

Disidentifying with Fan Culture Narratives: A Case Study on EXO Anti-fans in K-pop Fandom in the Digital Era



Universiteit Leiden

MASTER THESIS

MA ASIAN STUDIES (POLITICS, SOCIETY & ECONOMY)

by

Robert Beers (0808385)

Supervised by Dr. M. Winkel

Leiden University,

July 2015

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Word count: 11418 words.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are radicals in every spectrum. In the world of South Korean popular music fandom, or K-pop, the radicals are those who are overly obsessed and those who are abhorred. Like in any fandom, there are lots of fans who love their Korean idols and support them. Then there is a small group of people who cause distress and even harm them. In the world of K-pop fandom these people are powerful presences. They are the *sasaeng* 팬팬 fan and the anti-fan.

In his article “Hallyu Tsunami: The Unstoppable (and Terrifying) Rise of K-pop Fandom” Sam Lansky explained the *sasaeng* fan by its stalker nature and its destructive obsession with Korean idols saying: “Perhaps [the increasing amount of incidents by intrusive fans] augured the era of the *sasaeng* fan, a recently coined term that might as well be Korean for ‘stan’¹: ‘sa’ means private and ‘saeng’ means life, in reference to fans’ all-encompassing obsessions with their preferred artists”².

Defining the anti-fan is less straightforward. There are some notorious incidents where the misdemeanor of *sasaeng* fans has caused great uproar and antagonism between fans. This antagonism seems superficial, yet is complex; netizens are slandering each other in the comment sections but nobody knows why. K-pop is a realm that boasts many different artists, produced by various companies, and through the industry’s marketing strategies that consolidate fan identity their following is incredibly dedicated and competitive. This means that within this realm there are a multitude of fans, traditionally each dedicated to a certain group or solo performer. Individual fan identity is fluid and by no means bound to a predetermined set of fandom practices. Though,

1 Based on the central character in the Eminem song of the same name, a ‘stan’ (stalker fan) is an overzealous maniacal fan of any celebrity or athlete.

2 Sam Lansky, “Hallyu Tsunami: The Unstoppable (And Terrifying) Rise Of K-pop Fandom”. *Grantland*, 10 September 2012. <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/k-pop/>.

individual fans organize themselves in the form of fan tribes, finding connection with each other and consolidating a fixed set of fandom practices. The K-pop realm is small and different artists often share the same stage and collaborate, so fan activities often converge and overlap. Because they believe only their idols' qualities are supreme, rivalry between different fan groups leads to anti-fan behavior and the birth of the anti-fan identity. In other words, this is when fan tribes go to war.

The *sasaeng* fan is a powerful concept because it is unique. In no other major music fan culture there is such a distinguished and recognizable identity prescribed to the stalker fan. Because of this unique concept, the K-pop fan culture becomes even more distinguished as well. It adds up, because the K-pop fan culture in itself is already recognizable as a distinct fan culture. It is centered on a music style that has rooted connections with the South Korean national identity. However, K-pop is a globalized product that caters to many tastes and transcends national borders.³ Idol groups have many proximate fans in South-Korea and Asia, but their following is apparent all across the world. Through marketing practices that will be discussed later on, K-pop holds low barriers for global audiences to enjoy and attach personal value to the performance. Although in the K-pop discourse much emphasis is put on the Asian-ness of it all, there is actually no necessity in trying to approach K-pop and its fan culture as something Asian. Before embarking, I would like to detach the K-pop realm from any attachments to being an Asian phenomenon and instead isolate it. Just because it is from Asia and was created in that context does not mean we cannot regard it in the context of an ever globalizing world. Instead, I consider fan groups as stateless, multi-ethnic, cross continental tribes that are only limited by the languages they can understand.

When it comes to conduct with their idols and with different K-pop fan groups, the fan following of Korean boy band EXO have an extremely notorious reputation within the K-pop realm. Online, many

3 Jeff Benjamin, "The 10 K-pop Groups Most Likely to Break in America," *Rolling Stone*, 18 May 2012. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-10-k-pop-groups-most-likely-to-break-in-america-20120518>

blogs, Facebook pages and YouTube submissions that are labeled 'anti-EXO' confirm this identity. These 'anti' internet sites are significant because they are the paramount platform where anti-fan discussion and anti-fan confrontation is being hosted. It is, however, not immediately clear who is who. We deal with fans, anti-fans, and *sasaeng* fans.

Internet sites that are dedicated as 'anti' are not a new phenomenon, but form pivotal cases when studying the anti-fandom phenomenon in a K-pop environment. Studies on media texts and fandom have traditionally been centered on the position of the fan who is interested in a certain medium, text or genre and who enjoys it. Despite anti-fandom prominence within the realm of K-pop, notable research on the K-pop *sasaeng* fan versus anti-fans is scarce. Therefore, this thesis is dedicated to researching patterns of online EXO anti-fandom. The question it seeks to answer is how incidents of EXO *sasaeng* fan behavior are the instigators of EXO anti-fandom.

This study bears relevance because it is one of the first that unites the anti-fandom discourse with Korean popular culture academics. Moreover, reading anti-fandom in EXO fan culture provides an insight into a the K-pop realm that is not headlined by a single central text like or medium like EXO, but in fact consists of many different artist groups and their fans and anti-fans. In other words, if the EXO spectrum has many radicals, so do spectra of other groups, and these spectra may also interact with each other forming a bigger spectrum. Thus dealing with the realm of K-pop means dealing with a complex demography of groups that may or may not be in favor of one another. Overall, some scholars have assumed that their definition of anti-fandom is mature enough to be employed in the field. Although I do not underestimate current bodies of work that have dealt with the issue of anti-fandom before, EXO anti-fandom will prove that there are still some gaps that need to be filled in order to realize its potential.

1.1 Hypothesis

I hypothesize that although anti-fandom contains negative feelings directly to members of EXO, in this particular study the content of such claims are actually irrelevant. Simply because fans of K-pop idols worship in the same fan realm, there are some clear parallels in the way idols maintain their agency over fan groups. Their agency is competitive but never seeking authority over other idols' power structures. Instead, I suppose that EXO anti-fandom is about disagreeing with the way certain audiences, in this instance the *sasaeng* fans, engage their bias. Not only do they reject frenzied and obsessed stances towards their idol, it also includes the way in which *sasaeng* fans regulate their identity as part of the EXO fan tribe. Because outsiders of the *sasaeng* fan group are confronted with this behavior through participation in the K-pop fan realm, they are forced to be confronted with these incidents. Through the dynamic nature of the internet, fan tribes become anti-fans because they are forced to redefine their stance towards the tribes they do not belong to and do not want to belong to. I call them tribes because they participate in the realm of K-pop and mutually identify with a collective of fans. This collective has negotiated their own fan practices, relationships with idols, and locale in the realm. This process of distinguishing is being conducted by online discussion where participants speak out against certain fan behavior and identify themselves as alternate. Finally, the dynamics of this process are observed as anti-fandom.

1.2 Methodology

In order to approach the issue of this thesis, I have observed a large number of comments, writings and other forms of media dealing with EXO *sasaeng* fandom that happened online and offline. For this kind of research, the online discussions are highly valuable because they convey the very nature of anti-fandom. Virtually any content that can be encountered that deals with EXO anti-fandom is a suitable source, because I do not seek relevance in objectivity but in how their expression of anti-fandom is being narrated. In this particular setting, it will prove to be difficult to categorize

fandom for instance by degree of fan involvement⁴. Finding no solace in quantification of anti-fandom, I deem it more suitable to listen to the story that is being told by netizens online.

By assuming fan groups are stateless, digital tribes of fans that worship the same idols and follow the same kind of fan practices, I engage with the online materials in an ethnographic way. This means that I consider different fan groups as groups that each have their own identity or stance towards a certain idea about EXO. I will pay no special regard towards individual identity other than that this study will only cover online contributions written in English. I realize that this is a limitation, but I am forced to do so for reasons of time and place. This also implies that fans and anti-fans are seen as global; it does not matter from which country they come from but will likely be outside of Asia. By limiting myself to these tribal groups, it also means that the position of the K-pop industry is largely left out. Instead, I focus purely on the different relationships between (*sasaeng*) fans, anti-fans and EXO and how these relationships are being maintained through changing attitude dynamics of fans and anti-fans. By closely analyzing manifested ideas, I seek to determine what is the actual target of anti-fan allegations and why.

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two will provide brief historical and cultural context for this study by introducing the Korean Wave phenomenon as globalized cultural product that has brought forth the worldwide spread of Korean pop music. It discusses the global nature and impact of this product, how its industries position their product to appeal to different markets worldwide, and how they maintain power relationships with audiences through social media. In chapter three I will construct a framework upon which analysis of anti-fandom will be conducted. This is based on existing literature within the fields of anti-fan studies and participatory fan culture in a convergent media landscape. Chapter four is dedicated to the analysis of a number of incidents regarding EXO by frenzied fans, where I test the existing anti-fan discourse in the realm of K-pop. Finally this thesis

⁴ Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences* (London: Sage, 1998).

concludes with answering how *sasaeng* fans cause anti-fandom behavior, as well as how this contributes to the field of study.

Chapter 2: Korean Wave and K-pop Awareness in a Global Perspective

This chapter gives a brief outline on the K-pop academic discourse and shall discuss the spread of the Korean Wave outside of Korea into the world. Furthermore, it emphasizes the globalized nature of K-pop by pointing out that it is marketed and disseminated that way. Finally insights will be given in the ways the K-pop industry maintains the relationship between fan and idol.

2.1 Korean Wave as a vehicle for cultural awareness and international diplomacy

The Korean Wave was designed by Korean cultural industries to spread Korean pop culture products in Asia and primarily Japan, and its success initially was because of drama series (2006). A great advancement overseas was the airing of the enormously popular drama called *Winter Sonata* in Japan, though it debuted only in 2003⁵. Shim Doobo argues that because of the economic downfall in the 1990s, importing Korean television programs was cheaper for Japanese broadcasting companies than to produce domestic ones⁶. Having established a market in Japan, entertainment became television-oriented through music channels becoming popular and by showing video clips many Japanese became fan of Korean stars.

5 Tooru Hanaki et al., "Hanryu Sweeps East Asia: How *Winter Sonata* is Gripping Japan" *International Communication Gazette* 69(3;2007).

6 Shim Doobo, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," *Media, Culture & Society* 28 (1; 2006): 31-35.

Then came what some scholars call *Hallyu*⁷ 2.0, a new phase in the Korean Wave, or what some call even a whole new wave. With Korean pop music becoming more popular, new markets for music were soon discovered and entertainment agencies sprouted. Along with video games, it was K-pop that has initiated the growth of the Wave. Jin Dal Yong argues that the most important distinction between the '1.0' and 2.0 version is the technological incentives that have driven *Hallyu* 2.0. He says: "*Hallyu* 2.0 is the combination of social media, their practices, and the uses and affordances they provide, and this new stage has been made possible because Korea has advanced its digital technologies"⁸. Therefore, social media has been a key instrument for the industry, as it enables the agencies to distribute their products in a faster pace to a wider audience.

It may come as no surprise that this shift in distribution, from television to internet, has enabled K-pop to reach audiences much wider than it already did in Asia. In addition to accessing popular culture, social media enables users to share information and it is arguably responsible for the first sparks of awareness outside of Asia. There is few literature that describes how and when exactly this passed, but studying fans as well as anti-fans will prove useful in uncovering this. An important suggestion, and possibly a pitfall, is the question where exactly 'outside of Asia' is located. Arguably, most fan activities that can be traced on the internet are written in English. Instead of being reluctant to pinpoint this audience geographically, no such attempt should be made and it should therefore suffice to say that these fans are simply located outside of Asia or even globally.

⁷ *Hallyu* 할리우 in Korean or *hánliú* 韩流 in Chinese literally means "flow of Korea". This term is originally coined by Beijing journalists in 1999, who wrote about the growing interest in South Korean cultural exports.

⁸ Jin Dal Yong, "Hallyu 2.0: The New Korean Wave In The Creative Industry," *International Institute Journal University of Michigan* 2 (1; 2012).

Not only did the Korean Wave have the benefits of a rapidly developing technology, but the Korean government has linked the awareness of Korean popular culture to international diplomacy⁹. Many studies have related the concept of soft power, coined by Joseph Nye, to the consumption of popular culture and the Korean Wave is no exception. Put extremely short, soft power is a non-military way of dominating people in order to force them to assimilate¹⁰. In the case of the Korean Wave, Lee says Korean agencies use their cultural products in three ways. First, to create a positive image of Korea and Koreans that is contrary to the intimidating image of a closed off country that is at war. Second, to spread Korean standards such as consumer behavior, fashion, food, and the Korean language. Third, to use Korean idols like charismatic politicians to spread ideas of prosperity and to become an example for their followers¹¹. Like Korean cultural agencies, Japanese agencies employed similar tactics in the 1980s during a boom of Japanese pop culture products¹². This implies that K-pop fans tend to be interested in Korean culture, the Korean language, Korean society, Korean history, et cetera.

2.2 Korean Pop Music

What exactly is K-pop, and who are the idols we are talking about? K-pop is not to be understood as a specific universal music style or genre but rather as a realm. This realm is different from style or genre because it transcends its status as music. Rather, it is the combination of music and its fan nation, a label that encompasses both music and fan practice and considers it as an independent cultural

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 'Ministry Of Foreign Affairs, Republic Of Korea'. Mofat.Go.Kr. http://www.mofat.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?boardid=302&typeID=12&tableName=TYPE_ENGLISH&seqno=311119.

10 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

11 Lee Geun, "A Theory Of Soft Power And Korea's Soft Power Strategy," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21 (2; 2009), 205-218.

12 Nissim Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia," *International Relations Of the Asia-Pacific* 8 (1; 2007).

economy that plays by its own rules. As pioneers in creating a new music style, the group *Seo Taiji and Boys* were the first to experiment with different styles in the 1990s. These music styles were genres like hip-hop, rap and R&B originating from the United States, and which were caught on by Seo Taiji as a youngster. Through the hybridization of styles a Korean pop music style was born¹³. According to Rolling Stone author Jeff Benjamin, “K-pop is a mixture of trendy Western music and high-energy Japanese pop (J-Pop), which preys on listeners' heads with repeated hooks, sometimes in English. It embraces genre fusion with both singing and rap, and emphasizes performance and strong visuals”¹⁴.

Performance and strong visuals are indeed a very distinct component of the K-pop experience. In her article on the aesthetic style of Korean singers, Judy Park discusses how clothing and styles were employed to be able to suit Japanese tastes. Typically, K-pop employs a group that consists of either girls or boys. They can contain any number of members, but roughly taken the median is around five. Example groups are girl groups Wonder Girls, Kara, 4minute, and of course boy groups EXO, Big Bang and SHINee. However, composition of groups can change over time by adding new members or members quitting.

Popular girl groups like Girls' Generation and Kara have in common that they are in their teens or twenties, and have a youthful, playful and flirty style¹⁵. They are sexy but girly, their body language and choreography shows them with closed legs, and they are feminine yet reserved which increases their sense of girly-ness over their sexual attraction. Park explains: “Korean singers offer something for everyone with their diversity. Girl groups and boy bands include members with their own carefully

13 Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia.”

14 Benjamin, “The 10 K-pop Groups Most Likely to Break in America.”

15 Judy Park, “The Aesthetic Style of Korean Singers in Japan: A Review of Hallyu from the Perspective of Fashion,” *International Journal Of Business and Social Science* 2 (19; 2011), 28

calculated unique image so anyone can find a type they like in the group, and solo artists either stick to a certain image and focus on their fans or sometimes change their look and type of music to show off different sides and keep up with the current trends while offering great entertainment”¹⁶.

Indeed, through unique mixes of music and visual style K-pop is an approachable genre because it is marketed to offer something for everyone but is also free from cultural constraints. It is no wonder that the Korean Wave was successful in Asian countries as there are multiple levels available with which Asian audiences can identify. After all, after decades of Asians having to conform to Western influences – most notably American music and Hollywood movies – a postcolonial period has begun where Asian people are able to construct an alternative Asian identity by adhering to a new voice from Asia¹⁷. Korea’s story of a modernizing society with a capitalist dimension, where a new middle class is rising and where economic capital is translated to cultural capital, is also the story of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, et cetera.

While this settles for the popularity within Asia, there is a way to approach K-pop’s success in a global sense. For international audiences, K-pop is an innovating, stimulating, energetic product that is always combining and experimenting with existing styles in order to create something new¹⁸. Because of this blend, K-pop is something culturally hybrid. In analyzing this hybridity, Marwan Kraidy argues that hybridity points at the fact that there are other cultures within a single culture. Therefore it provides media and marketers transcultural incentives to build bridges of affection between their commodities and local communities. In turn, hybridity offers an active exchange that leads to a

16 Ibid., 29.

17 Cho Hae-Joang, “Reading the “Korean Wave” as a Sign of Global Shift” *Korea Journal*, winter 2005: 148-182.

18 Park, “The Aesthetic Style of Korean Singers in Japan: A Review of Hallyu from the Perspective of Fashion.”

mutual transformation of both sides. In other words, hybridity is not only responsible for globalization but is actually the logic that drives it¹⁹.

If Kraidy is to be believed, it should be noted that there is barely anything Korean about K-pop. Of course, the same could be said about any present day popular music or visual style as styles are constantly being reinvented. In a time where music flows freely throughout the world by means of the internet, music is always changing through time, space and culture. However, K-pop is a distinguishable product that it being propelled by its industry. Kraidy notes that commercial transculturalism is a profit-driven strategy that structurally seeks to capitalize cultural amalgamation and changing identities²⁰. In this sense, hybridization is a process of power, influence and the goal of 'otherization'. K-pop is not to be understood as a Korean product but a global product because it is being governed by profit-driven companies and not initially the Korean government. In this sense, K-pop idols are without nationality, or what Koichi Iwabuchi refers to as culturally odorless (*mukokuseki* 無国籍)²¹. This term was introduced to point out the same lack of cultural thresholds for Japanese popular culture like anime and pop idols back in the last century.

2.3 K-pop industry and SNSs

Speaking of Japanese popular culture, there are actually many parallels between Japanese and Korean cultural management. Cultural anthropologist Hiroshi Aoyagi had already thoroughly researched the Japanese idol industry, though it turns out that the K-pop industry works in very

19 Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

20 Ibid., 90.

21 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press).

similar ways.²² For instance, at the head of many a successful idol group is typically the talent agency. Many authors have discussed the 'industrial' way of creating new stars²³²⁴, because the agencies use the same production model for every other group to be. This cookie cutter policy is what Lee Su Man, founder and front man of one of the biggest agencies *SM Entertainment*, calls 'cultural technology'²⁵. This signifies a business strategy that K-pop idols are not exactly born but groomed through rigid and precise protocols. Idols to be are prepared for stardom as they are drilled at singing, dancing, stage performance, dealing with fans and the press, and speaking other languages to be able to communicate with them, all while forbidden to make any mistakes. As a result, there are large parallels between idols' exemplary behaviors and impeccable postures.

Also governed by the industry are the official channels through which idols communicate with the audience. Twitter and Facebook are major examples of social networking, and these are major sites where audiences can follow the activities of the idols that are being managed by their respective agency. Typically, posts contain promotion for newly published songs, events, or other announcements accompanied with exclusive images such as snapshots of idols, promotion imagery, or (spoiler) videos. To appeal to wider audiences posts are not only in Korean, but English and Japanese have become the norm. Not surprisingly, and possibly to avoid loss of face, there is ample to no direct interaction with the audience. Although social media is designed to be principle about sharing, the K-pop industry social media usage seems to deploy a one-way strategy when it comes to

22 Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles* (Cambridge: Harvard).

23 Shim, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia."

24 John Seabrook, "Factory Girls" *The New Yorker*, 8th October 2012.
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/10/08/121008fa_fact_seabrook

25 Stanford Graduate School of Business. 2011. *Korean Entertainment Agency Taking Its Acts Globally*. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGP5mNh9zo8> and Stanford Graduate School of Business. 2015. 'Lee Soo Man: Taking Korean Pop Culture Global'.
<http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/lee-soo-man-taking-korean-pop-culture-global>.

audience engagement. Therefore, these are not the sites of discussion but serve their purpose as information channels. Aside of the pages 'of the house', for instance the SM Entertainment official Facebook page 'SMTOWN'²⁶, the industry also carefully orchestrate the pages of idol groups and individual pages. These pages also serve the same purpose, being an influential tool for marketing purposes.

These activities are very reminiscent of the activities of the pre-internet notion of the official fan club. Like explored in Christine Yano's research on *enka* music fandom²⁷, fan club channels such as news bulletins or social networking services (SNSs) are being maintained by industry officials. They are also contributors to the K-pop community's economy in the sense that they produce information, images and other materials. However, they are not the official fan club itself. Part of the cookie cutter policy is that each group has its official fan club. This fan club has its own name, color, and a way to refer to fans of this particular club. For instance, girl group *Girls Generation* (SNSD)'s official fan club is called 'S♥NE' (소♥논; pronounced as *so-won*) and refers to SNSD's 'S' and 'one' as SNSD and their fans are one. The official color is pastel rose, and members of this fan club are referred to as 'S♥NE's'²⁸. These name and the club color are important components in constructing fan identity. Fans can express unity and loyalty, and by attaching a name to a fan of a certain group a specific communal fan identity is created that can be deployed and recognized by fans from other groups. This marketing strategy causes a pillarization phenomenon in the K-pop realm; by vertically dividing fan groups and giving them a name, a color, a logo et cetera there are psychological boundaries between fan groups. This is

26 'SMTOWN'. <https://www.facebook.com/smtown?fref=ts>.

27 Christine Yano, "Charisma's Realm: Fandom in Japan," *Ethnology* 36(4, 1997).

28 "소♥논 Girls' Generation / SNSD (소♥논) Official Thread #3", accessed March 14 2015. <http://forums.soompi.com/en/discussion/341781/%E5%B0%91%E5%A5%B3%E6%99%82%E4%BB%A3-girls-generation-snsd-%EC%86%8C%EB%85%80%EC%8B%9C%EB%8C%80-official-thread-3>.

why I consider all EXO fans as a single tribe, although there can be mutual differences in fan identity and involvement. Those who do not identify with this tribe are naturally outsiders.

The Korean Wave, and more specifically the industry of K-pop, is a highly organized, meticulously schemed movement. Through extensive marketing practices, idols and idol groups manifest themselves to their audiences with impeccable posture. Powered by financial and political incentives, the K-pop industry has always been finding ways to create new products and ventures by combining styles, trying to appeal to a wide as possible audience. By deploying large SNS operations, which cater to audiences of different languages, the industry seems to be very aware of technological advances in the field of social media and uses it in its advantage so that audiences can interact with them more easily. It is however important to note that although SNSs facilitate dynamic forms of media as well as audience interactions, major K-pop agencies seem to abstain from regulating audience engagement and only focus on the distribution functions. Finally, in the case of K-pop the official fan club is a powerful instrument in organizing their fans and nurturing their needs in seeking proximity with their idol. It is important to consider the authority of the official fan club in the way the industry has created distinguishable fan tribes that are based on their idol of adulation. It is the fan audiences who stand on the frontiers of fan and anti-fan interaction and who proudly wear this fan identity badge.

Chapter 3: Defining Anti-Fandom Culture and its Online Localities

Now that the cultural aspect of K-pop is examined, this chapter is dedicated to establishing a framework upon which an understanding of the K-pop anti-fan is based. This chapter is divided in two parts. The first part treats existing literature that is analyzed in order to provide a preliminary understanding about the fan and its anti-fan counterpart and why they matter. Moreover, I will discuss that although anti-fan discussion has become more prevalent, we actually do not know much about what drives their behavior. The second part introduces the online localities of anti-fandom, where the central idea is that K-pop anti-fandom is commonly an online phenomenon driven by technological incentives and changing power relations.

3.1 Defining anti-fandom

If the anti-fan is the counterpart of a fan, then what is a fan? Defining 'fandom' has been no simple thing despite its everydayness. Everyone knows that a fan is a fanatic, an enthusiast or a supporter of a form of entertainment, sports, or a medium text. More important is how fan identity is being approached by scholars. Naturally, there are many approaches, but I choose to incorporate one particular definition by Matt Hills. The reason is because it perfectly suits the fact that this thesis deals with a global audience that is new to Korean culture and is confronted with it for the first time through K-pop. Hills says that being a fan is not a thing but rather an identity, and fan status may be taken as "a sign of 'inappropriate' learning and uncritical engagement with the media"²⁹.

Interpretation of mediated text through fans has always had its way in academics. A large portion is devoted to TV programs and film. , such as for instance 'Bewitched', where "fans treated TV texts with the same level of interpretive thoughtfulness and reverence that one might assign to a Proust novel or the plays of Shakespeare"³⁰. The science fiction genre is also a prime example with the 'Star Trek'

²⁹ Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xi-xii.

³⁰ John L. Sullivan, *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications), 207.

series and 'Star Wars' saga enjoying a rich fan culture. The focus of this research, however, are music fans. In current academics, TV and film fans tend to be generalized along with music fans. I do not necessarily oppose to this notion, because either way fan cultures are highly useful for conducting research. After all:

*"(...) as much as fan objects are experienced in and through mediated texts, so are the very challenges to life in the twenty-first century (...): war, ethnic conflicts, widening inequality, political and religious violence, and ecological disasters are to most of us, most of the time, experienced through the same patterns of mass mediation, and, crucially, often related to by the same mechanisms of emotionally involved reading as fan objects."*³¹

As long as there is a group of devotees that have created a fan culture, any fandom is suitable for studying. In his research on *The Simpsons*, however, Jonathan Gray argues that it does not suffice to merely focus on fans as the only audience. Instead, although anti-fans are usually ignored, they can provide different perspectives and different proximities on texts³². He argues that focusing on only a particular kind of involvement may give a very positivist view or even romanticize a certain text. He says that "to fully understand what it means to interact with the media and their texts [...] we must look at anti-fans [...] too"³³, therefore advocating the inclusion of paratexts as they shape viewers' and nonviewers' experiences³⁴. The way audiences position themselves in regard to a text can explain a lot about the text's meaning, so every kind of positioning should be considered. Audience studies

31 Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, "Introduction: Why Study Fans?," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, (New York: NYU Press), 10.

32 Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans And Non-Fans," *International Journal Of Cultural Studies* 6 (1): 70, accessed March 14 2015, doi:10.1177/1367877903006001004.

33 Ibid., 63.

34 Ibid., 72.

indeed seem to have ignored and underestimated the relevance of anti-fandom as a number of works on anti-fandom have sprouted only recently, such as the *Twilight Saga* anti-fandom by Anne Morey³⁵, and anti-fandom in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones³⁶. These examples being movie anti-fandom, studies on Western music performers such as Justin Bieber are also prevalent³⁷.

If according to Gray the anti-fan is important, then what is an anti-fan? Jonathan Gray argues: “this realm is the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”³⁸. Gray argues that enquiring into anti-fans may seem eccentric at first, but obviously anti-fans need a cause for disliking what they dislike. Therefore, anti-fans have some kind of involvement in a certain text just like fans.

In the anti-fan discourse there are different ways researchers have approached, located and defined anti-fandom. I have selected two approaches that for my own purposes form the cornerstone. Matt Hills says that anti-fans are those who hold dislike for a specific text, often without much experience of it, basing their dislike on shallow paratexts such as trailers and other textual snippets, carrying out ‘distant readings’ and express moral and cultural opposition to particular media products³⁹. This

35 Anne Morey, *Genre, Reception, And Adaptation In The 'Twilight' Series* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012).

36 Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones, 'Fifty Shades Of Ghey: Snark Fandom And The Figure Of The Anti-Fan'. *Sexualities* 16 (8; 2013): 951-968.

37 Raquel Recuero et al., 'Fandoms, Trending Topics And Social Capital In Twitter'. *Association Of Internet Researchers* 13 (2012): 20.

38 Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Nonfans”.

39 Matt Hills, “‘Twilight’ Fans Represented in Commercial Paratexts and Inter-Fandoms: Resisting and Repurposing Negative Fan Stereotypes.” in *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the “Twilight” Series*, ed. Anne Morey, 115–129. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

approach, which concurs with Gray's cornerstone definition, would mean that anti-fans are particularly focused on the text to subvert it, backing their claims with fortuitous arguments.

Second, Jessica Sheffield and Elyse Merlo who, having studied *Twilight* anti-fandom, say that anti-fans gather their feelings "from paratextual fragments such as news coverage or word-of-mouth, reading, watching and learning all they can about a show, book, or person in order to better understand and criticize the text and, very often, its fans"⁴⁰. In this definition I am most interested by the very last part, namely that anti-fans seek dialogue with fans. I have selected these two definitions, firstly because not only do they consolidate each other in the sense that there is conformity in *how* an anti-fan performs its identity, secondly that it is not clear *who* is the target of anti-fandom – in this case: EXO or their fans? – and thirdly that although said scholars have taken great aim at constructing the concept of anti-fan it is not clear yet *why* they do it.

3.2 Patterns of online fandom

With the rise of the internet, so too has fandom become more and more a digital activity (Pearson 2010). Henry Jenkins says that fans in particular were early adopters of digital media technologies: "their aesthetics and cultural politics have been highly influential in shaping public understanding of the relationship between dominant and grassroots media (...) [Fans] build on their enjoyment of particular media products, to claim affiliation with specific films or television programs, and to use them as inspiration for their own cultural production, social interaction, and intellectual exchange"⁴¹.

Obviously, this is certainly the case with K-pop fandom (Jung & Hirata 2012). In today's audience interactions, social media has been playing an increasingly important role as a digital alternative to

⁴⁰ Jessica Sheffield and Elyse Merlo, "Biting Back: *Twilight* Anti-Fandom and the Rhetoric of Superiority" in *Bitten By Twilight*, ed. Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 209.

⁴¹ Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?" in *Media And Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2nd ed., (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell), 556.

traditional media. Social media is an umbrella term that generally signifies online websites that enable the user and audience to interact with each other, and are part of the internet as web 2.0. In short, scholars believe that the internet once was an online environment that enabled 'static' consumption: only those equipped with the knowledge and tools to maintain an internet website would deliver content for visitors to consume⁴². Social media has for instance created an interface where technical knowledge is no longer required to enable people to produce information or content.

Théberge explains that activities like collecting memorabilia for instance, which is one way to express fandom, is part obsession, part memory work and identity formation. During this process, "[it] ultimately places fans in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the culture industry: in their quest to know everything possible about stars and their personae, fans develop a significant potential for cultural awareness and critique."⁴³ An additional aspect is the "ritual sharing of information" that is one of the foundations of much fan discourse and of the sense of commonality felt among fans⁴⁴. K-pop fans have shown to go beyond the performances of the idol itself and address, discuss, actively participate in and provide charity to social issues or emergency situations such as funding orphanages or the Indonesian tsunami in 2004⁴⁵. Functioning like an informal promotional agent, fans not only perform these activities for those charities, but also as a way to promote their idols.

This "participatory culture" according to Jenkins means "to participate in the creation and distribution of media narratives"⁴⁶. Strict boundaries between consumers and producers have broken free from

42 Matt Hills, "Fiske's 'Textual Productivity' And Digital Fandom: Web 2.0 Democratization Versus Fan Distinction?", *Participations* 10 (1; 2013): 131-132.

43 Theberge, "Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, And The Quotidian Rhythms Of The Internet."

44 Ibid.

45 Jung, "Fan Activism, Cybervigilantism, and Othering Mechanisms in K-pop Fandom."

46 Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?," 555.

the traditional media landscape as audiences now dispose of new ways of distribution. The advent of participatory culture signified a shift in audience and industry reciprocity, transforming audiences from passive individuals that retain parasocial relationships with their idols to audiences that cultivate and mediate their parasocial relationships through “prosuming” cultural capital that is relevant to their fan interests. The “prosumer” is a participatory culture-related term, describing the fading boundaries between consumer and content producer as consumers come to interact with content in a producer-style way, appropriating content in a new manner⁴⁷.

This stance towards cultural industries and patterns of engagement on the internet is a useful mode for observing fan culture. After all, Jenkins says that “computers and video games encouraged us to see ourselves as active participants in the world of fiction”. Because idols can be omnipresent, it reinforces the connection between digital media content and daily life because using the Internet for most people means leisure and keeping in touch with social contacts, constantly staying in the know of what is going on in the world⁴⁸. In the case of K-pop, this signifies the community and fan economy, where fans and anti-fans are constantly connected with each other and gather their news, gossips and updates by K-pop related news sites.

Participatory culture⁴⁹, fan work⁵⁰, textual productivity⁵¹, web 2.0⁵²; eventually they all boil down to the same thing. They refer to the fact that the internet has enabled audiences to produce their own

47 Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities And Transcultural Consumption* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).

48 Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?,” 555.

49 Jenkins, “Why Participatory Culture is Not Web 2.0: Some Basic Distinctions.”
http://henryjenkins.org/2010/05/why_participatory_culture_is_n.html

50 Trisha Turk, “Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy”, *TWC* 15 (2014).
<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/518/428>

51 Theberge, ‘Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, And The Quotidian Rhythms Of The Internet.’

content such as images, texts, music, et cetera, and upload it online to share it with the world. In an age where social media is in prime and where sharing information with each other on a daily basis has been made the norm through such media as blogs and social media, it must be understood that these possibilities have made an impact in the way fandom and anti-fandom is practiced. In the light of convergence culture, the participatory culture of K-pop fandom has paved the way for anti-fans to reach beyond previously existing borders, and changing the power relations of the dominant cultural industry by actively opposing it.

This chapter has shed light on how the anti-fan is situated in fandom practices discourse. It is necessary to understand the way fandom is practiced, as anti-fandom is the supposed fandom counterpart and its practices can be employed in the same way. This means that in considering anti-fandom, we must find its parallels with the way fandom practice is structured upon which the anti-fandom structure can be modeled. Now, converging of media and the democratization of fandom culture has been explained. With this knowledge it is possible to engage online K-pop anti-fandom materials for analysis to find out how it can contribute to a coherent understanding.

52 Hills, "Fiske's 'Textual Productivity' And Digital Fandom: Web 2.0 Democratization Versus Fan Distinction?", 131.

Chapter 4: Analysis

“Researchers are astonished that EXO Fandom is able to spread so quickly. In fact, it is due to the globalized world we live in. Here we see a barge full of 'Overdose' albums on its way to infect another vulnerable country. (...) Finally, on May 18th, 2019 the human race has fully succumbed to EXO Fandom. (...) Luckily, there is still time. While EXO Fandom is a real threat it has not yet reached pandemic levels. We can still fight back. Please, do your part to ensure this stays a work of fiction. It is up to you.”⁵³

4.1 EXO and fan incidents

Who is/are EXO? Taken from the word ‘exoplanet’, EXO is one of the bigger names in K-pop today. Formed by SM Entertainment in 2011, they were originally an all-male group of 12 members⁵⁴. To appeal to Asian audiences, the group consists of two subgroups, EXO-K and EXO-M, performing in

⁵³ Soyeon Friend “A Hypothetical Scenario In Which Exo Fandom Causes The Collapse Of Civilization/ The World,” *Anti Kpop-Fangirl*.
<http://antikpopfangirl.blogspot.nl/2014/06/a-hypothetical-scenario-in-which-exo.html>.

Korean and Mandarin respectively. In the early days, EXO had already managed to attain a fanatical, dedicated fan base without even releasing any music but by mastering the art of anticipation. As is common, pop groups usually debut by publishing teasers and singles for an upcoming album. No less than 23 teasers had been released by January 2012 before the actual release of the album 'XOXO' in June 2013. In other words, invested fans had waited eighteen months after the teasers for it to be released.⁵⁵ To date, EXO has released two studio albums, nine singles and twenty music videos sung in both Korean and Mandarin.

Very similar to other K-groups, EXO has more to offer to fans than just their genre-transcending music. Two separate performance groups means twice the amount of fun in terms of seeking pleasure in group members' personalities. Moreover, being dubbed 'rookie group', not being around for such a long time means that there still is plenty to discover. Because of the depth and multitude of aspects EXO has to offer, this could explain the intense fan base it is surrounding. After all, fans needed to work in order to keep up: "When I first got into them, the 'MAMA' [music video] had just dropped, and I was scrambling to learn all their names and backgrounds with everyone else. 12 people is a lot and once you invest that kind of energy you kind of feel... stuck with them."⁵⁶

Just like EXO fans need endure labor in order to find their pleasure, EXO members themselves are being exposed to fan pressure as well. It is widely reported that EXO fans are prone to inappropriate behavior, letting their hysteria get the best of them in conducting with their idols as well as other fan groups. It can be argued that EXO fan culture has been unbridled and chaotic from the beginning,

54 In May 2014, member Kris filed a lawsuit against managing agency SM Entertainment to be removed from the group because of violation of basic human rights and career choices. In October 2014, member Luhan followed, EXO carrying on with ten members.

55 Aja Romano, "What You Should Know About EXO, The Biggest, Strangest Band In K-pop," *The Daily Dot*. <http://www.dailydot.com/fandom/exo-guide-kpop-fandom-tumblr-xoxo/>.

56 Ibid.

simply because there was no official fan club that was there to regulate fan behavior. It was not until August 2014 when it was announced that SM Entertainment set up 'EXO-L', a fan club that is the first to operate through mobile application⁵⁷.

Facts and rumors about fan misconduct have stigmatized EXO fan culture greatly. A notable and typical phenomenon is fans crowding up in the airport to greet arriving EXO members. Because group members are guarded heavily by their management, avoiding exposure in public spaces as much as possible, the airport is an eminent venue for fans to publicly spot their idols. However, fans crowding up has escalated to chaotic situations at several times and EXO members have found themselves wrought by the massive hordes of fans, reportedly being grabbed, groped and injured⁵⁸. That EXO fans can be an extremely rancorous group is also proven when it was announced that EXO fans were officially banned from having access to SBS' live music TV-program 'Inkigayo' recording on August 1 2013. SM Entertainment stated:

"There are already multiple complaints at the public office and at the police station. It is not just 'Inkigayo'. Every time at other music shows, EXO fans would not respond to staff instructions during entering, leaving, and recording. Fans also took photos and recorded videos [even though it's not allowed] during recording, and after the recording, fans would jump into the road to wait and run after the car. Even though EXO fans have received many penalties such as being denied access to the recording or having the number limited, we are disappointed because the fans' actions have not changed. For the fans who are attending other broadcast recordings, not only as the fanclub but also as a regular audience

57 "EXO To Open Official Fan Club "EXO-L"," Soompi.
<http://www.soompi.com/2014/08/04/exo-to-open-official-fan-club-exo-l/>.

58 "[★TRENDING] EXO's Chanyeol praised for protecting Baekhyun at the airport," Koreaboo.
<http://www.koreaboo.com/video/exos-chanyeol-praised-for-protecting-baekhyun-at-the-airport/>.

members, if you have come to cheer on EXO, please follow the station's rules. In the future, please follow the staff's instructions no matter what.”⁵⁹

Very often, other kinds of incidents have been dismissed as the work of *sasaeng* fans. It is true that there are plenty of incidents that include the deeds of individuals. For instance, it has been reported that individuals rent vans to follow the group’s schedule, that they wait outside of dorms and hotels the whole day hoping to catch a glimpse of their idols, booking tickets to flights their idols are on and taking lots of pictures, et cetera. Aiming to contribute to the fan culture aside of finding their own fannish pleasure, these practices are often reported online backed by photographic evidence.

4.2 Sasaeng breaking boundaries and the genesis of the anti-fan

Because sharing (online) is an integral aspect in fan culture, it did not take for other EXO fans to give comment on how their idols were treated. In time, many fans had published blogs, comments and other outings on how they condemned the ‘stalker fans’ who violated the integrity of their adulated idols. One EXO fan blogger discusses *sasaeng* fans:

“I too read that he actually cried in pain and whispered something like "Stop it, Noona... it hurts" which really broke my heart. I don't want to call those people fans anymore. They are everything but fans. (...) Buying the same van as EXO just to lead them into your car and not the official car, placing hidden cameras into plushies you give them as a present just to spy on them - is that everything a fan can do? Is that really what a fan wants to do? I really doubt that this is what the boys want us to do.”⁶⁰

Over the course of time, the aggressiveness of some EXO fans had also stormed the frontiers of other K-pop fandoms as well. An EXO confessional blog contributes:

59 “EXO Fans Banned From Having Fandom Access At SBS 'Inkigayo',” *Allkpop*.
<http://www.allkpop.com/article/2013/08/exo-fans-banned-from-having-fandom-access-at-sbs-inkigayo>.

60 “Anti-Fans And So-Called "Sasaeng"s,” *EXODUS*.
<http://tokyo-prince.blogspot.nl/2013/02/anti-fans-and-so-called-sasaengs.html>.

*"I didn't check out EXO at first because they were everywhere and i thought they were overrated. I got really mad when EXOtics, basically sasaengs, were bashing my biases. Eventually I decided to give EXO a try. Honestly i thought they were good, but in no way do their fans have the right to say that they are better than their well established sunbaes, however i believe they have potential."*⁶¹

Another example of how two K-pop fandoms can get confrontational is when popstar BoA released a music video of her song 'Who Are You' which featured one of EXO's group members Sehun⁶². In the comments section of the YouTube video rage sparked when EXO fans admitted they saw the video only for Sehun, complaining that he deserved more screen time and disrespecting BoA's performance. Of course, this provoked reactions from BoA-fans that felt that EXO fans intruded on their fandom. One comment in favor of Sehun reads:

*"the reality its that most of the people will watch this because of Sehun. let's be honest, Boa's popular time ended a long time ago and SM know that the way to increase views is by featuring Sehun. (...) if this boy wasn't in the video, nobody would've noticed this song. It's quite sad because Boa is a talented dancer and that it's the less some kpop girl groups are doing nowadays"*⁶³

EXO fan culture is very similar to the fan cultures of other K-groups because of its online nature. The frenzied fan activities mentioned above are not unique to EXO fandom; each K-pop fandom has their own profile. Fiske calls fan culture a "shadow cultural economy that lies outside that of the cultural

61 *Anti Exo Confessions*.

<http://anti-exo-confessions.tumblr.com/post/68859102185/i-didnt-check-out-exo-at-first-because-the-y-were>.

62 SMTOWN, *Boa* [EXO]_ *Who Are You (Feat. Sehun)*_ *Music Video*. Video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sjfQWGkGF4>.

63 "EXO-Ls Pillage The Comments Section In Boa's 'Who Are You'," *Anti Kpop-Fangirl*.

<http://antikpopfangirl.blogspot.nl/2015/05/exo-ls-pillage-comments-section-in-boas.html>.

industries yet share features with them”⁶⁴, but EXO fan culture narratives flow freely in and out of the online fan frontiers and can be accessed by anyone. Moreover, EXO fan culture is not an isolated set of practices but a tribe within the realm of K-pop. Audiences are aware of the many fan tribes that are active in this realm. Over the years, as interest in K-pop as a genre has increased, a number of K-pop news sites have sprouted that act as journalists or informants of K-pop fan culture. Because K-pop is the unifying label that connects interacting audiences from all over the world, it has become inevitable that K-pop fan tribes drift towards convergent culture.

Because of the awareness of other interacting audience groups, fans of other tribes had not gotten out of their way to condemn EXO fandom for the negative precedents. However, EXO fan aggressiveness did not limit itself only to their own idols. In their passion to declare their idols’ supremacy, other fandoms have also become the area of the fan’s desire to express dominance. Crossing the border of one’s own fandom is called interloping fandom by Matt Hills⁶⁵. In the case of frenzied EXO fans, it meant comparing EXO with other bands and deliberately stating that EXO was better. One blogger confesses:

“I hate it when people compare exo with other bands, especially seniors. come on idiots, of course senior bands will be billions of times better. I saw a stupid fan saying exo is better than bigbang and bigbang is old whilst exo are fresh. please, bitches, old is another word for legendary. the reason i hate exo now is because of their fans. fucking hell, I'm out.”⁶⁶

64 John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992) ed. Lisa A. Lewis, 30.

65 Hills, *Fan Culture*.

66 *Anti Exo Confessions*.

<http://anti-exo-confessions.tumblr.com/post/68992641687/i-hate-it-when-people-compare-exo-with-other>.

This quote is an example of what Rebecca Williams in her study on fans of the *Twilight* sage calls “accidental anti-fans”⁶⁷. The distinction is that while inter-fandom can be a pleasurable, productive, and welcoming thing, while Hills’ “interloping fan” and the “accidental anti-fan” do not share such positive relationship. She explains that the “interloping fan” is the fan who ventures into the sphere of a different fandom and adopts a fan identity towards the secondary fandom, and the “accidental anti-fan” is “who acts out of necessity and to protect against interloping fans rather than an active desire to dismiss or deride other objects and communities”⁶⁸. In other words, had EXO fans been more diligent towards other fandoms, being able to maintain EXO fandom next to respecting the secondary one, there would have been no clash and the fan of the secondary fandom would not have felt the necessity to defend it.

4.3 Towards a deeper understanding of anti-fandom

Two kinds of clashes can be identified. One clash takes place within the EXO fan tribe itself, where fans call out on frenzied fans because of their disagreeable misbehavior. Their anti-social behavior have sparked outrage and have tarnished the EXO fan culture and therefore are dismissed from the rest of the fan tribe. The second clash is between frenzied EXO fans and fans from other tribes. Because EXO participates in the same realm as other K-pop idols, their bad behavior has sparked antagonism between both groups. These two clashes are also the actual initiators of anti-fan behavior. Because there is a need for both the non-frenzied EXO fans and the fans of other tribes to distinguish themselves from anti-social fan behavior per se, their reaction is initially a negative judgement towards the fan group that apparently has different standards in fan practice. In this regard, the very origin of EXO anti-fandom is neither in compliance with Gray nor Sheffield and Merlo

67 Rebecca Williams, “‘Anyone Who Calls Muse A Twilight Band Will Be Shot On Sight’: Music, Distinction, And The ‘Interloping Fan’ In The Twilight Franchise,” *Popular Music And Society* 36 (3; 2013): 339

68 Ibid., 335.

who both argue that anti-fans gather their negative feelings from a given text or genre or from paratextual fragments.

This does not mean that every form of EXO anti-fandom is based on the behavior of a certain group of fans, but gathering paratextual fragments to make a point is consequential. A large portion of anti-fandom towards EXO is based on the group members itself and its management. In January 2014, South Korean news site Sports World reported about anti-fan cafe 'Ga Mang So' – short for 'sound of K-pop's destruction' – which had been growing in number with its personal attacks against EXO. One post on the cafe's mission reads: "we think of our anti-fan cafe members' relief of our feelings as first priority so feel free to insult and criticize EXO and their fans and parents without hesitation"⁶⁹. Though this institution resembles the anti-version of frenzied EXO fans, it is interesting to note that anti-fandom seemingly goes hand in hand with scrutinizing fans. Where do anti-fans seek pleasure if it was not for a direct or imagined dialogue with fans? The answer to this seems to be that EXO fan misbehavior within the EXO fan tribe and interloping fandom are prerequisites for EXO anti-fandom to exist, and that the narratives of every fan war between the EXO fan tribe and another tribe theoretically can be deduced to this point.

There lies great significance in examining EXO anti-fandom in regard to the anti-fandom discourse. That is to say, Gray and Sheffield and Merlo were very close in defining anti-fandom and indeed do explain *what* an anti-fan does but not *why*. To give better meaning to why EXO anti-fans act the way they do, I draw upon the phenomenon of interloping fandom and the consequential accidental anti-fandom as demonstrated in this analysis. One important addition, however, is that it is necessary to include *what* the anti-fan is against.

69 "EXO's Anti-Fan Cafe Spotlighted For Its Malicious Posts Against EXO And Their Fans," *Allkpop*. <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2014/01/exos-anti-fan-cafe-spotlighted-for-its-malicious-posts-against-exo-and-their-fans>.

In this analysis it is proven that the root of EXO anti-fandom is mediating the relationship between different groups in the K-pop realm. Because anti-fans are just as vocal as fans there is inevitable and perpetual discussion between the two. Although the anti-fan discourse has always positioned the text in a central role, in EXO anti-fandom the text – EXO songs and offline performances – actually becomes the periphery of the parasocial relationship that is being acted out. It would also suffice to say that the text that is central in this anti-fandom is not EXO but the fans: by taking the fans as a narrative about a set of practices of identification, the anti-fan rejects these practices and opts for disidentification. In this way, through exhibiting agency and a great deal of creativity, the anti-fan has become a cultural critic. Therefore, it is once again justified that scholars are to interpret this activity as an addition to previous fan studies that moves beyond the sentiment of uncritical and pleasurable cultural engagement by fans.

This thesis has started by pointing out that there lies no significance in considering the K-pop realm as an Asian phenomenon. It must be clarified, however, that outcomes of this analysis are not to be understood as a universal theory for understanding anti-fandom. This seems contradictory, as K-pop has been observed as something detached from its Asian context, and has been placed in a global point of view. Indeed, in the anti-fan discourse the K-pop realm is significant not necessarily because it is Asian, but because it is unique in the way power relations are structured. As is the industry's norm, there is hardly any direct dialogue between EXO and fans nor anti-fans. That is why there is no industry authority that governs the relationships acted out in fan culture. The reason why anti-fandom is so significant in K-pop fan culture is exactly because of this.

The understanding of anti-fandom pointed out in this research is only relevant for this very fan culture. If there would exist a direct dialogue between idols and their fans, where idols speak out against negative behavior and thereby governing fan culture, power relationships between fan groups and between fans and the idols would be completely different. Because of this, narratives of fans

from such culture and narratives from K-pop (anti-)fans are completely different. After all, the narrative that the anti-fan then is disidentifying with is not the fan's but the idol's. In this sense, it is possible to say that disidentifying with fan narratives is typical for any realm that shares the same power structures as the K-pop realm. If power structures were different, like for instance with American idols who express much more authority, it remains to be seen why anti-fandom increasingly has become the topic of fan culture discussion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As one of the first studies of its kind, this thesis answered how incidents of EXO *sasaeng* fan behavior are the instigators of EXO anti-fandom. Interpreting how cultural texts such as Korean popular music through fans has been done before, but like studies on different media texts the interpretation of the anti-fan has largely been left out. The fan realm of K-pop is a particular one. It is inhabited by fans from all over the world that identify themselves with a fan tribe online. Fans are aware that this tribe is not real, but is in fact a credo that has its own culture of fan practices and the way it mediates

relationships with other tribes. EXO fandom knows different tribes; EXO fans globally adulate their members and performances, but in different ways. One of these tribes are the *sasaeng* fans, a frenzied type of fan that is covered throughout this thesis.

Defining anti-fandom has been done in a number of studies, and their approaches are workable but not definite. An anti-fan is someone who, like a fan, is interested in a text, but for different reasons. It is a given that the anti-fan holds negative considerations, but up until now the reasons why they do are left in the margins of anti-fan understanding. Venturing in the online fan realm of K-pop has laid bare that the blatant misbehavior of *sasaeng* fans have afflicted both idols and fans from EXO flagged tribes and other tribes. Converging mediascapes and online participatory fan culture have created a platform where traditional power structures between consumer and producer are blurred and have become freed from constraints of time and place, enabling every kind of audience to contribute to narratives of interloping fandom.

It is proven that the way fans maintain parasocial relationships with their idols and others within the realm of K-pop is the actual root of EXO anti-fandom. This finding moves away from the ongoing anti-fan discussion in that the text that was always a central component of the discourse has actually drifted into the periphery. Instead, the core of anti-fandom is the negative consideration towards the narrative of people, the narratives that have been put online by certain fan tribes that are deemed intolerable or immoral have become the text that they seek to criticize, and that those fans seek to justify. In this sense, the fan narrative has transformed into a perspective on how a cultural product is being perceived by a globalized audience. Anti-fans are not only the body of disidentification of the fan narrative, but also that of EXO as a South Korean cultural commodity.

This research has proven a point about anti-fans by attempting to differentiate groups of fans, but in the process it had heavily generalized them. Just like fan identity, being an anti-fan depends on

context. Although the features are the same, being an anti-fan can be done in many different ways. Expressing feelings of resentment towards others you disagree with is always a choice, but so is intentional provocation by some EXO fans. For further studies, the path is still open to other kinds of fandoms within the K-pop realm to validate that this theory is indeed exclusive to the K-pop realm. Likewise, fan cultures based on music with an active online fanbase that have completely different power structures are suitable samples to bring nuance to this theory. The question if it matters whether a fan realm is based in Asia or in the West still lies open.

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