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Who are the Swedish K-pop Fans? Revisiting the Reception and Consumption of *Hallyu* in Post-*Gangnam Style* Sweden with an Emphasis on K-pop

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Abstract

During the summer and autumn of 2012, K-pop finally got its breakthrough in Northern Europe due to the *Gangnam Style* world phenomenon and also in Sweden wherein K-pop previously had had a very small fan base. This article consists of a study of the reception of *hallyu* in Northern Europe after 2012 and with Sweden as the case study and national context and with an emphasis on K-pop. Given that it is highly unlikely that any K-pop artist will ever again be able to reproduce and replicate PSY's unique and momentary popularity in such a peripheral European country like Sweden, the article tries to offer some insights into Sweden's K-pop fandom base of today by the way of a mapping of the fan world and interviews with 8 Swedish K-pop fans: What has happened with the reception of K-pop in Sweden since *Gangnam Style*, how big is the fan base, who are the fans and why are the fans attracted to K-pop? The article begins by introducing the context of *hallyu* and K-pop in contemporary Sweden and continues with an overview of the Swedish K-pop fandom world and an account of the interviews and at the end the findings are summarised and reflected upon.

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Introduction: Studying *hallyu* and K-pop in Sweden

During the summer and autumn of 2012, K-pop finally got its breakthrough in Northern and Western Europe in the form of one of the South Korean music industry's most unlikely candidates - PSY and his song and music video *Gangnam Style*. For a while *Gangnam Style* was the most or the second most sold iTunes song in Northern and Western European countries like the UK, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Luxembourg and the Netherlands and also in Sweden, where K-pop previously had had a very small fan base if not counting the fact that a surprisingly high number of K-pop songs are written and composed by Swedes (Hübinette 2012; Lindvall 2011). The sudden and huge popularity of PSY's viral music video sparked Swedish flash mob events and the forming of Swedish K-pop dance groups and seemed to at last make Korea's long cherished globalisation drive, soft power strategy, nation branding project, cultural diplomacy offensive and pop cultural dream come true, and which Ingyu Oh and Hyo-Jung Lee (2013), and Gunjoo Jang and Won Paik (2012)

and John Lie (2012) have scrutinized and written about, namely the final international breakthrough for *hallyu* including in Northern and Western Europe and thus at last making K-pop mainstream in the whole of the Western world.

At least that is most probably what the Korean Embassy thought when the biggest *hallyu* event ever and at least so far took place in Sweden and in central Stockholm on September 22, 2012 when 400 people gathered and created a flash mob dancing together to *Gangnam Style* while at least around 1,500 had come to watch the unique spectacle (Fahl 2012). During the event, some of South Korea's middle-aged and male embassy personnel somewhat awkwardly walked around among the crowd dressed in business suits and distributed brochures about Korea focusing on traditional Korean music, art, religion and culture as there were no official brochures at all about K-pop at that time or at least not stocked at the Korean Embassy in Stockholm. I also attended the event as a curious bystander and of course also as a researcher having been engaged with issues concerning Korea and East Asia in a Swedish setting for many years and I noticed that afterwards many of the distributed brochures were left on the ground as if the Swedish children, teenagers and young adults who had participated in the *Gangnam Style* flash mob event did not care that much about Korean traditional medicine, old Buddhist temples or classical Korean court music.

Gangnam Style's 2012 success was almost surreal in a Northern European country like Sweden, which differs fundamentally from both the Western European and the North American settings as well as from Australia and New Zealand and not to mention both Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. This is given the fact that the region of Northern Europe hosts very small Korean and Asian minority populations and that all too many Northern Europeans' and Swedes' harbour specific negative and degrading attitudes towards Korea and Koreans, and towards East Asia and Asians in general including such ingredients as a lingering colonial-style racism, a very weak position for Asian men in particular, and the widespread existence of racist so-called "gook humour" (Hübinette and Tigervall 2011).

This article consists of an examination of and a reflection on the reception of *hallyu* in Northern Europe after 2012 and with Sweden as the case study and national context and with an emphasis on K-pop. The article is partly a continuation and an update of my article "The reception and consumption of *hallyu* in Sweden: Preliminary findings and reflections" from 2012 which covered the state of *hallyu* in pre-*Gangnam Style* Sweden (Hübinette 2012). The article tries to offer some insights into Sweden's K-pop fandom base of today by the way of a mapping of the fan world and interviews with 8 Swedish K-pop fans: What has happened with the reception of K-pop in Sweden since *Gangnam Style*, how big is the fan base, who are the fans and why are the fans attracted to K-pop?

Interestingly or even weirdly enough even if it is of course just a sheer coincidence, while my former study was conducted and written just before *Gangnam Style* became a world hit during the summer and autumn of 2012, this article was compiled and written just before and partly also during the time when BTS managed to become the first K-pop band ever to top the US Billboard 200 album sales chart with the album *Love Yourself: Tear* in May 2018

while its hit song *Fake Love* managed to reach number ten on the US Billboard Hot 100 list during the same month (Sisario 2018). Another fascinating aspect of BTS' extraordinary success during the spring of 2018, and which the *The Guardian's* Sam Wolfson pointed out, is the fact that the band's songs are performed in Korean thereby contributing to the recent trend in more and more non-English language songs on the US Billboard charts:

In the 16 years between the summer of the Macarena in 1996 and the viral success of Psy's Gangnam Style in 2012, there wasn't a single song performed in a language other than English to hit the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100. In the past three years though, the proportion of non-English tracks on Billboard has been increasing. This has, in large part, been down to the success of reggaeton artists and, in particular, Despacito, the Daddy Yankee and Luis Fonsi hit that had a 16-week record breaking reign at No 1 last summer. Despacito opened the door for other Latin tracks. In 2016, the year before its release, there were just four Spanish-language tracks in the top 100 all year. In 2017, there were 19. (Wolfson 2018)

This new linguistic development within popular music reminds of Hae-Joang Cho's (2005) reflection that *hallyu* is more than just a South Korean phenomenon as it on a deeper level signals a global shift from the centuries' old world hegemony of the West which is rapidly waning at this very moment to the rise of the non-Western world including both Asia and Latin America and in the near future also for sure Africa. The fact that this study is based on empirical material and interviews that date from and that were collected and conducted before and partly also during the time when BTS reached its top positions on the US Billboard lists, and which was also replicated on Swedish iTunes where the album *Love Yourself: Tear* reached the number one position while the hit song *Fake Love* reached the number six position, has to be underscored and even if I am well aware that this might be a bit problematic it is arguably also still too early to say something about the longer effects of BTS' recent success when it comes to the K-pop fan base of Sweden.

This study is based on eight interviews with *hallyu* and K-pop fans in Sweden that were conducted during the first half of May 2018 as well as on a wide range of *hallyu* and K-pop related material that has been collected and taken from social media and mainly from Youtube, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, from print media and mainly from Swedish newspapers and magazines and from analogue media and mainly from Swedish radio and television reports. I also took part in the K-Pop Party in Stockholm on June 5, 2018 when the South Korean Young Bros' DJs performed together with the Korean-American rapper Flowsik and in the K-Pop World Festival on June 9, 2018 which both took place in Stockholm and while the first event was a concert organised by Young Bros and a club scene called Klubb Blå the last one was a contest organised by the Korean Embassy with Swedish fans dancing to K-pop hits.

My own disciplinary background and theoretical approach comes from a mixture of Korean studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and critical race and whiteness studies and I am particularly interested in who the fans are with regards to age, gender, race and class

and why they are attracted to *hallyu* and listen to K-pop. It must also be said that I am adopted from Korea and I am myself not a regular consumer of K-pop and nowadays not even of Korean pop culture in general but I work as a teacher in intercultural studies at Karlstad University in Sweden where some colleagues actually have children who are K-pop fans and I live in a minority dominated suburban neighbourhood in southern Greater Stockholm where I sometimes actually see minority girls practicing K-pop dance in a park. In my former study, I concluded that the general *hallyu* fan base of Sweden could broadly be divided into two groups:

Many if not most fans of K-pop are non-white working-class and often belong to the so-called 2nd generation, children of usually non- Western migrants, who live in segregated and underprivileged areas and suburbs dominated by a non-white population in the bigger and middle-sized cities of Sweden. The other group of fans belong to the educated white middle-class in the bigger cities, but there are also white working-class consumers of hallyu in small towns. Not surprisingly, quite many but not all of the non-white fans have a Pacific Asian origin — they are adopted Koreans and adopted Asians, Asian migrants, both 1st and 2nd generation, and mixed Asians, but they can also have an origin from for example Chile, Turkey, India, and North Africa. (Hübinette 2012, 519).

In this article and contrary to the former one I will more or less solely focus on K-pop as K-pop seems to have become the main category or genre of the Korean wave in contemporary Sweden even if it was originally Korean cinema that sparked the first Swedish interest in Korean cultural productions and products already in the 1990s and early 2000s and although there is still a small fandom of Korean film among circles of cineastes. Furthermore, K-drama has never really made it yet among a general Swedish audience in the way how Korean feature films were once quite popular even if there are today viewers of Korean television dramas among some K-pop fans and perhaps especially among immigrants and their children in the working-class suburbs coming from countries and regions where K-drama is big such as from Asia and the Middle East and certain parts of Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America.

Finally, even if the Seoul-Stockholm Korean Film Festival that took place between 2007-17 does not exist anymore, now and then especially Korean arthouse films are still screened at the two biggest Swedish film festivals in Stockholm and Gothenburg respectively, a few Swedes still blog about Korean dramas, and sometimes but seldom nowadays compared to how it was before Korean *manhwa* is translated into Swedish while on the other hand so-called K-beauty has slowly but steadily entered the Swedish market during recent years and today there are several Swedish companies importing K-beauty commodities to Sweden (Svedberg 2017).

Who are Sweden's K-pop fans?

Concerning previous research there is still very little done when it comes to studying various aspects of *hallyu* and K-pop in Sweden except for my own former study and the 2013 book *Loverholic Robotronic* by Elin Mellerstedt and Johanna Stillman (2013) which is a unique insider account of the somewhat weird world of the Korean music industry written by two Swedish K-pop fans who have travelled to South Korea and visited for example SM Entertainment and taken part in music concerts and K-pop related events. The two authors who actually encountered K-pop for the first time through Taiwanese pop music have also been behind the K-pop blog *dancingonourown.com* and they have lectured on *hallyu* and K-pop in Sweden and introduced K-pop for a wider audience through the Swedish media and they have also been the main proponents for persuading and convincing Swedish language speakers to pronounce K-pop in Swedish and not in English (Samuelsson 2013; Thörnkvist 2013).

There are also a few quite recent Swedish student theses on a B.A. or M.A. level written on *hallyu* and apart from those that are merely historical accounts of the birth and development of the Korean popular music industry Rywon An (2010) has for example examined the issues of sexuality and homoeroticism in Korean idol fan fiction from a queer theoretical perspective (Ekström 2015; Flodman 2015; Knutsson 2015; Schön, 2015; Wahlberg 2017; Williams Jolin 2017). To continue, Agnes Wahlberg (2017) has looked at how the seemingly permanently viral Swedish YouTube personality, influencer and game commentator Felix "Pewdiepie" Kjellberg and other white Swedish men have mocked and poked fun at the so-called *kkonminam*-like BTS members and at Asian men in general as being gay, androgynous and feminine as well as being ugly, unattractive and ridiculous. This disparaging view on Korean and Asian men from the side of white Swedes is unfortunately all too widespread and also socially accepted especially in Northern Europe and in Sweden where the hegemonic white masculinity that is dominating there more or less sees itself as the total opposite of East Asian masculinity firmly rooted as it is in the myth of the Aryan race or the Nordic race. At the same time, Korean and Asian women are on the other hand objectified, Orientalised and sexualised in an explicit and even violent manner in the contemporary Northern European and Swedish context. The negative image of Korean and Asian men from the side of both white men and white women was highly present in 2012 when PSY's world hit also hit Sweden and when racist views on and attitudes towards Asian men were openly expressed on social media and in the so-called blogosphere. Such deplorable attitudes and opinions coming from the side of white Swedes are in other words far from how Korean male K-pop artists and Korean masculinity have been received in Asia (Jung 2011).

Pernilla Knutsson (2015) has in her M.A. thesis on K-pop fans in Sweden included a questionnaire which 256 Swedish K-pop fans participated in out of whom 88% were women and 74% between 12-20 years old and most of them lived in the big and middle-sized cities of Sweden and only about 15% had been K-pop listeners before 2010 and most of the participants had encountered K-pop for the first time on Youtube (46%) followed by through friends (37%). To continue, 70% had participated in K-pop concerts, events and activities and

according to Knutsson's study when asked why they were attracted to K-pop some stated that they appreciated that K-pop is so different from American and Western popular music and also that it is less sexualised, and that the music videos are tantalising as they are so visual and well produced seamlessly combining song and dance and almost addictive to watch.

Additionally, K-pop fans turn up now and then in a few theses studying fangirls such as among second generation minority girls in the suburbs or among visitors to Swedish fan conventions focusing on East Asian and mainly Japanese pop culture while Stephanie Flodman (2015) has made use of Swedish K-pop fans as informants such as Julyssa Diaz who is the founder of the company Kpop Nonstop and Elin Törnqvist who is the founder of the digital magazine *Hallyu.se* in her M.A. thesis which is looking into to the use of social media within the Nordic music world in general (Görander and Hansen Karaduman 2014; Hargefeldt 2016; Lönn 2017).

Flodman's thesis from 2015 also contains a questionnaire which about 110 Swedish K-pop fans took part in and the results from the questionnaire clearly show that without the Internet and the social media platforms and outlets there would probably be no K-pop fan base in Sweden at all apart from a few individuals: 44% of the respondents stated that they encountered K-pop for the first time through social media, 74% through YouTube and 14% through blogs, and 38% through friends and family members, 87% followed fan made pages, accounts or channels on (in hierarchical order) Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Tumblr, 45% had created a fan made page, account or channel themselves on (in hierarchical order) Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, 91% followed a K-pop artist or a K-pop group on social media and a majority extended their "contacts" with their favourite artists or groups by following other activities where they perform – 76% watched their appearances on television shows, and 72% followed television dramas and 54% movies wherein they are acting.

Finally, some respondents also stated that they found K-pop by the way of Japanese popular music or J-pop and others by the way of eSports while some also stated that they have started to study Korean language as they became K-pop fans and the total number of Swedish students going to Korea to study Korean or any other subject has also increased from 277 in 2012 to 352 in 2016 as well as the number of students studying Korean at Stockholm University which is the only Swedish university offering Korean language courses (Universitetskanslerämbetet 2017).

So how then does the Swedish K-pop fan base look like in post-*Gangnam Style* Sweden and just before BTS' incredible US Billboard achievements? To begin with, a total search on the keyword "K-pop" in the Swedish media text database Mediarkivet which contains practically every Swedish printed and nowadays also digital newspaper and magazine since the 1990s and including digital news reports coming from both the public service and private radio and television channels the following annual results clearly show that there is a sharp before and after *Gangnam Style* in Sweden just like in practically all

Western countries when it comes to Swedish media coverage on K-pop (See <https://www.retriever.se/product/mediarkivet>).

Table 1. Total number of media texts on “K-pop” in the Swedish database Mediearkivet

Year	Publications
2006	1 (article on the Korean music game “DJ Portable Max”)
2007	1 (article on the mixed Korean American artist Amerie)
2008	0
2009	0
2010	2 (article on a K-pop concert in Singapore)
2011	4 (on a K-pop event and on a K-pop fan)
2012	144 (“the <i>Gangnam Style</i> year”)
2013	122
2014	110
2015	72
2016	139
2017	287
2018	January 1 - June 30: 379 (“the BTS year”)

Deeming from the Swedish media text statistics, after 2012 it might well be argued that K-pop has almost become a mainstream topic in the Swedish media or at least not something like a cherished subcultural secret among the few fans that existed before that year and even if there is a decrease in the number of Swedish media texts on K-pop between 2013-2015 the number rises again in 2016 and practically explodes in 2017-18 due to BTS and the last number only covers the first six months of 2018.

Another finding according to the material that I have collected for this study is that when it comes to physical events if there were a few night clubs and dance scenes playing K-pop once a month or even less than that before 2012 there have been regular and annual events ever since then such as for example the so-called K-pop World Festival which the Korean Embassy in Stockholm organises since 2014 and whose winners receive an invitation to perform at a KBS show in Korea. Furthermore, the previously mentioned Kpop Nonstop company which was founded in 2012 in connection with the *Gangnam Style* craze has today developed into becoming the main organiser of night club events, K-pop concerts, dance workshops, cooking classes and fan meetups for the country’s K-pop fans and at the beginning of May 2018, Kpop Nonstop’s Facebook page, and Twitter and Instagram accounts had 8,803, 1,720 and 1,865 members and followers respectively although not all of them are Swedes (See <https://www.facebook.com/KpopNonstop>, https://twitter.com/Kpop_Nonstop and <https://www.instagram.com/kpopnonstopsweden>). On September 27, Kpop Nonstop arranged its first public event and invited the then SM Entertainment associated DJ group BeatBurger from Korea to make it “feel like a club in Hongdae” at the House of Culture in downtown Stockholm and on November 2, 2013 Kpop Nonstop stood behind the first K-pop

concert in Sweden, in Northern Europe and the Nordic countries ever when VIXX performed at Oscarsteatern in Stockholm (Björk 2013).

The previously mentioned digital magazine *Hallyu.se* which was also founded in 2012 nowadays covers not just Korean pop culture but all things Korean in general and the magazine has about 7,600 followers on Facebook, 430 followers on Twitter, 350 subscribers on Youtube and 270 followers on Instagram as of May 2018 and as all texts are in Swedish at least the first number might be an indication of something like the total number of K-pop core fans in today's Sweden and at least among Swedes being active in social media.¹ Additionally, another big Swedish Facebook group is Swedish Kpop Fans which had 3,401 members as of early May 2018 while the association Hannuri which was founded in 2014 and which focuses both on K-pop and on Korea and on things Korean in general had about 850 Facebook members in May 2018 (See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/408618522486209> and <https://www.facebook.com/hannuriforening>). In line with the conscious soft power policy of the South Korean state, the Korean Embassy in Stockholm has since 2016 also organised the Korean Culture Festival in Stockholm in August every summer. The festival is co-organised by Korea related associations and Korea related companies in Sweden and at the festival venue Korean food can be consumed, Korean products are exhibited and sold and taekwondo shows take place and there is always a K-pop event staged during the one day festival and sometimes also K-pop artists are flown in directly from Korea to perform (See <http://www.koreanculturefestival.se>).

There are also nowadays several K-pop dance groups such as Chrystalight in the second biggest Swedish city Gothenburg and the Swedish capital city group ToXIC\$ which won Stockholm City's culture prize in 2018 and which since 2014 regularly arranges a K-pop Cover Dance Festival or the Kpop Plot Twist Dance Contest (Kamgren 2014). Almost all of these dance groups are consisting of girls and young women and that was also what I saw and experienced myself when I attended the so-called Changwon K-Pop World Festival in Stockholm on June 9, 2018 and when only a few boys and young men performed on the scene while perhaps 80% or so of the audience was composed by females. This was more or less also the demographic composition of the audience that took part in Young Bros' and Flowsik's concert in Stockholm on June 5, 2018. Also, at that event about 80% of the participants were women.

It is worth noting that both the dance groups Chrystalight and ToXIC\$ and the two previously mentioned event audiences as well as most of the founders of Kpop Nonstop and many of the writers of *Hallyu.se* are not just dominated by women – they are also highly heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, religion and nationality as perhaps half of the fan base if not more consists of minority fans and in practice mainly minority and non-white fangirls. This is in other words something which has not changed throughout the years and since my first article: The fans, the consumers and the audiences of K-pop in Sweden are in other words still predominantly dominated by girls and women, and by minority and non-white girls and women although of course white Swedish girls and women still comprise the single biggest demographic group. At the June 2018 concert with Young Bros and Flowsik

for example perhaps 60% of the visitors were white Swedes and the rest were from the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and various parts of Asia out of whom many were mixed Asians while only a handful were Koreans and most of them actually adoptees like myself.

In 2012, the total number of Swedish inhabitants with a foreign and minority background stood at about 25 percent and today it has increased to a whole one third of the total population of Sweden according to Sweden Statistics and among them a bit less than 2 percent or about 200,000 derive from Northeast and Southeast Asia taken together while 20,000 have some kind of origin in South Korea and out of whom half are adopted and about one out of three are mixed thereby dwarfing for example the Asian American population which today makes up around 6 percent of all US inhabitants (Statistiska centralbyrån 2018).

However, as Sweden is today a Western country whose demographics can well be described as super diverse according to Steven Vertovec's (2007) term the minority aspect of the K-pop fan base has become even more important to consider in today's Sweden given that the proportion of Swedish Asians and Swedish Koreans is still relatively small while inhabitants who derive from the Middle East and Africa dominate the Swedish minority population. As most of the non-white minority population and in particular those who derive from the Middle East and Africa also belong to the working-class or even the under-class it is also probably fair to say that a substantial proportion of the Swedish K-pop fans come from that social background although it is more difficult to say if a working-class background is more or less common among the white Swedish girls and women who listen to K-pop.

Continuing with the eight interviews although I cannot in any possible way claim that they are representatives of the whole K-pop fan base of Sweden they were between 16-41 years old, 5 were women and 3 men, and 1 was a mixed Filipino, 1 an adopted Korean, 1 a second generation Iranian and 5 white Swedes. To begin with, what is striking is not the female dominance nor the minority presence but the fact that 2 informants were around 40 and 2 around 30-35 while the rest were around 16-25 even if it is difficult to say why as many as half of the informants were older than the usual teenage and young adult K-pop audience attending events. The interviewees were found by placing a "Call for informants" on and in various social media platforms and groups that are frequented by Swedish consumers and fans of K-pop such as the Facebook group Swedish Kpop Fans and Kpop Nonstop's Facebook page. The interviews with the informants that contacted me voluntarily took place at meetings and events or by phone or by e-mail and I posed the same or similar four questions to all of them:

How did you get in touch with K-pop in the first place and what or who made you start listening to K-pop?

Do you listen alone, or do you belong to a context or a group with others who also listen to K-pop?

Do you feel and experience that many people listen to K-pop today in Sweden and has

its popularity decreased or increased?

Do you visit different K-pop events and, if so, which ones?

Even though the interviews were rather highly structured some of the informants also told me about other details apart from them being K-pop fans and I will from now on refrain from any attempts to interpret the interviews in a quantitative manner and instead account for them one by one and beginning with the two fans of Asian descent who are both men and the second generation Iranian who is a girl. For all three of them, there seems to be an explicit or at least implicit element of identifying with the non-Western, Asian and Korean elements of K-pop including a sense of pride, and explicitly so at least when it come to the adoptee. The Korean adoptee lives in Stockholm and regularly attends K-pop concerts and events and he told that he listens to K-pop as part of what he called his “decolonialisation process” meaning that he has grown up in a more or less totally white Swedish environment and now as an adult he wants to consciously consume Korean and other Asian popular cultural products. The adoptee fan is in other words well aware that he has been raised and socialized among white people and naturally and accordingly also acquired white tastes and styles and white aesthetical ideals including white beauty and body ideals and one way for him to maybe not get rid of them as that is probably not fully possible but to at least create a distance towards them and thus become conscious about them is for him to be both a K-pop and a *hallyu* fan as he also watches Korean cinema and drama regularly.

I interviewed the 20 years or so mixed Asian who lives in Gothenburg and who seems to listen to K-pop mainly by himself when BTS suddenly made it on the US Billboard chart and he said that “the biggest boy band in the world in 2018 consists of Asians while in the 1960s it was The Beatles and in the 1990s Backstreet Boys” thus echoing the idea that the hegemony of the West is finally on the verge of disappearing now. He also added that he actually does not think that China will be the main cultural power for Asians living in the West but Asian Americans, and that the fact that more and more Asian Americans are playing lead roles in Hollywood films is a positive sign for the future and he also mentioned that the fact that so many of the K-pop fans in Sweden, in the US and in the West in general belong to a minority and are non-white is also a symbol of the declining power of white men, white people and in the end perhaps whiteness itself.

The second generation Iranian girl who lives in a mid-sized Swedish city just became an adult and she said that she has listened regularly to K-pop ever since she was in her early teenage years and she also said that she mainly listens by herself and she added that her impression is that more and more people listen to K-pop in Sweden compared to when she herself started to become a fan. She mainly watches music videos and other K-pop related film clips on Youtube and she also listens to K-pop on Spotify and her impression is that the majority of fans are still white Swedes or at least in the mid-sized city where she lives.

Going over to the 5 white Swedish fans that I interviewed among whom 1 was a man and 4 were women two of them can be said to be seasoned and veteran fans from the early

2010s or even perhaps in one case from the late 2000s. These two “oldies” in their early 30s who both live in Stockholm and who once were deeply into K-pop and visited concerts also in other European countries both told that they are nowadays content that they are not alone anymore listening to K-pop and they are happy when they notice that K-pop songs are actually now and then played on the Swedish radio or heard as background music in certain restaurants, pubs and clubs. The male informant told that although his more intense fan years are probably over once and for all by now he described that he listens to K-pop like other ordinary Swedes listen to American pop music and which basically means more or less on a daily basis and as a routine-like habit and which is certainly not very common yet among 30-ish old white Swedes in general.

He also said that he was moved to tears when he saw the two Korean teams marching in together during the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang and he was also moved when the Swedish radio suddenly played BTS’ song *DNA* at the time of the very same Olympics. The female veteran fan told that she is not anymore a fangirl on a daily basis but she also seems to have integrated Korean pop culture in her life and she also said that the new and young fans of today are probably not even aware of older bands like TVXQ or DBSK which she actually saw in a music program show in Seoul at the beginning of 2018. Among the audience composed of about 400 people she said that only four were white and all white women and the rest were Koreans and other Asians and many were Japanese women who were between 20-70 years old.

One informant was a white Swedish girl who is 16 years old and she is perhaps a more representative example of today’s both core and hardcore K-pop fans of Sweden. She lives in a small town and she told that she first heard K-pop as she saw a K-pop song being on a top list and possibly on iTunes and after that she checked around for more songs on Youtube and on Spotify and after that she became an ardent fan. She prefers to listen to K-pop by herself although she is well aware that there is an active fandom subculture nowadays and also in Sweden and she is also noticing that the popularity of K-pop is increasing among people around her. She also added that most fan activities take place in Stockholm and in the big cities and she hopes that similar events will be arranged also in small towns like her own in the future.

The other two white Swedish women who were interviewed were around 30 and one of them who lives in a mid-sized city frankly stated that she started to listen to K-pop as part of her “30-years crisis” as the Korean boy bands remind her of the boy bands of her childhood such as the UK band Take That. The same woman said that she also listens to Korean indie music and she seems to be aware that as a white Swedish woman who are a little bit more than 30 years old it is still extremely rare to consume Korean music and she therefore asks herself “Is it a flight from reality and a way of coping with stress? Or is it a result of too many years as a single woman?”

Finally, the other somewhat older white Swedish woman who is also around 30 and who lives in Stockholm told that she came in contact with K-pop for the first time when she

visited South Korea and as she is a music producer by profession her first relationship to K-pop was a professional one but as time went by she became more and more fascinated by the trainee and factory-like aspects of the Korean music industry which are so culturally different from Sweden and the West. She also added that even if she listens to K-pop nowadays and now and then she distances herself from the more naïve fans who believe that “Korea is a pink and glittering paradise where there are no problems” and probably meaning that she is more aware that South Korea is not a perfect country and society like at least some Swedish teenage K-pop fans might believe who have never been to Korea at all.

Swedish K-pop fans between retrospective nostalgia and a desire for another masculinity

After this overview of the current state of the Swedish K-pop fandom world it is clear that in post-*Gangnam Style* Sweden, K-pop has gained a firm foothold and managed to attract a fan base which can well be compared to the fans in many other European and Western countries in terms of entrepreneurial-like fan companies and enthusiastic fan activities although the number of Swedish consumers and listeners of K-pop remains relatively small compared to the much bigger audiences in North America, Australia and New Zealand and in certain parts of Western, Southern and Eastern Europe. At the same time, today’s Swedish fans are without doubt much more numerous, much more active and also much more visible in the Swedish media and in the Swedish public sphere compared to the situation before 2012 and the core group of Swedish K-pop fans might perhaps consist of upwards to 10,000 individuals.

Furthermore, although it is absolutely clear that girls and young women dominate the K-pop fandom world of Sweden and that a disproportionate number of them belong to a minority and are non-white and also working-class it is more difficult to generalise about why Swedes regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and class are attracted to and listen to K-pop. A mapping of the Swedish fans by the way of the collecting of both social media, digital media, print media and analogue media material dealing with *hallyu* and K-pop and through visiting, observing and participating in fan events like I have done also misses the K-pop listeners who never attend events and who are not even active in social media and thereby leave very few fan traces behind themselves.

The eight interviews that I conducted gave some insights into why at least some Swedes are attracted to K-pop but given the relatively small number of informants and the heterogeneity among them in terms of among others age, sex, race and region it is not possible to make any clear generalisations about them and it is also not easy to compare Swedish fans to fans in other countries. For example, middle-aged fans of K-pop exist in other countries as well and not the least in Japan and minority fans including diasporic Asian fans also exist elsewhere such as in the US and in France but that does not mean that they are comparable to the Swedish middle-aged fans and to the Swedish minority and Swedish Asian fans when it comes to why they are attracted to K-pop (Oh 2011; Sohn 2012; Ter Molen 2014).

However, it is possible to say that at least some of the Swedish minority fans and the Swedish fans of Asian and Korean descent are attracted to *hallyu* and K-pop as they more or less consciously seek out something which is not American, not British, not Western and not white, and which they can identify with racially and for some also politically while some of the somewhat older and middle-aged white Swedish female fans seem to listen to K-pop due to nostalgic reasons and perhaps also as an exotic and possibly also romantic escape as the Korean boy bands remind them of the Western boy bands of the 1980s and 1990s. It is more difficult to say something about the children, teenagers and young adults when it comes to the attraction of K-pop apart from the obvious visual spectacle of the music videos and scene shows, the catchy melodies and the highly disciplined and almost militaristic hyper-choreographed dancing styles which seem to be addictive to both practice and watch. Apart from these immediate response-like aspects of K-pop it is also according to my interpretation possible to discern the promise of and the desire for another kind of masculinity which is not the same as the hegemonic white masculinity of Sweden in spite of the degrading attitudes to Asian men that otherwise are so common among Swedes. Taken together, Sweden's still relatively small but vibrant and for sure also growing K-pop fan base is therefore in most parts well in line with what Ingyu Oh (2013) calls forward learners in the sense that they are attracted to K-pop as it for them is a sign of a near future and a new world which is less Western and less white, and more non-Western and more non-white and one way of adapting to this coming world is perhaps to consume *hallyu* products and listen to K-pop.

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Notes

1. See <https://www.facebook.com/hallyuse>; <https://twitter.com/Hallyuse>; <https://www.youtube.com/user/hallyuse> and <https://www.instagram.com/hallyuse>.

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