spaces more free to express themselves. The more they express themselves and communicate with complete outsiders alone, the more they learn about their own identity and character, likes and dislikes. Fan space in this case is becoming a practice space for social experiences.

Duygu (25) is one of the very active members of the fan community who has been following the K-Pop sector since she was 14, for eleven years. She was one of the interlocutors who had the harshest criticisms for the structure of the sector and the way it takes too much time from young people’s lives as well as for the problems existing in fan communities, which led her to use fan spaces much less than before. Still, she has strong emotional connection with her favorite three idol groups, and she was collating them in accordance with how long she had been a fan of the group. Like talking about old friends, she said ‘we have been through a lot with Exo and Exo-L’s (fandom name of the group) even though they are not my favorite I have to count them as my number one group since I have a fidelity debt for them’ while laughing. When she was asked about the importance of digital space for fans she answered as;

Its the attempt of finding yourself by young people who lost themselves. Even though fans lynch each other over ridiculous things in there (social media) that's the place where they are accepted the most. They got lynch but because of their own opinions and character. They somehow approved because their opinion got recognized. She says I hate BTS and all BTS fans attack on her, and she thinks that my dislike of BTS means something. If she say the same thing on the street no one would care it would be nonsense and she knows it. They open fan accounts on social media because thats the place where they can express themselves as they are and still get recognition for it.<sup>171</sup>

As she mentions even though there may arise conflicts or disagreements within the fan spaces, they are still considered as a place of freedom for especially young people, also a source of agency. They find the chance of showing their identity as they want without having to confront the social world, which already has fixed rules and values. Instead, in fan space they are able to stretch and flex ideas and moral codes and be in communication with other fans without one of them having the role of a higher authority to limit others. She also highlighted that for most fans, this existence on fan space is the first time when they became able to defend something, something that they found themselves or together with their friends but without the lead of their family. Thus, this makes them even more attached to idols or fandom since this is very likely to be the first experience of having 'their own idea' and 'their own ideals' and that person or group, can become symbolically important. Firstly it is easy to stand up and defend them because everything is happening on social media and people know that the consequences would not likely to be very harsh. And secondly, this feeling of 'fighting for someone' is giving them agency maybe for the first time. Although this seems to happen mostly with younger fans, older fans too experience similar situations of empowerment because of being a good fan or because of getting recognized and being cared about in a social space and this is one of the reasons why K-Pop becomes more special for such fans, as a source of agency and self-expression.

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<sup>171</sup> Translated from Turkish; "Kendini kaybetmiş gençlerin kendini bulma çabası...Saçma salak şeyler için birbirlerini linçleseler de bir fanın en çok kabul gördüğü yer yine sosyal medya oluyor...Kendi düşünceleri kendi fikirleriyle linçleniyorlar. Düşüncesi ilgi görmüş oluyor yani neredeyse bir şekilde onay alıyorlar. Ben BTS'ten nefret ediyorum diyor bütün BTS fanları buna saldırıyor, bu sefer diyor ki benim BTS sevmemem bir şey ifade ediyor. Sokağa çıkıp aynı şeyi söylese kimsenin umrunda olmaz saçmalık olur yani o da biliyor bunu... Böyle sosyal medyada fan hesapları açıyorlar evet çünkü bu şekilde kendilerini ifade edip birilerinden tepki görebilecekleri tek yer orası."

It is possible to place social media platforms as megacities in non-physical space. With this idea, as Richard Sennet's classical definition of a city is "where strangers meet with strangers".<sup>172</sup> Bauman explains this definition as "the situation where strangers meet with strangers and came out from this sudden encounter as strangers", and he adds "these encounters are likely to be without past".<sup>173</sup> I am taking these two thinkers' definitions to have a better understanding about being on social media and being in constant communication with strangers, where people are 'losing and finding themselves'. I believe Bauman's explanation is actually fitting to social media space too, although he said it regarding a physical city. But for the fan space part of social media this situation changes. Being a stranger on fan space has a different meaning. As Kim explains, "'collective intelligence,' which is the ability of a virtual community to combine and utilize expertise through close interactions among fans, and 'participatory culture' formed by active involvement have become common characteristics of not only fans but also general media consumers".<sup>174</sup> Together with high interaction K-Pop idols give, collective intelligence and participatory culture of social media enables fans to experience similar feelings and events in different times and places while sharing the same space. Thus without meeting personally, fans of the similar culture still have a shared history in terms of their fan identity and become familiar with a side of each other that they don't express in their real lives.

When interlocutors of this study were asked about how do they feel when they see another K-Pop fan on street or somewhere outside of social media, many of them described it as like 'seeing another Turkish person when you are on a foreign land'. One of them said "like you would recognize that this person is your fellow countryman (*memleketlin*) from their way of speak or the way their cloths are and you would exchange a look and maybe a little smile its just like that with other fans". This shows the strength of the shared culture of K-Pop fans, to the point that it almost awakes similar feelings to nationality. Feeling of belonging to the community and mutual acceptance is also making them feel familiar with each other without

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<sup>172</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On Social Psychology of Capitalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 39.

<sup>173</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 147.

<sup>174</sup> S.J. Kim & S. A. Kim, 'From interpretation paradigm to performance paradigm: overview and issues of fandom research.' *Korean Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies*, 29(4). (2013).

necessarily sharing a common place, language or face-to-face communication. Thinking of popular culture as a powerful norm mechanism, we can interpret K-Pop sector as much more powerful in comparison to other streams of popular culture because of these shared feelings and the mutual trust of fans.

### **3.3 K-Pop Idols as Moral Role Models and Fans as Idol Producers**

As it was mentioned in the first part of this study, the main reason why almost all interlocutors find and get interested in K-Pop, and more generally the Hallyu sector, was because of the moral and sincere characteristics depicted by the products, from K-Pop groups to multiple drama scenes. Most of the interlocutors express that they are uncomfortable with pop culture products from the west and also from Turkey, because of them being ‘too much modern to the point that does not include any other moral value than being modern’ as one interlocutor described. Most of the interlocutors don’t enjoy seeing unreachable fame figures who are not necessarily highlighting any moral values in their work. Also famous people being too involved in politics or having an immoral life style like using drugs explicitly or having an unclean image in general is making them unattractive for the interlocutors of this study and as the general opinion observed in social media. On the other hand, fans highly approve of the behaviors of K-Pop idols such as, being respectful towards their fans and other idols, being humble about their talent and success, giving importance to family and friendship bonds and also having an innocent, pure and over all ‘easy to reach’ image.

Although some idols have been involved in multiple crimes from sexual assault to selling drugs, and although most of the fans are aware that there is a ‘dark face of the sector’, which is not shown on camera, they are still appreciating that ‘moral characteristics’ are always highlighted and given importance in the sector. This is often mentioned by idols themselves both with their behaviors and words. In multiple interviews, it is also mentioned by big companies such as CEOs of SM, YG, and JYP that they prioritize good character and the personality of idols more than

talent.<sup>175</sup> This discourse overall makes the sector more trustable in the eyes of fans in comparison to other entertainment sectors. There were multiple criticisms towards fame figures in Turkey and it is often claimed that many of them are more egoistic even though they are less talented than K-Pop idols. In interviews, Sujeong Kim and Soo-Ah Kim conceptualize this as “collective moralism”<sup>176</sup> when they describe how K-Pop idols are oppressed by Korean society and that domestic fans have to behave in morally acceptable ways in accordance with Confucian norms and values. Especially domestic fans demand from stars to behave perfectly as a role model in public. Many Korean fans follow their idols everywhere and often recognize if they have any behaviors that would not be acceptable for society. As one of the interlocutors who often does translation works from Korean to English explained, fandoms often know bad characteristics and inappropriate behaviors of their idols because they are able to follow them and spread information inside the fandom anytime. But such information usually remains a secret within small fan groups in order to protect the image of the idol, and even though they are communicating on social media globally, they behave carefully to not ‘publicize’ the information. Thus K-Pop idols are both protected and “trained by their fans”<sup>177</sup> to behave as role models and in the frame of moral codes.

This side of the sector is not very easy to grasp and is only understandable by reading news about K-Pop or watching K-Pop music videos, and although it is the main reason that attracts fans, I believe it is also the main point that is missed by anti K-Pop discourses. K-Pop in its broadest definition is a music genre, but the strength of it is coming from reality shows where idols show their personality, authenticity and private lives as well as personal relationships and also set standards for moral characteristics. They “unfold on blurred boundaries between “real” and “acting,” but idols do present ordinary and clumsy images as young adults in front of the ubiquitous observation camera.”<sup>178</sup> Therefore fans are able to see their ordinary lifestyle and daily habits which makes their bond with idols much stronger. The impeccable performances on the stage are supported by familiar and humane

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<sup>175</sup> S.J. Kim & S.A Kim, “The ethos of collective moralism: Korean cultural identity of multicultural K-pop.” *Media & Society*, 23(3), (2015) 5-52.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Sejong Kim, “Universality and particularity of K-Pop as a glocal culture,” from annual rapport of KOFICE, *Hallyu White Paper* (2018): 110.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

behaviors on reality shows which gives a wholesome image for fans. This is much more than one time experience but enables fans to build relationship and connection with idols layer by layer and getting to know them deeply through time as it happens in real life relationships.

According to Sejong Kim, what makes K-Pop and K-Pop idols distinct in the global entertainment sector is these manners of “humility, personality, familiarity and authenticity”.<sup>179</sup> By looking at the interviews I also add ‘ambition’ to these four manners as something making K-Pop idols different than others. It was often mentioned in interviews that seeing young people working hard to reach their goals despite the struggles in their lives, makes fans work harder for their own goals, and it glorifies a hardworking and tenacious personality that doesn’t easily give up. Interlocutors expressed that when they feel down they often find strength from multiple reality shows of K-Pop idols and dramas. We can take boy group Seventeen’s recent documentary as an example which highlights all characteristics mentioned here.

Documentary named ‘Seventeen Hit the Road’ shared with fans on the group’s YouTube channel with multiple episodes, with a special for each one of 13 members of the group. Through the documentary they share the hardships each member had to face and how they end up solving them or getting better with the help of other members and the encouragement of fans. Under one of the videos, a fan with nickname ninabon says, ‘...we can see that Seventeen’s family bond is no joke. They respect and love each other so much. This documentary always make me proud and grateful to be part of this family...’ All of the comment sections often share these kinds of opinions which shows how evincing such intimate scenes are in awakening the family-like feelings of fans. In one of the episodes the group member Wonwoo, who got injured during the concert, says ‘fans are the priority of course’ while lying on a stretcher, under the concert stage with health workers all around him. The loud voices of fans cheering and other members of the group continuing to perform can be heard at the background. ‘I didn’t want to disappoint them’ he continues, since one of their group members was already sick and unable to join the

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

concert he didn't want to disappoint both his group and his fans. After this scene, the video is showing him again on the stage dancing and singing with a smiling face as if nothing happened.<sup>180</sup>

Such scenes are very common in idol reality shows, and documentaries, giving a hardworking and thoughtful image of idols. They are also very powerful in leaving an impact on fans and strengthening the connection between them. Such products of pictures, videos etc. do not remain as how they shared by idols but after they got into fan spaces in various social media platforms they started to be reproduced and recreated again and again. Fans as prosumers, start getting actively involved in the storytelling process of the group and make multiple editings, translations, comments and discussions about the given idol product, from such documentaries to a simple instagram update. "Free labour in digital economy"<sup>181</sup> shows itself often in fan spaces with the active participation of fans in distribution of idols' products and "the boundaries between consumption and production are blurred, the importance and value of fandom becomes increasingly high in the industry"<sup>182</sup> with this major part of the K-Pop sector.

vLive and weverse are two distinctive applications used by idols to show their daily life and have intimate communication with fans. vLive is a live broadcasting app where almost all K-Pop groups have their own channel. Idols open live broadcasts in which fans are able to comment and send hearts during the broadcast. It is written 'From anywhere in this world, you can find out what your star is doing right now' as a description of the app on google play states. The application has a free and paid versions, and fans can increase the communication with idols in the paid version, by extra broadcasts, having multiple stickers to express themselves better and to have more chance of being recognized by their idol. Broadcasts are often from the private spaces of idols like bedrooms or dormitories in casual clothes and without stage

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<sup>180</sup> From the documentary of the boy group Seventeen, Hit the Road 2nd episode: 'Speed isn't all that matters'. SEVENTEEN, "EP. 02 Speed Isn't All That Matters | SEVENTEEN : HIT THE ROAD", May 19, 2020. YouTube video, 11:30.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enX6em-xjo4>

<sup>181</sup> T. Terranova, "Free labour: Producing culture for the digital economy." *Social Text*, 18(2), (2000) 33-58.

<sup>182</sup> Kim, "Universality and particularity of K-Pop as a glocal culture", 87.

make up. If it is by one idol it is like speaking face to face on a video call although thousands of fans are watching at the same time. If it is by the group, they often sit around a round table or in a circular way. Sometimes they talk and joke with each other, and sometimes they speak directly to the camera while answering fan questions. Such structure makes the audience feel like they are sitting with a friend group, and as if they are casually chatting all together.

The importance of vLive is that it makes stars reachable, increases empathy and turns the experiences, memories and emotions of idols into a product to be consumed. This application enables the private spheres of idols to enter the private spheres of fans, and together they have a feeling of being in a private communication with their idol. Fans also enjoy being able to share these moments together with thousands of other people in their fandom. Discussions, jokes and memories about the broadcast usually continue in different fan spaces and contribute to fans' participatory culture. vLive application could be one of the best examples of how social media has irreversibly broken the public and private sphere understandings .

Weverse is a relatively smaller application that includes a few groups but has a huge number of users because of the popularity of the groups. It is similar to other social media platforms like instagram and twitter and enables idols to share daily small videos, photos or simple posts like telling about what they dreamed yesterday or asking movie suggestions from fans. Posts are usually in Korean but easily translate into English inside the app. Also fanpages in Turkey translate each one of posts in Turkish in the next minute usually. I downloaded the app recently and got around 50 notifications daily, from idol posts and answers given by idols to fan posts. Together, often using common social media platforms like twitter, instagram and youtube, such applications are also successfully produced and used by the sector. This kind of intense and continuous communication that aims to reach a global audience is not seen in any other entertainment sector, and it is one of the main sources that makes K-Pop fans so attached to their idols. Such broadcasts, behind the scene videos, and reality shows are showing highlighted moral characteristics of individual idols, and also close emotional bonds between group members, which enable fans to gather deep information about small habits or their reactions in different situations through years.

By a short observation in a random K-Pop fanpage it is very easy to observe that most of the idol group members share a photo or small message on social media accounts, or in other multiple applications mentioned before, at least once a day. Those updates are translated daily, usually after minutes, by each country's multiple fan pages and accounts to deliver it immediately to other fans. Then fans start to produce jokes, comments or further guesses about what the idol is doing or hinting them. Mostly, under such updates fans have conversations between themselves including inside jokes of the fandom and mentioning their past memories between fandom and idol, and between fans inside Turkey's fan community. They describe their feelings towards the idol and the group with either very open or sarcastic language, and behave as if the idol is their close friend or family member. It is also very common for fans to refer to idols as 'my sons/daughters' or with other references that remind one of familial relations is.

Tweets and translations about extremely ordinary things about idols — like what do they do in their leisure time or what kind of coffee they like to drink — are the most common kind of thing shared by fanpages. As I described in the previous section, to endure producers of the sector understand that they have to get inside the private spaces of fans. To be able to do that they often highlight the family like behaviors of idols within the group and down-to-earth characteristics of the group to prove that 'they are also people like you'.

NCT TURKEY @NCTTURKEY, 9 January 2020

200108 Gaon Chart Müzik Ödüllerinden;

Stray Kids Felix Jisung'ın elini sıkamak için elini uzattığında Jisung her zamanki makas işaretini yapmış. @TurkeySk<sup>183</sup>

The excerpt above is from one of the biggest Turkish pages of the popular boy group NCT. They shared it with a three second video of the moment taken by a fan and tagged the other group's (Stray Kids) fan page. Without the existence of the idols inside, the communication goes on in both fan communities about the memories of two idols' interactions. What fan pages are sharing are mostly things like this, very

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<sup>183</sup> Translation; From Gaon Chart Music Awards; when Stray Kids(group) Felix stretched out his hand to shake Jisung's hand, Jisung made scissors mark as he always does.

random moments and daily life activities, which looks extremely unimportant for an outsider but are important for the fan community to strengthen their knowledge and thus closeness to their idol as well as the ‘realness’ of the idols. They are also contain a very intimate and private kind of knowledge. The more random the knowledge is, the more private it becomes ‘in the eyes of fans because it causes both to make idols seen as ordinary, thus more real, human beings also it makes fans to feel like as if they are physically and emotionally close to them enough to learn small and very detailed information. In most of the interviews this feeling of ‘being next to them’ came up. As Marshall puts it;

Fans build up relationship with their star through the stories they collect and the desire they nurse to know about and engage in his personal life as well as his cinematic avatar. They are intrigued by the on and off screen life of a star which they trace, pursue and follow through magazines, television and circulating stories.<sup>184</sup>

Just like the cinematic avatar Indian movie stars use according to Marshall, K-Pop idols are also using a kind of an avatar on and off the stage.

The main importance of all this is that they are creating a deep trust from fans to idols, and this turns idols into people that fans feel they have known for years. Many interlocutors said even though sector and companies are problematic and there are multiple idols who are only acting nicely, they do trust that idols they are fan of are sincere in their words and behaviors. Because fans are able to communicate with idols almost every day, most of them said it is not possible to act all the time, and it would be understood if they were not sincere. Thus sincerity becomes the main characteristic appreciated by fans and the main source why fans take idols as role models.

While talking about her favorite group Nuest, a 17 year old interlocutor Züleyha was describing their family like relationship. She said she feels lucky to be included in their ‘family’ and added, ‘I never had such supportive and fun friend group in my life

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<sup>184</sup> David P. Marshall. Cinematic Apparatus and the Film Celebrity. In *The Film Cultures Reader*. (London and New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 234-235.

(about NUEST). While watching them I often dream maybe I can also be a friend like them.’ As individuals, many fans want to be like their idols mainly because of their moral behaviors, ‘when I see such thing I want to be like him/her’ was openly said multiple times in different interviews referring to respectful, openly emotional or hardworking behaviors of multiple idols. And as friend groups, mainly in the same fandom, they want to have a family like close friendships as idol groups often show.

### **3.4 Collectivity in Fan Spaces and the Agency coming from Fandom**

Youtube, Weverse and vLive are mostly used to communicate with idols but as my interlocutors said, the real fan conversation goes on in twitter because it is more open to the public, and easier to get in touch with different people. So inside the fan space of social media, we can talk about two main subspaces; spaces where fans interact with idols and spaces where fans interact with other fans. The first one depends on more emotional devotedness and knowing the other while the latter is used more to create publicly-private spaces where fans freely communicate with each other in a limited public space. The limitedness of these fan-fan interaction spaces comes from the culture they create there, and they don’t like to include non K-Pop fans to prevent judgements from their likes or dislikes. Still, what they talk and share in their fan accounts of twitter is not only linked to K-Pop or idols but they share a variety of subjects from politics to women rights, to daily life struggles and food recipes. Some interlocutors said I use fan account only for myself just to collect photos and videos in one account instead of downloading them. The majority said it is a place for me to talk freely and it’s fun to be in interaction with other fans.

The ‘us’ language is as often used as ‘I found myself here’ discourse. The perception of considering the idol group and also people in the same fandom as ‘family’ is very common among fans. Many interlocutors said if they need help in their private life, they would trust their friends from the same fandom. Many expressed that their closest friends and the most trusted people around them are K-Pop fans and often from the same fandom. Together with this, another thing I have seen in the social media fan spaces is the strong collective behavior. This seems much more common in younger fans since they are more engaged with social media culture and using

smart phones. One of the interlocutors, Şüheda (22), was very upset when she came to the interview. She told me she is an Exo fan and has a large fanpage for the group. She had a fight with some BTS fans, and they had a 'spam group' which they used to delete her page. According to Şüheda it is very common for fans to have 'spam' or 'stream' groups. In spam groups they take action against people who are somehow do something wrong toward their favorite idol, and for stream groups these are mostly used to increase the views of their favorite idols' music videos, which are considered important for award shows, while encouraging each other to continue. Thus fans are collectively establishing spaces. Some spaces on social media are public some are slightly more private, and they are able to use them for their collective actions. According to interviews, each fandom has a different feeling in their own private space on social media, and this is important for them in their decision to get in a fandom. Some fandoms are more childish, some are more fun, some have a good sense of humor etc. This can be interesting because people do not know each other in real life, and communicate mostly through social media sharing similar characteristics within the same fandom according to interlocutors. This shows that people are really creating spaces, which have to be private, to come together with each other and these spaces are highly effective on at least fans' behavior or shown characteristics on social media.

The impact of created identities on social media continues in other fan spaces such as K-Pop events too. In the K-Pop dance event I joined one 18 years old fan told me I must be a 'shawol' while we were talking about how he got interested in K-Pop (later I learned that it is the fandom name of boy group Shinee). He explained he thought this because, I 'speak in a kind way and everyone knows that shawols has a kind way of speaking'. In other interviews after him, I asked interlocutors if this statement is true, all except one said they haven't heard it before. But they too had their own categorizations and statements similar to his, about different fandoms. This again, shows the identification with idols and also with fandom as well as the amount of internalization of the K-Pop sector.

If we consider idols and their shared private spaces as a product of consumption, consuming them is uncovering feelings similar to the ones Bauman refers to, with the

example of a shopping mall as a consumption temple: “a soothing sense of belonging, the peaceful mind of being part of a community.”<sup>185</sup> As Bauman argues that consuming together with everyone in a shopping mall gives one a sense of belonging, being on social media and sharing their likes and feelings about certain products, idol characteristics and privacy in this case, is giving a high sense of community and the idea of ‘there are others who share my emotions’ to fans. Because “in a world everything in a constant move where nothing is certain, man or women every individual searches for a group to belong.”<sup>186</sup> There are two points in this issue first one is being present in digital space.

According to Jensen<sup>187</sup> what is important in a fandom is the realization that you as a fan are not alone with your enthusiasm and love for the fandom. Interactions of fans mostly take place in an offline fandom space at least at the beginning, yet they still show how important presence is when fandom is concerned. Presence means to be seen and to see; to acknowledge the existence of the other fans and their contributions to fandom; and to be able to interact and socialize with and into fan groups. “Presence ’in this sense actually meant present at the same time in a virtual space, negotiated beforehand between interested members of the group.”<sup>188</sup> This sense of community seems it is mostly coming from acceptance or a greater chance of being accepted in the space of social media in comparison to real life.

The second thing has to be mentioned about the community feeling on digital space, and fan spaces in particular, is the agency fans provide to each other. According to Ong the sense of belonging is through the ability to communicate.<sup>189</sup> Today communication can be every day in every moment even with the people who are living across the world and in K-Pop sector aims to maximize the communication as it was mentioned. The high level communication with idols through social media enables fans to find ways for constant communication with each other too. Most of the fans told me how this ‘hobby ’helped them to get to know so many people from

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<sup>185</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 153.

<sup>186</sup> Eric Hobshawm “The cult of identity politics”, *New Left Review*, 217 (1998), 40.

<sup>187</sup> Thessa Jensen, “On the Importance of Presence within Fandom Spaces.” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5 (2). (2017), 141–55.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>189</sup> Walter Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), 117.

so many different backgrounds and how it became very beneficial in their life. Ebru (36) who is a housewife was telling me;

This (Korea in general), is my life. It is sad but true.. Sad because I am giving so much time to it but at the same time I get to know so many people. I would not have such friendships if I was not in this. Just think about it what would I do? Now some of my friends are doctors, some are teachers.. Of course I will think about this too..<sup>190</sup>

She also expressed how being a fan of K-Dramas and K-Pop on social media helped her to establish a network. She married at a young age and didn't have any close friendships before she met K-Dramas. She said 'the more I got involved in (with K-Pop and other sides of the Hallyu) the more I met with different and interesting people. This alone is another joy enough to stay (to stick with the sector).' She was part of a big website about K-Dramas and is respected in the fan community in different events and meetings because of her contribution to the community. We see that especially for people who do not have the chance to socialize because of different reasons, K-Pop and Korean pop culture in general can be a door to gain agency through the communication from social media. The fans that I interviewed who are older than 30 were all telling me that it started with dramas and with house wives who do not have many things to do, as they describe. So for people who are not able to socialize this is a way to get in social media and have different kinds of capital in there. For example, a fan can be a page owner, a site admin or translator for videos, or just being a fan of the same group for many years are all ways to give one capital in the fan community. Fans who spends their free labor to produce or distribute the content from idols are rewarded by the rest of the community with support messages and respect. In this case too, it shouldn't be generalize to all K-Pop community but we can say that the community's activeness on social media and the existence of fan spaces can be a chance for some fans to freely express themselves, to be respected by multiple people they don't know personally and to become a subject with agency.

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<sup>190</sup> Translated from Turkish; "Bu benim hayatım. Üzücü ama öyle.. Üzücü çünkü yani bir sürü zamanımı buna veriyorum ama aynı zamanda bir sürü de yeni insan tanıyorum bu vesileyle. Bunun içinde olmasam şimdi böyle arkadaşlıklarım da olmayacaktı. Yani düşün bi ne yapabiliirdim?...Şimdi doktor olan arkadaşlarım var öğretmen olanlar var.. Tabii ki bunu da düşünürüm."

In the ethnographic work of Lowe, she coins the term ‘dysfandom’ which means <sup>191</sup> excluding the fans who are misbehaving, forcibly curtailing, telling to be silent or ignoring them as the community. I want to use her concept while adding the meaning of marginalizing of some fans in fandom because of their disapproved behaviors. This situation can occur both because of fans’ violent behaviors like sharing personal information of idols, being labelled as *sasaeng*<sup>192</sup>, saying bad or untrue things about their idol<sup>193</sup>, also because much more simple or ‘local’ issues like having a fight with another fan who is respected by the community or doing something seen as hurtful for the community (by community here I mean the local, not global -means not in English- fan page or small groups of fans including WhatsApp groups and private groups on social media). They also referred it as ‘lynching’, *linç yemek/linçlemek*, to the similar fans whom draw anger of the fandom to themselves. They usually are ‘forced’ to delete their accounts by spamming or leaving too many negative comments and messages and open a new account to start all over.

This behavior of collectively deciding who is considered as ‘one of us’ becomes very important while discussing changing gender norms; because, apart from the K-Pop sector and idol behaviors, this collective behavior itself is deciding what kind of gender representations ‘we as K-Pop fans’ are accepting and what kind ‘we’ are against. Feelings of ‘belonging’ are very important and distinctive for the fans of this sector as it was mentioned before. To exist in fictional spaces fans need continuous recognition and appreciation from each other since their existence is not connected to physicality but emotional bonds and reactions of others. We can observe, especially by looking at younger fans’ behavior on social media, they easily change their norms and values to gain other fans support and approval; and towards non-fans and outsiders of K-Pop fan spaces, they became very defensive for their community and its accepted norms.

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<sup>191</sup> J.S.A Lowe, “We’ll Always Have Purgatory: Fan Spaces in Social Media.” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5 (2), (2017), 175–92.

<sup>192</sup> Special to K-Pop, an obsessive fan who stalks, or engages in other behavior constituting an invasion of the privacy of a Korean idol or other public figure. They stalk their idols to everywhere and even though they seem marginal in the fandom, many knowledgeable about idols -true or not- coming from *sasaeng* fans.

<sup>193</sup> I use as ‘their’ because fans are using this kind of discourse ‘benim idolüm, onun idolü’ etc.

From the interviews I can see there is a will to take these communal relationships started in social media to the physical world. This means getting know people face to face or gathering together as groups outside social media. Interlocutors explained it as 'it has different layers to come close with people on social media 'and the last stage was always to meet with them or invite them to their houses. By looking at this, I cannot say relationships on social media are taking the place of face to face interactions. The opposite seems to be true in some cases;it is increasing the sociality of people who don't have enough friends to interact daily. On the other hand, it seems as if it makes people who are physically close to each more distant, while making people who are physically distant from each other come closer. People are looking for others with similar taste and hobbies to be able to contact easily. Social media enables them to find other people who are similar to their interest, which makes them make less effort to communicate with people physically around them. From some perspectives this might cause damage on family relationships by lessening the dependence on one's family in terms of communication. Most of the interlocutors were openly saying it is like having a family to be in a fandom as it mentioned before. By family they mean being accepted, feeling free to express their thoughts and emotions without worrying about the criticisms they might get. Which means this kind of relationships can be, if we look at the negative side, an encouragement to a person to live without caring about shared social norms or values since it is very easy to find people who share your own specific norms and values. Rather they could start giving more importance to the norms and values spread in fan spaces to be accepted in there. In this case, it seems like it will get harder to have shared social norms since in the land of social media 'social 'is too broad and is all over the place. One of the interlocutors told me that her fan account is the space where she shows her real character the most. Even though she is not happy with overall fan culture on social media, and despite the fights and bad comments or other negative things on social media she can't stop herself from going back there. Because it is the only place she feels accepted, even though some people are rejecting her opinions she feels proud because she is able to show her own opinions at least, which she is not able to show in the real world. Even being excluded, or dysfandomed on social media, shows that there are people who care about the opinions written and they care enough to disagree with them.

### 3.5 Non-Physicality of the Digital Space

For talking about such internalized and emotional spaces, we have to remember the embodied space of Setha Low, “..embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness takes on material and spatial form...It is a model for understanding the creation of place through spatial orientation, movement and language”.<sup>194</sup> She also talks about the importance of the body, as a carrier of the space.

The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship to a person’s emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions. In Western culture we perceive the self as ‘naturally’ placed in the body, as a kind of pre-cultural given.<sup>195</sup>

What gets my attention about this is how do we carry our spaces to cyber space without a physical body. Social media is like a different world where you don’t need a physical body for speaking and acting or at least you don’t need to show the physical part of the body. This invisibility changes the behavior and attitude. People are there but they are not there completely by thinking they can disappear anytime they want. It is possible also and is a very simple thing to detach from all your connections and relationships on social media. Mostly because of not having to carry the physical body as the presence. The presence here, on social media, is up to you to decide. This causes a fake sense of limitlessness, as if you can become anyone or even anything that you are not able to be with the limits of the physical world. Some interlocutors claimed that there are fans who act as if they are male on their fan accounts because fanboys are few in the community, and it is easier to catch the interest of others and get recognition by saying or hinting that you are a fanboy. Also one interlocutor mentioned many male fans try not to show their gender on social media and behave as if they are female. Some enjoy being in a female dominated space without being seen. Some are hesitating because there is more social pressure on male K-Pop fans, especially after the current anti K-Pop discourses.

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<sup>194</sup> Setha Low, “Spatializing Culture: An Engaged Anthropological Approach to Space and Place.” *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, (2014), 9.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

This clearly shows that gender, as well as all other parts of the identity, become fluid, easily changeable, in the space of social media. Identifying self without a physically existing body is changing many understandings about identity. The body serves as the tool showing us, and, with the help of the social norms, teaching us the capacities and roles that we have in social life. The more this detachment of the self from the physical body occurs, the more confused and the more dissatisfied with one's self one may become because of not having a base to build an identity on. So, the more body becomes fluid, the more identity is also becoming fluid. Gender is something that is both represented by the physical body and the identity. Thus, it must be the first thing which is affected by this detachment.

In his book *Simulation and Simulacra* Baudrillard discusses the reality and symbols in society. According to him, in this era we are able to produce reality with technology but this produced reality cannot be the same as the natural one. Thus what we are actually producing is something not having any connection with the 'real' which he calls the 'simulation'.<sup>196</sup> Simulation is the production of the real through models and signs; he also calls this as hyperreality. He sees media as the genetic code which connects reality with hyperreality.<sup>197</sup> He claims that human experience is a simulation of reality and that people are taking the reality of television and other digital sources as more real than their actual lives. By connecting more and more deeply with these realities that are simulating reality itself, one can cause 'the death of the real'. The massed collection of these simulations has resulted in the condition of hyperreality, where we only experience prepared realities such as edited war footage or reality TV shows and the distinction between the 'real' and simulations has collapsed.<sup>198</sup> I believe K-Pop is also one of the simulations that is prepared and accepted as reality for fans and also by fans. The bombarding of knowledge about idols with social media as it mentioned before, gives a fake sense of long time relationship with someone and simulates the emotions of loyalty and fidelity with the sense of family.

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<sup>196</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 14.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*.

The producer of the popular group BTS, Bang Shi-hyuk talks about ‘building universes to connect fans and artist beyond live shows and albums’ in one of his interviews;

With BTS and K-pop idols, fans want to be a part of the lifestyle of their beloved idols outside of concerts, but there’s no product on the market that fulfills that desire...Many people believe because K-pop idols hold the title of “singer” that it’s the same thing, but fans of typical singers [are different]. They might go to a concert, buy an album or a track, or buy a t-shirt. But K-pop idol fans want to feel close with their idols.<sup>199</sup>

With the success of BTS other artists too started to ‘build their universes’ that contain much more than music and show a complete lifestyle. This shouldn’t be misunderstood as fans are copying the lifestyles of idols but this enabling fans to get in a simulation of a given lifestyle. With the use of digital media, many interlocutors expressed that it is like they have two different lives. One as who they are and one as their fangirl identity.

In his book, Debord deals with the changing relation between direct experiences of life and the changed representations in the common era. According to him everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. For Debord there is no separation between physical real life and the represented one which he calls the spectacle. The world had not yet encountered with life with social media when he wrote this book. His description is similar to Baudrillard’s example of Disneyland. Baudrillard was focusing on Disneyland because as a physical space the isolation and ‘going into a different world ’is very visible and obvious in Disneyland. People wear costumes of characters, and make cartoon characters or fictional movie images ‘real ’ physical human beings. If Debord or Baudrillard saw the situation with Disney and social media fandom right now even they might be surprised with the accuracy of their theories and how it became much more deeper with everyday life usage of the social media. Today you do not have to go into Disneyland, but you can still feel the ‘realness ’of fictional characters through the internet. The lines between the fictional

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<sup>199</sup> See full interview; <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/>

world and physical world became thinner with smart phones which are tools for us not only to communicate but to enable us to leave the physical space we are in and experience another space immediately. This happens so quickly and so many times in a day that those fictional spaces become almost physical for people who continuously go into them. For some fictional spaces could be even felt more real because of the various emotions they include.

The fan culture in social media space changed the representations and turned the spectacle into a more common thing in everyday life. People have friendships and relationships online with people whom they have never seen but with whom they share a common interest, like K-Pop, and also with the help of the anonymity feel easier to talk about their feelings and deep thoughts that they might feel insecure to share with people they are physically together with. Because you can always log out if the relationship turns into something you don't want or just change your account to another one. I see this as one of the most dangerous situation for fan spaces on social media. This situation of being able to attach and feel close to other people very quickly and also being able to break apart and disappear or change your account whenever you want is a danger both for one's emotional stability and identity as well as relationship dynamics in the physical world.

If we call K-Pop a simulation than it has its own moral values and behavior codes that are accepted by fans and they are not completely Korean nor from other cultures but they emerged as a mixture of all. Social media has its own moral codes and values. They are mostly about, from my limited observations, plagiarism or violence through comments. But if they exist that means there can also be new hidden values coming and these are values that we don't talk about or notice easily but accept automatically or unconsciously. What makes this important is that this simulation is, unlike some others it is very determining about norms since it is mostly depending on emotional bonds between people. It makes it more effective in norm making I believe.

K-Pop and K-Pop fandom is not only coming into family life and especially friend groups but it , like Baudrillard argues, simulates relationships and dynamics of everyday life so well that after some point it completely turns into an example of how ‘real’ relationships should be for the fans. So even though this moral and ethical characteristics of the sector is making it more attractive for most of the fans it actually has the capability of being much more dangerous than the openly immoral pop sectors. The feelings and relationships are not fake versions of real relationships since there are actual people and real characters in this but without the effect and affect of the face to face communication, I believe, with the huge influence of social media made relationships they become simulacras of the past ones.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

I tried to describe the importance of the space for fans and also the morality based characteristics of the idol sector and why they are the main reason to become attached to the sector and to individuals for fans. Apart from their musician identity, K-Pop idols show various parts of their identity while highlighting moral and positive characteristics which makes them more trustable and relatable in the eyes of fans. This provides a powerful emotional connection between fans and idols. Emotional connection also reflects on fan to fan relationships too, and social media platforms play the carrier role in this. They connect different people, as well as different ideologies, norms and values. Being accepted and recognized is important for fans to continue existing on digital space, thus I argue that gender norms as well as other values can be flexed to be able to continue being part of the fan community. The fan space which appears especially on social media with the gathering of fans is not something which can easily understood by an outsider. It has its own dynamics and shared feelings in the space which makes it more powerful to create and accept multiple norms. To be able to discuss the impact of the K-Pop there should be an understanding of the fan space and the community inside.

Another important point made in this chapter was the compulsory detachment of mind and body. Digital space is able to multiply one’s identity by creating a fake one online without the limitation of the body. This can cause a sense of limitlessness

which would end up making one's identity non-permanent and open to become more fluid than it is able to be with the physical body. This has an impact on gender norms and fans also start to question the characteristics of masculinity and femininity.

Considering anti K-Pop discourses, K-Pop itself should not be seen as a source to spread immoral behaviors but rather the increasing interest towards K-Pop should be perceived as a call for help from people who want to feel sincere emotions and want to see role models with a sense of morality. Fieldwork and the words of interlocutors were proving the main reason why fans feel connected with the K-Pop sector and this is mainly due to their trustable and sincere image. This image is so highlighted that while anti K-Pop discourses are focusing on the physical appearance of idols, what fans see and connect with is mainly appreciated characteristics shown by idols together with professionally prepared stage shows and the sincerity they sense from idols. In the next section of this study, I will discuss the gendered emotions shown by idols and how are they struggle with existing gender understandings and changing fans' perception of the ideal masculinity and femininity.

## CHAPTER IV

### GENDER AND ‘K-POP MASCULINITIES’

Through this study I tried to show how K-Pop and Hallyu sector works, and how it was possible for them to gain huge amounts of loyal global audience with various strategies and tactics. Previous chapters showed the impact of fan spaces and the new field of digital space as a space that naturally separates mind and bodily existence. Since my main reason to choose this topic is to contribute gender discussions and changing masculinity ideals with popular culture, in this chapter the issue of gender and its relation with the K-Pop sector will be discussed with the focus on the audience in Turkey.

As it mentioned at the beginning of the study, K-Pop is discussed together with gender and gender norms in the context of Turkey. This discussion is caused mainly by anti K-Pop discourses in the last few years, which highlighted the appearance of —especially male — idols that claim that they give a genderless image together with their appearance and behaviors. The whole anti K-Pop discourse in the country is mainly based on the argument of ‘they look like girls’. This gives us a good chance to discuss and observe what is gender and how masculinity representations are understood and interpreted.<sup>200</sup> In this chapter I will argue that gender representations are highly affected by emotions and emotional bonds. Although some interlocutors believed that K-Pop can be used to direct young people to homosexuality (which was mainly claimed by anti K-Pop discourse), I will argue that the main reason behind this is the emotional variety idols show, which expands the limitations of masculinity set by society. The behaviors of idols that are interpreted as ‘feminine’ are often seen as comforting and as moral characteristics by female fans. Considering the interviews, these behaviors appreciated and defined as ‘trustable’ mainly because of

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<sup>200</sup> Although my aim was to discuss both masculinity and femininity understandings, both anti K-Pop discourses and fan discourses in interviews were focusing more on masculinity representations and masculinity ideals. Thus naturally this study included more discussions on masculinity.

their contrast with not masculinity but especially ‘toxic masculinity’. This shows us the mistake in social gender constructions which often gives masculinity negative characteristics with a relatively bad attitude while portraying femininity with positive characteristics with much softer and approachable attitudes.

To be able to discuss this I will first give reasons why I believe gender can easily impact popular culture discourses. Then I will describe the distinct gender representations generally seen in K-Pop performances, backstage and in reality shows and also in Korean dramas, which often intertwines with K-Pop and idols. Afterwards, I will discuss the problem of gendered emotions, which is a topic that was often problematized in gender discussions. I will claim that the main problem is defining masculinity and femininity in a very limited, insensitive, and inconsiderate way which ends up with causing the loss of the feeling of one's identification themselves with a gender. Also, I will add the impact of digitalization and the sense of limitlessness in virtual spaces which is highly effective in K-Pop fan spaces. Lastly I will mention about *fanarts* and *fanfics* which often referred to by interlocutors as ‘the real dark side of the K-Pop’.

#### **4.1 Construction and Normalization of Gender Norms with Popular Culture**

Through interviews and in digital ethnography observations, many fans defended that K-Pop is just a popular culture and can't have an actual impact on gender norms. I do not agree with that. Popular culture also popularizes incorporated world-views and ways of thinking.<sup>201</sup> One of these world-views contain gender roles, representations and norms. In many different ways popular culture can recreate traditional gender norms with specific characters in television series, with particular images in music videos or some storylines and discourses used in songs or movies. While it is able to recreate patriarchal norms it is also able to change them according to benefits. The study of Chris Wienke is a good example to see the direct usage of popular culture to shape gender norms of society.

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<sup>201</sup> Buket Yıldız, “K-Wave Experience in Turkey - Handling Subjugation in a Patriarchal Society.” Mair Thesis, Leiden University. (2017), 5.

Wienke builds an interesting relationship between historical events and changes in masculinity.<sup>202</sup> He claims that the reason for a “threateningly physical understanding of masculinity” in Hollywood movies in a specific era was because of the American defeat in the Vietnam War and newly gained rights for women. They wanted to ‘remasculinize the America ’to prevent the feelings of social weakness. Thus many actors represented high masculinity with distinctively muscular bodies and a tough, and aggressive male model who is very powerful and beats everyone, like Sylvester Stallone. This example shows us that popular culture is actually a way for the state to shape citizens ’gender norms accordingly. Not only the state but multiple capitalist elites can also propagate and support different gender norms. If it was effective in the past when there was no social media and popular culture was not as popular as it is now, it will be much more effective today.

Together with this it should be remembered that gender itself should be understood as something built and constructed with accepted social norms. Joan Scott argues that it is not important even if we say that gender is socially constructed but we need to show and explain how it is constructed or reproduced.<sup>203</sup> Although there are multiple ways to construct gender, considering the amount we are connected with social media and pop culture names almost to the point of addiction, it is not irrational to believe popular culture is on the front lines for the construction of gender and identity. As it touched upon in the previous chapter, social media and digital technologies today are intertwining with everyday life much more than before. Popular culture icons are more accessible than ever; thus the ideologies and norms they are representing also became inseparable from everyday life. K-Pop distinguishes itself from others by being extra successful in infiltrating everyday life.

Discussions of K-Pop and gender focuses more on masculinity representations in the context of Turkey. Before getting into the discussion of why masculinity representations of idols are seen as a threat by anti K-Pop discourses and why fans find this masculinity comforting, we should mention about masculinity and hegemonic masculinity discussions in the gender field. Taking Connell’s

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<sup>202</sup> Chris Wienke, “Negotiating the Male Body: Men, Masculinity, and Cultural Ideals.” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 6, no. 3 (June 1998): 255–82.

<sup>203</sup> Joan W. Scott. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

descriptions, I agree that masculinity is also culturally and geographically constructed through history. He suggests the concept of “doing masculinities” in order to explain culturally constructed masculinity, arguing that;

different cultures, and different periods of history construct masculinity differently ... masculinities do not exist prior to social behavior, either as bodily states or fixed personalities. Rather, masculinities come into existence as people act. They are accomplished in everyday conduct or organizational life, as patterns of social practice.<sup>204</sup>

Thus, “masculinity is something produced and maintained” and it is possible mainly with “culturally specific and repetitive everyday practices”,<sup>205</sup> which are highly impacted and intertwined with popular culture today. He adds that these everyday practices, “such as those of acting, dressing, or speaking are performed in particular gender-specific ways”.<sup>206</sup> Therefore by taking his explanations we can say first masculinity is fluid, and second it is continuously constructed according to historical and political events in relation with the performativity<sup>207</sup> of man. This means there can be multiple understandings of masculinity that are intertwining and conflicting with each other. These understandings changing and evolving according to accepted social codes are part of the “subjectification process of an individual. Therefore there is no masculinity but *masculinities* and they are variable, dynamic and diverse.”<sup>208</sup> With social media and digital communities multiple masculinity understandings can cluster and be represented in virtual spaces, as well as physical spaces. Masculinity represented by different K-Pop idols is one of the examples of various masculinities in the world.

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<sup>204</sup> R. W. Connell *The Men and The Boys*. California: University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>205</sup> R. W. Connell *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, (1995), 6, 35.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>207</sup> Judith Butler, *Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics*. AIBR, (2009), 4(3), i-xiii.

<sup>208</sup> Cengiz, Kurtuluş, Uğraş Ulaş, and Önder Küçükural. “Hegemonik Erkekliğin Peşinden.” *Toplum ve Bilim 101*, 2004, 54.

## 4.2 Versatile Masculinity of K-Pop Boy Groups

I believe masculinity representations in K-Pop should be examined in two dimensions: bodily representations and behavior patterns. While the first one is related with visual image of idols, which is the first thing that gained attraction from anti K-Pop discourse; the latter is about shown characteristics and emotions of idols, which seems to be more related with fans' masculinity perceptions than visual representations. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Hallyu sector and K-Pop aims to show perfection and impeccability both in performances and visuals. Therefore both boy and girl groups are expected to have flawless skin, slim and tall body proportions and overall display an aesthetically pleasing image. Visual branding of K-Pop idols as 'flower boys', referring to their soft and delicate features is common both in Korean and western media. Male idols who gained weight or showed an inattentiveness to looks in airports or any other place even though it is not the performance stage are harshly criticized especially by Korean netizens.<sup>209</sup> Although looking beautiful is socially more attached to women bodies almost as a social expectation and obligation, the K-Pop sector often compels male bodies to look beautiful equal to women bodies. This causes the normalization of male idols doing heavy make-up, continuous skin care routines daily, coloring/styling their hair and clothing with the aim of having striking looks while playing between male and female fashion.

Although all popular culture and entertainment sectors around the world expect both men and women to pay more attention to looks that will attract the attention of the

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<sup>209</sup> The word netizen stands for the combination of words internet and citizen. Interlocutors often used the word and it is common on social media spaces. Referred to -usually by Korean- people who comment on multiple websites like Pann, Nate or Naver, for news and reports written by journalists. News which is related to idols are translated by multiple websites from Korean to English and from English to Turkish. Fans often expressed their anger towards 'Korean netizens' because of their harsh criticisms and dissatisfaction towards idols.

Most well-known English translation website for 'netizen news' defines them as; "These are the voices and opinions that drive the Korean entertainment industry and its media. Netizens play a bigger role in the decisions that are made in this industry than probably any other industry in the world and have an extreme amount of control in the decision making processes of companies and their artists. Netizens have a cause and effect relationship with the media. They cause it, the media has an effect on it: it being the industry." See website; <http://netizenbuzz.blogspot.com/p/are-these-netizen-comments.html>  
See Turkish website; <https://netizenturkey.net/hakkimizda/>

audience, on television and in live performances; we can surely say that the K-Pop sector is much more rigorous in the attempt to give aesthetically pleasing visuals. The global popularity of K-Pop today, already has an impact on fans' understanding of both gender and beauty because of daily consumption of given norms. And not only K-Pop but the American entertainment sector too is slightly shifting towards more androgynous looking man. This means the unrealistic beauty standards and social expectations on women are now becoming valid for men too. On the one side, this can be interpreted as equality in expectations. Some interlocutors perceived this as a very positive thing while criticizing men in Turkey;

They (*man*) expect women to look beautiful and impeccable all the time! To wear good clothes to have clean skin, shining hair...I don't know there are so many things a women should follow to look beautiful but man can just wear a t-shirt and go out...His hair is all mixed up and doesn't even bother to wash his face... And when they see a beautiful well-groomed man in K-Pop they curse at them get angry of course.. Because they (*idols*) rise our standards to the sky you see. I completely support man being extra careful about his looks and make more effort to look beautiful. It was good when you (*man*) have nonsense expectations for beauty standards from women now try it yourself<sup>210</sup>

(Duygu, 25)

She said 'they curse at them and get angry' because we were talking about anti K-Pop discourse and she was referring to how a significant amount of men in Turkey verbally attack to K-Pop fans on social media, especially on Twitter, by cursing, or sometimes even with death threats. During the interview she highlighted how most men in Turkey she encountered get angry or ridicule male K-Pop idols and anyone who finds such masculinity attractive. We see changing masculine ideals and a rise in the expectation of beauty in men can be perceived as an empowerment of women as well as a threat towards hegemonic masculinity, which I will discuss in the next

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<sup>210</sup> Kadınlardan sürekli çok güzel çok kusursuz bir görüntü bekliyorlar! Kıyafetlerin güzel olsun, cildin düzgün olsun, saçlar parlansın...Ne bileyim bir kadının güzel gözükme için dikkat etmesi gereken onca şey var ama adam tişörtünü giyip çıkıyor...Saçlar karman çorman, yüzünü yıkamaya bile zahmet etmemiş... Sonra K-Pop'daki bakımlı güzel adamları görünce tabi sinirleniyorlar böyle küfürler ediliyor.. Çünkü onlar standartları arşa çıkardı görüyorsun sen de yani... Kesinlikle erkeklerin böyle giyimine kuşamına görüntüye ekstra dikkat etmeleri olayını destekliyorum ben. Yani siz kadınların saçma sapan güzellik standartlarına uymalarını beklerken iyiydi şimdi kendiniz görün bi de"

part of this chapter. But what is more striking in this issue I think, is the impact of consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism “suggests manipulation of consumer demand so potent that it has a coercive effect, amounts to a departure from free-market capitalism, and has an adverse effect on society in general.”<sup>211</sup> Looking at the global trend of gender representations, while women are forced to have more masculine characteristics in order to be economically successful in male dominated work space;<sup>212</sup> men seem to be prompted towards the consumption of cosmetic products and to fit into newly rising beauty standards as it happened to women before. Cesare Silla defines consumer capitalism in his book about the roots of the theory, as it follows;

The increasing importance of goods and consumer practices for structuring experiences, defining and molding identities, social values and social relations ... appropriation through which social actors bestow meanings on commodities consumed that are very often different from the meaning assigned by the economic system.<sup>213</sup>

Considering this definition, I believe rising standards of male fashion and male beauty cannot be reduced to a ‘K-Pop style’ or East Asian understanding of the masculinity but it seems more likely to be an encouragement and leading men to consume more and to face with similar problems of capitalism which women have been facing for a long time in order to be accepted in the society. We can’t claim that this new masculinity standards are global and accepted by the majority yet but the popularity of androgynous male bodies on media and normalization of the male idol image who is obligated to have unrealistically impeccable looks are signals and doors for this new consumption field. Thus, by looking at interviews and social media observations, although I agree with anti K-Pop discourse that K-Pop idols partially normalize ‘feminization of man’ in terms of what is mentioned here; nevertheless I think in this case the main reason, and main thing we should be

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<sup>211</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “consumer capitalism,” (accessed August 8, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumer\\_capitalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumer_capitalism)

<sup>212</sup> Kurtuluş, Ulaş, and Küçükural. “Hegemonik Erkekliğin Peşinden.” 52.

<sup>213</sup> Cesare Silla, *The rise of consumer capitalism in America, 1880-1930*. (New York Routledge: 2018), 5-6.

worried about should be this orientation of man to new consumption styles which will put us socially deeper in capitalism instead of making assumptions about idols' sexuality or belittling feminine characteristics as the main discourse of anti K-Pop in Turkey has been doing so far.

Paying more attention to male visuals could also be related with the rising purchasing power of women. Modiri argues that cinema is produced as a spectacle for male gaze and is organized around male desire. She continues as claiming that mainstream popular media are patriarchal.<sup>214</sup> What is different in Korean popular culture is it looks like it is mainly arranged for women's gaze. While in many American and European TV shows there is a large number of women trying to get the attention and love of a man, in Korean drama and reality shows we see almost the opposite kind of relation in which multiple men are fighting over a women's attention and love. Also idol visuals, song concepts and behaviors looks more towards to pleasing the female gaze. In many shows and videos multiple idols expressed they aim to gain female fans' hearts and it is obvious that there are many more female fans than male fans of both K-Drama and K-Pop. Idols often appreciate but are surprised to see that they have male fans. This change in popular media from appealing to the male gaze to appealing to the female gaze is most probably about the rise in both women's and youth's purchasing power and their gained agency as consumers.

In interviews not doing makeup and wearing masculine clothes is referred to as 'normal man' most often. Idols who use a lot of makeup and wear feminine clothes claimed to be this way because of show business and it highlighted that they don't put on makeup or wear such clothes in daily life with reference to idol reality shows and times when they met with idols in Turkey or their visits in Korea. One interlocutor defined it as 'I also don't like makeup but do it when I go to weddings, their makeup is like that too' referring it is not coming from idols' femininity but it is because of the expectations and nature of their work. Most of the interlocutors expressed they appreciate the skin care efforts of male idols but they don't like to see 'too feminine' looking makeup on them.

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<sup>214</sup> J. Modiri. Popular culture, law and our "sexed and gendered lives": feminist reflections on "refusal" and "sisterhood". (Stellenbosch Law Review= Stellenbosch Regstydskrif: 2012), 23(1), 121.

Some of them really look too feminine I mean the way they smile the way they walk... makeup makes it look feminine usually. Their faces are very masculine actually, have you seen no makeup pictures? I mean put bb cream, be well-groomed (*meaning skin care*) but sometimes they put red lipstick or mascara for example and it is like uncomfortable, because it looks wrong.<sup>215</sup>

(Elif, 30)

Like Elif, most of the interlocutors said it becomes uncomfortable when they do ‘too feminine’ makeup (like evidently putting lipstick, painting their nails) or wearing feminine clothes (like crop tops, transparent shirts or clothes with lace). But when we look at multiple tweets online in Turkish, we see another discourse referring the similar type of makeup as ‘male idols looking stunning’ or saying ‘normalize male idols wearing female clothes’ which is completely opposite of what interlocutors mostly mentioned. Here we should again remember that there is not one single type of K-Pop fan or a single ideology shared by all of the fans. Fan opinions vary according to their own backgrounds and ideologies separately from K-Pop. But considering there were many different backgrounded interlocutors who referred to similar kinds of masculinity as ‘normal’, I believe common discourses may change in online and face-to-face communications.

We may say that on online fan spaces it is very common to see female users wish and request male idols to wear more feminine clothes or appreciate heavier makeup on male idols. Fans who are against or objecting to such ideas, who are as common as the first group, are having continuous discussions going on online. A user nicknamed AZA shares a screenshot of other two users discussion on twitter and writes, ‘This is starting to get very uncomfortable, your psychology is not okay’.<sup>216</sup> The screenshots she is referring belongs to a user who shared a photo of women in a white satin nightgown, asking ‘who do you think would look good in this?’ and another user answers as ‘Taehyung’ who is a member of boy group BTS. She adds

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<sup>215</sup> Translated from Turkish; “Bazısı da cidden feminen görünüyor yani bi gülüşü bi yürüyüşü...makyaj feminen gösteriyor ama çoğunu. Aslında yüzleri gayet erkeksi, sen hiç makyajsız resimlerini gördün mü? Yani bb kremi sür cildine bak tabi ama bazen maskara ya da kırmızı ruj falan sürüyorlar yani rahatsız edici bir görüntü, yanlış görünüyor çünkü.”

<sup>216</sup> AZA`シ | İSTANBUL SÖZLEŞMESİ YAŞATIR (@minhosexuall), “Çok rahatsız edici olmaya başladı, sizin psikolojiniz iyi değil” Twitter post, July 31, 2020, <https://twitter.com/minhosexuall/status/1289143315900829698> .

most of the comments below the question are suggesting other male idol names. While some comments below AZA's post are agreeing with her by saying this is uncomfortable/ perverted/ disrespectful towards idols; more of them are saying there is nothing to be uncomfortable about seeing a man in a nightgown because clothes don't have gender. Many also share Taehyung's and other BTS members' photos in which they wear skirts, lace, or corsets<sup>217</sup> claiming they are already wearing feminine clothes. After AZA's post many other fans shared different posts referring to the 'fantasizing of male idols in female clothes' and opened different discussions both for supporting and criticizing the situation.

This example, which is only one of many others on social media, can prove two things: First is the separation of mind and body on digital space, that was discussed in the previous chapter, has an impact on gender understandings by enabling fans to imagine and fantasize about idols without the limitations of the body. This can go to the point that idol bodies which fans in Turkey mostly see only as pictures or videos, can be dehumanized or reduced to only a body as well as reduced to a character which can be put in any 'body'. Second is not completely but partially matching with the anti K-Pop discourse; versatile masculinity representations of male idols are really causing fans to question ideal masculinity.

Sun Jung calls masculinity representations in K-Pop a "manufactured versatile masculinity"<sup>218</sup> referring to their changeable, flexible and adaptable masculinity. He discusses this fluid masculine representations with the example of boy group 2PM. 2PM is one of the older groups in the K-Pop sector and is considered as one of the successful groups from 2nd generation idols.<sup>219</sup> The group is known with the nickname of 'beast-idols' referring to their masculine image.<sup>220</sup> While having a tough and aggressive image on stage; on reality shows and back stage videos "by

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<sup>217</sup> ece♥rest (@JEONHUBBY), Twitter post, July 31, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JEONHUBBY/status/1289260073378893824> .

<sup>218</sup> Sun Jung. "K-Pop Idol Boy Bands and Manufactured Versatile Masculinity: Making Chogukjeok Boys." In *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, 163–70. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011.

<sup>219</sup> Groups who debuted in roughly close era are considered as one generation because of following similar trends of their era also because of getting similar kind of trainee and education period in entertainment companies. There is no official or clear separation of generations, and they often overlap with each other. But some fans consider groups who debuted between 90s and early 2000s as the first generation; 2003-2012 as the second generation; 2011-2018 as the third generation; and 2017 to present as the 4th generation.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

performing as immature and obnoxious boys, they practice *kawaii* (cute) masculinity” which is according to him is evidence that there is a constructed masculinity formed through different media channels.<sup>221</sup> Thus this diversity and transitivity in masculinity representations shows that there is a given constructed image of ideal men. This image is not only taking masculine characteristics but mixing it with feminine behavior and appearances and reveals a mixed and also fluid gender understanding. Not only 2PM but most of the contemporary boy groups too fits in Jung’s definition of group member Taecyeon;

this 186-centimeter-tall muscular boy often transforms into one of the girl group members, wearing a navy cap with a big pink ribbon or bright orange-colored tight skinny jeans. His masculinity is flexible, transformable, and hybridized. As such, 2PM is the best representative of versatile masculinity often exemplified by the contemporary South Korean idol boy bands<sup>222</sup>

The previous example of the boy group BTS, who debuted 2 years after Jung’s book, is also contributing to similar versatile masculinity by using female and male clothes together on and off stage similar with many other boy groups. Male idols often use long hair and are advertised as having 'girl like beauty' in various TV shows they join. On variety shows, doing girl group dance covers, by male idols, as feminine looking as possible often shown as idol’s attractiveness. At the same time, male idols often show muscular bodies as a highlight of their masculinity with different song concepts and photo shoots. These concepts are more appreciated by fans when they drastically change from one song to another. The same group can wear black military like uniforms and sing songs that have darker and tougher feelings with a sharp choreography, and a few months later can make another comeback with a more shiny and a cute concept with colorful clothes and softer images. Jung interprets this as being “able to fulfill the complex desires of contemporary pop-consumers with various cultural backgrounds.”<sup>223</sup> This variability in gender norms, together with feeding the consumer capitalism mentioned

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<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

previously, is also giving way to deeply questioning fixed gender norms. While somehow empowering femininity by not being ashamed of being feminine, they also mix up gender norms physically which I believe can be a danger for identity because all of these norm changes are happening on social media where physical reality can be easily bended.

Almost all interlocutors expressed that they think K-Pop idols are masculine. Some said they are more masculine than the men around them or their masculinity is more preferable than the men around them. Definitions of interlocutors too, often shifted from feminine to masculine during the interviews. To interpret this we should discuss the second dimension of masculinity discussions about K-Pop; characteristics of idols, apart from their physical appearance. The shown characteristics and emotional expressionism of male idols seems to be an alternative to hegemonic masculinity, for fans.

#### **4.3 ‘Confidential’ Masculinity of K-Pop Boy Groups**

Psychoanalyst Ethel Person describes masculinity as multiplicity which differs “not only within different cultures, but also within any one culture”<sup>224</sup> which is the common understanding in contemporary studies. Hegemonic masculinity defined by Connell as “a culturally idealized, honored, and glorified form of masculinity in a given historical context”<sup>225</sup> According to her “becoming a man involves the process of taking on and negotiating hegemonic masculinity, which is a largely unreachable set of social norms and ideals for most men”.<sup>226</sup> Hegemonic masculinity should not be understood as the real character of men in fact she defines it as a tool which “legitimizes patriarchy” and “even though they support it, are regulated by it, and use it to judge other men’s behaviors”<sup>227</sup> most men don’t really fit in the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Thus it is a set of norms and behavior codes for ‘how ideal man should be’. These behaviors are normalized and “engraved on male bodies”

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<sup>224</sup> Bruce Reis, & Robert Grossmark. *Heterosexual masculinities: Contemporary perspectives from psychoanalytic gender theory*. (New York, Routledge: 2009), 2.

<sup>225</sup> Connell, & Messerschmidt. *Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept*, 184.

<sup>226</sup> Connell. *Masculinities*, 77.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

since their birth or even before, and become as "normal behavior that does not even need to be talked about."<sup>228</sup> Although it changes in different cultures and geographies, the main characteristic of it is that it legitimizes patriarchy and secures the hierarchy between men and women as well as men and other men.

Hegemonic masculinity in western societies, which I believe is the most effective one on global popular culture streams including Turkey, defined as economic autonomy, ability to take care of the family, rationality, ability to control feelings, and apart all of them, not being anything that known as feminine.<sup>229</sup> Peterson defines western masculinity as emotionally recessive, calculating and able to hide anxieties.<sup>230</sup> Also masculinity highlights norms like courage, certain forms of aggression, mastery, severe mental and physical toughness.<sup>231</sup> When we look at these definitions, and compare them to fans' descriptions of their idols' characteristics we see that they are almost opposing each other. Most of the interviewees described the idol they support as someone who is not afraid of showing his feelings or insecurities. For the women who are used to seeing strong, irrepressible and insuperable man as an ideal masculinity this version is different and often perceived as more confidential, trustable, and reassuring for them. I assume it is because by showing man's insecurities they are empowering women in a way. They are showing that the vulnerable one is not only women but it can also be men. This idea can be a comfort in societies where women are seen as someone who cannot protect herself.

One of the interlocutors said that watching her favorite idol group (boy group - Exo) is making her feel like a part of a friend group. She said their kind behavior and intrepidity for being feminine (she referred kindness as feminine) makes her feel very comfortable. She added;

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<sup>228</sup> Kurtuluş, Ulaş, and Küçükkural. "Hegemonik Erkekliğin Peşinden.", 57.

<sup>229</sup> R. Alsop, A. Fitzsimons, and K. Lennon. *Theorizing Gender*. (Cambridge, Polity: 2002), 141.

<sup>230</sup> Alan Petersen. *Unmasking the Masculine: Men and Identity in the Skeptical Age*. (London, Sage Publications: 1998), 88.

<sup>231</sup> Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee. "Toward a new sociology of masculinity" *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985): 551–604.

they show us their cute side, their soft spot. They are not always like that but for fans they behave more sweet more like child. Men don't do that easily. It makes you feel closer to them (*idols*)<sup>232</sup>

(Simay, 26)

Mentioning 'they show us, for fans' shows that displaying insecurities or their emotional side is perceived as closeness and enables fans to feel valued and beloved. Other interlocutors too defined different male idols with word like; 'sweet', 'kind', 'funny', 'child-like', 'innocent', 'pure', 'approachable', 'easy to get along with', 'humble', 'hard-working', 'modest', 'sincere' and 'friendly'. These words came out in almost all interviews when I asked them to define their favorite idol or why they love their favorite idol. Most of these features are also accepted as socially more feminine features. Fans also expressed that they love to see that idols don't behave as powerful or rationale all the time. Especially when they go on reality shows which are mostly followed by fans rather than the general public. They show a much softer, childlike image that does not hesitate to look 'clumsy' or 'stupid'. Another common definition in most interviews was 'they don't behave as tough guy' both as drama characters and as themselves on reality shows or on stage;

In Korean dramas for example man are not hesitating to show their weaknesses. They easily startled when they are scared of something for example, like this. Maybe the characters are trying to hide it from people in dramas but they are showing it to the audience eventually. And when the audience see this kind of things their sympathy towards those characters increase. In our country our fathers, brothers are seen as indestructible trustable characters. We have this understanding of man cannot collapse but in smallest illness or sadness they have, we got disappointed because of this understanding. I think their weaknesses should be known by the society. They are human too we never think about this. In our country it is not reflected like that in television, man have to be like a mountain. He cannot fall, he cannot bend, he cannot be ill even... but even the mountains cannot carry everything.<sup>233</sup> (Nesrin, 42)

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<sup>232</sup> Translated from Turkish; "bize o tatlı yanlarını, yumuşak yanlarını gösteriyorlar. Tabi sürekli böyle değiller ama fanlar için daha tatlı böyle daha çocuksu davranıyorlar. Bir erkeğin kolayca yapacağı bir şey değil bu, seni onlara daha yakın hissettiriyor."

<sup>233</sup> Translated from Turkish; "Kore dizilerinde mesela erkekler zayıflıklarını göstermekten çekinmiyorlar. Mesela korkunca yerinden sığıyor onun gibi. Dizideki karakter belki bunu saklamaya çalışıyor diğerlerinden ama bir şekilde izleyiciye bu yönünü gösteriyorlar. İzleyici de bunları görünce karaktere olan sempatisi artıyor. Bizim ülkemizde babalarımız

It is considered more sincere and intimate to show weakness which strengthens the connection between fans and idols and also awakens the feeling of clemency and affection of female fans. Seeing emotions that are gendered as feminine by society on male idols helps to build this sincerity and intimacy. On reality shows, live streams or backstage videos male idols often do things like; hugging their friend who is crying, clapping hands and jumping when excited, screaming or being startled when they are scared from a loud voice or a bug, show intimate friendship with their group members and overall show a variety of emotional transitions which are highly appreciated by fans. This overshadows physical feminine looks, which that can be uncomfortable, and breaks the hegemonic masculine image by making smooth transitions between socially accepted feminine and masculine emotions and characteristics. Masculinity arises from this, is perceived as someone who still can be tough, hardworking and determined but in addition to these he is emotionally more open and expressive, who takes his strength from his courage of showing fragility and most importantly it is perceived as a masculinity which does not aim to become hegemonic over women.

It is also interesting, because men are looking like a women you don't really... you can't really separate. After a while eyes will get used to it and you can separate but at the beginning because you cannot separate them, both man and woman looks sympathetic. Because you think like they are all the same... Maybe if they were looking like tough men they wouldn't be this much attractive to us. They look more sympathetic because they look feminine, like they cannot harm you. Like you know they think this for women 'how can she hurt me?'. Because of her physical appearance you think a women cannot hurt anyone. It's the same with them. <sup>234</sup>(Şeyma, 24)

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<sup>233</sup>..erkek kardeşlerimiz hep yıkılmaz güvenilir karakterler gibi görülür. Sanki erkek asla yıkılamazmış gibi bir inancımız var ama en ufak bir hastalıkta üzüntüde bu sefer hayal kırıklığına uğruyoruz. Onların zayıflıkları da toplumda bilinmeli bence. Onlar da insan yani hiç böyle düşünmüyoruz. Bizim ülkemizde televizyona da böyle yansıtıyorlar, erkek dağ gibi olmalı bizde. Düşemez, eğilemez, hasta bile olamaz... ama dağ bile olsa herseyi taşıyamaz."

<sup>234</sup> Translated from Turkish; "O da çok ilginç gerçekten, erkekler kadın gibi gözükükleri için çok da.. yani çok da ayırt edemiyorsun. Bir süre sonra gözün alışıyor ayırıyorsun tamam ama o başta ayırt edemediğin için kadın da erkek de sempatik geliyor. Çünkü ikisi de aynı şey gibi düşünüyorsun... Belki de böyle sert erkek tipli olsalar bize bu kadar çekici gelmeyeceklerdi. Kadınsı göründükleri için daha sempatik geliyorlar, sanki sana zarar veremezlermiş gibi. Hani kadın için 'bana nasıl zarar verebilir ki' diye düşünürler ya. Görüntüsüne bakınca bir kadın kimse incitemez gibi düşünürsün. Onlar için de aynı."

With looking also at other interviewees' words, what female fans see in Korean idols is someone who will be kind to them and someone who cannot hurt them because they don't look 'masculine' in the way men around them look. It is common that traditional families do not want their daughters to have male friends and often teach their daughters to stay away from men because 'men are dangerous'. This idea, while partially normalizing men to behave immorally or 'instinctive', teaches women from a young age to behave extra carefully around men. With idols they see a different kind of man who is not oppressive in the way the other men they have seen before are, and also a man who is not sexually demanding but has moral behaviors and shows respect to women. This might be a reason for women to develop trust and sympathy in confidential masculinity they see in boy groups. Not their feminine looks but emotional variety and characteristics they show which are socially considered as feminine, makes them attractive in the eyes of fans.

As it is mentioned in the previous chapters, Hallyu and K-Pop became popular among so called 'third world countries' including many Muslim and east Asian countries and mostly among women. Gender dimension as an alternative to hegemonic masculine ideals might have an impact on this. Especially if we look at Turkish audience's experience, Turkey went through a strong modernization process. In the Ottoman era distinction between sexes was more clear. Men were equated with the public domain while women were equated with the private domain. With the modern Turkish state new kinds of gender types were produced by the state and the distinction between sexes became more complicated than before because Turkish femininity produced as working women who are able to take care of children. Who will be the authority in public and private spaces became a reason for confusion for both men and women. Women were earning their own money while taking care of children and they saw that they could do many things on their own while men were still learning masculinity, mostly from women as they were mothers or educators, ideas such as being the protector of the family but they did not have as much authority as before. This confusion still continues today and still has no solution. It caused a rise in oppressive/toxic masculinity behaviors in which men are trying to and are forced to ensure their masculinity and power while women are trying to ensure their place in public sphere.

Alev Erkilet points out that the relationship between the sexes is not complementary in both modern and traditional societies; it is hierarchical and hegemonic.<sup>235</sup> She is criticizing the traditional understanding which put women under men by legitimizing this notion with religious arguments which happened not only in Turkey but in many other Muslim societies. She claims that the problem about gender is not the biological or psychologic difference between men and women, but the class-status differences which are based on this biological and psychologic 'nature 'and this is used as a reason for determining social boundaries.<sup>236</sup> Women were struggling with the given form of masculinity in Turkey like in other countries. In Turkey and in other Muslim countries the struggle was a bit different because of the social mixture of tradition with the religion was making it hard to resist the problematic norms of patriarchy. Thus the attachment with K-Pop idols and highlighting their moral behaviors by interlocutors can be interpreted as a reaction for this social situation in Turkey. Since gender roles are often defined by shifting and recreating religious discourses in order to legitimize inequalities between men and women, idol masculinity could be found as comforting for women in Turkey as a still moral but less oppressing alternative of masculinity. Different masculinity constructions on different platforms as Jung mentioned, both enable fans to choose the ideal masculinity they like to see and makes continuous transitions from feminine to masculine taking both sides of attractiveness.

From what I saw in interviews and multiple posts on social media, the main way this is problematized in masculinity discussions by fans seems to be gendered emotions which means assigning gender to emotions and limiting the opposite gender to expressing themselves fully. While men are socially expected to behave aggressively when they feel heartbroken, women are expected to cry when they get angry instead of losing their temper. Idol behaviors seems to be not strictly limited to such boundaries in behaviors and feelings which continually is praised by interlocutors during the interviews. This appreciation of emotional freedom and 'ungendering' emotions is strengthening the bond between fans and idols by turning the communication more intimate. It is also giving fans new ideals for masculinity, and

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<sup>235</sup> Alev Erkilet. "Toplumsal Cinsiyet ya da Tanrıların Elçileri Olarak Erkekler Sorunu" İSAV Dini ve Toplumsal Boyutlarıyla Cinsiyet Tartışmalı İlmi ihtisas Toplantısında sunulan tebliğ. (2011), 310.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

even though physical appearance can be uncomfortable sometimes when they ‘get used to it’ in time and normalize the appearance by making reasons for it or by seeing the natural /non-makeup visuals of idols, emotional expressionism and moral behaviors overshadows the physical appearance. Idols are seen as safer and more reliable because of their ‘feminine emotions and moral codes’.

This shows how social construction of men carries more negative or threatening emotions and behaviors like anger, violence, smugness, toughness, reticence, melancholy, and hiding/limiting their positive emotions; construction of women and femininity carries more positive emotions and soft behaviors like the feeling of family, sincerity, warmth, modesty, emotional openness, sweetness, cheerfulness, kindness, showing love and affect. The verbal attacks to the point of death threats by men on social media, as it mentioned by interlocutors is mainly because of the construction of men as ‘staying away from anything related to femininity’, the fear of *offemirinity* and belittling or even hating anything that is ‘women-like’.<sup>237</sup> Beyond behaving like a woman, this goes to hesitating to use a pink colored pens or acting extra tough or rude to prove their manhood to the gaze of hegemonic masculinity. This construction is both oppressing men and women by obstructing both sides from openly feeling and behaving like humans.

#### **4.4 Discussion on ‘Genderless Image’ of Idols**

According to interlocutors the ‘genderless image’ of idols which is discussed by anti K-Pop discourses is an actual problem but not in the way anti K-Pop discourse defines it by looking at visual gender representations but as something created online and often by fans. Considering my insider and outsider position in this study as a researcher, I understand and in most examples agree with their problematization. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, “technology increasingly gives fans the tools not only to circulate music but to rework it, creating their own videos an montages...and inserting a private female presence into the public male dominated

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<sup>237</sup> Kurtuluş, Ulaş, and Küçükkural. “Hegemonik Erkekliğin Peşinden.”, 58.

production of music.”<sup>238</sup> Although explicit sexuality is much less observed than in other pop music videos or lyrics, according to Peace who did an ethnography about K-Pop fans in China in 2003, it was still present in fans’ fantasies and implicit in groups publicly. Fans “playfully overturned gender roles and power relationship between males and females, idols and fans.”<sup>239</sup>

Although fans are completely against and angry towards anti K-Pop discourse, when I asked them ‘can being K-Pop fan become harmful for anyone’ the majority led me to the ‘ship culture’. ‘*Shipping*’ in fan slang means basically wanting two people, opposite or same sex, to become a couple. In K-Pop it is very common to ship idols in the same group. According to interlocutors, some fans ship two idols because they like the close friendship between them but there is a considerably larger group of fans who want and often believe that the two people they ‘ship’ are a couple or in love with each other. I realized while many of the older aged fans I talked were not very familiar or haven’t even heard about ‘shipping culture’ younger fans were very familiar with. One sixteen year old interlocutor who had been fan since she was 8, told she started to hide her fan identity from her classmates when she realized it became too much about non existing sexual relationship fantasies between idols;

My friends in middle school were really like freaks about this. They were keep talking about ships...watching videos and reading stories about them. I like to see their friendship too but it really becomes disgusting and strange after some point. Like there are ‘dream of’s (hayal et) if you know them, like what would this idol do in this situation you ask to the page and they post the answer...they starting to do things like that! They started to ship each other with other friends. It’s as a joke but it’s really unnecessary...<sup>240</sup>

(Sena, 16)

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<sup>238</sup> Rowan Pease. “Korean Pop Music in China: Nationalism, Authenticity, and Gender.” In *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia: What Makes a Difference in a Region Makes*, (Hong Kong University Press: 2009), 163.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Translated from Turkish; “Orta okuldaki arkadaşlarım gerçekten bu konuda bir acayıplardı. Sürekli ship konuşuyorlardı...işte onlar hakkında videolar izliyorlar hikayeler okuyorlar. Ben de aralarındaki arkadaşlığı görmeyi seviyorum ama bir yerden sonra gerçekten işler garipleşiyor ve iğrençleşiyor. Hani bu ‘hayal et’ler var ya bilmiyorum biliyor musun, hani bu idol bu durumla karşılaşsa nasıl tepki verirdi diye istek atıyorsun sayfaya onlar da cevabını paylaşıyorlar... onlardan yapmaya başlamışlardı! Kendilerini bile başka arkadaşlarıyla shipliyorlardı artık. Şakasına yapıyorlar da çok gereksiz bir şey gerçekten...”

Most of the interlocutors were not talking about shipping culture very openly, or explaining what it really is in detail, except saying ‘it is disgusting’ for them they don’t like it or it ‘can be harmful for fans who are too young’. Sena came to the interview with her mother Ebru (36), and they were both fans since 10 years. Ebru shared her interest in Korean dramas and K-Pop with her daughter since she was very young age, ‘under her control’ as she adds carefully. They were both speaking much more openly about ships that are created by fans and how it affects fans negatively. They highlighted that they gained many positive things from being ‘Korea fans’ (learning language and culture, establishing network, character development, and friendship like mother-daughter bond were some of the examples they gave) but also witnessed many negative stories too. Many of those stories they told in interview were raising interest in homosexuality at very young aged girls that Sena personally knows from her own school, which was an *imam hatip*<sup>241</sup> middle school and *imam hatip* high school right now. Ebru mentioned that she believes parents can be too oppressive for their daughters especially about their interactions with men. She said;

I believe many of them don’t even know what homosexuality means but they know if they have a boyfriend it will cause problems, they behave like lovers with their girlfriends. I feel sorry for those girls, they want to feel the sincerity and pure love they saw on (*reality*) shows and dramas actually.<sup>242</sup>

Ebru agreed with Sena about normalizing the ‘ship culture’ which was originally based on sincere friendship between group members, is normalizing fans to ‘ship themselves with their friends’ with the meaning of a praising their close friendship. But as ship culture of K-Pop is often presented as homosexuality online, their relationships too become complicated. Hayal Et (dream of) pages were one of the interesting things they said because I haven’t heard of them before. When I searched online, I found countless pages and accounts on twitter and Instagram also many

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<sup>241</sup> Imam Hatip is vocational school aims to train Imams to be employed in government. Schools known to be giving bases of Islamic religious knowledge and are a controversial issue in Turkish politics.

<sup>242</sup> Translated from Turkish; “Bence bunların çoğu eşcinsel nedir onu bile tam olarak bilmiyor ama biliyorlar ki erkek arkadaşları olursa problem çıkacak, bu sefer kız arkadaşlarıyla sevgili gibi davranıyorlar. O kızların haline çok üzülüyorum, yani asıl istedikleri o dramalarda realitylerde gördükleri içtenlik o saf sevgi”

montaged videos — both in English and Turkish- on Youtube. As Sena explained, admins of these pages get ‘dream requests’ about idol reactions in different situations. The language used in pages and ‘dreams’ and also followers’ profiles made me think they are made and followed by very young audience, from middle school or elementary school maybe. If this assumption is true then the situation is alarming and would lead many to other future problems because these ‘dreams’ mostly include sexuality and violence together.<sup>243</sup> These pages seem to be an extension and social media adaptations of *fanfics*. Fanfic (*fanfiction*) is the name for stories written by fans (not only K-Pop fans but it exist in general fan culture in online popular culture) taking famous people as main characters and developing stories about them. They have a huge reader mass who are also mostly young aged. With the popularity of K-Pop fan fiction also has gained popularity among K-Pop fans, K-Pop idols and ship culture in K-Pop seems to have made it easier for fans to write and imagine stories about idols. One of the interlocutors defined fanfic and their topics as follows;

There is a drawn character in those stories and its usually taken from existing ships. For example Baekhyun (*member of boy group Exo*) is shorter, has a puppy face, he is cute like a puppy and Chanyeol (*also member of the same group*), we call him Yoda he has big ears tall and a little clumsy. Baekhyun is very outgoing Chanyeol is more like introvert...They are both male okay but I don’t think it is really about their gender it’s more like their matching characters. When you read you don’t read story of two men but two characters I mean. I know many fics are really focusing on sexuality and can be perverted but actually these ships and fics are based on two characters’ sweet interaction. They went too far though..<sup>244</sup>(Emine, 23)

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<sup>243</sup> See some of the accounts in Turkish that has high follower numbers;

(@bts.\_hayal.\_teпки04) Instagram account, [https://www.instagram.com/bts.\\_hayalet.\\_teпки04/](https://www.instagram.com/bts._hayalet._teпки04/) , (@btstepkiandhayalet123) Instagram account <https://www.instagram.com/btstepkiandhayalet123/> , (@kpop\_tepki\_hayalet\_) [https://www.instagram.com/kpop\\_tepki\\_hayalet\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/kpop_tepki_hayalet_/)

<sup>244</sup> Translated from Turkish; “O hikayelerde çizilmiş bir karakter var ve bunu çoğunlukla zaten var olan sahiplerden alıyorlar. Mesela Baekhyun daha kısa, işte böyle yavru köpek gibi bir yüzü var, yavru köpek gibi şirin chanyeol da..ona yoda diyoruz biz böyle büyük kulakları var biraz sakar. Baekhyun daha dışa dönük chanyeol daha bi introvert... Tamam ikisi de erkek ama bence bu cinsiyetlerinden çok o karakterleri arasındaki uyumla ilgili. Okuduğun zaman aslında iki erkeğin hikayesini okuyormuşsun gibi değil de yani sanki iki karakterin hikayesini okuyormuşsun gibi. Biliyorum bazı filler baya baya cinselliğe odaklanıyor bazıları sapıkça da olabiliyor ama bu sahiplerin ficlerin asıl olayı oradaki iki karakterin tatlı etkileşimi. Tabi bu aralar baya aştlar..”

Such stories that are mainly based on the idea of opposing characteristics matching together, can, I believe, mainly be considered as the ‘real dark side’ of the sector and fan spaces, as many fans also mentioned. What makes them ‘dark’ is that many stories or those ‘dream of’ pages contain 18+ warning in their titles but authors of fanfics are as young as 9 to 13. They enable children to encounter highly sexual content without any limitations on social media. It is an existing problem of social media usage of children but what makes it more problematic is the space of this encountering, which is the ‘fan space’ discussed in previous chapter. As it was mentioned before, fan space can be perceived as a trusted and sincere area where fans feel secure. Together with this the emotional bond of fans established with idols makes them feel reliable and trustworthy in anything about their favorite idols. Using idol faces and names in such stories, visual edits etc. which contains sexuality and violence together is not the same as children encountering random pornographic images online but much worse because they seem to be unable to see the inappropriateness of such content. The absence of the physical body on digital space also normalizes the fluidity of gender understandings in such stories and edits.

It doesn't have to be sexual I thought about this before too.. I know it looks problematic but I think it's like... when two group members hug each other at concert for example it proves that all those things she (*fan*) watched on reality shows, that sincerity is real. She says ‘it's not acting on TV’ and it makes her happy. It's like seeing behind the scene. Like she can know everything about them by watching shows but at the end she knows that some could be acting because it's on TV...but when they hold each other's hand or like exchange a sincere look it makes her think ‘this can't be acting they are really close friends’... But ship thing is kind of scary, because it's completely up to your imagination. Imagined characters imagined stories they just take idol's face and what they know about their image<sup>245</sup> (Melike, 21)

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<sup>245</sup> Translated from Turkish; “cinsellikle ilgili bir şey olmak zorunda değil aslında ben bunun üzerine önceden de biraz düşündüm.. Baya problematik görünüyor biliyorum ama bence aslında.. yani iki grup üyesi konserde sarıldığında mesela, o aslında onun (fanın) onca zaman realitylerde izlediği şeyin gerçekliğini kanıtıyor, o samimiyet gerçekmiş diyor. Yani sadece televizyondaki bir rolden ibaret değil bunlar diyor ve bu onu mutlu ediyor. Sahne arkasını görmek gibi. Yani bu showları izleyerek onlar hakkında herseye öğrenebilir aslında ama sonuçta o da biliyor ki bu televizyon, yani bazıları rol de olabilir..ama ne bileyim birbirlerinin elini tuttuklarında işte aralarında samimi bir bakışma geçtiğinde diyor ki bu rol olamaz bunlar cidden yakın arkadaş.. Ama ship olayı bi tık korkunç bir olay, çünkü tamamen hayal gücüne kalmış. Hayali karakterler, hayali hikayeler.. sadece idollerin yüzünü bi de karakteri hakkında ne biliyorlarsa onu alıyorlar.”

Macit talks about ‘parasocial interaction’ when he defines the bond between K-Drama fans and drama characters. According to him there is a repeated type of masculinity in Korean dramas which makes audiences believe in the existence of such masculinity.<sup>246</sup> I used the word ‘idols’ to refer to most of the idols mentioned in the different interviews throughout the thesis. Because even though names and groups were different, appreciated behaviors and characteristics were very similar. Thus, with acknowledging the authenticity of idols, we can say there is a repeated type of masculinity in K-Pop too. This ‘mythicized representation’ becomes something apart from the real idol as a person and becomes someone existing only in the imagination of fans,<sup>247</sup> which bring us back to Baudrillard and hyperreality. Idols embodied these non-existing representations on their shows and videos which mostly are reached through the internet and digital space by fans. This creates a virtual universe with non-existing representations and bodies in a digital reality of the fan space. Fans experience these representations through digital space and although they are aware that it is not completely concrete and real they react as if it is real as Macit conceptualizes as parasocial interaction.<sup>248</sup> He defines it as the interaction of movie and drama stars which are experienced as real by the audience which makes audiences have real feelings towards characters and make those characters part of their lives.<sup>249</sup>

On the other hand, the hyperreality of idols, which blurred the line between real and fake, causes the dehumanization of them on social media. According to Kam, “the emergence of consumerism and the internet means that new groups of people - women and children- are gaining power”<sup>250</sup> and it seems like new groups are establishing new symbolisms. It is interesting to see when women gain power the problem of objectifying women and women body shifts to objectifying men and male bodies. Kam’s article about ‘boy love mangas’ (which are created by women for women) in China actually shows that the same system and with the same problems that were criticized by women until today are still continuing with changed actors. K-Pop idols too are in the very middle of the problem of objectifying and sexualizing

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<sup>246</sup> Macit. *Kore Dalgasi*, 145.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Louie, Kam. “Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia, with Special Reference to China.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 940.

men. The boy group BTS, because of their popularity and company's strategy of putting forward ships in the group, is the group who has the most fan fictions and sexual edits. Although the company recently announced that they will take legal action for comments and photos that contains sexual harassment towards the group members, and some fans established 'report groups' online to systemize informing the company about such edits and stories;<sup>251</sup> many fans claim that these can't be considered as sexual harassment or allege that idols can't have any problem with it.<sup>252</sup> We see that on the one hand the shared emotions and shown sincerity with different shows and contents makes fans feel like family or a close friend group with idols. This awakes feelings like intimacy, clemency, and compassion of fans. On the other hand, since all relationships and communication is happening on the digital space, it can also cause the dehumanization and objectification of idols, which lead fans to believe they have rights over idol characters and relationships as a consumption product.

To sum up; I don't believe that this discussion of K-Pop and gender is as simple as 'man with make-up' as it mostly is referred to in anti K-Pop discourse. Rather it needs deeper analysis about gender norms and especially the construction of masculinity also as a form of deeper capitalist consumption style. I perceive the reason of this increasing interest as a resistance to hegemonic masculinity and negatively constructed masculine ideals. The masculinity model idealized by fans is rather to be morally sensitive, and respectful character with softer and understanding attitudes which understood as more 'feminine'. Actually the main thing which should be problematized in this issue should be the roles attributed to femininity and masculinity. The increasing normalization and interest in homosexuality among K-Pop fans, which is claimed by anti K-Pop discourse, could be based on this problem of defining genders within limited behavioral and emotional boundaries. Such definitions, while structuring who fits in to them, are also excluding who can't fit in such roles. Therefore young people start to look for new definitions and categories which would accept them without putting limitations on emotional variances. Considering ship culture and fanfics given before, I can't claim that anti K-Pop

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<sup>251</sup> See Army Report Group in Turkey; (@T\_ARMY\_REPORT), twitter account, [https://twitter.com/T\\_ARMY\\_REPORT](https://twitter.com/T_ARMY_REPORT).

<sup>252</sup> See discussion on twitter; (@T\_ARMY\_REPORT) Twitter post, August 13, 2020 [https://twitter.com/T\\_ARMY\\_REPORT/status/1293655812905336834](https://twitter.com/T_ARMY_REPORT/status/1293655812905336834)

discourse is completely wrong or pointless with their arguments. But rather their claims are mostly superficial and are not able to point out actual problems nor able to give any solutions. Also considering the general attitude on social media there are many people who are using this discourse to belittle 'feminine' characteristics which only reproduces hegemonic masculine ideals.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to give an analysis on the current phenomenon of K-Pop in the context of Turkey. K-Pop has had a significant amount of popularity in Turkey for many years. Globalization and K-Pop's popularity in the American pop culture sector made K-Pop much more popular than it was before, thus K-Pop became visible to the general public in Turkey. This shows that cultural hegemony today is not only rooted in Europe and America but it is also based in capitalism. Thus, it can come from any cultural area. The physical appearance, and especially masculinity representations of K-Pop male idols has gained attention from Turkish media with such titles of articles as 'Genderless Project for Youth'. With this anti K-Pop discourse, K-Pop started to become a topic for discussions on gender in the country. Some critics claim that the feminine looks of male idols is causing young people to lean towards a genderless image that can be seen as an obstacle for identity production and family formations in the understanding of anti K-Pop discourses. I realized these discussions became very widespread in public media and that they caused misinterpretations towards the sector while ignoring the real problems of youth's digital media use or the impact of capitalist behavior in entertainment sector. Anti K-Pop discourses are also often causing racism towards Asian people and even hate toward Korean culture. Therefore my aim with this thesis was to clarify the misunderstandings and miscommunication which are causing the appearance of much dangerous and hateful discourses that are not solving any problems of youth but only causing more.

With this aim in the first chapter I explained what K-Pop is by including its roots, history, and how idol groups and fandoms are created. By looking at its history and production stages, it is obvious that there is a constructed image that is produced and sold through idols which also includes gender representations. The first chapter also showed the importance of popular culture in Korea's soft power which is becoming

equally important with military force or economic resources of the country. Considering Turkey's recent boost in exporting soap operas to multiple countries, Hallyu sets a successful example for Turkey. There are existing studies on this example and the chapter also depicted how Turkey can learn from these studies. However, I believe the producers in our country should also consider that many young people are choosing Korean dramas and pop culture instead of existing ones, because they believe produced content in their own country does not match with their values as much as Korean ones. This can be taken as a warning about a possible rupture with country's youth and content producers, which would give the power of popular culture to outsiders.

In the second chapter I aimed to explain specifically about the fandom in Turkey which mostly exist on digital space, and how fans create their own fan spaces in it. I argued that spaces are important carriers for emotions and are crucial in establishing new bonds between people who are physically far away from each other. Fan spaces on digital space, are the main gathering space for fans and not for only K-Pop but also for discussing and sharing about their own daily lives, norms and values. Thus fan spaces easily become sources of intimacy that can become effective on one's belief systems and norm mechanisms. Because of the current gender discussions, I focused on changing gender norms on fan spaces especially for people who use digital spaces to socialize more than daily face-to-face interactions. I found that the moral characteristics highlighted by K-Pop sector and idols are making digital fan spaces more comfortable and also trustable for fans. Also being together with lots of other people on fan spaces provides fans network and agency. By being a fan they highlight their self-authenticity and subjectivity which most of the fans are unable to express in their daily lives. Since most of the K-Pop fans consist of women and people of a young age, I believe being a fan often becomes a way for them to empower themselves by sharing and defending their thoughts, beliefs, and values in a community that acknowledges their voices by supporting or criticizing them. Also fan space is an experience which can't be understood without being involved with it. It has its own use of language, an international network and inside it has its own rules. More importantly, fan space has a strong emotional circulation that has an effect on insiders' moral norms. Thus it is not possible to criticize or praise K-Pop

completely nor to be able to understand fan behaviors as a complete outsider of the fan space.

In third chapter I discussed gender and masculinity representations which has opposing definitions from fans and from anti K-Pop discourses. While anti K-Pop discourses are more focusing on feminine visuals of idols, fans are giving more importance to their characteristics, which are mostly considered as feminine according to socially constructed gender norms. The continuous transitions of male idols from being feminine to masculine is giving a new way of acceptance of masculinity. Fieldwork and the words of interlocutors were proving the main reason fans feel connected with the K-Pop sector is their trustable and sincere image. This pointed out the social problem of attaching 'positive emotions' and 'harmless behaviors' to femininity and 'negative emotions' and 'harmful behaviors' to masculinity. This categorization is an obstacle both for men and women to experience emotions freely.

One of the main points highlighted by interlocutors was they like to see masculinity that is emotionally expressive and has a 'feminine' image that perceived as 'harmless'. I found that gender understandings are changeable through emotional connection and given masculine and feminine characteristics which are strictly defined by society are causing confusions in especially the younger generations. Lacking culture industry products in our society is one of the most important reasons why this confusion is easily abused by different hegemonic powers. Especially the wrong definitions and limitations put on masculinity was the main point made by this study. This situation is making cultural norms and values of our society vulnerable for vanishing in the era of globalization and fluidity. Such definitions are not only legitimizing oppressive and rude behavior by men but also forcing them to be this way in order to 'be a man'.

According to this study, anti K-Pop discourses are wrong by thinking K-Pop is only for girls of a young age who don't think or discuss problems of the sector considering interlocutor ages for this study were varying from 16 to 42 and most of them were in their mid-20s on average. Most of them were critical towards the sector

and fan groups. Anti K-Pop discourse overall, seems to be mainly concerned about the emergence of a new masculinity against hegemonic masculinity with the exception of a smaller group who are concerned for the possible identity and gender crisis of youth. Hegemonic masculinity builds itself mainly on ‘differing from feminine’ which often emerges as ‘fear of or, hate for anything feminine’. Interviews and social media observations showed that there are many male social media users who are belittling the feminine appearances and behaviors of K-Pop idols with almost hateful language also often verbally attacking K-Pop fans, many of whom are very young. These attacks can go to the point of sexual harassment and death threats, which shows that anti K-Pop discourse online does not mainly contain concerns for the future of youth but also concerns, confusions and fear from the possible loss of hegemonic masculinity.

On the other hand, anti K-Pop discourse partially touches a more important issue that was also mentioned by interlocutors with concern, which is the ship culture and fanfics of K-Pop. They are causing fans to encounter highly sexual content at very young ages starting from 9 as far as I saw. This encounter is different and more harmful from simply seeing pornographic images on TV or internet because of the emotional attachments and trust towards the images of idols and the shared fan space. It can cause fans to underestimate the given content’s harm, and it can be perceived as morally acceptable. Also, social media observations showed that continuously communicating with idols through social media and digital spaces, can cause the dehumanization of idols and perception of them. Additionally, other fans, who are only communicated with through social media, can begin to be perceived as unreal, and thus invulnerable objects or products to be consumed. The nature of digital space which compulsorily separates mind and bodily existence makes gender understandings fluid because of the absence of the body in fan spaces, where emotions and norms are circulated. This separation often causes a sense of limitlessness that makes social media users feel that they can do or be anything they want, at least on social media. Considering the large amount of time we are spending on social media today, feeling limitless on social media spaces and faced with bodily limitations in everyday life and face-to-face communications can cause identity crises and disconnection from one’s own body and gender.

This study included fanfics and ship culture mostly by looking at interlocutors' words and through limited online observations without becoming deeply involved with it. They are not only bonded by K-Pop but have a wider audience and should be studied by future researchers. I believe there is a rising interest for different cultures and different countries' popular culture products. While fans in Turkey do not want to follow Turkish soap operas arguing that they are not matching with our values, we see many people in multiple Arab countries or European countries like Spain and Italy are choosing Turkish soap operas with the exact same discourse; that they contain more morality, more desired masculine ideals and matching with their values more. The reasons behind this too, could be researched in future studies. Interlocutors of this study often mentioned about the relationship between religious background and being a K-Pop fan. While anti K-Pop discourse often claimed that Hallyu sector specifically aiming Muslim young women, or female students in Imam Hatip schools; some interlocutors of this study also agreed that K-Pop and Hallyu sectors are easily spread among women with religious background. Although most of the interlocutors were disagreeing and arguing that fans shouldn't be labelled this way, because of many claims and attachments of the society, relationship between religiosity and Hallyu could be a topic for future research. This was not the main concern for this study but came from the field during the research, thus it can be deeply investigate in a future study. Lastly, this study uncovered the importance and significant impact of popular culture, which Turkey seems to be lacking to produce for its own people, especially youth, and it should be studied from multiple perspectives including gender definitions and representations.

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## APPENDIX

### LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Date of the Interview</b>
Arzu	28	Female	05/ 08/ 2019
Esra	30	Female	06/ 01/ 2020
Zeliha	36	Female	06/ 01/ 2020
Sema	20	Female	07/ 05/ 2019
Şeyma	24	Female	10/ 05/ 2019
Nesrin	42	Female	16/ 05/ 2019
Nur	22	Female	04/ 10/ 2019
Melike	21	Female	08/ 01/ 2020
Ebru	36	Female	30/ 07/ 2019
Sena	16	Female	30/ 07/ 2019
Duygu	25	Female	25/ 01/ 2020
Emine	23	Female	22/ 11/ 2019
Simay	26	Female	19/ 06/ 2019
Elif	30	Female	03/ 10/ 2019
Merve	22	Female	27/ 04/ 2019
Kübra	22	Female	03/ 08/ 2019
Ayşenur	27	Female	09/ 09/ 2019
Ahsen	21	Female	09/ 10/ 2019
Ece	24	Female	04/ 01/ 2020
Beril	24	Female	04/ 01/ 2020
Büşra	25	Female	07/ 01/ 2020
Filiz	26	Female	30/ 11/ 2019
Selin	19	Female	05/ 10/ 2019
Esmâ	25	Female	04/ 02/ 2020
Rümeysa	22	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Ayşenur	23	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Şüheda	23	Female	06/ 02/ 2020
Sümeyye	25	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Meryem	24	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Saliha	20	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Hande	20	Female	05/ 05/ 2019
Yakup	17	Male	17/ 11/ 2019

\* More than half of the interlocutors wanted their names to remain hidden, therefore I decided to use nicknames for all interlocutors in order to protect their privacy.

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