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Julia Trzcińska, University of Wrocław

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K-Pop Fandom as a Left-Wing Political Force? The Case of Poland

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Abstract

The article explores the political viewpoints of Polish K-Pop fans that have been dragged into political discourse in Poland and strongly associated with left-wing ideology. It demonstrates the popularity of K-Pop and Poland and provides background information on why and how its fandom has been seen as an active political force. The research was based on a survey with fans themselves, sharing what was important for them, but also on observation of Polish Facebook groups devoted to K-Pop. An important task of this paper is to discuss the findings in light of the notion of youth political participation and civic engagement.

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Introduction

Since the early 2010s Korean pop music (K-Pop) has been continuously gaining popularity not only in Asia, but also worldwide. Every year brings new events and phenomena which make this topic interesting for scholars – developing not only Hallyu studies, but also broadening our knowledge on glocalization processes, media usage, or even enterprise management. Undoubtedly, one of the most important parts of this phenomenon is its fans, without whom the most detailed business plans could not come to live.

K-Pop fans are known for their fervent support for their favorite artists, but recently they gained more interest after engaging in some political actions. Some of the most notable examples were seen in the United States, where K-Pop fandom managed to ridicule Donald Trump's rally and engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement, but those examples are not exhaustive. With the increasing number of Korean pop culture fans, their actions become more visible worldwide and it is no different in Poland. What was different from other countries was the fact that the interconnection between Polish K-Pop fans and national politics was twofold. On the one hand, Polish fans became more active in expressing their opinions outside their internet bubbles, and on the other hand, they were dragged into Polish political discourse and framed as (alt) left-wing movement by journalists, publicists, and opinion leaders not linked to K-Pop in any way.

Fans all over the world have been known for their outstanding engagement (not necessarily in the spheres directly connected to their object of affection), new ways of using CONTACT Julia Trzcińska  julia.trzcinska@uw.edu.pl

media and organizing themselves. Scholarly analysis of fans has been framed in several ways, including general studies of fannish practices (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1992; Hills 2002; Hallekson 2009; Gray et al. 2017), participatory culture, and fans' use of media (Lévy 1999; Jenkins 2006; Pearson 2010; Stavros et al. 2013; The Janissary Collective 2014; Booth 2015; Bury 2017), fandom as a community (Obst et al., 2001; Hills 2015; Chadborn et al. 2017), the economy of fandom (Smith 2011; Gałuszka 2015), transnational aspects of fandom (Chin and Hitchcock-Morimoto 2013; Lee 2014), and even fan studies as an academic field (Bennett 2014; Booth 2013; Evans and Stasi 2014; Ford 2014; Turk, 2018). One of the emerging subthemes is also fan activism (Lopez 2011; Jenkins 2012; Brough and Shresthova 2012), which can be linked to more general studies on interrelations between pop culture and politics (Shea 1999; van Zoonen 2005; Sandlin and Milam 2008; Street 2013; Caso and Hamilton 2015), but also to the ones on (political) participation in the digital age (Buckingham 2000; Bennett 2008; Jenkins 2016; Shresthova 2016).

Building on these findings this paper focuses on K-Pop fans in Poland and their political engagement. Polish K-Pop fandom itself has been a topic of only a few works so far (e.g. Kida 2014; Trzcińska 2018), but I would also like to contribute by focusing on political ideologies and opinions among fans. The purpose of this study was to find out whether Polish K-Pop fans represent a left-wing approach, as was suggested by some journalists and observers, as well as to analyze their activities in the light of the previous works on fan activism and political engagement. I used an online survey to ask Polish K-Pop fans about values that are important to them and analyzed it in the context of the recent changes in Poland and non-fans' reactions to K-Pop. Following a brief history of Polish K-Pop fandom and description of its main characteristics and similarities with fandoms in other countries, I will provide some context of Polish politics and recent developments to proceed with the analysis of the survey's results. This will also allow adding to the on-going discussion on political participation among youth and could be a starting point for other research projects.

Polish K-Pop Fandom as a Part of the World Community

Although this paper focuses only on the case of Poland, Polish K-Pop fandom should be seen as a part of the world K-Pop fans' community. It shares a lot of characteristics with other countries' fandoms. Having said that, just like Howard and Lekakul observed in their work (2018), we must remember that not every fan is active online and therefore have in mind that every time we mention Polish fandom activities on Facebook or Twitter we actually mean only those fans who actively participate in fannish practices online. Those who are just "lurkers" are very difficult to analyze and we tend to have fewer data about them (Kozinets 1999). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that it is still a large community, with some of the biggest Facebook groups having around 20-30 thousand members.¹ Moreover, when speaking about characteristics that Polish fandom shares with K-Pop fandom in general, we have to mention that it is dominated by female fans and when it faces criticism from the outside, it is mostly done by men (e.g. members of sci-fi or fantasy fandoms, media or music experts, and many others), which confirms the pattern already observed in many other countries.

Lyan and Otmazgin (2013) argue that the Middle East is a region that is neither Western nor Asian and this perspective is very useful for analyzing Poland as well. The country is

situated in the region that is not easily defined (see many approaches to the concept of Central Europe itself), laying somewhere between East and West. This influences not only politics and international relations but also Pole's culture consumption. Just like in many other countries, K-Pop is not a part of the mainstream, but rather a subculture, and nothing suggests that it might change in the nearest future. However, the start of the phenomenon's popularity in Poland, unlike in Israel, is not connected to K-dramas. Although Polish TV channels did not air any K-dramas, fans actively used the internet to search for the things that interested them, skipping the Hallyu 1.0 phase, and participating in Hallyu 2.0 from the beginning. What also differs Poland is the fact that it was included in some European tours and fans were able to attend K-Pop related events in Warsaw, while Israeli researchers stated that at the time of their analysis there was no concert in their country. Some of the idol groups, such as 24K or Mont, seem to have even more popularity in Poland than in their home country – South Korea. Polish fans were able to participate in dance and vocal workshops with the first group and hear covers of Polish hit-songs *Początek* and *Weź nie pytaj* sung by the second one.³

This shows that Poland is considered to be a relatively big market for K-Pop idols and their agencies. Among groups and artists that have already had concerts in Poland, one can find 24K, Ateez, B.A.P, Block B, DAY6, Dreamcatcher, Epik High, Eric Nam, K.A.R.D, Mont, Ravi, SF9, Sunmi, UP10TION, VIXX, Zico, and others. For concerts of more worldwide popular idols, such as BTS or NCT, Polish fans still have to travel to Berlin or other European capitals.

For Polish fans, as well as for Israeli, K-Pop is both a source of collective identity and a source of distinction (Otmazgin and Lyan 2013). Fans feel a connection with other fans, but they also often agree that it makes them different from others and therefore it makes them unique and special. This phenomenon seems to be present in many fandoms (and subcultures), where people are afraid of sharing their passion with others as it might lead to being ridiculed (Kozinets 2001; Gray et al. 2007) and can share similar emotions only with likeminded people, who have the same interests (Caldwell and Henry 2005).

Not only research on fans and fandoms can be applied to understand Polish fans, but also the literature on the use of music itself. Lonsdale (2018) argues that there are several reasons why people listen to music and it is no different for K-Pop fans. According to the researcher, music helps in regulating and managing moods, expressing identity, can be a way to interact with others, and can simply be a source of enjoyment. It has also been proved that teenagers are keener on making new friends among people who listen to the same music and that music is very often a useful topic during conversations with strangers (Rentfrow and Gosling 2006), which shows strong connections between listening to music and relations with other people. Music can also play a crucial role, especially for young people, in creating an external image to others (impression management) (North et al. 2000; Tarrant et al. 2002).

The sudden growth of interest in the topic of K-Pop in Poland can be traced to Gangnam Style and BTS' popularity, but it must be stressed that there were people who were already interested in South Korean pop culture long before these phenomena. Before 2012 it was, however, a very niche interest, often connected to be a fan of Japanese culture, mostly anime. This change in popularity of K-Pop can be also seen on the chart showing some articles containing this word that appeared in Polish electronic media in the years 2010-2020 (till April 30th). Although the numbers do not show all of the materials that have been published, they do

show a trend and some turning points in K-Pop media coverage in Poland. Those few moments that got more interest in Polish media can be seen in 2012 (Gangnam Style), 2013 (a scandal in the South Korean army – singer Rain mentioned as a K-Pop star), 2018 (Pyeongchang Olympics and North Korean leader watching K-Pop). In 2019 we can observe a sudden rise of articles. Numerous pieces were published on former f(x) member Sulli's death and then on molka scandals and Goo Hara's suicide. This shows a change in the overall importance of K-Pop idols for the Polish audience, as we did not see as many articles on a very similar case of Kim Jonghyun's passing in 2017.

Although the numbers are still not overwhelming which proves that K-Pop cannot be thought of as a part of the mainstream culture in Poland, recent years have shown not only the growth of K-Pop fandom but also a change in recognition of K-Pop itself among Poles, which partly can be assigned to its fans.

Interestingly, however, K-Pop in Poland started to be associated with certain values, ideologies, lifestyles, or even views on sexuality. From a very niche "hobby", known only to people who were ready to spend hours to find limited information, it became a topic present in Polish political discourse. The rise in popularity of K-Pop seems to coincide with the growing polarization of Polish society. Although this phenomenon was present in Polish society for quite some time, all recent changes in democratic standards, public sphere included, can be traced back to Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) victory in parliamentary elections in 2015 (Freedom House 2020).⁴ The moment when mainstream opinion leaders dragged K-Pop into this polarized public sphere was already described, but it didn't explain why a music genre was associated with certain values, and therefore even with an ideology.

Admiration for Asian values was found among Israeli fans in the research conducted by Lyan and Levkovitz (2015) and it was explained as "longing for something that is lacking in one's own culture." What is surprising, however, is that the values that are being ascribed to K-Pop and therefore its fans in Poland don't have much in common with Asian values. Regardless of their gender, K-Pop idols are considered to be very feminine, which leads to simplified assumptions about their sexuality. Although it may be surprising to see sexual orientation when discussing values/ideology, in Poland the conservatives argue that being gay is rather a part of a lifestyle that one can choose and therefore it is often associated with left-wing movements threatening traditional family. Sexual minorities are still a controversial topic in Poland and being called 'gay' very often implies strong, negative meaning. Although it may be surprising to see sexual orientation when discussing values/ideology, in Poland the conservatives argue that being gay is rather a part of a lifestyle that one can choose and therefore it is often associated with left-wing movements threatening traditional family. Colorful music videos and clothes are also being associated with the rainbow – the symbol of the LGBT+ community. Oh (2015) defines western female fandom as viewers who tend to have a heterosexual orientation (at least in a public space), use English as one of the languages they are most comfortable speaking, and either live in countries in the West or, in a society under the influence of western culture. Although Polish K-Pop fandom is certainly under the influence of western culture and fans very often can speak English well enough to understand subtitles on various videos or messages from their favorite idols, they cannot be defined as having a predominantly heterosexual orientation. Many discussions on K-Pop Facebook groups show that their members quite often identify with sexual orientations other than heterosexual – at least in their declarations that they want to share

with other fans. As it was observed only in a form of comments and discussions, it is hard to estimate the numbers and proportions, but the sheer fact of this kind of discussions reappearing regularly, show that it is an important topic for Polish K-Pop fans, who cannot be seen as people who “tend to have heterosexual orientation.” It seems that for Polish K-Pop fandom being “different” from the majority of the society correlates on various levels. Nevertheless, the associations that Poles, in general, have when hearing about Korean pop culture is certainly very different from the one that the South Korean government would use in their nation branding.

The first time K-Pop fandom appeared in a politics-related discussion was when the fans decided to react to a survey published by TVP Info – a television news channel run by the Polish public broadcaster (Telewizja Polska – TVP). One of the channel’s programs entitled *Strefa starcia* (Eng. Clash zone) prepared an online survey asking netizens whether they are in favor of adopting children by homosexual couples or not. As it is widely known in Poland that public broadcaster represents the conservative ideology of the ruling party, it was obvious that the creators of the survey hoped for most of the respondents to react negatively to such a question. The outcome was different, however, as the survey was discovered by Polish K-Pop fans who used their social media channels to organize themselves and vote collectively in favor. Right-wing journalists and Twitter users, seeing K-Pop fans’ avatars with their favorite idols, believed that the survey was attacked by internet trolls or that someone bought votes to spread the so-called “LGBT ideology.”

The market value of 25K votes in this poll can be estimated at around PLN 30,000. Votes that can be bought in India, Pakistan. Such polls have influenced social media opinions since 2014. @StrefaStarcia had no idea that the #lgbt surveys are ‘rigged’. Now the winner will be the one who pays more (Polityka w sieci (@Polityka_wSieci), tweet published on 17.03.2019, translated from Polish).

On the other hand, K-Pop fans thought it to be their success and with the increased online activity on the subject, the whole case became better known to a wider audience, causing left-wingers to present K-Popers (K-Pop fans in Poland are called K-Poperki, or K-Poperka in singular form; the suffix -ka/ki is a feminine ending) as their fighting squad on Twitter. They were believed to be politically active, representing the leftist approach and tech-savvy.

The only hope is that by 2023 [when the next parliamentary elections in Poland will be held – J.T.], enough K-Popers will get full age and have electoral rights (Mistycyzm popkulturowy, post published on Facebook on 13.10.2019, translated from Polish).

Although it was rare to find some political posts on Facebook groups of Polish K-Pop fans, I decided to make the first attempt to analyze, whether they can really be seen as a politically active group with clear political views as others seemingly believed them to be.

Methods

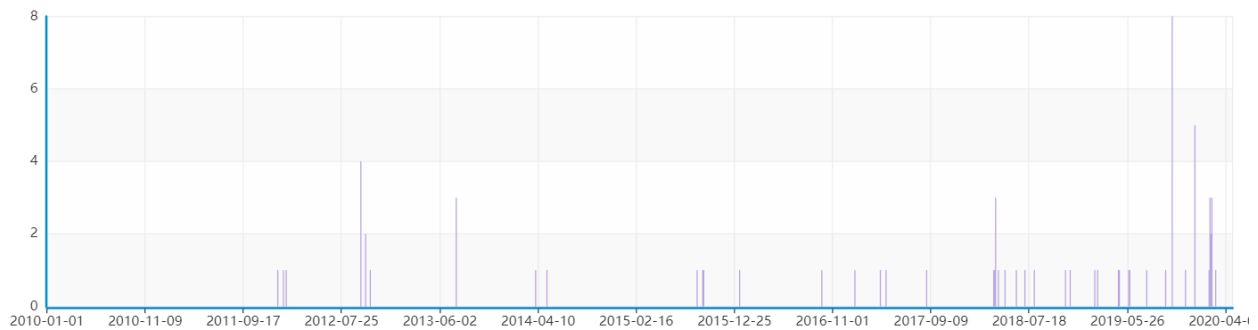
Seeing these escalating political discussions where K-Pop fans were used by both right- and left-wingers I asked the fans themselves about their political views, participation, but also views on some important in Polish politics topics. Research on the relations of music genres and political preferences has been conducted since the late 1980s and most of its findings focused on liberal-conservative dichotomy. Unsurprisingly, fans of rebellious music were rebellious themselves (Robinson et al., 1996), punks were less accepting of authorities, fans of heavy metal more open for 'Machiavellianism' (Hansen and Hansen 1991). Although most of the research focused only on the United States, the general finding was that liking of liberal or conservative musical styles is associated with respectively liberal or conservative attitudes (North and Hargreaves 2007). It is very difficult, however, to place K-Pop on this liberal-conservative spectrum. Innovative when it comes to music production does not necessarily mean liberal in terms of lyrics or message. Nevertheless, it didn't seem to be a real question in the Polish discourse as K-Pop was already associated by people from the outside of the fandom with not only liberal views, but in some cases even alt-left ideology.

During my research, I faced some obstacles, one of the biggest being the problem of preparing the survey and posing questions. From the previous research, I knew that a big part of Polish K-Pop fandom is young adults or even teenagers who might not only not have an opinion on topics related to the state's influence on the market, but might even have problems with understanding the questions at some point. Basing my questions on Heywood's research on political ideologies (2017), I tried to make them simpler and easier to understand for younger respondents as well, but it must be stressed that because of that the answers might not show the complexity of fans' opinions on various topics. Connected to the same reason was the attempt to make this survey quite short to engage more fans and obtain more responses. Polish K-Pop fans are quite eager to help and fill out surveys, but they prefer short polls that can be answered directly on Facebook rather than separate files that take more time to answer. The first version of the survey was filled out by a few teenagers aged 15-17 and after hearing their feedback on the complexity of the questions, I prepared the final version.

The final survey consisted of 22 questions in Polish. The first three questions were very general. I asked participant's age (divided into six groups: 10-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36+), gender (woman, man, don't want to choose), and place of residence (village, small/medium town, large city, e.g. capital of the province). The second section focused on issues related to political ideologies and asked the respondents to assess 19 statements on the five-point Likert scale. Most of them were connected to political ideologies, both in terms of economic freedom and personal freedom (e.g. "Private property should be eliminated, which means that we should share everything" – alt-left, "The rulers should act as little as possible and the market should be free, meaning that economic rules will shape the situation themselves and the state should not interfere" – libertarianism, "I am interested in other cultures, but I consider the Polish nation better than others" – nationalism). Some questions concerned democratic values (e.g. "Freedom of speech is crucial for the good functioning of the state", "The sphere of politics should be available to everyone without restrictions for reasons of class, property, religion or race"), but also some current issues, present in Polish political discourse such as feminism (e.g. "In most societies, the male perspective is given priority and women are treated unfairly") or environmental issues (e.g. "Environmental issues should be prioritized by all countries in the world"). Two questions were related to individualism versus collectivism dichotomy and two to the Polish K-Pop itself and its ability to deal with issues related solely to

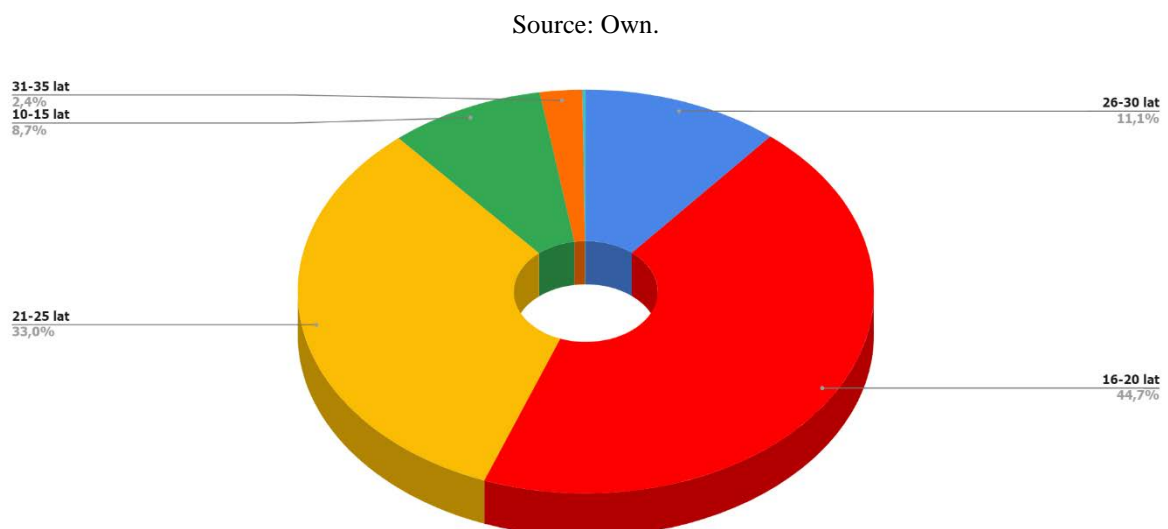
K-Pop and the potential of collective solving other problems as well. To avoid suggesting answers, the sequence of the questions was random and different for every respondent.

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES OF “K-POP” IN POLISH ELECTRONIC MEDIA (01.01.2010-30.04.2020)



Source: Frazeo.pl

FIGURE 2. AGE OF RESPONDENTS.



Without explaining why I needed those answers, I asked the fans to share what was important to them. I shared only the fact that I would be inquiring about the values and their stance on various topics, but I definitely avoided sharing the information that the questions referred to specific ideologies and political viewpoints. Interestingly, some people commented on the survey itself that the questions were very controversial in their opinion and it “made them think.” The answers were analyzed, and the quantitative data was backed up with some observations from the Polish K-Pop-related Facebook groups as well. Once again, I would like to stress that the survey was filled out only by people who are members of those groups, so it does not necessarily reflect the opinions and attitudes of all Polish K-Pop fans. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that only members of those groups and fans that are active on Twitter are the ones

that engage in organized actions described above that attracted the attention of people from outside the fandom.

Results

In November 2019 the survey was filled out by 506 Polish fans; not all of the questions were answered by all of the respondents, but the smallest number of answers for a question is 503. The majority of respondents were aged 16-25 (77,7%), which proves that Polish K-Pop fandom is rather young, but definitely not dominated by teenagers anymore.

It is hard to determine whether this data reflects the actual age of the majority of the fandom or maybe this kind of questions attracted older fans, but it shows that Polish fandom is rather young, but also that its age structure changes with older and older fans being active online as well. It also changes when it comes to fans' gender. In the survey, 92,9% of respondents identified as women, 4,9% as men, and 2,2% didn't choose. This demonstrates a subtle, but visible growth of the number of male and non-binary fans. The survey's respondents were also mostly residents of big Polish cities (48,1%). 30,9% of them lived in small cities and 21% in villages.

Table 1. shows their Likert scale-based assessment of the aforementioned statements, including the percentage of those who "definitely agreed" with each statement, mean, and standard deviation. The answer "I strongly agree" was represented by "1", which means that the smaller the mean, the more fans tend to agree with each statement. Six out of nineteen questions got more than 50% of answers with a clear statement of agreement on the fans' side.

71% of respondents agreed that the state and religion should be completely separated. The strong reaction of fans can be understood better if we take into account the context of Polish politics being strongly influenced by Catholic Church officials and political engagement of catholic media (such as TV Trwam or Radio Maryja). It has also been proved that priests during masses sometimes suggest whom the believers should vote for in the elections (both parliamentary and presidential).

The second issue that seemed very important for Polish fans was the problem of climate change. 64% strongly agreed that environmental issues should be prioritized by all countries in the world. The third and fourth were related to democratic standards. According to 61% of the respondents, freedom of speech is crucial for the good functioning of the state and 58% strongly agreed that the sphere of politics should be available to everyone without any restrictions. More than 50% of fans were also convinced that freedom is the highest value and that everyone should be equal.

The percentage of respondents who chose "definitely yes" answer shows which issues were the most important for Polish fans. Another important value is the mean showing which issues were more generally agreed on, even if not always strongly. The issue with the smallest mean and therefore with the most answers agreeing with this statement is "Freedom of speech is crucial for the good functioning of the state", but very closely we can also find "Environmental issues should be prioritized by all countries in the world" and "The sphere of

politics should be available to everyone without restrictions for reasons of class, property, religion or race.”

Table 1. Polish K-Pop Fans’ Political Orientation: Survey Results

Survey question (1- “I strongly agree”, 2- “I rather agree”, 3-“I don’t know/ It’s hard to say”, 4- “I rather disagree”, 5- “I strongly disagree”)	Mean	SD	“I definitely agree” (1) answer percentage
P1. Private property should be eliminated, which means that we should share everything.	4.21	1.11	2%
P2. Governments should actively reduce inequalities among their citizens, even at the cost of very high taxes for the richest people.	2.43	1.22	18%
P3. The rulers should act as little as possible and the market should be free (meaning that economic rules will shape the situation themselves and the state should not interfere).	2.27	0.94	11%
P4. I am interested in other cultures, but I consider the Polish nation better than others.	4.34	1.02	1%
P5. Freedom is the highest value.	1.55	0.66	51%
P6. I believe that the state and religion should be completely separated.	1.42	0.83	71%
P7. The fact that some occupy higher positions, have more power or prestige is due to the fact that they were "created" for it.	3.99	1.12	1%
P8. Social and economic reforms should only be made as a last resort.	2.99	1.24	4%
P9. Everyone, regardless of any factors, should be equal.	1.71	0.95	50%
P10. Human rights can sometimes be restricted in the name of so-called higher good	3.29	1.35	5%
P11. In most societies, the male perspective is given priority and women are treated unfairly.	2.01	0.95	28%
P12. Environmental issues should be prioritized by all countries in the world.	1.45	0.75	64%
P13. Community goals (e.g. family, group, society as a whole) should be more important than the goals of an individual.	2.75	1.15	5%
P14. The goals of every person and his / her freedom are the most important.	1.7	0.68	38%
P15. Freedom of speech is crucial for the good functioning of the state.	1.43	0.63	61%
P16. The equality of all people is more important than the individual freedom of each person.	2.66	1.16	7%
P17. The sphere of politics should be available to everyone without restrictions for reasons of class, property, religion or race.	1.5	0.73	58%
P18. Polish K-Pop fans should only deal with issues related solely to K-Pop itself.	3.22	1.35	9%
P19. Polish K-Pop fans have the potential to solve problems not only related to K-Pop itself, but also, for example, to social issues.	2.21	1.09	22%

Source: Own.

The results show that Polish K-Pop fans were concerned about the things that are not necessarily linked to any ideology. Most of them were just a part of the democratic system, such as freedom of speech or equality in the sphere of politics. Polish K-Pop fans showed a lot of concern regarding environmental issues which is very common among post-millennials (or Gen-Z) and cannot be assigned only to this group. They disagreed with both alt-left (e.g. “Private property should be eliminated, which means that we should share everything” got the

mean of 4.21) and alt-right proposals (e.g. “I am interested in other cultures, but I consider the Polish nation better than others” with the mean of 4.34).

Moreover, the statements regarding economic issues were the ones with the most answers revolving around “I don’t know/It’s hard to say.” Statements arguing that governments “should actively reduce inequalities among their citizens, even at the cost of very high taxes for the richest people” and that they “should act as little as possible and the market should be free” received very similar answers (2.43 and 2.27 respectively) although they stay in stark contrast to each other. This might mean that Polish K-Pop fans do not have well-established views on economic issues and that their political views should be considered more focused on worldview and values.

Correlation of specific statements also seems to prove that fans’ opinions do not form any specific ideology that would be dominant among the respondents. Fans were consistent when the questions regarded freedom or equality, but the correlation was much less visible with more ideology-oriented statements (e.g. P7 and P8 which are both representing a conservative view on society).

Very interesting were the views of Polish K-Pop fans on their own role as a potential acting force. 22% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that “Polish K-Pop fans have the potential to solve problems not only related to K-Pop itself, but also, for example, to social issues”, but on the other hand 9% strongly agreed with the opposite statement arguing that Polish fandom should focus only on K-Pop related issues. This shows that Polish fans generally agree with the opinion that they have the potential to “do more”, but it’s not a dominant opinion among them and they don’t necessarily see themselves as an acting force.

Polish K-Pop fandom in action

The results show that Polish K-Pop fans have some areas that are especially important for them and they are ready to fight for it, but it does not mean that they openly and knowingly support left-wing ideologies. Nevertheless, Polish K-Pop fandom is definitely open-minded and cares for freedom and equality. Although it seems unlikely that the Korean government planned for K-Pop to be associated with a liberal approach, for many young people living in the countries where Korean pop culture is not a part of the mainstream, this is exactly what happened. One of the examples can be seen in Polish K-Pop fans strongly supporting the LGBT+ community. It could be observed on June 1st, 2020, when Pride Month started.

Around 5 PM in Poland and midnight in South Korea [5], most of the groups simultaneously added rainbow flags to their names to show their support for the LGBT+ community during Pride. This support became even more visible after President Andrzej Duda’s words in mid-June 2020. During his presidential campaign, he screamed at one of his rallies: “they are trying to convince us that they are people, but this is just an ideology”, referring to the LGBT+ community. This sparked a lot of cases of aggression towards this community members as well as a lot of protests against such statements. On the photos from the events supporting the LGBT+ community and protesting against Andrzej Duda’s words, it is easy to spot some fans wearing their favorite groups’ logos (e.g. BTS) or even slogans such as “Maybe if Duda stanned Loona” written on a rainbow background.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Polish K-Pop Fans: Survey Questions

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	
P1																				
P2	.307																			
P3	.021	.031																		
P4	.104*	.064	.032																	
P5	.078	.075	.207	-.017																
P6	-.055	-.012	.095*	-.245	.111*															
P7	.119**	-.068	.042	.045	.036	.011														
P8	.202	.178	.189	.188	.151***	-.022	.132**													
P9	.210	.294	.123**	.010	.133**	.017	-.072	.142**												
P10	.072	.108*	-.014	.177	-.035	-.136**	.119**	.123**	-.066											
P11	.096*	.165***	.047	-.102*	.124**	.171***	.002	.059	.097*	-.107*										
P12	.069	.157***	.135**	-.053	.239	.112*	-.071	.118**	.187	-.049	.180									
P13	.174	.167***	-.007	.157***	-.038	-.081	.060	.127**	.090*	.200	.001	.084								
P14	.109*	.106*	.189	.041	.384	.072	.049	.220	.150***	-.028	.075	.170***	-.055**							
P15	-.061	-.029	.188	-.030	.238	.094*	.041	.005	.156***	-.068	.039	.159***	-.067***	.132**						
P16	.246	.289	.049	.048	.066	-.001	.033	.141**	.310	.150***	.066	.112*	.261	.159***	.097*					
P17	.072	.091*	.098*	-.043	.136**	.097*	-.086	.010	.282	-.072	.160***	.123**	.053	.052	.208	.150***				
P18	-.022	.015	-.036	.146***	-.070	-.091*	.127**	-.002	-.062	.153***	-.098*	-.110*	.054	-.046	-.101*	.065	-.110*			
P19	.115**	.113*	.144**	-.028	.157***	.055	-.020	.216	.099*	-.027	.124**	.189	.104*	.084	.158***	.015	.155***	-.453		

Note: df=503, *p<0,05. ** p<0,01. ***p<0,001.

Figure 1. Polish K-Pop Groups on Facebook: Changing their Names on June 1st, 2020.



Source: own.

This fact was also quickly noticed on the internet where K-Pop fans were humorously mentioned alongside with every other group that openly criticized the president, such as the European Union, the deans of the universities, but also Facebook fanpages with memes or CD Projekt company. The ‘forces’ unifying against the president were even portrayed as Sauron’s army in the battle for Minas Tirith from the Lord of the Rings movies, jokingly showing them as orks standing against the fortress.

Figure 2. Photos of K-Pop Fans during Protest Supporting LGBT+ Community in Wrocław, Poland



Source: Agencja Gazeta/Tomasz Pietrzyk (Gazeta Wyborcza Wrocław)

Although it might seem like just a joke, it shows that K-Pop fans were strongly acknowledged for their fight against discrimination. Polish public opinion started to be more interested in the topic in January 2020, when K-Pop fans forced a major Polish TV channel TVN to fire one of their reporters after he made fun of BTS' Jungkook. After a racist program where the hosts were laughing at idol's appearance and suggesting that it is too feminine for him to be considered the most handsome man of the year, Polish fans started trending #dziendobrytvnisoverparty (Dzień Dobry TVN [Eng. Good Morning TVN] is the name of a morning show aired by TVN) on Twitter and demanded apologies for the group. Fans rightfully criticized not only racist comments, but also lack of journalistic objectivity and fact-checking as the reporter asked only elder Poles on the market what they thought about Jungkook while showing them a photo of another BTS' member – J-Hope. In the end, one of the reporters responsible for this footage was forced to leave and Discovery, Inc. (the owner of TVN) issued an official apology towards BTS's fans and the idol himself. After this event, many Polish media outlets became interested in K-Pop as a phenomenon (Rzeczpospolita 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Wyborcza, 2020), but it was also another case of using K-Pop in political discourse in Poland. TVN was heavily criticized by public broadcaster TVP for lacking journalistic standards (TVP 2020), but less than half a year later in one of their own programs the host was making fun of BTS yet again, which led to trending of #TVPisoverparty.

Figure 3 An Internet Meme “LGBT Activists Attack the President”



Source: Fiksacje Seksualne Prawicy on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/fiksawka>)

Polish K-Pop fans fight for their favorite idols, but also for what they see as important issues. In June 2020 they ‘took over’ the hashtag ‘IStandWithJKRowling’ (trending in Poland on June 7th with more than 38k tweets) and flooded it with gifs and videos of their

favorite idols in response to Harry Potter's author controversial words referring to transgender people. These kinds of undertakings led to even more jokes on K-Pop fans being a political force. Paweł Opydo, a YouTuber and podcaster, shared on Facebook his "plan for Poland," which included: 1) to delegalize marriages; 2) to give the power to k-popers; 3) to announce Harry Styles as the president of the world. A similar mood was expressed by Fiksacje Seksualne Prawicy (Eng. right-wing's sexual fixations) fanpage on Facebook: "If you don't what's going on, it's probably K-Popers."

This phenomenon was present even in the 2020 presidential campaign in Poland. During Q&A with President Andrzej Duda, he read and answered a question regarding K-Pop. Fanpage Andrzej Duda Memes asked the candidate: "Mr. President, we have already heard many promises (...), but what about the most important issue, i.e. the banning of K-pop. There is no denying that this is a key issue for the security of the country." Andrzej Duda answered the question in a similar joking manner: "Ladies and gentlemen, I will say 'yes, I think that K-pop is an opponent that I have to boldly compete with' (...). K-pop fans can remain calm, there will be no outlawing. Like any competition, it meets my respect, but I will be boldly competing with it." Although both the question and the answer were only a joke, it proves that K-Pop is not only present in political discourse in Poland, but it is also acknowledged by the top politicians in Poland.

Discussion

K-pop has been challenging traditional values worldwide since it became an influential subculture. It starts with the division suggesting that women are objects to be watched, while men are the audience, which K-Pop reversed. Its audience is mostly female, and fans often fantasize about male idols (Oh 2015). Male dance is being associated with sex, which undermines the aforementioned traditional division, but also the belief that men do not dance. Experts argue that in this sense K-Pop can be an element of female empowerment for those who dream of a different model than "strong male and submissive female." Oh argues as well that K-Pop male dance is neither fully masculine nor feminine and it expresses fluid and hybridized gender, which opens discussion on defining traditional gender roles. Moreover, in a 2011 work Jung wrote as well that Indonesian K-Pop fans cover dance practices deconstruct normative gender representations, which in turn reinforces the construction of new femininity.

This aspect can partly explain why K-Pop is being associated with the LGBT+ community that is also accused of attacking traditional values in Poland. Nevertheless, it does not explain why K-Pop is being associated with left-wing ideologies. What can be certainly said is that K-Pop fans worldwide are tech-savvy and they use social media very efficiently. It was proved not only in Poland but very recently also in the United States of America,

where K-Pop fans used social media to undermine Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma as well as to flood racist hashtags on Twitter with K-Pop fancams and their idols' photos (Lorenz et al. 2020; Sinha 2020; Curto 2020; McCurry 2020). Although these events could prove that the values that are being ascribed to Polish K-Pop fans are very similar to those of their American counterparts, it actually proves a generational change that we experience. People who reserved most of the seats in Tulsa only for the sake of not showing up and leaving the venue half-empty were mostly "K-Pop fans and TikTokers." This probably stresses not a particular set of values (or at least not only) but rather skills that members of this group possess and the sense of solidarity it provides. K-Pop fans are very efficient not because of their radical views or ideology, but because they gained the skills of mobilization and organizing on social media required to support their favorite groups (and each other), such as streaming videos on YouTube, trending hashtags on Twitter, commenting on Facebook, and so on. It is paired of course with an open-minded viewpoint and being passionate about some issues, but not necessarily with an organized ideology. Moreover, as the Polish case shows, the aforementioned issues are important for young women in general, not only fans. A recent study conducted by Korolczuk proved that the youngest female voters are the most progressive part of Polish society (Chrzczonowicz 2020). Young women are concerned about human rights and environmental issues. When asked what they feared the most, women aged 18-39 mentioned above all the climate catastrophe and the collapse of health service. Later they named the intensification of nationalist movements and Poland's exit from the EU.

Polish K-Pop fandom's actions strongly correlate as well with studies on fan activism. Experts argue that fans (regardless of the object of affection) master awareness and participation and while for some of them those are the objectives in and for themselves (Jenkins 1992, 2012), others think that it should be seen as components of functioning democracy (Sandvoss 2013). Moreover, Sandvoss writes that "fandom is the most personal, most dedicated form of media consumption and production – articulating a sense of who we are and strive to be through our fan engagement with the object of fandom" and explains that politics could become the object of affection as meaningful as any media text. As early as in the 1990s, long before K-Pop became a worldwide phenomenon, Fiske argued that fans are a group of marginalized people who were confronted with the mainstream media landscape and found themselves in an unbalanced situation with a much stronger opponent. Similarly, works on music and pop culture show that it can be seen as a form of resistance. Street (2003) provides examples of the folk songs of rural England, the work songs of slaves, anti-war protest songs, and illegal raves. This explains why fandom connected to pop culture texts, being originally a disadvantaged group itself, stands in defense of other groups who are marginalized (e.g. LGBT+ community), but it also shows strong interrelations between fannish practices and democratic system mechanisms.

Although it seems that being a part of fandom should facilitate both the understanding of participation as well as the position of underprivileged groups in modern societies, modern

days youth is often being criticized for being politically inactive and detached from reality. More and more researchers are proving, however, that this might not be true. The fact that young people do not register to vote in the United States, does not mean that they do not care about the world around them. Youth often feels excluded from the language and processes of politics (Buckingham 2000). What fandom members get from being a part of it, is most importantly a sense of solidarity that empowers individuals to make decisive steps (Jenkins 2012; Shreshtova 2016). For many decades there was just one model of the informed and engaged citizen that is being projected upon young people until today. Kligler-Vilenchik (2016) argues that in this information-rich environment people might even avoid all news content if they are forced to be informed about everything and all the time. Media texts and pop culture allow people to understand even very complicated issues. The scholar provides an example of using werewolves in the magical world as a representation of discriminated minority groups. Similarly, Harry Potter books were used by the Harry Potter Alliance to discuss real-life problems and modern society challenges (Slack 2010).

Although some scholars see fannish practices as a way to substitute macro-politics with micro-politics which they see as a potentially dangerous direction (Buckingham 2000), others prove that media texts and fandoms are actually a mean to bridge those two aspects (Slack, 2010). Moreover, it is also discussed that informal, cultural engagement can be in fact analyzed as a form of political participation (Brough and Shresthova 2012) – the one that youth allegedly shuns.

Fandoms and fan activities discover new forms of political engagement that is as valuable as the traditional model that we knew. Although many people tend to criticize pop culture as being “less worthy” and distracting, new approaches prove that it actually provides means and resources for people to come together and be mobilized to social action (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012). Bennett (2008) draws attention to yet another problem of youth engagement sites sponsored by the government and NGOs. Having clear but outdated visions on proper citizen activities they are often seen as inauthentic and just irrelevant to young people. They prefer spontaneous and creative forms of being active online and offline to the forms we are used to.

Fan communities are mostly known for their engagement in actions and events directly connected to their objects of affection, such as protests against canceling TV shows, flashmobs encouraging entertainment companies to organize a concert. Their activism, however, exceeds those examples. Fandoms have long supported charities that were either tied to the theme of a given movie or TV series or because some key actors or producers were involved (Jenkins 2012). There are cases of activism that started as a smaller case project and evolved to a much more general, societal action, such as the example of The Last Airbender fans who were trying to affect ticket sales, but later on started a large-scale campaign dedicated to the cause of promoting the general casting of Asian Americans and other minorities (Lopez 2012).

Similarly, K-Pop fans worldwide have demonstrated their engagement in charity. Instead of sending their favorite idols birthday gifts, they often support schools for the poor or plant trees in the name of this idol. In Poland BTS' fans gathered on one of the beaches to clean it as a form of celebration of one of the members' birthday. It can be argued whether it comes from their willingness to be active and make a change or rather their need to be acknowledged by the idol, but it is hard to deny participation and engagement. A good example of a help-oriented action invented by K-Pop fans for other fans could be a hashtag invented by Stray Kids' fans. The group members were known for providing support for their fans during their live streams on social media. It was hard for them, however, to respond to all of the fans and to be always active online. Inspired by their idols, Stays (the name of the fandom) came up with an idea of #StaysOpenUp where fans could post their worries and problems using this hashtag and the others would engage in conversation, sharing similar concerns or pieces of advice on how they managed to overcome it, strengthening the sense of solidarity in the community.

K-Pop fandom rarely uses the so-called cultural acupuncture (Slack 2010). Slack (2010) defined cultural acupuncture as "finding where the psychological energy is in the culture and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world." It does not have many stories that can be connected to real-life problems like Harry Potter books. It seems that it is much more similar to Madonna fandom that was described by Fiske (1992). Madonna fans stressed that being a fan empowers them, helps them find meanings of their own sexuality, and strengthens independence. The interviewees explained that dressing like their idol made people look at them which was a source of real self-esteem that was so important especially for young girls. Polish K-Pop fans, following their idols, quite often dye their hair to bright colors, practice Korean-style makeup and wear colorful clothes, which could be helpful for them in a very similar that it was for Madonna's fans in the 1980s.

Although Polish K-Pop fans didn't prove to have one ideology or political movement that they support as a group, they certainly proved to be politically active – but differently than the one we know from our textbooks. They embrace new forms of activism and political participation online, but they can also be seen protesting on the streets and therefore bridging the micro- and macro-politics on the one hand, and online and offline forms of expressing their opinions on the other.

Conclusion

My focus in this paper has been on the Polish K-Pop fandom and its political engagement. Although many people jokingly or seriously saw a strong left-wing political force in Polish K-Pop fandom, they overlooked the real potential behind it. Polish K-Pop fans are mostly tech-savvy post-millennials, trained in social media-based support for their favorite groups.

They are also in majority young women, who are proved to be more progressive than the other parts of Polish society. On top of that, not only K-Pop's reception itself challenges traditional values, but also being a part of a subculture and non-mainstream media fandom is a source of solidarity among its members that allows them to take decisive actions and be heard. Both the survey results and fandom's online and offline observations proved that its members have issues that are very important for them and that they are willing to fight for them. Their means of doing so differ, however, from what we know because of the new tools that social media provides and because of the understanding of what activism and civic/political engagement can mean.

What also changes are the divisions on 'serious' political matters and 'trivial' pop culture. Political rhetoric uses pop culture references and at the same time becomes a topic for TV shows, movies, song lyrics, and many more. This interconnection is for Jenkins (2012) a striking feature of postmillennial politics.

Nevertheless, further studies on K-Pop fans and politics are much needed. Previous works on wars between K-Pop fans in mainland China and their counterparts in Hong Kong (Leung 2016) or nationalist movements in South Korea and Japan after Hallyu (Chen 2018) proved that those connections are strong and evolving with changes in K-Pop reception worldwide. Another interesting subtheme to explore could be the negative aspects of K-Pop fan activism, such as the cases of *sasaeng* activities (i.e. stalking their favorite groups, hiding in their hotel rooms, sneaking to their apartments, or even writing letters in their menstrual blood), or the cases when fans in South Korea questioned Tablo's education often saying that it was necessary for the society to know the truth and using the "common good" card (Jung 2012).⁶ Although it can be seen as a form of activism its goal was rather questionable.

Undeniably, K-Pop became a worldwide subculture, finding fans in many countries – sometimes sharing similar cultures, and sometimes providing cases of entirely different understandings of the same media texts and cultural products. It certainly can ignite political activism and participation among its fans, but not in the traditional way with left-right division and voting as the only political act that can be performed by an informed citizen. Young people in Poland, by sharing interests, build their own communities that strengthen their sense of solidarity. K-Pop itself empowers them to take the path less traveled and be open about it. Moreover, their use of electronic devices and social media shouldn't be interpreted by using old frames. This feeling was well captured by a telecommunication company Telekom recently. In their commercial Billie Eilish, teenage idol herself said:

"Look at us. Just a bunch of kids who are screen-obsessed. Disconnected. Not in the moment. (...) But you know what? When it comes to what we really care about, difference we can make means even more now. Maybe next time they see us staring at a screen, and they ask us what we're doing on it, why don't we show them what we're doing with it?"

The advertisement ends with the tagline: “We’re here for this generation, and what they do next,” which could be a motto for youth-criticizing policymakers as well.

Julia Trzcińska got her Ph.D. from the University of Wrocław, where she has been working as a research and teaching assistant for 5 years, specializing in political communication. Her research interests include social media, soft power, but also South Korea and K-Pop.

Notes

1. As of 08.05.2020 some of the biggest and most well-known Facebook groups had the following number of members: K-Pop Poland – 23 101, BTS A.R.M.Y. Poland – 37 350, KPOPowy Spam xd – 30 878.
2. Aside from Empress Ki that was aired in 2015-2016, when K-Pop was already popular in Poland. The drama filled the slot of a Turkish period drama Kurt Seyit ve Sura.
3. The first cover was noticed by Polish mainstream media and some short information about it could be seen on TVN24 channel or Gazeta.pl website.
4. This division was especially visible in the recent presidential election in Poland, where the two candidates – the incumbent president Andrzej Duda, representing the Law and Justice Party and Warsaw’s mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, representing the opposition - both got more than 10 million votes. Their results were so similar that exit polls couldn’t indicate the winner, because the statistical error ($\pm 2\%$) for this method was bigger than the difference (0.8%).
5. Polish Facebook groups often use Korean time, especially when celebrating idols’ birthday or anniversaries.
6. Sasaeng is a fan who invades the idol’s private life (Kor. sa - “private,” saeng - “life”).

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