

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

*Hallyu* is a phenomenon which started K-Pop trend outside South Korea. Korean Wave or also known as *Hallyu* refers to the global popularity of Korean popular culture which emerged in Southeast Asia and mainland China since the late 1990s. Korean culture that is spread through *Hallyu* consists of dramas (K-drama), Korean music (K-Pop), movies, fashion, beauty, and food. It has now become a symbol of national pride for many Korean citizens (Kim, 2016).

*Hallyu* as a form of soft power in Korea's foreign relationship started with the spreading of K-dramas in Asia region such as China, Taiwan, and Japan in the late 1990s, this phase is called *Hallyu 1.0*. South Korea then continued their Korean Wave influence beyond East Asia that are called *Hallyu 2.0* which includes K-Pop, *Hallyu 3.0* includes Korean culture, and *Hallyu 4.0* which is K-Style (Kim, 2015).

*Hallyu 2.0* which consists of K-Pop was the peak of the Korean Wave that managed to reach the entire world outside Asia. It introduces not only Korean music, but also Korean fashion and beauty. In the Korean music industry, K-Pop idols represent perfection through their bodies and visuals which created an exceptional beauty standard. K-Pop industry that is dominated by men would mostly give more freedom to male idols about their choices while female idols would generally go through "forced" body and visual transformation in order to appeal to the male gaze (Jonas, 2021). This is one of the examples of gender discrimination in the K-Pop industry.

Discrimination is defined as an unfavourable treatment shown towards anyone based on their gender, race, social status, etc (Pokharel, 2008). It is recognized as a threat to the legitimacy of the social system as it signifies that members of some groups are not treated equally (Blodorn, O'brien, Kordys, 2012). Discrimination is acknowledged as a form of inequality and unfairness issue for women around the world (Pokharel, 2008). Men are less likely to receive unfair treatment that is considered as gender discrimination than women, this shows that men may also be less likely to offer a fair judgement in favour of gender discrimination cases towards women (Blodorn, O'brien, Kordys, 2012).

Gender basically consists of two sexes, men and women. Gender discrimination is an unfair treatment received by an individual or group due to their gender. Gender discrimination occurred due to the creation of a gender discrimination atmosphere by society, norms, culture, and people (Shastri, 2014). Gender discrimination is a common issue that can be found everywhere, including the South Korean workplace. According to Korea Ministry of Employment and Labor 1987, gender discrimination in South Korean workplace is an exclusion and limitation of women in the supply and use of goods, facilities, and services, as well as their right in obtaining freedoms in political, social, and cultural aspects (Patterson & Walcutt, 2013). This signifies that gender discrimination also happens in the K-Pop industry (workplace) as well as its fandom.

The K-Pop industry is considered as a workplace influenced by a shift of ideological and gendered consequences that comes from both ideological assumptions and traditional South Korean belief of gender roles (Jonas, 2021). The rapid development of K-Pop created a rousing euphoria called the K-Pop wave. The

K-Pop wave that is spreading has influenced young people all around the world. An unprecedented obsession towards K-Pop celebrities or idols during the past decade is a result of the influence of K-Pop wave on young people all over the world (Ding & Zhuang, 2021).

The spread of K-Pop wave has created several generations of K-Pop groups. The third and fourth (newest) K-Pop generation are part of K-Pop groups who are currently still active in the K-Pop industry. BTS and BLACKPINK are the two biggest K-Pop groups from the third generation. Following them, the fourth generation of K-Pop groups such as Stray Kids, (G)I-DLE, and Le Sserafim have also managed to climb the popularity both in South Korea and outside Asia although still not as big as their seniors which are BTS and BLACKPINK. These fourth generation of K-Pop groups' popularity helped the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* to spread even further all over the world.

The spread of K-Pop wave creates communities named K-Pop fandom which are filled with a group of people who fancies the same idols. The direct impact of K-Pop's existence in the Korean Wave generates the presence of fans and groups of people in K-Pop communities called fandom (Fibrianto, et al, 2019). K-Pop fandom build their own identity by showing their distinctions and uniqueness to non-fans, as well as to distinguish them from other K-Pop fandoms (Jang & Song, 2017).

K-Pop fandom is always linked to a negative stereotype which is fanaticism. Fanaticism is defined as a form of excessive enthusiasm and extreme love towards fanatical objects that can lead to aggressive behaviour such as spreading hatred and anger on social media (Fibrianto, et al, 2019). These negative stereotypes of

fanaticism which identifies K-Pop fandom shown through their actions that are willing to do anything to prove their loyalty and love towards their idols (Ananda & Windah, 2021). Initial assumptions about K-Pop fandom are they always seen as a group of people who are obsessive, tacky (someone who has an unusual obsession towards something that can't be understood by other people), and strange, whose obsessive interest is lay on a particular cultural object that being used as a "shield" to pursue the awkwardness of their social life (Tartila, 2013).

This obsessive behaviour of K-Pop fandom can be seen in social media or other discussion forums such as Quora. Quora is a Q&A based social site where users create a forum by asking and answering questions, and identify the best answers by upvote and downvote features. (Patil & Lee, 2016). Despite its short history, Quora managed to reach 150% growth in one month and almost achieve 900% in one year (Wang, et al, 2016). Although it has the same concept as other Q&A based social sites such as Yahoo Answers, Quora is more succeed in directing their users to the high-quality content or questions with qualified and informative answers. Whereas Yahoo Answer are filled with low-value questions which it difficult for the users to find useful content (Wang, et al, 2016). Quora is also filled with a large number of expert users who posted high-quality answers in forums. Different from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter whose users tend to follow celebrities in order to get their updates, Quora users tend to follow expert to get knowledge and information that they find interesting (Patil & Lee, 201). These are the reasons why K-Pop fandom often creates a forum to discuss about their idols in Quora.

K-Pop fandom creates a discussion about an issue that is happening in their community or idols' life. From this, something called gossip culture is formed. Elmer as stated in Eckhaus and Ben-Hador (2017) added that gossip is classified as human's unscheduled form of communication. Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington also stated in Eckhaus and Ben-Hador (2017) that gossip is associated with negative, judgement, and insignificant opinion about someone or something. Gossip is considered as a form of communication that is being used to maintain or destroy someone's circumstance and pursue self-interest to raise individual or social meaning (Feeley, 2012). Celebrity or idols' life became the main consumption for K-Pop fandom's gossip culture. Female celebrities are constantly being the discourse of gossip culture in K-Pop fandom's discussion. Female celebrities are often being scrutinised about their age, behaviour, lifestyle, look, which is a result of a deeply entrenched of double standard in society (Fairclough, 2012). This situation in which female idols' life is constantly being the consumption of K-Pop fandom gossip created another culture that is known as cancel culture.

Cancel culture is a phenomenon where an individual is being targeted for harassment in social media. All kinds of public figures, from politics to Hollywood to the music industry have been called out and badly criticised by the people for unacceptable behaviour. This form of exclusion created by the people is known as "cancel culture" defined as people's attempt to call out and boycott an individual (who commonly has an influence) as a response to problematic remarks and behaviour that they have expressed in a public forum (Gopal, Velasquez, Wu, 2022). Cancelling someone means an expression of people to withdraw their attention from the targeted subject that is being cancelled, whose actions, speech,

and values are so offensive, and people will no longer contribute to enjoy the subject's presence with their time or money (Clark, 2020).

Celebrities are people who have influence that are constantly marketed on different media which allows judgments from public, this leads to them being held strictly against the standard of social acceptability in which may be cancelled if they are not fit to those standards (Velasco, 2020). Cancel culture often gives a negative impact towards the subject that is being cancelled on social media. Thus, cancel culture is now debated to be the subject of the cancellation itself due to the exaggerated negative effects that are received by the targeted subject or people (Ng', 2020). Compiling gender discrimination, obsessive behaviour, and cancel culture, K-Pop fandom is bound to these aspects and female idols are often being the victim of these phenomenon.

Cancel culture has been a way for K-Pop fandoms to harass or express their disappointment towards their K-Pop idols' scandal. One of the common scandals that is being faced by K-Pop idols is the accusation of bullying. There have been many idols who were cancelled because of bullying scandals although it was still an accusation. However, the ones that usually get many harassments after these accusations come to the surface are female idols. For male idols, fandom will usually stay neutral until the scandal is proven true. Whereas, for female idols, they usually suffer from the targeted harassment on social media although the scandal is still under investigation by their agencies.

Big agencies or entertainment houses in South Korea consist of SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and the newly emerged which is HYBE Entertainment. These agencies are called the "Big Four" by K-Pop

fandom. The big influence that these four agencies have towards the grow of K-Pop wave is that they created groups that managed to climb the popularity into known by fans worldwide, such as Super Junior from SM Entertainment, BIG BANG from YG Entertainment, 2PM from JYP Entertainment, and BTS from HYBE. These big agencies rely on their groups' popularity and image in order to maintain their position as one of the biggest entertainment companies in South Korea. Thus, idols are expected to have clean records and free from scandal accusations such as bullying as it could make a bad impact for the agency.

Bullying scandals are a common phenomenon that happens in the K-Pop industry. This phenomenon happened to four K-Pop idols which are Taeyong of NCT, Soojin ex member of (G)I-DLE, Kim Garam ex member of Le Sserafim, and Hwang Hyunjin of Stray Kids. NCT is one of the most successful K-Pop boy groups from SM Entertainment. This group managed to placed fourth with more than 2 million of reputation index in K-Pop Boy Group Band Reputation that is uploaded every month by Korean Business Research Institute. As a group with high popularity, NCT needs to maintain their good image in public. However, one of the members who is also the leader of the group, Taeyong, was accused of bullying scandal in 2019.

The same thing happened to one of JYP Entertainment boy group members, Hwang Hyunjin of Stray Kids. Being in a group with more than 2,5 million reputation index, Hwang Hyunjin was accused of school bullying when he was in middle school. The accuser stated that he was rude and often threw sexual remarks to his classmates. However, K-Pop fandom still supported him after the rumour

spread. Most of them defended him and chose to stay neutral about the bullying scandal.

Kim Garam who is a former member of a K-Pop girl group named Le Sserafim from HYBE Entertainment was accused of school bullying even before her debut. The accuser was her middle school friend who stated that Kim Garam was problematic and had bullied her. K-Pop fandom response towards this rumour was outrageous. Kim Garam was being harassed and cancelled although the rumour wasn't confirmed yet. However, the endless hate from K-Pop fandom regarding her bullying scandal led her agency to terminate her contract.

Soojin was a former member of a K-Pop girl group (G)I-DLE from Cube Entertainment that managed to reach the second place in K-Pop Girl Group Brand Reputation by Korean Business Research Institute with 2 million reputation index by the time the scandal took place. Soojin was accused of school bullying in 2021. The accuser stated that she was a bad student who often drank and smoked. She was rude to her classmates and constantly bullied them. Although being in a big group, Soojin was still cancelled by K-Pop fandom for her bullying scandal.

There are several previous studies regarding this topic. Zhao (2017) conducted a discrimination, sexism, and racism in K-Pop research titled “#RespectLisa, Stop Racism: Intersectional Discrimination in Global K-Pop”. This study talks about intersectional discrimination faced by a Thai K-Pop singer, Lisa. The research was designed as a descriptive study and conducted through a qualitative method. The data were collected from comments on a trending hashtag, #RespectLisa in social media. The result shows that many K-Pop fans who are also



an anti-fan of Lisa, throw malicious comments about Lisa's nationality, visual, and body image.

Putri et al. (2022) done their research on K-Pop fandom war (fan war) topic titled, "*Analisis Dinamika Komunikasi Kelompok Penggemar K-Pop Generasi ke-4 (STAY, ATINY, dan MOA) dalam Menanggapi Fanwars di Media Sosial Twitter*". This study examines fan wars or fights between fandoms by bullying other fans or their idols. The research was designed as a descriptive qualitative study. The data for this research was collected by analysing the three fandoms' reaction towards the fan wars. The result shows that there are several types of fans within the fandoms and most of them use Twitter to search for more information regarding the fan wars.

Another previous research regarding gender discrimination in K-pop was conducted by Lin & Rudolf (2017) in their "Does K-Pop Reinforce Gender Inequalities? Empirical Evidence from a New Data Set" research. This study examines the sexist portrayal of both female and male idols in the K-Pop industry. It analyses the relationship between individual K-Pop consumption and K-Pop fans' gender attitude. The data for this research were collected through a data set of 6.317 fans of K-Pop in 100 countries around the world. The result shows that the K-Pop industry that is actively promoted by the Korean government contains elements that could reinforce sexist and traditional gender role culture within South Korea and global. Thus, it makes it hard for women to achieve the opportunity of gender equality.

This study focuses on analysing different reactions of K-Pop fandom towards male and female idols' bullying scandals using Martin and White Appraisal Theory and theory of gender by Raewyn Connell. The K-Pop bullying scandals that

will be examined are bullying scandals of Taeyong of NCT, Hwang Hyunjin of Stray Kids, Soojin ex (G)I-IDLE, and Kim Garam ex Le Sserafim. The reaction of K-Pop fandom that will be analysed will be collected from Quora forums.

## **1.2 Research Question**

Based on the background of the study, the research questions that are going to be analysed will be:

1. How did K-Pop fandom's reactions in Quora create gender discrimination towards Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam's bullying scandals?
2. How did K-Pop fandom's reactions in Quora affect Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam based on their gender?

## **1.3 Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is K-Pop fandom's reactions or comments towards Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam's bullying scandals. This study will be focused on the differences of K-Pop fandom's reaction towards Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam's bullying scandals on Quora and the effect of it to the four idols mentioned.

## **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to identify:

1. The different reactions of K-Pop fandom in Quora towards Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam's bullying scandals that create gender discrimination.

2. The effect of gender discrimination shown by K-Pop fandom through their reaction towards Taeyong, Hyunjin, Soojin, and Garam's bullying scandals.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study is expected to give a new perspective to other researchers in understanding how K-Pop fandom practised gender discrimination through their reactions of male and female idols' bullying scandals.

