





# Online community development through social interaction — K-Pop stan twitter as a community of practice

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## ABSTRACT

Fandom practices are often considered meaningless and unnecessary. However, the use of social media carries the potential for positive as well as negative impact on the users. Using the framework of Community of Practice, the latest theory addressing community formation and interaction, as its theoretical framework, the study explores the Twitter-based online fandom community (called stan twitter) of Korean Pop-Music (K-Pop) as a working Community of Practice (CoP). This community is a hub of non-native English language speakers, who actively communicate on this platform. This qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews and participant observations to collect data, and analyzes it using qualitative coding. The study finds that the members of K-Pop Stan Twitter form interpersonal bonds, communicate regularly, and create a close-knit community where everyone contributes in their own capacity. The study suggests that the platform in question does possess the characteristics to be considered a working CoP, with the addition of another element that makes it unique: power hierarchy among the participants of the community, which is usually the least noticed aspect in research on online platforms. Moreover, it carries implications for inculcation of various positive qualities in the users.

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## 1. Introduction

The virtual world has made it possible for people to communicate across linguistic barriers, geographical boundaries, and physical distances (Tuttle, 2016). People interact online, especially the youngsters (Prensky, 2001; Xu et al., 2018). This practice has given rise to various kinds of online communities, both official and unofficial, where similar interests and passions act as a binding force between community members (Carter, 2018; Wesely, 2013). One popular online domain is fandom activity, where fans of a celebrity figure, idol, musician, model, or TV show gather to enthuse about their favorites (de Kloet & van Zoonen, 2007). It is a way for fans to express their admiration and affection for the celebrities. However, fandom practices have been associated with negative connotations such as hysteria, obsession and addiction (de Kloet & van Zoonen, 2007), and thus this, along with several other reasons, has led to a negative perception of online activities (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). This research looks at fandom practices to understand interaction patterns in online communities.

Fandom communities are composed of people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, a variety of skillsets and aptitudes, and different personalities. These people interact, intermingle,

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and communicate with each other and these interactions carry the potential of increasing their knowledge and awareness. Such a community echoes the tenets of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998), where people gather and work towards a certain goal or domain, and form interpersonal relationships. The interactions they have with other community members are centered around any topic about and beyond the community itself.

This study explores a kind of fandom community based on the online social media platform of Twitter, called stan twitter. Within stan twitter, the fans of Korean Pop Music (K-Pop) refer to their community as the K-Pop stan twitter community. K-Pop stan twitter is a platform where people from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds join together, and communicate using English, the most commonly used language in online communication (Bayyurt, 2016; Mauranen, 2018). This study explores K-Pop stan twitter community under investigation as a Community of Practice (CoP). The purpose of the study is to investigate K-Pop Stan Twitter through the lens of the CoP scholarship and explore how it might serve as an online community. The study is governed by the following research question: How do K-Pop stan twitter members interact with each other on this platform, and how does this interaction serve to establish an online community?

The study finds that the K-Pop fandom possess all the characteristics required for CoP and henceforth a place of learning. The members of K-Pop stan twitter engage in online interactions, form interpersonal relationships owing to their shared interests, and perform several goal-oriented activities as a group. This study contributes to the research on CoPs by revealing that a new element is found to exist within this online community: power hierarchy. The existing scholarship on CoPs overlooks this element in favor of advocating the community as a place where equal participation and recognition is possible (Khan, 2014; Wesely, 2013). However, this study reveals the omnipresent nature of power, even in communities that are thought to promote equality, and platforms that advocate freedom of speech.

### 1.1. Social media and K-Pop

More than four billion people in the world use the internet (Kemp, 2018), and 3.196 billion people use social media (Kemp, 2018). The millennial generation, or the generation Y (Prensky, 2001), is born into this digitalized world and has been in the company of technology since birth (Bennett et al., 2008; Wesner & Miller, 2008). This generation actively produces, shares, searches, and consumes content of the online world (Bolton et al., 2013). The internet has quickly become a hub for creative activities (Lerat, 2018), both original art and art based on existing characters, movies, serials, artists, and so on, as this allows the users to search for and find different ways of expression (Ståhl & Kaihovirta, 2019).

One popular mode of online activity is fandom practice, a domain mostly permeated by youngsters. Cambridge Dictionary defines fandom as a group of people who are all fans of someone or something and are very passionate about the object of their fandom (Fandom, 2019). Fandom activities, when consolidated on and around the famous online platform Twitter, form a community termed as stan twitter. Stan twitter is defined as a community of passionate fans on Twitter (Bellos, 2018), a judgment-free zone where people can gather and talk about their favorite shows, music, books, and so on (Tony, 2017). It is a place where various users from all over the world gather to hype their favorite celebrities (Krishna, 2018). Within stan twitter, the fans of music originating from various countries are also differently labeled, such as the fans of Korean pop music (K-Pop) calling themselves as part of the K-Pop stan twitter community. Within the K-Pop fandom, different factions of fans are made based on the idol or groups they follow. For instance, the fans of the boy group *Monsta X* are called *Monbebe*; a title given to them by the official artists.

The K-Pop phenomenon has recently experienced a massive growth, expanding to engage a broad audience, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Egypt, Asia, Southeast Asia, and so on (Choi et al., 2014). Consequently, the K-Pop fandom includes members belonging to diverse countries and continents. In fact, this fandom has been a major contributor to Twitter's growing popularity as a social media platform (Park, 2019). The topic of K-Pop, then, has become

an area of interest for current researchers, owing to its rise in popularity. Alongside this, there is a growing interest in exploring online Communities of Practice due to the excessive use of internet and social media. Existing scholarship on CoPs has investigated teacher communities (Khan, 2014; Qi & Wang, 2017; Tang & Chung, 2016; Tseng & Kou, 2014; Wesely, 2013), fandom communities (Carter, 2018; Hills, 2015; Korobkova & Black, 2014), as well as twitter communities (Gilbert, 2015; Grandjean, 2016; Melvin & Chan, 2014; Roland et al., 2017). However, these studies on fandom communities have focused on identity formation (Korobkova & Black, 2014), fandom practices in terms of response to the “canon” or official narrative of the TV series *Doctor Who* (Hills, 2015), and the interpersonal relations between an idol and their fans (Carter, 2018). This study explores fandom communities as possible online CoPs.

## 2. Theoretical framework

As the people under consideration were part of a pre-made community on the basis of their adoration for the idols they like, the theoretical framework used is Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Communities of Practices (CoPs) are formed out of necessity and exist everywhere in the world, both outside and inside defined organizational structures (Wenger, 1998). They are naturally formed due to the needs of a group of people (Liedtka, 2016) so they develop over time and are created and destroyed (Squire & Johnson, 2000). The essential characteristics (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) of a CoP are a shared domain (shared interest), practice (activities that members engage in as a community), and community (creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships). The learning in CoPs happens in the backdrop of all the community activities (Wenger, 1998). As members work together and communicate with each other, they learn from each other in the process.

Although Lave and Wenger (1991) had not touched much upon the idea of online CoPs, now online communities are also explored as CoPs (Johnson, 2001; Qi & Wang, 2017). In these communities, face-to-face interaction is not required, and the members gather due to their shared interests, goals and aims; examples of which can be found in the form of teacher communities for pedagogical training (Qi & Wang, 2017; Tsai, 2012; Wang & Lu, 2012), or student communities formed by a teacher to utilize social media as a learning platform (Goodyear, Casey & Kirk, 2014). Other than these formal communities, there are online platforms without an overt teaching aim, but that do act as teaching spaces nonetheless, such as Facebook groups, Twitter fandoms and Fanfiction communities (Magnifico et al., 2015), where people learn from each other through informal interaction and conversation (Kassens-Noor, 2012; Wang et al., 2016).

Online communities have been explored and revealed to carry large potential as CoPs, and they can be based on varying platforms such as language-teachers on We-Chat (Qi & Wang, 2017) and personalized websites (Khan, 2014), or fandoms gathered on forums and blogs (Carter, 2018; Hills, 2015). Twitter communities have also been investigated with the conclusion that the community does carry the potential to be a successful CoP. Some examples are: teachers sharing their pedagogical experiences and figuring out innovations and solutions (Wesely, 2013), or healthcare knowledge-sharing between healthcare workers gathered on twitter (Roland et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2015).

Therefore, it follows that online fandoms such as fandoms of singers, boybands, girl groups, and boy groups can also be considered as CoPs (Carter, 2018). These are platforms where fandom members can communicate with each other, help each other gather information on the person they are all united through, and interact with each other. They have their own language and ways of humor (Carter, 2018). The members therefore are united by a shared domain, are connected as a community, and regularly participate in activities are being performed. These are all the necessary requirements for a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Therefore, the K-Pop fandom community under consideration is a site which carries the potential of being a CoP.

We propose that the K-Pop stan twitter community under question can be explored as a platform that maintains and sustains a CoP, with its members being joined by a shared domain, working

together towards a common goal, engaging in community activities, and learning from each other within these social processes. As such, we have used the theory of Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as the theoretical framework. Using semi-structured interviews, field-notes, and descriptive coding of the gathered data, we have explored the common emergent themes in the data.

### 3. Methodology

Human knowledge is socially constructed through life experiences (Crotty, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2000). The study is guided by the interpretivist research paradigm believing in socially constructed reality (Check & Schutt, 2012). The study explores research participants' experiences within the fandom community using qualitative methods. Qualitative research allows the researcher to collect in-depth data in a natural setting focusing on the participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

#### 3.1. Study participants

We shortlisted active stan twitter members by browsing through the replies under the ten most recent tweets posted by the official *Monsta X* account. *Monsta X* is one of the popular boybands in the K-Pop genre, having recently rose to fame as international artists (Deen, 2018). Moreover, their fandom has recently acclimated a large body of international fans, owing to their recent successful world tour as well as the rise of the K-Pop genre in the international sphere (Herman, 2018; Hodoyan-Gastelum, 2018).

The thirty shortlisted users were then asked to fill out a Google form after being made aware of the purpose of the study, where they had to provide some basic demographic details such as their name or a pseudonym, age, nationality, and native language. Although all thirty users were eligible, some of them showed hesitance in sharing their experiences and letting their twitter feed be used in the research, while some had time constraints due to work and other responsibilities and could not make themselves available for an extended interview. The study, thus, had ten willing research participants (Table 1).

#### 3.2. Data collection

The research tools employed in this study were participant observations and interviews. Participant observers are a part of the community under scrutiny and thus are knowledgeable about some of the key issues or trends within the community (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The first author was the participant observer for five months (i.e. August 2018 – December 2018). Although she was a member of the fandom community for quite some time, the data for the study were collected during this time.

**Table 1.** Particulars of the research participants.

Participant pseudonym	Age	Duration as a stan twitter member	Nationality	Native Language	Follower count	Following count
Rou	20	1.5 years	Spain	Spanish	254	80
Dali	21	1 year	Syria	Arabic	1670	357
Hanna	27	2 years	Spain	Spanish	705	1629
Chang	21	1 year	Philippines	Filipino	363	1165
Ayako	16	1 year	Italy	Italian	4951	909
Sunny	35	2 years	Serbia	Serbian	733	604
Vik	18	4 years	England	Urdu	1270	854
E	17	1 year	Singapore	Bahasa Melayu	910	127
Sammy	20	4 years	Philippines	Filipino	229	1135
Skye	23	2 years	Serbia	Serbian	309	613

During the observation period, she was observing all the activities happening in the group closely. She observed and took note of the group dynamics, social interactions between community members, the various events and activities arranged and participated in by the fans, as well as the roles and duties of various groups within the community under review. She took screenshots of the members interactions. She wrote field notes daily to record the happenings. Fieldnotes are notes on anything and everything observed by the researcher during the course of a research study (Nespor, 2006). Following this, the fieldnotes for the current study contained notes on all of the mentioned aspects and were useful in keeping track of the raw data that was being gathered.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted that required subjective and opinionated responses from the interviewees. Interviews are ideal research tools for researchers interested in others' stories (Siedman, 2006). Since this was a qualitative study directed at an understanding and exploration of human experience, it was possible that there would be a need to modify and add questions during the course of the interview. The semi-structured interview protocol is attached as appendix. The interviews were conducted online, as the users belonged to faraway locations which made physical interviews impossible. The time span of an interview was about two to three (i.e. 2–3) hours, due to the asynchronous nature of online communication. The interviewees were given a choice to either complete the interview in one session or to break it into two or three sessions depending on their availability. Except for one participant, everyone gave the interview in one session.

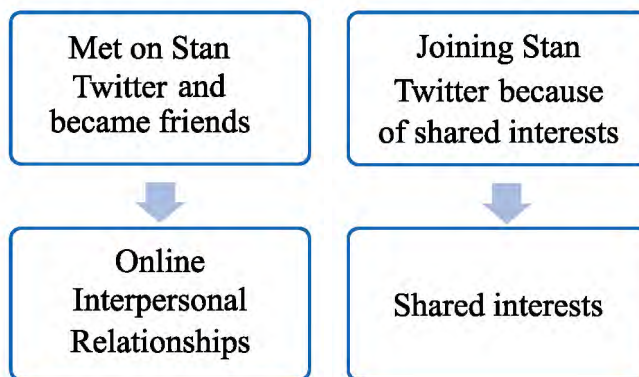
### 3.3. Data analysis

The data were coded manually, which allowed the researcher to make sense of large amounts of raw data (Basit, 2003), and to identify certain patterns (Dey, 1993). A code is most often a word or a phrase used to label a portion of the qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013), and is generated based on the activity happening within that portion. We used the descriptive coding technique; coding based on the topic of the data being coded (Saldaña, 2013). This resulted in the generation of a list of primary codes, which were then refined and revised to increase accuracy (Figure 1). Then, the most frequently occurring codes were shortlisted (Charmaz, 2014), and similar codes were grouped under one category (Figure 2). The various emergent categories were then studied to identify thematic relationships between them (Figure 3), and the resultant themes were then discussed as findings of the study.

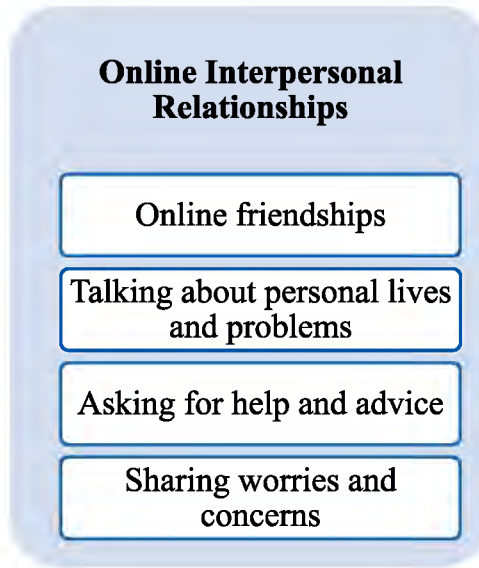
## 4. Findings: K-Pop stan twitter as a working CoP

### 4.1. Domain and community

A CoP is a community where the members are joined by shared interests and goals (a shared domain), on the basis of which they engage in mutual practice and interaction. As a result of this



**Figure 1.** Revision of primary codes in secondary coding stage.

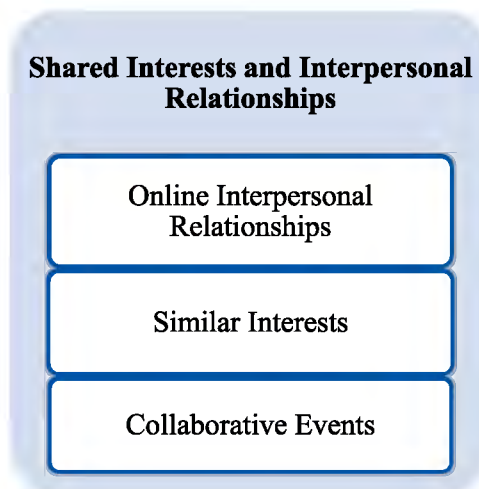


**Figure 2.** Grouping of similar codes under one category.

interaction, they create and maintain interpersonal relationships (they form a community) while also carving out their own place within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The current study found that the K-Pop stan twitter members are joined together by their shared admiration for the idol group *Monsta X*. They work towards the shared goal of supporting their idols and helping them grow. During this process, they engage in regular interaction with other community members and form interpersonal relationships while also choosing a role and place for themselves and contributing to the fandom community in their own respective capacity. In this section, we discuss all these emergent themes in detail.

#### **4.1.1. Shared interests and interpersonal relationships**

A Community of Practice (CoP) requires the members to interact on a regular basis (Ehrenreich, 2018; Wenger, 1998). As the members work towards their goals, they engage in joint discussions, exchange



**Figure 3.** Similar categories grouped under one theme



of information, and other activities, leading to the evolution of various kinds of interpersonal relationships (Wenger, 1998). In online communities, relationships among participants vary, since the users are often anonymous and reluctant to share personal information (Carter, 2018). Nonetheless, the members of a community engage in communication and interaction and form interpersonal relationships.

The study found that stan twitter community favors interpersonal interactions. The primary reason for joining the community is “to talk with others who like the same as me” (Rou, Interview, 26/10/2018), because “it’s hard to find people with similar interests in real life” (Vik, Interview, 18/01/2019). This community is based on mutual interests, and members help each other in staying updated, knowing the schedules of official/unofficial fandom events and gathering more information (Fieldnotes, 15/11/2018). This results in a kind of mutual engagement, where people with diverse backgrounds come together and interact, share personal and professional information, and work towards the goal of the community having a “tight node of interpersonal relationships” (Wenger, 1998, p. 78). Therefore, one of the primary reasons the community stands well on its own and functions like a well-oiled machine is the close interpersonal relationships.

The members of a CoP gather because they have common interests and can stand as a united community having some goal (Wenger, 1998). In stan twitter community the shared domain of interest is the artists that the members follow. In the current sample, the shared domain is the K-Pop boy group *Monsta X*. All members of the stan twitter community called *Monbebe* are united as a community by their love and admiration for *Monsta X* (Chang, Interview, 05/01/2019). The goal of this community is to “do our best to support *Monsta X*” (E, Interview, 18/01/2019) and “sharing love and admiration for idols we like, and doing our best to support our boys” (Chang, Interview, 05/01/2019). Therefore, every single member of the community works towards this goal, strengthening the bond between the members in the process. Further elaborating, Chang adds, “we all want the same thing; for our boys to be successful, happy, and healthy, and that is why we come together here and that is why we are all one; we are united” (Interview, 05/01/2019). Therefore, the community contains both a shared domain of interest and a shared goal.

Working towards the goal, stan twitter members build personal relationships. Some of them insisted that they are closer to their online friends than their offline friends:

... the relationship i’ve had with the people here are genuine considering we share our problems a lot in this stan twitter platform and sometimes we can even relate to each other? I feel like that kind of connection is something hard to obtain in the real world. (E, Interview, 18/01/2018)

Compared to offline life where a period of correspondence is required to establish commonalities, stan twitter allows people to automatically recognize fellow members, as it is usually written in their twitter profile bio or their username usually hints at the idol/s they like. Therefore, finding people with similar interests and “having friendships here is easier” (Dali, Interview, 13/12/2018). The clash in likes and dislikes in real life seems to be the impetus for a lot of online friendships.

People come to stan twitter to fill the void they have in their real lives caused by the negative perception of their fandom activities. Hanna refers to the stan twitter community as a “minority” (Interview, 29/12/2018). Even if they are fans of some celebrity, people fear openly expressing their interests because of the negative connotations attached to fandom activities. Moreover, Hanna adds that K-Pop in particular is even more “marginalized” (Interview, 29/12/2018). This is because firstly, the language of the songs is Korean. Secondly, the cultural values and habits of the K-Pop artists are vastly different from those of the rest of the world, such as the fact that Korean male idols wear makeup. Naturally, this receives a lot of criticism from the anti-fans of K-Pop. Therefore, people who like K-Pop and express it in their offline lives face “criticism and judgement” (Sammy, Interview, 19/01/2019). Hence, stan twitter becomes a special place for Kpop fans, and – for some of them – their bonds online are much stronger than their bonds offline. The phenomenon of strong interpersonal relations has been observed during fieldwork as well, where many stan twitter members are seen expressing their love and affection for their online friends (Figure 4).

As mentioned previously, a CoP keeps interpersonal relationships and interaction as its primary requisites (Tang & Chung, 2016; Wenger, 1998). Whatever the goal may be, the community members work towards it while interacting with one another. These elements exist in the K-Pop stan twitter community as well, and the common interests, goals, and interpersonal relationships are stronger online than in real life. Henceforth, online existence is getting stronger.

#### 4.1.2. Fandom roles

In a CoP, every member of the community carves out their own unique space and identity, which are both “further integrated and further defined” (Wenger, 1998, p. 76) as the members have diverse background and skills. A similar scenario can be observed in the community of stan twitter. As previously mentioned, the people within this community gather from all over the world with varying backgrounds. Members have different skills and talents and contribute towards the community in their own unique ways. Based on these contributions, the community can roughly be divided into two broad categories of accounts: fanwork accounts and service accounts, as shown in Table 2.

The accounts within stan twitter all perform different duties with no clear distinction between the roles performed by these members. For instance, sometimes fansites also share updates, fanartists can also share GIFs, updaters act as translators, and so on (Fieldnotes, 15/01/2019). Moreover, just because an account is performing a specific role does not mean they cannot act like a regular normal stan twitter account. For instance, fansites, fanartists, AU writers and updaters also reply to the idols’ tweets with expressions like those posted by the other small account holders. Therefore, just because an account takes up a role does not immediately imply that they only perform that role. In Rou’s words, “everything is mixed” (Interview, 26/10/2018), and no one has a clear role or duty within the fandom. As such, these observations comply with the idea of a CoP comprising members with various skillsets and the consequent manifestation of those skillsets in different sub-domains (Carter, 2018).

Similar studies on CoPs show this characteristic emerging in the form of various online/offline roles performed by the members of the community. For instance, members of a forum dedicated to the fans of the American singer Lady Gaga are found to be acting in different capacities, as moderators, administrators and community coordinators (Carter, 2018). In a CoP connecting various teachers, the roles were observed as contributors and consumers (Wesely, 2013). Usually, the members of a CoP

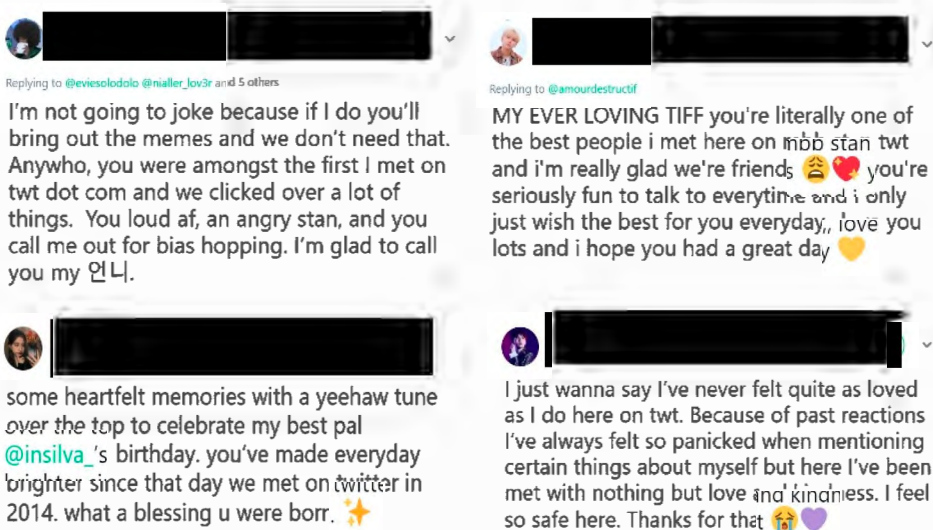


Figure 4. Stan twitter members expressing their affection for online friends.



**Table 2.** Division of fandom accounts based on roles.

Fandom Roles	
<i>Fanwork Accounts</i>	
Fansites	Follow idols in real life to take pictures and videos; sell their high-quality photographs as merchandise
Fanartists	Make picture edits of the idols; share sketches, <i>chibi</i> (cartoonish caricatures) drawings, photos edited through software, and water paintings based on the idols.
GIF makers	Share Graphic Interchange Format clips; 2–3 s clips taken from any official video, slowed down or fast forwarded.
AU Writers	AU: Alternate Universe; meaning the author creates an alternate universe for their story; these are FanFictions written as mobile texts shared between the characters (the idols); shared as screenshots in the form of Twitter threads.
<i>Service Accounts</i>	
Counselors	Provide help to struggling fandom members; share messages of hope and positivity; usually in a small amount.
Event Guides	Provide guides to official idol events sponsored by company, or arranged by fans themselves; also provide guides for voting processes for potential awards.
Updaters	Provide updates about the idols' lives as well as careers.
Translators	Translate official news and posts from Korean to various languages, but most commonly to English; translate official messages shared during official events such as album-signing, and the like.
GA/GO holders	GiveAway (GA) holders hold polls to select a winner who gets the GA item for free, it can be an album or any other official or unofficial merchandise; GroupOrder (GO) holders order albums and merchandise in bulk, and are usually localized.
Archivers	Keep a record of idol pictures, videos, and any other updates, with the date and venue of the picture, video, or other updates mentioned.

take up various roles or functions depending on their ability and aptitude within the community (Qi & Wang, 2017). This aspect can be used in the effective running of an organization to allow individual to contribute as per their talents and capacities.

#### 4.2. Practice: fandom activities

To support their idols in more noticeable ways than just tweeting, fans arrange certain events and activities. They are of various types, such as birthday events, hashtag trends, *selca* days, and streaming events as shown in Table 3 (Dali, Sunny, Skye, Chang, Interviews). They are promoted and coordinated through stan twitter and the members gather in large numbers to make them happen.

In a CoP, the members engage in “practice” (Wenger, 1998), denoting various activities that the members perform while working towards the community’s goal (Tang & Chung, 2016). The fandom activities of stan twitter are done with the collaboration and participation of all the community members through interaction and discussion; the members decide the beginning, middle, and end of the activity between themselves, and encourage each other during the activity (Fieldnotes, 16/01/2019). These activities act as a “bonding force” (Dali, Interview, 13/12/2018) for the community, and everyone “gets closer to other” (Rou, Interview, 26/10/2018). These activities allow “people to communicate and talk to each other” and everyone “wants the same thing, we all feel like we are united in our goals” (Ayako, Interview, 16/01/2019). Thus, these activities, or, in Wenger’s terms, community practices (1998), help in strengthening the interpersonal relations of the members, and

**Table 3.** Fandom activities (Community Practice).

Fandom Activities	
Birthday Events	As celebration for an idols' birthday; can be a private party at the fans' own homes, can be a donation in the name of the artist, and so on.
Streaming Events	Held to increase the views on an official YouTube video, or to increase the rankings on different official music charts.
Hashtag Trending	Using certain hashtag phrases (phrases beginning with the symbol # at their beginning) continuously in tweets, in order to make the phrase popular on Twitter.
<i>Selca</i> Days	<i>Selca</i> means selfie in Korean; fans take selfies in similar postures as one of the idols' official photos, and post the photos side by side with a heartwarming or witty caption.

therefore help create an even stronger community. They act both as a means for community members to become closer and form bonds, and to progress forward as a community.

#### **4.3. Hierarchy within stan twitter**

Hierarchy is an implicit or explicit difference in ranks of individuals based on some collectively decided social dimension (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). There are obvious hierarchies, such as organizational positions, and there are hidden hierarchies, such as the hierarchy within a group of classmates. Hierarchies also exist within online platforms but are differently expressed on social media. On social media, users gain recognition based on the content they share and the amount of feedback they get rather than official positions of authority or power (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Keeping this dimension of hierarchy on social media in mind, we found a common strand of the presence of a hierarchy within the stan twitter platform that has been overlooked in previous CoP scholarship. In this system, individuals having earned recognition and distinction are automatically placed on a higher rank as compared to new or small accounts (Fieldnotes, 02/02/2019).

The interview participants recognize big accounts (accounts with a large number of followers) as the “leaders” (Sunny, Interview, 19/01/2019) of the community. Emphasizing on their power and influence, Chang emphasized on the fact that newcomers “follow their examples” since the big accounts are the “representatives of the whole fandom” and have “influence” (Interview, 05/01/2019). This statement highlights the role of big accounts as the “trend-setters” within the fandom; they create the trends and the members of the community follow along. Moreover, Chang emphasizes on the role of these accounts as “a reliable source of information” (Interview, 05/01/2019) which shows their fame and respect in the community.

Due to their influential status, big accounts also hold the responsibility of organizing and/or promoting fandom events. No event can have a large number of participants if it is not promoted by a big account because these accounts can reach a large audience easily (Sunny, Interview, 14/01/2019). Small accounts, however, cannot reach a significant audience and therefore, remain largely unnoticed despite the novelty or importance of their shared content (Sunny, Skye, Chang, Hanna, Interviews). Along with this, big accounts are also responsible for sending reminders to the fandom about scheduled official events, fandom activity, meet-ups, any official or unofficial news that has been revealed by the Korean media but has not yet reached the international fans. Therefore, these accounts contribute to the fandom, and this helps reinforce and maintain their popularity.

The small accounts actively seek to increase their number of followers and are very active members of the community. They relentlessly work to retweet and share valuable content so that their contribution might be noticed and lead to a higher status within the community (Sunny & Skye, Interview). They actively interact with big accounts in hopes of being noticed by the big account’s followers. This process falls in line with inbound trajectory of identity formation (Wenger, 1998), and is a significant part of identity formation within a CoP. Inbound trajectories are defined as the identity formation processes through which members go from being less involved in community practice to full participation and thus gain a status and name within the community (Wenger, 1998). Small accounts, in this way, start as members who do not have a large audience and are less active, gradually gain followers as they contribute to the community, and eventually become some of the popular accounts that are active in their contribution.

A CoP functions as a community where there are experts and newcomers/newbies (Carter, 2018; Wenger, 1998). Both exist in the same space and are considered equally valuable for the community (Khan, 2014; Wesely, 2013). The experts though, as is unavoidable, carry more respect than the newcomers; not because of their status, but simply because they have been there longer and have carved out a place for themselves (Wenger, 1998). These big accounts on stan twitter are another manifestation of the experts in a CoP. During observations, the first author has come across numerous tweets where the small accounts or relatively less popular accounts praise the big accounts (Fieldnotes, 02/02/2019). These accounts are considered deserving of appreciation and respect because of the place

they have made for themselves within the community, and their contribution to both the fandom and the artists.

A Community of Practice advocates itself as a community that's open for all (Schwen & Hara, 2003). Despite differences of time, knowledge, age, gender, social status, economic status, or academic status, everyone is equal (Carter, 2018; Khan, 2014; Wesely, 2013). In fact, social media is founded upon the idea of equal opportunities and equal access to the online facilities and perks (Silva et al., 2016). However, despite these popular opinions, the actual manifestation of an online community has fallen short. The community is an open space that allows freedom of expression. However, those who have been here longer hold more power and status and are more likely to have their voices heard than those who are new.

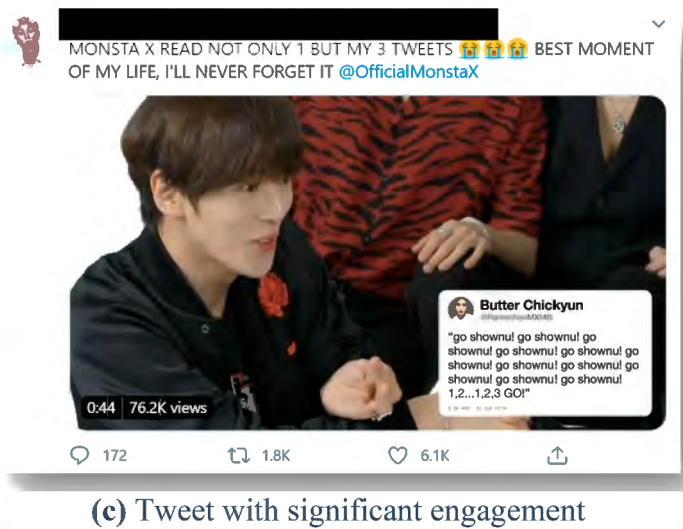
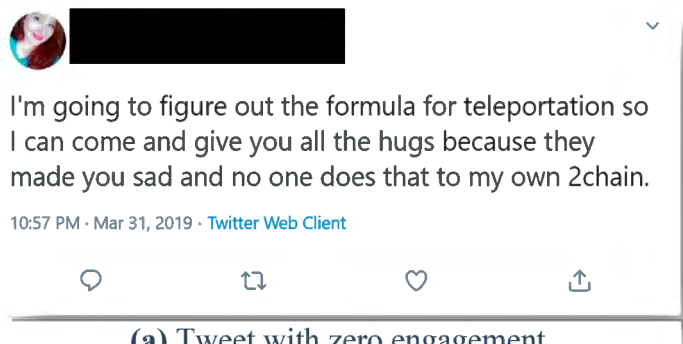
The idea of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37) talks about the roles of newcomers and old-timers within a CoP. The premise is that new members observe, interact with, and learn from old-timers as they work their way up from peripheral participation to full participation (Heidt, 2015). In a way, then, the only power difference there is, exists because of the initial newbie status of the newcomers and disappears or is toned down as they rise to full participation. In the K-Pop community, then, these are the new accounts that have recently joined the community and do not have a rapport or a status as of yet. They post content here and there, although they lack an audience (Fieldnotes, Interviews). Through peripheral participation (the initial contribution as a newbie), they are able to contribute and gradually make their way towards being noticed and gaining followers. That is, newcomers are able to enter the community, contribute in their own capacity, and slowly make their way upwards towards full membership and participation.

However, the difference between Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of peripheral participation leading to full participation, and the K-Pop stan twitter community in question is the fact that the new accounts are only able to gain the status of small accounts, and very few rise to the status of big accounts (Sunny, Interview, 19/01/2019). That is, they are only able to rise from having zero followers to having follower counts in some hundreds or single digit thousands. To reach even this status, as mentioned above under the discussion of inbound trajectory formation, they share content, reply to big account tweets, and interact with big accounts continuously in hopes of being noticed and maybe rising to 'fame' themselves.

However, only contribution in terms of highly in-demand content can take them towards the status of big accounts, as in the case of some popular big accounts on *Monsta X* K-Pop stan twitter. These accounts gain their status because of their contribution in the form of on-the-dot updates, well-written AUs, high expenditure on official merchandize, streaming or other paid content passes, or by becoming an official fansite who dedicatedly follows the group around on their activities and takes exclusive pictures and videos to share with the community (Fieldnotes, Interviews). The new and small accounts that cannot manage their contribution and interaction in terms of active and prompt updates, replies, interactions, comments, and tweets are left unattended (Fieldnotes, Interviews), with only a few likes or retweets or sometimes with no interaction at all (Figure 5). Therefore, the stan twitter community displays a different – *stronger* – form of hierarchy within its ranks; one that cannot be broken unless one is extremely invested in the community goal and/or has a lot of time and money on their hands.

## 5. Discussions and conclusion

The discussion of common strands emerging from the data has brought to light several factors that support the idea of the K-Pop stan twitter community as a Community of Practice. The community has proven to be a site where people are bound together through a shared domain of interest, and engage in several events and activities. All these are the necessary pre-requisites for a community to be considered a CoP (Wenger, 1998). To clarify, the members of the community under consideration are connected through their mutual interest in, and admiration for, the K-Pop boy-group *Monsta X*. As a result of this connection, they engage in communication with each other,



**Figure 5.** Comparisons of tweets with zero, minimal, and significant engagement. (a) Tweet with zero engagement, (b) Tweet with minimal engagement, (c) Tweet with significant engagement.

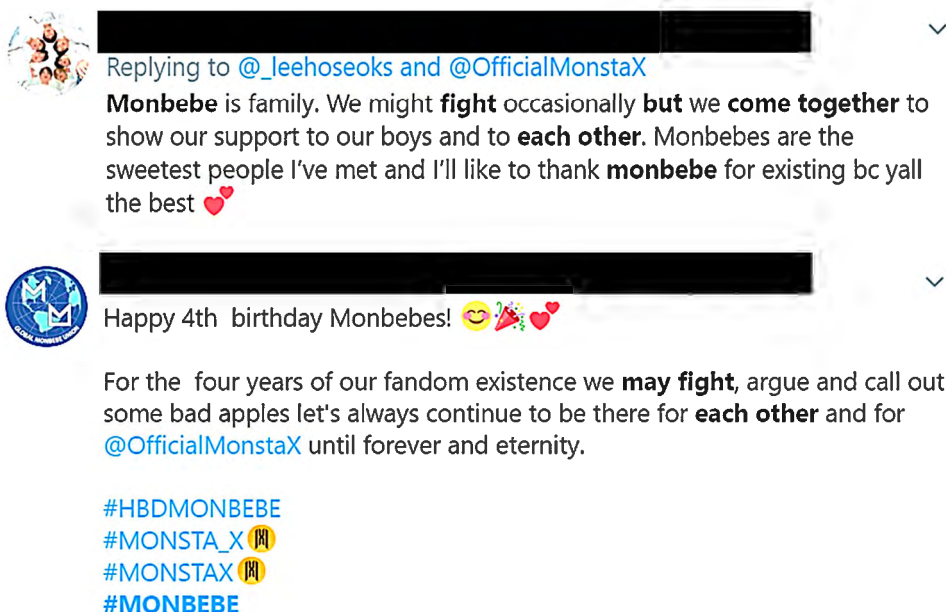
including a phenomenon referred to as 'fangirling' in stan twitter language (Fieldnotes). Fangirling is the way fans express their love and adoration for their favorites in a very excited and enthusiastic manner (de Kloet & van Zoonen, 2007). Through this communication, people get to know one another, and eventually create strong bonds online because of their shared love for their idols. Therefore, the element of a community glued together due to shared interests and consisting of strong interpersonal relations between the members is present in the K-Pop stan twitter community.

Therefore, it can be concluded that shared interests and the availability of a judgment-free zone makes people feel comfortable in life. This can be used in professional as well as social life to allow maximum participation of an individual in contributing for the betterment of society. Similarly, a conclusion can be drawn that such environments should be created in educational institutions and professional organizations to encourage full participation of the members. Moreover, the personal interests of the individuals, when considered, can lead to better performance and active participation of the workforce, both in academic and professional lives.

An interesting offset of this power difference and consequent need to share more and more content is the manifestation of different fandom roles (Table 2). Members of K-Pop stan twitter take on different roles, depending on the kind of content they feel they can provide easily, or would get them the most followers (Fieldnotes, Interviews). As the table shows, members take on different roles like translators, updaters, AU writers, GIF makers, archivers, and so on (Table 3). These roles are, as mentioned, not strictly bound and do not limit the kind of content being shared. An updater may, for instance, also write AUs or provide translations of official content. A notable fact, however, is that these roles are not immediately born as soon as someone joins a community. A newbie does not have any role; they are just a small account who is trying to fit in and see how the community works. However, as they begin participating in the community, they start learning the different kinds of contributions they can make, and gradually they are able to build their own space and take on a role (Fieldnotes, Interviews). This is in line with Wenger's (1998) idea of communities consisting of people with different skillsets and abilities who work together to reach the community goals. The K-Pop stan twitter members all excel in different fields, and their contributions vary based on the field they believe they excel in. As discussed, however, power differences exist. Therefore, disagreements and conflicts also exist. However, when it comes to the goals of the community, the members unite and work together to support their idols to the best of their individual abilities (Interviews, Figure 6).

Moreover, the idea of finding one's role and contributing to the community in one's own capacity and ability further adds to the development of positive values in the users. By interacting on this platform and discovering their role, they engage in a microcosmic process of finding and locating who they are. As such, this process can develop confidence and self-sufficiency in the users. Additionally, the K-Pop stan twitter community welcomes contributions of all kinds and provides feedback, thereby instilling the users with confidence in their abilities and their position as a valuable member of the community. As human beings, this process can help them realize the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the contributions of the people around them. It also shows that division of responsibilities can help in gaining maximum output. However, as members of a community, people should also contribute to the responsibilities of others, keeping in view the ultimate goal and aim of the community.

The study has brought to light a new element in CoPs. The findings about the hierarchical differences between stan twitter members require the inclusion of the dimension of power relations, or the role and use of power in a hierarchical relationship. Although the world of social media is a platform where anyone and everyone can access it (Silva et al., 2016), it does not mean that everyone is heard. Within online platforms as well, there exists a differentiation based on the recognition and distinction that the users earn by sharing valuable information for the other users (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Moreover, members of a community will only keep giving positive feedback when they are interested in the content being shared. The users that generate this content, then, go through a process of imagining their audience, and setting their content according to the preferences of this imagined



**Figure 6.** K-Pop fandom *Monbebe* discussing how despite their arguments, they are a family and are united in their goals.

audience (Ståhl & Kaihovirta, 2019). For instance, a K-Pop stan twitter member will like and retweet content related to K-Pop, and they will follow accounts that provide K-Pop content as well. Twitter itself promotes and highlights the most popular tweets related to one's set preferences (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Therefore, the already popular accounts are likely to be noticed, while the less popular accounts fade into the backdrop. In this way, the big accounts are noticed, seen, and followed, while the newbies are overlooked unless a user has direct interaction with them. In terms of hierarchical setups, then, the big accounts have gained a respectful and powerful status within stan twitter, and the small accounts are below them in the stan twitter hierarchy.

The scholarship of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) overlooks the element of power and status. The original theory does mention the presence of “core” and “peripheral” members of the community (Wenger, 1998, p. 7), and the existence of possible conflicts arising due to different perspectives or difference of opinions (Ehrenreich, 2018). However, the studies using the CoP enterprise are often seen to overlook the element of power imbalance (Carter, 2018; Hills, 2015; Khan, 2014; Wesely, 2013), indicating it only if the difference exists in real life as well (He, 2009; Shi & Yang, 2014). and instead focus on the advocacy of a CoP as a harmonious platform. The current sample contains members whose real-world status differences play no role in their power within the CoP; it's only their online profile and contribution that makes a difference (Interviews & Field-notes). The CoP is advocated as a platform where everyone is equal and welcome to contribute to the community, brainstorm with the other members and put forward suggestions. However, the stan twitter community under consideration shows signs of a power hierarchy.

Within an online community, relations of power are not unidirectional (Levina & Arriaga, 2014), and are more in line with Foucault's (1980) idea of individuals being a locus for both the production and exercise of power. Power, then, does not have one fixed starting point; instead it is produced and practiced everywhere and is directed from everywhere towards everywhere all at once. Therefore, although it is true that some accounts hold a higher position due to their number of followers, it does not mean that the other accounts are powerless or at the mercy of the popular users. Rather, it has been noted that large content consumers are the ones who attract attention of their peers towards a certain topic of interest (Garg et al., 2011; Susarla et al., 2012). Therefore, the big accounts

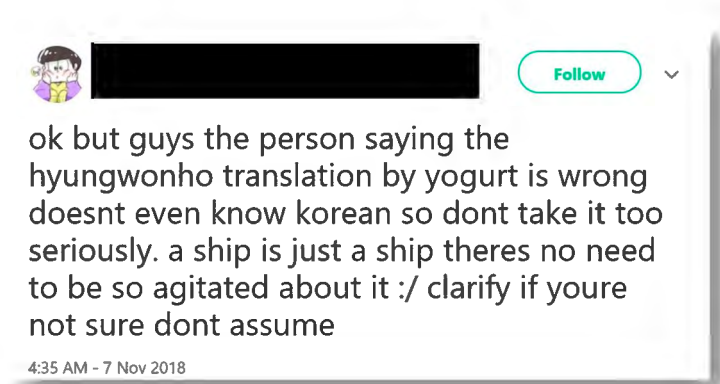


owe their popularity to these large consumers, and that is why the nature of the contribution of these accounts depends, to a large extent, on the people who consume their content (Levina & Arriaga, 2014).

However, as has been mentioned in the discussion of legitimate peripheral participation of newcomers, the hierarchy within stan twitter is more than just a matter of small contributions until one becomes powerful. While it is true that a big account only has a big audience because they provide content that everyone wants, because of the audience itself promoting that account, once an account on stan twitter is in power, it is nearly impossible to take it down from its “pedestal” (Sunny, Interview, 19/01/2019). Once established as a big account, these users gain what the interviewees refer to as an “army of defenders”, who fight for them against anyone who tries to discredit or attack a big account (Fieldnotes; Sunny, Skye, Sammy, Chang, Dali, Interview). An example of this phenomenon is provided in Figure 7, wherein a set of tweets is displayed that show the users defending a big account when they were attacked for inappropriate content related to *Monsta X* member *Changkyun* (Figure 7). Figure 8 shows another instance of a big account being defended after they were called out for posting an incorrect translation. Therefore, the stan twitter community displays a unique power imbalance, where power is both everywhere (Foucault, 1980), and concentrated with the popular and long-time users who have gained a large body of audience due to the content they post (Levina & Arriaga, 2014).



Figure 7. Twitter users defending big account accused of posting inappropriate content.



**Figure 8.** Twitter user defending a big account accused of posting incorrect translations.

Henceforth, we argue that the use of twitter develops democratic attitudes in the participants. The position of power, then, is largely unstable, and is constantly at stake, owing to the fluid nature of online communities (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). The position is something that anyone can hope to achieve, and that is why the users within that online platform are constantly vying for it. To maintain one's position, they must continue providing valuable content (Faraj et al., 2011). The idea of power and status in an online platform such as stan twitter reinforces the omnipresent nature of power (Foucault, 1980), and brings to light an opposing argument for the advocacy of social media as an open and equal platform. No matter how fluid and implicit it may be, hierarchy is still hierarchy, and therefore there are those who silence and those who are silenced. Those at the bottom find it hard to speak their minds, and therefore newcomers or small accounts are pushed to the periphery while big accounts enjoy prominent positions. This idea contests the equality of positions advocated by CoP researchers (Carter, 2018; Hills, 2015; Johnson, 2001; Khan, 2014; Wesely, 2013), and demands further analysis of online CoPs in the light of power relations. We propose that a CoP is not immune to the all-encompassing nature of power, and the members within a CoP are divided into different power levels based on some scale.

We conclude that the K-Pop stan twitter community is more than just a group of fans gathered together. It is a platform where they are actively collaborating and coordinating their efforts towards a goal. In the process, they are learning from fellow community members. Therefore, this platform carries the potential to be considered a Community of Practice, fulfilling the three requirements outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) in their theorization of a Community of Practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## APPENDIX

### *Semi-Structured Interview*

The interview used for this study was semi-structured, which means there were a few pre-designed questions, while the rest were modified and designed during the course of the interview. The pre-designed questions were also subject to rephrasing and modification, in case the interviewees needed further clarification or explanations. Below are the pre-designed questions for the semi-structured interview used in this study. These questions were mostly direct and straightforward, and further elaborations were asked during the course of the interview.

1. How long have you been a member of stan twt?
2. What was your motivation behind joining stan twt?
3. How would you describe the structure of the stan twt community? That is, are there any roles for each members? Any division between novices/newbies and experts?
4. In your opinion, are there any rules of conduct or guidelines about being a member of stan twt?
5. What kind of activities are performed within this community?
6. What is your opinion about language learning on stan twitter?
7. What are your thoughts about this platform's role in learning how to communicate in English? Please be as detailed as possible in your answers.
8. Can you elaborate on some ways you feel this platform helps or does not help your English language proficiency?
9. What are your thoughts on the use of interaction and communication in English as an aid to learning to speak English with confidence and fluency?
10. What are your thoughts on the role of this platform as a space for practicing and learning English as a beginner or non-native speaker of English language?