

K-pop Fandoms Through Durkheim's Lens

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ABSTRACT

Applying Emile Durkheim's ideas to modern-day K-pop fandoms provides insight into how classical sociological theories can still be found today. This theoretical framework explores how fandom culture, specifically through the lens of K-pop, showcases ideas from classic sociological theories. Emile Durkheim's ideas of solidarity, integration, rituals, and anomie connect to the concepts found in K-pop fandoms. Organic solidarity is shown through the interdependence of different roles within a K-pop fandom to keep it alive, while mechanical solidarity is demonstrated through multiple factors, like internalizing idols' values or creating black oceans, to further strengthen the well-being of the fandom and idols. K-pop fans utilize rituals, like fan chants or watching online entertainment programs, in order to foster this integration within their fandom. The connection K-pop fans have fostered turns into a solution to anomie, leading them further away from alienation. Further research can provide a more in-depth analysis of how other classical theories can apply to newer fans of K-pop or other fandoms.

Imagine fans all over the world, from Los Angeles to Seoul, tuning into the latest music video release from their favorite K-pop group even though it might be 2 AM where they are located. K-pop has found its way to the top of Western Pop Culture, scoring numerous records on music charts and selling out multiple stadiums for their concerts. The success of K-pop can be linked to various factors, especially the fans. Fandom culture is not a new concept when it comes to popular culture, but K-pop fandoms, in particular, give a unique take on how these fandoms operate. These fandoms are seen as mini-societies because they have similar functions in how a society operates.

Studying society and how it operates can be best explained by the theories of Emile Durkheim. As one of the first French sociologists, Durkheim's ideology was heavily influenced by French society during the mid to late 1800s. Considered the

grandfather of sociology, Durkheim influenced many in the field (Coser 1977). Durkheim focused on different aspects of society, specifically how individuals are incorporated into society, as well as anomie and functionalism. Emile Durkheim's ideas of solidarity, integration, rituals, and anomie connect to the concepts found in K-pop fandoms. Researching these fandoms provides insight into how the fans of K-pop groups highlight classical theories in sociology.

SOLIDARITY

Durkheim saw how individuals interacted in societies through two lenses: organic and mechanical solidarity. Organic solidarity is when the social integration of a society develops out of interdependence, while mechanical solidarity is the opposite, where social cohesion develops from collective values and uniformity (Coser 1977). To delve further into each concept, organic solidarity highlights how modern-day society works as we depend on specific roles people take on to keep society running. Mechanical solidarity explains primitive societies where individuals are more alike, leading to a decrease in the division of labor. Both ideas of solidarity can be found in K-pop fandoms.

In fandoms, fans utilize different ways to show their admiration as they fall into the forms of participatory culture (Jenkins 2013). Fans adopt roles like fan editing or fan organizers who organize fan events in their local cities. In K-pop fandoms, there are roles Western fandoms do not have. Within K-pop, there are various roles a fan can take on, especially becoming a translator. Due to content from K-pop idols and groups being in Korean, bilingual fans have taken on the role of being a translator for their fandom. These roles create interdependence within the fandom as some fans might depend on the translator fans to convert the idol's content into one with English subtitles. Translators, also known as fansubbers in the K-pop fandom, have significantly impacted the spread of Korean content by minimizing the language barriers and allowing participation from fans beyond Korea (Aisyah and Yun Jin 2017). The opposite also holds true as Western K-pop fans translate English content into Korean for Korean fans, alluding to the interdependence aspect.

To further visualize this idea, Bangtan Translations has garnered over 1 million followers on both X, formerly known as Twitter, and YouTube (BANGTANSUBS 2013). Their website has teams of translators and subbers, all contributing to translating BTS content with the intent of no profit (BANGTANSUBS 2013). English-speaking fans utilize their services to keep up with BTS and its content. Their translations provide needed context or emotion for the message BTS is trying to communicate, which cannot be fully captured by auto-translating services like Google Translate. The roles these fans take on stimulate and continue the functions of the Western K-pop fandoms. To connect this back to Durkheim, the interdependence on fansubbers emulates how K-pop fandoms represent organic solidarity. Organic solidarity depends on mutual reliance on each other in a society, which connects with the interdependence on fansubbers for Western K-pop fandoms. Fans of K-pop fandoms cannot consume or engage with content without these fansubbers because of that language barrier.

Mechanical solidarity can also be found in K-pop fandoms because they are formed through fan loyalty and shared interest in a specific K-pop group. The emotional investment and action K-pop fans feel for their idols showcase this bond that varies in each fandom. For example, the bond differs between ARMYs (the name given to BTS fans) and BTS compared to Blinks (the name given to Blackpink fans) and Blackpink (King-O'Riain 2020). This resembles the ideas of mechanical solidarity because these fans share a strong commitment to the community's well-being and collective values. Fans in a specific fandom, such as the ARMY, are all alike because of their collective love for BTS. For mechanical solidarity to operate, individuals in a society are alike and hold similar values regarding their society, alluding to the ideas of ARMY and BTS. The collective values of ARMY come from the members feeling like BTS takes a place in their lives as role models, therefore connecting to experiences by internalizing the promoted values (Cheriyah and Hadi 2022). The social cohesion within the BTS fandom depends on ARMYs' devotion to BTS and their success and well-being, resembling Durkheim's ideas of mechanical solidarity. Durkheim's ideas of solidarity are seen through K-pop fandoms, explaining how

fandoms represent how societies can operate. The underlying mechanisms of how K-pop fandoms operate also rely on the interactions between fans to integrate fans into the specific fandom.

INTEGRATION & RITUALS

Durkheim's ideas of integration are seen throughout K-pop fandoms as newer fans interact with seasoned fans from a specific fandom. An element of integration refers to the interactions between group members (Coser 1977). An example of integration is participation in rituals because it allows members to bind together while engaging in common activities (Coser 1977). Durkheim's idea of rituals and its connection with integration can be applied to K-pop fans. Within each fandom, the fans will engage in common activities that bond them even more with the fandom and idols they idolize.

This idea can be applied to the fandom of the K-pop boy group Seventeen. Seventeen has created an online entertainment program that releases episodes weekly on YouTube called "Going Seventeen." Carats (the name given to Seventeen fans) engages with the program every week, highlighting how this online entertainment program increases artist loyalty (Limic and Limb 2023). This weekly routine that Carats engages with represents how common activities can improve the integration of a member in that group. "Going Seventeen" has attracted fans and non-fans to watch the weekly program, resulting in the program consistently being on the "trending" section on YouTube. Carats and Cubics (fans of only Going Seventeen) all engage in the same ritual every week in order to bring them closer to being active fans of Seventeen (Limic and Limb 2023). This ritual of watching "Going Seventeen" fosters this integration of making newer fans become full-time Carats because of their constant exposure to Seventeen through the program and having the same routine as many other Carats. When newer fans engage with the program, it gives them the feeling of community because they have the same routine as full-time Carats.

Another ritual that K-pop fans engage in is fan chants. Fan chants refer to a scripted adlib version of the songs K-pop fans sing along to while the idol or group performs a certain song. Fan

chants are usually planned so fans can say the key lyrics or members' names for future performances. As the fans engage with this ritual at the idols' performances, it enhances their fan experiences and the bonds they have with their idol. An example of an iconic fan chant fostering this fan bond and energy would be during the 2024 Coachella ATEEZ performance. They performed a song called "Guerrilla," which contained a fan chant during the outro of the song. All the members sang the lyrics "*The guerrillas*" while the fans screamed the response lyrics, "*Break the wall.*" The fans during this song did the fan chant at such a high volume that it was heard from other stages during that time (Koreaboo 2024). The energy from the fan chant did not go unrecognized, showcasing how Atiny (the name given to Ateez fans) reinforced their fan bond with Ateez while also gaining new fans in the process.

A final example of rituals performed by K-pop fans within their fandoms would be the use of lightsticks. With each generation of K-pop, fans have shown different ways to show support for their favorite idol group. The first generation of K-pop, which consisted of the 1990s idol groups, did not have lightsticks but other items fans utilized, like colored raincoats or balloons with their flashlight (Anderson 2019). In recent years, fans have used lightsticks to show the idol they are supporting them in the crowd of other fans. Lightsticks are light-up wands catered to a particular K-pop idol or group that fans wave around during live performances or concerts. The trend of utilizing colored balloons or lightsticks stemmed from how each fandom was assigned specific colors distinguishable from other fandoms (Anderson 2019). This can be shown through how Seventeen's official colors are rose quartz and serenity compared to Twice's, another well-known K-pop girl group, colors apricot and neon magenta (KProfiles 2017).

Lightsticks have become a well-known ritual in K-pop fandoms because of how fans have utilized them for specific events. "Lightstick oceans" are used by fans to show the idols that the fans are showing support for them (Anderson 2019). During live performance shows like SBS Inkigayo or Dream Concert, multiple idol groups perform; therefore, fans use the lightsticks to display the idol group they are supporting. As fans participate in

this lightstick ritual, they feel a sense of solidarity with the idol as they show support in the crowd. This ritual also creates a sense of unity in the fandom as they all use the lightstick similarly and distinguish themselves from other fandoms.

The idea of these rituals can also be tied to mechanical solidarity as these fans use these rituals to collectively promote the betterment of their community. The fans performing these rituals consistently engage with their idol group to fully distinguish themselves from different fandoms. Fans will use their rituals to further strengthen their loyalty to the idol group. Lightsticks have intensified fans' loyalty to a certain group by engaging with black oceans.

“Black oceans” are when K-pop fans purposefully turn off their lightstick to engage in the act of boycotting the idol group performing, leaving the entire audience in the dark (Anderson 2019). These black oceans happen when K-pop fans dispute over things like record sales or popularity. Black oceans have happened to many well-known artists today, like Girl Generation and BTS. The event that coined the term black ocean was when Girl’s Generation, also known as SNSD, received an entire stadium of fans turning off their lightstick during their 10-minute performance. Prior to this event, Girl’s Generation was receiving hate from fans of boy idol groups because they were consistently pictured next to male idols for photoshoots or advertisements. While already gaining an enormous amount of anti-fans, during the 2008 Dream Concert, Elfs (the name given to Super Junior fans) and SONEs (the name given to Girl’s Generation fans) engaged in a physical altercation, resulting in multiple anti-fans of Girl’s Generation to shut off their lightsticks during their performance (BeBoss TV 2020). This act of fans engaging in fan wars and collectively doing an action against a particular group emulates Durkheim’s ideas of mechanical solidarity.

Referring back to mechanical solidarity, fans engaging in fan wars through acts like black oceans shows how fans strengthen their loyalty to a group. Utilizing the rituals, like the black ocean, has fans engage in activities that bond fans together over a common “enemy,” in this case, a rival K-pop group or idol. This increases the fans’ bond with the group and with other members of the fandom. Fans utilizing black oceans creates a space for fans

to share a strong commitment to the fandom's wellbeing. When considering rituals and solidarity, K-pop and integrating into specific fandoms is seen as a modern-day solution to anomie.

ANOMIE

Anomie refers to the condition that occurs in the social structure that disrupts that society's previous norms and values (Coser 1977). Members of a society that has experienced anomie are left without moral direction in their lives, leading to a sense of loneliness and disconnection (Coser 1977). Through technological advances and harsh labor markets, people now face what Durkheim explained in the 19th century. Modern society has increased feelings of disconnection and loneliness as it becomes more visible in people's everyday lives. Anomie presents itself in the rise of mental health crises or the alienation from physical society through the means of digital spaces. K-pop and its fandoms can be seen as a unique solution to these feelings of alienation or loneliness. Fans use K-pop to combat the struggles of everyday life while simultaneously giving them a purpose and goal. K-pop fandoms hold space for the fans to engage with each other and form a sense of belonging and bonding.

According to Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil (2020), the meaning of being a K-pop fan transcends the average fan experience. Fans use K-pop as a form of escapism because of how it allows their fans to escape "unwanted social realities" (Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil 2020). By engaging in fan activities, like the rituals mentioned above, fans create a space where they can connect and belong. Due to the sheer amount of content put out by the idols, escapism is an easy practice fans do in order to steer away from anomie.

Even though digital spaces have created a sense of alienation because of the lack of physical contact with others, they can also be seen as a mode in which fans escape anomie. Fans utilize online forums and content from their idol groups to feel a sense of connection. The content that comes with K-pop and its specific idol groups allows fans to familiarize themselves with the idols (Yoon and Alexandra 2024). Fans have claimed that K-pop and its fandoms differ from Western celebrities because you feel a connection with the idol through the amount of content they

consume and the personalities the idols show in their content (Yoon and Alexandra 2024). K-pop idols give their fandoms a different way of approaching the celebrity-fan relationship.

The relationship between fan and idol is shown to be considered a parasocial relationship. This parasocial relationship has had negative connotations when it comes to the relationship between celebrity and fan, but in regard to K-pop fandoms, it can be used for good. The participants in Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil's (2020) study showed how fans found motivation from the words of their idols through speeches or songs to work towards a better life and goal. The parasocial relationship held between the idol and the fan encourages the fan to look up to the idol as a role model (Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil 2020). Parasocial relationships have been found to help fans find motivation and stability in their lives due to their idols (Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil 2020). Parasocial relationships give fans a purpose for living and stabilization of their hectic everyday lives. The fans combat anomie by engaging in these parasocial relationships, further helping them with feelings of alienation or disconnection.

Digital spaces also allow fans to connect with others worldwide. Online social media platforms like X or Instagram provide fans with a way to communicate with those not residing in their area. Fans form connections and interpersonal bonds that create a mini-community among themselves (Malik and Haidar 2020). Fans also use these spaces to validate their existence as fans within their fandom (Abd-Rahim 2019). Digital spaces like social media platforms give fans a space to share their common interests with people who share the same interests, combating feelings of alienation.

To reflect on my personal life, I have made many connections through being a fan of K-pop. The fandoms I was in allowed me to gain close relationships with people worldwide. Being in a certain fandom led me to go to concerts or join online fan forums, giving me a space to communicate with fans in the same fandom. I met one of my closest friends, whom I cherish dearly, on X. We have known each other for over 5 years, and without her being in the same fandom, I would have never connected with her. This relationship made me reflect on how anomie was at an all-time high during the pandemic. To combat

anomie, I was able to connect with friends through these online forums or social media. These digital spaces gave us a sense of connection when the pandemic isolated us in our homes. During times like the pandemic, anomie can overwhelm members of a society; therefore, K-pop and being in its different fandoms helped me find a sense of belonging. My life changed in a very sudden way, and the connections I had with my online friends helped stabilize me.

Reflecting on Durkheim's ideas, being a part of K-pop fandoms can help resist anomie. As fans engage with their fandom through rituals or parasocial relationships, they continue to give themselves a way to escape the disconnection they feel in their everyday lives. Fans of K-pop are given connection and purpose through their idols or groups they look up to. Durkheim delves into how anomie can be used as an index for the types of suicide that may happen in a society (Cosser 1977). Being part of K-pop fandoms can give fans a purpose in their lives; therefore, further research can apply this as a modern solution to anomie and rates of suicide.

To conclude, Durkheim's ideas of solidarity, rituals, and anomie can be applied to K-pop fandoms and how they operate. Organic solidarity can be found in how the interdependence on translators of Korean content keeps the fandoms who do not speak Korean alive. This connects with how organic societies rely on mutual dependence, while mechanical solidarity operates in the opposite form. Mechanical solidarity in K-pop fandoms is shown through how fans engage in certain acts, like internalizing idols' values or black oceans, to further strengthen the commitment to the well-being of the fandom and idols. Rituals, like using lightsticks or fan chants, are also used to increase the connection of being a part of the fandom. This sense of connection gives fans a solution to anomie. Being a part of a K-pop fandom gives fans a purpose and allows fans to steer away from alienation. Applying Durkheim's ideas to modern-day K-pop fandoms provides insight into how classical sociological theories can still be found today. Further research can provide a more in-depth analysis of how these can apply to newer fans of K-pop or other fandoms such as Swifties (the name given to Taylor Swift fans).

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