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Dorota Urszula Błaszcyk

Ethnographic study of interethnic and intergender relations at K-pop parties

in Wrocław, Poland

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Supervisor of bachelor thesis: David Verbuč, M.A., Ph.D

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Declaration

I declare that I have created the thesis by myself. All sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work was not used to obtain another or the same title.

Date:

Signature:.....

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Abstract

In my research I ethnographically explore K-pop events in Poland as a place of interethnic and intergender relations. My interest focuses on the inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations between Korean and Polish youth taking part at K-pop parties organized in club Liverpool in Wrocław. These relationships can stem from aesthetic intrigue (K-pop fandom), socialization (meeting people), interest among Polish participants in cultural/ethnic differences (so-called "Asianness"), and sexuality. One of the peculiarities of K-pop is that it promotes post-gendered patterns of "soft masculinity" (Almqvist-Ingersoll, 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Moon, 2019) and post-racial, hybrid patterns of Asianness (Oh, 2014). Oh's study proves that K-pop cannot be reduced only to the dimensions of contemporary musical performance and the Far Eastern variety of hip-hop understood as a consequence of the processes of globalization and westernization. For Korean audiences in particular, it becomes the embodiment of an aesthetic that grows beyond divisions of race, colonialism, etc. In this sense, "Asianness" becomes a universal global form, detached from its cultural, historical and geographical roots. From the perspective of the Western viewer, K-pop creates a decontextualized image of Asian culture, reducing it mainly to the dimension of "exoticism." K-pop idols embody a new model of aesthetic beauty and sexual attractiveness that is globally appealing (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014; Jung, 2011; Kroo, 2020; Min, 2021). It can be hypothesized that this image may also plays a role at "K-pop parties", since they attract mainly female Polish participants, in addition to Korean immigrant men. My preliminary research indicates that the intercultural relations carried out by Polish girls and Korean boys at K-pop events in Wrocław is driven by interest in K-pop fandom shaped by the aesthetic image of Korean culture treated as ethnic exoticization on the one side, and the sexual interests on the other.

There is a lot of literature about K-Pop fandom and its online (eg. Jung, 2011) and offline (Keith, 2019) communities (fandoms) and from different countries around the world. However, I did not find a study that ethnographically explored exactly the "K-pop party" events, which are relatively new phenomena mentioned in only a few recent academic texts (Abrorbek & Kazakbaev, 2022; Cicchelli et al., 2023). In some previous research the term "K-pop parties" existed only in relation to concert events (Hübinette, 2019). Therefore, my study may contribute to this emergent field of studies.

Because of the novelty of the problem, I plan to use exploratory idiographic research. I would like to map the social cultural content of social relations between participants. The broad literature on gender and (Asian/Korean) ethnicity and immigrant identity in Poland will provide a framework for discussion of findings. My results may be a contribution to the wider discussion on Polish interethnic relations with Asian/Korean immigrants. Previous studies were focused either on the way Korean-Polish relations worked during historical events (such as the Korean War) (Piszczyk, 2020) or the problem of cultural differences occurring in the area of professional cooperation between Poles and expats from Korea (Mościcka, 2013). There are also reports suggesting that the Korean minority in Poland remains isolated from Polish citizens, living in their own enclaves and having their own restaurants and shops (Kuźnik, 2022), so therefore “K-pop party” events might be considered the new dimension of Polish-Korean integration.

Key words

K-pop, K-pop party, K-pop event, Korean-Polish relation, Stereotypes, Gender Stereotypes, National Issues

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2021, during a casual evening at a Korean restaurant in Wrocław, my attention was captivated by a small pink poster near the exit advertising a "K-pop party." Initially dismissing it as a fleeting curiosity, I could not have anticipated that this chance encounter would lead to a profound exploration into the intricate phenomenon of K-pop events. In less than half a year, I found myself attending one of these gatherings, not expecting little more than a nostalgic journey and the realization of a teenage fantasy – dancing to my beloved K-pop songs in a club. This solitary visit soon burgeoned into a series of repeated attendances, ultimately becoming the focal point of my research.

The unassuming exterior of the Liverpool club, the perennial host of Wrocław's K-pop parties, conceals the vibrant occurrences within. At first glance, it appears as deserted as the late-night streets of Wrocław. The interior reveals no indication of the distinctive nature of the events held there. It might be easily assumed that the sole divergence from a standard club night is the resonant Korean pop music, yet this assumption does not give justice to the truth. The Liverpool club seems to have four distinct participation zones: a dance room with a dance floor, benches, and a stage specifically for those practicing K-pop dance choreographies; a bar room that includes the toilets; and a designated room for smokers.

Stepping onto the dance floor, the conspicuous presence of Korean men becomes apparent amidst the crowd. They either observe the proceedings from the periphery or engage Polish girls on the dance floor, complimenting them in a bid to secure, at the very least, their Instagram profiles. A stage, akin to those graced by Korean idols, is featured within the venue, where some of the participants particularly interested in dancing K-pop choreographies captivate the audience with their dance performances.

As my first time at the event elapsed, the transformative influence of Wrocław's K-pop parties on interethnic and intergender dynamics became increasingly evident. Couples formed by Koreans and Poles could be observed, their embraces often highlighting substantial age discrepancies between the men and girls, who can be potentially even underage. Singing, dancing, Soju bottles worth 40 PLN (around 230 czk), Korean employees under contract and somehow unrelated rock decorations of the club, like posters of rock bands, pictures of artists

and records – these elements collectively contributed to shaping participants' identities and relations and experiences during K-pop parties. The amalgamation of cultural exchange and unconventional connections in terms of ethnicity within this seemingly ordinary club setting provided a unique lens through which to examine the intricate interplay of identities in the vibrant world of K-pop parties.

My research investigates the dynamics of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relationships during K-pop events in Wrocław. It uncovers how these meetings provide distinct opportunities for cultural exchange, the development of identity, and social interaction among Polish and Korean participants. My research demonstrates that K-pop gatherings promote a sense of community and assist cross-cultural understanding. However, it also brings attention to obstacles such as language hurdles, cultural prejudices, and potential power imbalances in social and romantic encounters.

1.1 The Evolution and Global Impact of K-pop: From Musical Genre to Cultural Phenomenon

The study of K-pop begins with a seemingly trivial yet profoundly significant question: What exactly is K-pop? According to prevailing definitions, K-pop—short for Korean popular music—is a dynamic and influential genre that originated in South Korea (Leung, 2012), (Lie, 2015), (Fuhr, 2015). It seamlessly blends diverse musical styles, including pop, hip-hop, R&B, rock, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronic dance, folk, country, disco, and classical music, all while retaining its traditional Korean identity. (Lee et al., 2013). In K-pop songs, elements of trot (a genre of Korean popular music known for its repetitive rhythm and vocal changes) are often used (Kang, 2021). Some of the lyrics incorporate older phrases like “niliria” and “eolssu,” while melodies feature traditional Korean instruments such as the gayageum (a traditional Korean string instrument), taepyeongso (a traditional Korean wind instrument), samul nori (a type of Korean folk percussion), and pansori (a traditional style of Korean storytelling set to music with drums) (He et al., 2014). An example of incorporating Korean identity into a K-pop song is BTS’s “IDOL,” which also includes Korean instruments like kkwaenggwari (a brass gong), gagchung (a horn bow), and janggu (a traditional drum). The group uses the previously mentioned phrase “eolssu,” an encouraging exclamation traditionally used in pansori during the chorus (Lee, 2023). But among the various genres in K-pop, pop is the most prevalent. It serves

as the foundation for many K-pop songs, blending catchy melodies, upbeat rhythms, and relatable lyrics. Pop music resonates with a wide audience and contributes significantly to the genre's popularity. Additionally, hip hop and rap play a prominent role in K-pop, adding an edgy and energetic vibe (Oh, 2014).

The origin of K-pop can be traced back to the 1990s, coinciding with the emergence of the pioneering group "Seo Taiji and Boys.". The term "K-pop" gained prominence internationally in the early 2000s, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014). Its impact transcended geographical boundaries, captivating audiences worldwide. Notably, in 2018, K-pop achieved a pivotal milestone. It emerged as a formidable competitor to American music, disrupting established chart norms. BTS, the most globally popular group, further solidified K-pop's ascendancy by securing three No. 1 debuts on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in 2023, a feat previously accomplished only by The Beatles in 1964 (Lee, 2024). This rapid ascent and global dominance of K-pop as a musical genre prompts us to explore the factors that propel Korean artists beyond their Western counterparts.

At this juncture, it is crucial to grasp the essence of K-pop—what it truly is and what it is not. While K-pop is commonly defined as a musical genre, however, this label encompasses a vast spectrum of Korean popular music genres. Not every Korean-language song sounds the same. It is precisely this multigenre nature of K-pop that renders it exceptionally appealing (Kuk, 2021). There is a significant difference between a K-pop group and a Korean rock band. The latter cannot be classified as 'K-pop' because they exclusively create rock music, whereas K-pop groups incorporate it as one of their musical genres. Other differences include the fact that K-pop groups typically do not use instruments and have a specific stage presentation, almost always involving dance. Consider the global sensation BTS, whose discography spans lively pop tunes, rap tracks, and even more alternative rock-infused pieces. This strategic diversity not only provides K-pop artists with ample creative opportunities but also keeps fans eagerly anticipating each new release (Crow, 2019). Moreover, K-pop music videos are meticulously crafted, with production companies sparing no expense (Messerlin & Shin, 2017). Coupled with captivating choreography, these videos keep potential viewers engaged throughout their entire duration. Presently, K-pop is recognized for its high standards in both visual aesthetics and musical quality.

Underneath the towering success of Korean music lies a complex interplay beyond mere melodies and production. K-pop transcends conventional musical categorization; it is a cultural phenomenon (Kim et al., 2022). One pivotal factor that distinguishes K-pop on the international stage is the concept of idols. In the West, the term 'idol' carries significant weight and is often reserved for a select few, typically those who have achieved extraordinary fame and influence. Not many musicians in the West are readily labeled as idols. In contrast, the term 'idol' in the Korean context applies to many young performers who undergo rigorous training and are meticulously managed by entertainment companies. This practice places Korean musicians on a mythical pedestal from the outset, shaping the unique and dedicated relationships that will unfold with their future fans (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). This systematic approach to idol creation and the ensuing fan culture is a distinctive characteristic of K-pop, setting it apart from Western music industries. Achieving idol status in the competitive world of K-pop demands unwavering dedication and relentless effort from aspiring performers, particularly under the intense global scrutiny of the industry. Today, mere talent in singing is insufficient; proficiency in dance, languages, physical fitness, and appearance are equally essential. Record labels invest heavily in grooming their trainees, addressing perceived weaknesses and nurturing untapped potential from a young age. However, the journey from trainee to idol spans years of rigorous training, often starting in their early school years and culminating in a debut as teenagers or young adults. This process involves grueling 12-hour days, leaving little time for other pursuits, including formal education (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Yet, the approach to training and debuting idols is not without controversy. The strict and demanding nature of idol training raises ethical questions about the well-being and education of young trainees. Furthermore, not all trainees ultimately debut, highlighting the calculated and economic aspects of the idol industry (Lee & Jin, 2019). This complex environment underscores the challenges and sacrifices inherent in pursuing K-pop idol status.

Another critical factor contributing to K-pop's meteoric rise is the vibrant culture of the fandom. But what exactly is a fandom? It refers to a community of devoted fans of something. While K-pop did not initiate this phenomenon, it has harnessed it effectively. Fans form the bedrock of this genre's local and global success. Although this may seem unsurprising—after all, fans contribute to the popularity of any cultural phenomenon—the scale and rapid growth of K-pop fandoms extend beyond mere musical appreciation (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014). This

phenomenon is not solely a result of fresh musical trends; rather, it reflects a meticulously orchestrated strategy. K-pop fandoms are passionate and dedicated. Fans express their support through fan art, fan fiction, social media engagement, and participation and organization of fan clubs. In return, they seek the coveted attention of their “idols”. K-pop's marketing strategy revolves around making fans feel integral to their favorite groups' success, earning them a sense of "eternal gratitude" (Kim & Hutt, 2021). Idols actively cultivate a special bond with their fans. They engage more frequently on social media than their Western counterparts, participate in talk shows, and even host behind-the-scenes programs. Herein lies the crux: the term "idol," which inherently implies unattainability, suddenly becomes relatable and familiar to fans (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021). This cultivated familiarity, however, can lead to problems similar to those observed in Japan, where fans may feel entitled to scrutinize idols' personal lives, including their dating choices (Kakin, 2023). Additionally, this manufactured intimacy may create unrealistic expectations and blur the lines between parasocial relationships and real connections.

The seemingly intimate connection between idols and fans is exemplified by one fan's statement from an interview I conducted: "When I'm watching videos, for example, it makes me feel better, and I know they won't judge me for anything." This sentiment illustrates how the carefully crafted image of approachability and understanding fosters a sense of emotional safety and acceptance among fans, further strengthening their attachment to the idols. This fostered, somehow manufactured, sense of community and enthusiasm for it is what keeps K-pop "going" (McLaren, 2021), effectively capturing people within the folds of fandom through the illusion of a close, personal relationship with their idols.

The marketing prowess of K-pop is unparalleled compared to strategies employed by American music labels (Kong, 2016). K-pop idols are compelled to maintain a strong presence on social media platforms, with dedicated apps like V-Live facilitating direct communication between fans and idols (Souders, 2022). An essential role of fans is streaming new songs by their favorite K-pop groups on platforms like YouTube. This active engagement results in K-pop music videos accumulating billions of views and influencing app algorithms. Streaming is crucial because it impacts the rankings of songs on both the Korean and international charts (Hwang, & Lopes, 2023). The K-pop industry leverages its prowess to encourage fans to stream

songs through various strategies. Companies often announce specific streaming targets for fans to achieve, creating a sense of collective mission. This tactic capitalizes on fans' dedication and desire to support their favorite artists, effectively turning streaming into a form of fan labor that directly contributes to the industry's success

Furthermore, K-pop and the fashion-beauty industry are closely intertwined. K-pop has paved the way for the global sale of Korean cultural products (Kim & Ryoo, 2007). Currently, the Korean beauty industry is worth tens of billions of dollars (Marasca, 2020). Fashionably dressed and impeccably groomed, Korean idols have sparked demand for Korean fashion products used worldwide. Korean cosmetics are now (as of 2024) available on European and American store shelves. Clothing items worn by idols, documented in photos, sell out within minutes (Wang & Lee, 2021). Even idols' favorite beverages can disappear from Korean stores within days. A striking example occurred when Jungkook of BTS casually revealed his fondness for kombucha during a live broadcast in early 2021. This genuinely spontaneous mention sparked a remarkable 500% surge in sales for the Korean tea brand TEAZEN, renowned for its zesty lemon kombucha (Tiwari, 2021). Importantly, this was not a planned product placement, but rather an organic expression of Jungkook's personal preference. The incident demonstrates the extraordinary influence K-pop idols have on consumer behavior, even when they're not actively trying to promote products. It underscores how fans eagerly emulate their idols' choices and how a single, unscripted comment can trigger substantial economic effects in the market. This phenomenon highlights the unique power dynamics in K-pop fandom, where idols' authentic, everyday actions can have far-reaching commercial consequences.

The worldwide appeal of K-pop can be ascribed to the cultural phenomena referred to as Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. Hallyu denotes a significant upsurge in South Korean popular culture that has experienced a remarkable spike in global appeal throughout the 1990s, especially with the cessation of military governance in South Korea and the opening of its cultural sector. The word largely incorporates the extensive distribution of Korean television, pop music, movies, and fashion. Additionally, it includes animation, video games, technology, literature, cosmetics, and gastronomy (Kim, 2013).

The initial surge of Hallyu began in the mid-1990s, mostly focused on exporting Korean television dramas (K-dramas) and films to markets in China, Taiwan, and Japan. This cultural

boom acquired speed in the context of important historical events, such as the end of military dictatorship and the following liberalization of the cultural industry (Khachatryan, 2017). Two prominent plays that illustrate this tendency are "Jewel in the Palace" (sometimes referred to as "Dae Jang Geum"), which greatly fascinated audiences in China, and "Winter Sonata", which garnered passionate lovers in Japan (Lee, & Ju, 2010). These dramas not only provided entertainment for spectators, but also promoted cross-cultural interactions among Asian countries, thereby contributing to the worldwide spread of Korean popular culture.

Significantly, this period also signified a change in government policy. In 1993, the South Korean government implemented a policy of cultural commercialization, acknowledging cultural items as significant commodities for economic export (Parc, 2017). This change established the foundation for the following growth of the country's film, television, and music sectors. Prior to the 1990s, the South Korean government allocated funds mostly towards traditional forms of Korean culture rather than contemporary Korean pop culture. The transition in 1993 was not a deliberate attempt to initiate a worldwide surge in the popularity of South Korean pop culture, but it laid the foundation for future developments.

The Asian financial crisis of 1997 had a significant impact on both the cultural and political dimensions of Hallyu. From an economic perspective, the crisis forced broadcasters in East Asia to search for programming options that were more cost-effective. Korean dramas, known for their captivating storylines and likable protagonists, have emerged as a viable alternative to Japanese and Hong Kong television programming (Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020). From a political standpoint, the crisis resulted in substantial reforms. South Korea abolished military control in its entertainment industry and relaxed media laws, promoting private investments in cultural output (Ryoo, 2008). Amid the crisis, entertainment corporations intentionally shifted their attention to exporting cultural items as a means to generate additional cash. As a result, the first wave of Hallyu was inadvertently sparked, with a focus on exporting Korean dramas and films to nearby Asian countries (Shim, 2008).

The Basic Act on the Promotion of Cultural Industries was passed by the National Assembly in 1999, with the aim of providing governmental assistance to Korean cultural products (Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021). This legislation solidified the government's dedication to endorsing and advancing Korean cultural exports.

At this nascent stage, K-pop was in its early development, originating from the 1990s and the band Seo Taiji and Boys. Although this ensemble had a substantial influence on the development and progression of the genre, their reputation was primarily limited to their own country. Nevertheless, musicians such as BoA attained notable triumph by penetrating the Japanese music industry. Her adventure commenced during her teenage years when her agency, SM Entertainment, assigned her the task of moving and working on a Japanese-language record. In 2002, her efforts paid off as her first Japanese album, "Listen to My Heart", was well-received. BoA achieved the distinction of becoming the first South Korean pop star to have a substantial influence in Japan following the removal of trade barriers that had been in place since the conclusion of World War II (Jung & Hirata, 2012).

Both of her next solo albums achieved sales over one million copies each. BoA's success served as a source of inspiration for Korean idols, who subsequently recorded albums in Korean and then produced Japanese versions in order to promote themselves in Japan (Jung et al., 2015). Japan continues to be a highly significant market for K-pop, showcasing the ability of Korean singers to successfully reach a worldwide audience.

Simultaneously, the achievement aligned with an increasing acknowledgment among policymakers in South Korea regarding the potential of cultural exports. Starting from the early 2000s, South Korean presidents have considered cultural items as valuable commodities, especially following the Asian economic crisis (Elfving-Hwang, 2013). Former President Lee explicitly acknowledged that due to the unquestionable triumph of K-pop and South Korean dramas, our country prioritized the promotion of South Korean entertainment. This quotation emphasizes the government's proactive involvement in boosting Korean cultural exports as a component of its national plan.

Hallyu 2.0, also known as the second wave, emerged in about 2008 and represented a crucial milestone for K-pop. This period highlighted the genre's ability to surpass its Korean roots and gain recognition outside of its home country. The increase in interest was mostly triggered by the emerging social media platforms that were becoming more important during this time (Jung et al., 2015). K-pop adeptly utilized these nascent channels, deliberately marketing its musicians on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This action facilitated universal

access to K-pop content, allowing people from around the world to easily participate in activities such as downloading, buying, and streaming K-pop music (Jin & Yoon, 2016).

In the mid-2000s, the Korean wave began to spread from East Asia to other regions in Asia. However, in the mid-2010s, it expanded much farther to include Europe, the Americas, and Africa (Kim, 2021). In terms of music, the second Hallyu wave saw the rise of other groups in the music industry, including as Big Bang, Girls' Generation (SNSD), SHINee, 2NE1, Wonder Girls, and Super Junior (Leung, 2012).

With the increasing popularity of K-pop, new avenues for marketing and financial growth emerged. In order to motivate fans to buy CDs, creative additions were made, such as valuable products like photo books and photo cards, which showcase the group members. Moreover, the introduction of light sticks, which enabled performers to establish a visual connection with their audience during performances, became a distinguishing feature of K-pop concerts (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021). Moreover, during this period, there was a significant focus on captivating choreography, and stars underwent intense training to perfect their execution.

During this period, the South Korean government started to strategically utilize the increasing popularity of K-pop as a means of exerting 'soft power.' This policy leverages the appeal of intangible assets, particularly aspects of mainstream culture like K-dramas and K-pop, to create a favorable perception of the nation that resonates with individuals from other countries (Barden, 2019). Joseph Nye, the originator of the notion, argued that 'soft power resides in persuading the opposing party to covet what you seek.' This method was so crucial that it was integrated into South Korea's National Defense Strategy (Grix et al., 2021).

Turkish sociologist Alptekin Keskin considers this program to be successful, stating that Korea is unparalleled in its ability to properly utilize these groups and popular culture. This comment emphasizes the distinctive and efficient strategy that South Korea has employed in leveraging its popular culture for diplomatic and economic benefits.

The pinnacle of K-pop's second wave was reached when Psy's music video for "Gangnam Style" was released in 2012. This revolutionary video achieved the distinction of being the first on YouTube to exceed one billion views, therefore opening doors for future K-pop singers and

their worldwide triumph (Lee & Kuwahara, 2014). The remarkable triumph of "Gangnam Style" highlighted the capacity of K-pop as a means of cultural diplomacy and soft power.

Hallyu 3.0, also known as the third wave, began in the mid-2010s and continues to the present day. This wave deviates greatly from previous ones by emphasizing development into different markets and employing novel methods for content production and social media networks (Kim et al., 2021). K-pop's geographical spread has significantly broadened during this third wave, encompassing not just the United States but also the United Kingdom and France (Kim, 2021).

Notable musical ensembles that arose during this third wave encompass renowned acts like BTS, BLACKPINK, EXO, TWICE, and Stray Kids (Souders, 2022). These groups have attained unparalleled levels of worldwide popularity, with BTS, specifically, shattering multiple records and garnering fame comparable to that of Western pop icons.

An unmistakable characteristic of this era is the conspicuous surge in international partnerships between Korean and non-Korean artists (Romero, 2023). The Hallyu 3.0 strategy utilizes these collaborations to accomplish two main goals: broadening the audience beyond devoted K-pop enthusiasts and gratifying faithful overseas fans with music customized to their culture and language.

One notable collaboration is the "Mic Drop Remix" by BTS, which is an enhanced version of their Korean single. This remix smoothly combines English verses and includes the well-known American Producer Steve Aoki. In a span of only four months, the music video of the remix accumulated an impressive 225 million views on YouTube. This achievement made it the first single by a Korean group to receive a gold certification, indicating that it had sold over 500,000 units (Ju, 2019). For Korean musicians, incorporating collaborations and English renditions of songs is a logical approach to achieve success in America, considering that the language barrier continues to be a major hurdle for Korean vocalists aspiring to establish themselves in the United States.

The third wave also includes efforts to dominate Spanish-speaking markets. Although K-pop stars had previously performed Spanish songs, typically during concerts or festivals in Latin America, such collaborations were infrequent. Nevertheless, there has been a discernible surge

in these partnerships in recent years. The goal remains unchanged: a determined endeavor to penetrate the demanding yet lucrative market (Yoon et al., 2020).

Amidst this surge, the South Korean government has proactively integrated K-pop into its diplomatic strategies. One strategy used is to take advantage of the participation of celebrities in conventional diplomatic gatherings. Famous individuals are recruited to create recordings conveying their political endorsement prior to and after significant discussions. At the presidency of Moon Jae-in in South Korea, notable singers and golf stars were invited to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump, and friendship concerts were arranged at a summit with French President Emmanuel Macron (Day, & Wedderburn, 2022)

An exceptionally accomplished endeavor was the coordination of a concert in Pyongyang, the principal city of North Korea, showcasing esteemed K-pop celebrities such as Red Velvet and Baek Ji-young. This performance was organized to commemorate the inaugural meeting in 2018 between the former South Korean president and Kim Jong Un. The project was successful and attracted worldwide attention. The YouTube video of this concert garnered approximately 3 million views (Gibson, 2020).

Curiously, the South Korean government does not necessarily have to actively participate in order to impact the interest of overseas followers in Korean culture. Idols frequently integrate aspects of Korean culture into their songs in a natural and authentic manner. An evident trend in K-pop entails the use of traditional Korean instruments, dance components, and costumes such as the 'hanbok'. Certain music videos also incorporate elements from Korea's historical context. Korean idols unintentionally promote their culture through interviews and live streaming by showcasing Korean cuisine and products (Saeji, 2022).

Nevertheless, the 'soft power' doctrine carries certain inherent hazards. The worldwide proliferation of South Korean pop culture showcases emerging weaknesses that could potentially affect the advancement of soft power (Kim & Lee, 2014). When South Korea deployed an American missile defense system, China retaliated by placing sanctions on South Korean cultural exports, such as K-pop, and tourism (Kasinskaitė, 2022). This instance highlights the intricate interaction between cultural exports and geopolitical connections.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Hallyu persists in developing. According to certain sources, there is evidence of a fourth wave occurring, which involves the merging of several sectors, including food, beauty, and lifestyle, with Korean culture, commonly referred to as "K-style." The statement indicates that Korean culture has had a long-lasting influence on a worldwide scale (Nam, 2013). From a musical standpoint, the fourth wave represents the rise of highly skilled and extensively trained idols who develop dedicated fan bases even prior to their official debuts.

Hallyu 4.0 also encompasses the tourism sector. The previous waves of Korean media, industries, and cultural exportation were quite conspicuous. According to Lim and Giouvriss (2021), those who have been exposed to Korean media for a long time are becoming more interested in visiting South Korea as a tourism destination. The appeal is not solely derived from the entertainment content people receive, but also from the yearning to personally encounter the lively K-style.

To summarize, the emergence of K-pop and Hallyu is not solely a cultural occurrence, but rather a meticulously planned combination of cultural ingenuity and political tactics. The deliberate process of propagating Korean media over a span of nearly 30 years was not a result of chance. Instead, it was a deliberate and calculated effort that was acknowledged early on during its growth and later supported by the South Korean government. The relationship between South Korea's cultural exports and diplomatic endeavors will continue to define its international ties and worldwide influence as it navigates the global landscape. The continuous development of K-pop and its incorporation into other facets of Korean society implies that its influence will persistently expand and diversify in the future, solidifying South Korea's status as a dominant force in global culture.

1.2 The Rise of K-pop Fandom in Poland: From Online Communities to Offline Parties

The context provided by the previously discussed topics serves as a starting point for further discussion and analysis of K-pop fandom in Poland. The context provided by the previously discussed topics serves as a foundation for examining K-pop fandom in Poland, specifically in Wrocław. This chapter aims to explore the nature and social dynamics of relationships that develop among participants at K-pop parties in this Polish city, especially in the context of gender and ethnicity.

South Korean popular culture, actively supported by the South Korean government, aims to reach a broad global audience. K-pop's global impact is impressive, with the genre achieving significant success. However, Europe does not hold the same prominence as other markets when it comes to promoting Korean artists. While successes on the European continent are appreciated, they typically do not match the records set by K-pop in other Asian countries or the Americas (Hübinette, 2018).

Notably, Korean idols rarely embark on concert tours in Europe. When they do, it is usually limited to a few cities. In contrast, K-pop idols are more likely to appear at festivals in the USA than in any European country. Surprisingly, none of the top K-pop idol names have been featured in announcements for European festivals in recent years. Meanwhile, individual BTS members actively promote themselves in the USA. Europe lacks marketing power and significance in this context (Kim & McGoun, 2022).

One contributing factor to the absence of European concerts is the European Union's regulation on ticket pricing practices. Unlike in the USA and Asia, the EU prohibits 'dynamic pricing' for concert tickets. Dynamic pricing allows companies to adjust ticket prices based on demand, potentially leading to significantly higher prices for popular events. This practice can be highly profitable for K-pop agencies when applied in markets like the USA and Asia. However, the EU's restriction on this practice limits the potential revenue from concerts in Europe. For instance, BIG HIT, responsible for some of the top K-pop groups in the market, has reportedly been reluctant to send its artists on European tours due to this limitation. The inability to use dynamic pricing in Europe reduces the potential profits for agencies, making these tours less financially attractive compared to those in other regions where such pricing strategies are permitted (Trinh, 2023; Koreaboo, 2023).

Despite Europe often being overlooked as a receptive K-pop market, strong fandoms exist across the continent. While comprehensive data on K-pop fandom sizes in individual European countries is limited, studies and fan events have indicated significant followings in several nations. For instance, a 2019 survey by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange found notable K-pop fan bases in France, Germany, and the UK (KOFICE, 2019). Additionally, large-scale K-pop events like KCON, which has been held in Paris and London, have drawn thousands of attendees, suggesting substantial fan communities in these countries

.However, it's important to note that fan presence varies across Europe, with some countries having more visible and active K-pop communities than others.

The 8,000-kilometer distance between Poland and Korea not only separates them geographically but also underscores a significant cultural contrast. Despite historical similarities, these two nations remain distinct from each other. According to the preliminary results of the 2021 Polish National Census, 97.7% of the population identified as having Polish nationality, while 3.5% identified with other nationalities or ethnicities, for example Silesians, Kashubians and German (Główny Urząd Statystyczny [GUS], 2023).

Research suggests that attitudes towards foreigners in Poland are complex and evolving. While some studies indicate a degree of skepticism towards immigrants, particularly from non-European countries (Thérová, 2023), it's important to note that attitudes vary across different demographics and regions. For instance, younger and urban populations tend to show more openness to cultural diversity (Górka, 2022).

Historically, there has been limited mutual cultural understanding between Poland and Korea. A study by Trzcińska (2018) found that many Poles tend to view Asian countries as a homogeneous entity, sometimes associating them with lower levels of development. This perception, however, is gradually changing with increased exposure to Korean popular culture. For instance, the growing popularity of Korean language courses in Polish universities and the emergence of K-pop fan clubs in major cities indicate a shifting landscape of cultural awareness.

Despite all these cultural obstacles, K-pop has made its way into the Polish mainstream and garnered a devoted fan base. However, the functioning of the K-pop fandom in Poland significantly differs from how it operates in Asian countries or even the USA. K-pop is rarely heard on the radio in Poland, and when it is, it's usually songs performed entirely in English (Trzcińska, 2018).

K-pop fandom in Poland, much like in other countries with smaller audiences, primarily operates online mostly by K-pop groups on Facebook, online forums and social media. However, particularly in recent years, Poland has witnessed a growing number of concerts, events, and K-pop-dedicated venues. These developments provide fans with opportunities for offline engagement. Presently, several organizations, to varying degrees, organize K-pop parties

in major Polish cities (Trzcińska, 2018). However, comprehensive data on the number of these organizations, their size, or whether they are Korean-owned or Polish-owned is not readily available.

However, this significant offline activity is not the sole phenomenon unfolding in the country. Various privately owned companies, recognizing the escalating interest in K-pop-related themes, now offer workshops, camps, and even trips to South Korea. Another crucial offline pursuit embraced by Polish fans is the “cover dance”—the art of replicating choreographies from K-pop idols’ music videos. These dance performances are often recorded and shared online. The cover dance trend gained popularity in the late 2000s as YouTube and social media platforms became more prevalent. This allowed fans from all over the world to share their performances and connect with a global community. By engaging in cover dance, fans are able to fully immerse themselves in the world of their beloved idols. In Poland, an increasing number of groups specialize in reenacting these intricate moves, with some achieving recognition and success in international fan contests (Trzcińska, 2018).

Despite the emergence of new events and the growing number of K-pop stars visiting Poland, the majority of these activities remain concentrated in Warsaw. While K-pop parties or Dance Cover Challenges happen in most of the bigger cities in Poland concerts of K-pop artist haven been so far limited only to the capital. Unfortunately, this geographical limitation restricts participation for fans residing in other cities, hindering their ability to engage with the K-pop fandom in any meaningful offline manner.

While platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Wattpad, and Tumblr engage Polish fans, Facebook holds a significant advantage. On Facebook thrive numerous groups dedicated to K-pop, serving as hubs for communication among fans and fostering fan activities. Additionally, TikTok has emerged as a crucial platform for K-pop fandom, particularly among younger fans. Its short-form video format is ideal for K-pop dance covers, lip-syncing, and participating in idol-initiated challenges, further expanding the ways Polish fans engage with and create K-pop content.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of people who constitute the Polish K-pop fandom. Currently, the largest K-pop-related group on Facebook “Kpopowy Spam XD” has 27,500 members. However, it is essential to consider that probably not every member of this

group necessarily identifies as part of the fandom. Similarly, not all K-pop fans use Facebook or are part of this specific group. On only Facebook I found few smaller groups for example “K-pop stany” (3000 members), “Kpop Polska” (1500 members) and “Kpopiary” (6200 members). Nevertheless, these numbers don’t necessarily prove the exact number of K-pop fans in Poland. The total number of fans remains speculative due to the lack of concrete data on which to base precise numerical estimates (Trzcińska, 2018).

In her book “Polish K-Pop Fandom: Phenomenon, Structure & Communication” Julia Trzcińska presents several data points that illuminate the structure of the Polish K-pop fandom. Her research was conducted using online survey on the sample of around 1400 participants and 14 in-depth interviews. Results showed that early half of K-pop enthusiasts fall within the age range of 16 to 20 years old. Furthermore, almost 95% of fans are aged between 10 and 26 years. The author acknowledges that fans could be even younger than 10, as her study did not include an age category below that threshold.

Regarding gender distribution, a significant majority of K-pop fans in Poland identify as women (97.4%). Only 1.4% of study participants identified as male, while 0.9% chose not to specify their gender.

Another noteworthy aspect is the residential distribution of K-pop fans. It is almost evenly spread across three categories: large cities (38.2%), small/medium towns (39.4%), and rural areas (22.4%). Interestingly, nearly 87% of Polish fans describe their role in the fandom as observers, while only 1.6% actively engage in roles such as creating fan clubs or member groups (Trzcińska, 2018).

An interesting aspect that Julia Trzcińska also explored is the motivations that drive individuals to join a fandom. The majority of those surveyed cited a simple affinity for the music genre as their primary reason, while also appreciating elements such as choreography, fashion style, and visual effects, which are integral to this genre. Many fans also believe that K-pop has a positive impact on their well-being. Additionally, discussions often revolved around the differences between K-pop and Western music, particularly regarding the lack of excessive sexuality and body exposure in K-pop. In her book on Polish K-pop fans Julia Trzcińska notes that “Being different from Western music (although rarely specified in what aspects and how) and not being too focused on sexiness and exposing bodies were also important factors for Polish

K-Pop fans”. Polish fans are also drawn to the cooperation and camaraderie among K-pop group members, creating an almost family-like atmosphere (Trzcińska, 2018).

For many K-pop enthusiasts, the genre serves as a gateway to explore Korean culture, aligning with the principles of soft power. Through their engagement with K-pop, Polish fans not only acquire knowledge about Korean culture but also integrate it into their daily lives and identities. In Poland, the interest in Korea is steadily growing, manifesting in various ways. The emergence of Korean restaurants (at least 25 in the city), specialty stores offering Korean products, and the presence of Korean cosmetics on the shelves of popular drugstores all attest to this trend. Even Lidl, a well-known supermarket chain, has introduced buldak—the famous Korean instant noodles—into its product offerings. Furthermore, the field of Korean studies (Koreanistyka) has become increasingly competitive, at the University of Wrocław, as many as 26 people apply for one place in this major, reflecting the rising interest in Korean language, culture, and society. As the number of K-pop fans continues to grow, there is a corresponding need for events and activities that cater to their enthusiasm and foster a sense of community.

The remarkable success of K-pop has led to the emergence of more niche entities catering to domestic audiences. In Poland, approximately there is ten organizations in charge of throwing regular K-pop parties (Trzcińska, 2018). The inception of K-pop events in Poland likely dates back to 2016, with the first K-pop event taking place in Warsaw. However, due to the absence of official websites for these organizations, it remains challenging to ascertain their current numbers or track their historical presence. Some of these entities are intermittent, periodically reappearing and fading away.

Among these organizations, CheonCheonHi stands out as the most prominent and recognizable among fans. With around 8,000 followers on Instagram, CheonCheonHi regularly hosts events across several Polish cities and, as of April 2024, is venturing beyond national borders.

This consistent event series, which began in 2021, provides an excellent context for analyzing and studying the K-pop party phenomenon. Beyond mere club gatherings, K-pop parties serve as focal points for fan integration and social interaction. These events attract not only fans seeking mainstream K-pop experiences but also individuals with diverse motivations for attending. My research indicates that K-pop parties pique interest across a broad spectrum

of attendees. Again, literature needs to be discussed in this regard (social aspects, identity, motivations, etc).

K-pop parties are a relatively recent phenomenon that, as of the moment of writing this work, has not been thoroughly explored ethnographically. The term “K-pop party” started to be used in literature several years ago, primarily in the context of concert events (Hübinette, 2019). It has also been mentioned in a few more recent publications, although these studies do not focus on investigating this phenomenon (Cicchelli et al., 2023).

So, what exactly is a K-pop party? The answer is surprisingly straightforward: it’s simply a club event where only K-pop music is played. These events are becoming increasingly popular worldwide. A quick Google search for “K-pop party” reveals information about upcoming events in the USA, UK, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, and, of course, Poland. As K-pop’s popularity and fan base grows rapidly, so does not only the number of K-pop parties but also their organizers.

1.3 Beyond Music: K-pop Fandom as Identity and Lifestyle in Poland

K-pop fandoms across the globe are experiencing rapid growth. For fans, K-pop is not merely a music genre they listen to; it represents a hobby, or even a lifestyle. Academic research indicates that K-pop plays a significant role in shaping fans' identities, offering them not only music but also patterns of behavior, aesthetics, and values that they often adapt to their own lives and personal expression (Laffan, 2020). Despite this, K-pop remains a somewhat marginal popular culture/fandom phenomenon in Poland. Although there are increasing opportunities for fans to connect in settings such as school or work, a substantial portion of them have communicated exclusively online for years, in case of Poland mostly on the forementioned Facebook groups. It’s important to note that even before K-pop gained recent prominence, fandoms for this genre existed in various countries, leading some fans to rely solely on online communication (Maros, et al., 2022).

Currently, there is a growing need for spaces where fans can integrate and connect. My research shows that not all K-pop enthusiasts are interested in learning the language, dance, or singing associated with the genre. However, they all share a common love for K-pop music. This is precisely why K-pop parties, among all the events and groups, have achieved the great

success—they provide an inclusive space for every fan where they can be open about their identity.

This online and offline participation in K-pop fandom represent distinct yet interconnected modes of engagement from an emic perspective. Online participation often involves activities such as streaming music videos, participating in social media trends, and engaging in virtual fan communities. This digital engagement allows fans to connect globally, share content instantly, and participate in fandom activities regardless of geographical constraints. Offline participation, conversely, involves physical presence at concerts, fan meetings, and local events, offering a more tangible and immersive experience.

Theories of audience participation, such as Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture (2006), highlight how fans transition from passive consumers to active producers of content. In K-pop, this is particularly evident in the forementioned phenomenon of "cover dance." over dance serves multiple functions within the fandom: it's a form of tribute to the original artists, a means of skill development for dancers, and a way to create and share content within the community. Participants often form groups, rehearse extensively, and showcase their performances both online and at local events. The phenomenon has grown to such an extent that international cover dance competitions are now common, with some even sponsored by K-pop entertainment companies. These events not only provide a platform for fans to demonstrate their talents but also occasionally serve as a recruitment channel for the industry (Oh, 2020). Through cover dance, fans engage in a form of embodied cultural participation, physically enacting their connection to K-pop and contributing to its global dissemination. This practice exemplifies the active, creative role of fans in K-pop culture, blurring the lines between consumption and production in a way that is characteristic of contemporary participatory fan cultures.

1.4 Navigating Cultural Crossroads: Interethnic and Intergender Dynamics at K-pop Events in Wrocław

My study investigates the interethnic and intergender dynamics at K-pop events in Wrocław, Poland. The research focuses on events organized by CheonCheonHi, the most prominent organization within the K-pop fan community in Wrocław. These events attract a diverse audience, including Polish K-pop fans and Korean minority residing in Wrocław, creating a unique environment for cross-cultural interactions.

The research question guiding this study is: "What is the nature and social dynamics of the interethnic and intergender relationships that develop among participants at K-pop parties in Wrocław, Poland?" This question emerges from observations of the complex interactions occurring at these events, which serve as a sample of broader cultural exchange and identity negotiation processes.

Specifically, it examines the interethnic dynamics by drawing on theories of transcultural fandom (Jung, 2011) and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Study explores how fans from different ethnic backgrounds interact, negotiate cultural differences, and potentially form new, hybrid cultural practices. In terms of the intergender relations by using Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, I analyze how K-pop fandom provides spaces for exploring and challenging traditional gender norms, particularly through practices like cover dance.

This research adopts an emic perspective, considering how participants perceive and interpret their own interactions, while also employing etic analysis to contextualize these perceptions within broader theoretical frameworks.

Wrocław serves as an ideal location for this study due to its status as CheonCheonHi's base of operations and its diverse student population. Additionally, my familiarity with Wrocław facilitates deeper ethnographic engagement.

The existing literature lacks comprehensive insights into K-pop events, making this research significant. By conducting ethnographic observations and interviews, I aim to understand how participants perceive and interact at these events. Key aspects included identifying the event attendees, exploring their motivations for participation, and analyzing the interpersonal relationships among them.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of K-pop fandom in Poland and sheds light on the interplay between gender, ethnicity, and fandom within this context. Given K-pop's global influence and its varied manifestations in different countries, comprehending how individuals from diverse backgrounds engage with this phenomenon is crucial. Academically, this research offers several important contributions. It builds on Jung's (2011) work on transcultural fandom, exploring how K-pop fandom in Poland both reinforces and challenges existing theoretical frameworks. Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity,

it investigates how K-pop fandom spaces in Poland serve as sites for gender expression and negotiation. Furthermore, by focusing on Wrocław, this study adds to our understanding of how global cultural phenomena are localized and reinterpreted in specific cultural contexts. These theoretical explorations not only contribute to academic discussions in fan studies, cultural globalization, and gender studies but also have practical implications. Insights into interethnic and intergender relations at K-pop events can inform efforts to create more inclusive and harmonious spaces for fans, potentially benefiting event organizers, cultural policymakers, and educators interested in fostering intercultural communication and understanding through popular culture.

1.5 Structure and Content of the Following Chapters

This bachelor's thesis is structured into three chapters, each serving a distinct purpose. In this introductory chapter, I intended to acquaint the reader with the term "K-pop," tracing its historical origins and examining its global influence. Furthermore, I delved into the phenomenon's rise to prominence in Poland, shedding light on the emergence of K-pop fan culture and the proliferation of K-pop party events. The purpose of the chapter was to provide essential context for the subsequent analysis. By highlighting the multifaceted nature of K-pop, I aimed to set the stage for a comprehensive exploration of interethnic and intergender dynamics at K-pop events in Wrocław.

The second and third chapters will present an in-depth ethnographic examination of K-pop events in Wrocław, focusing on intergender dynamics and cross-cultural encounters respectively. Drawing primarily from extensive fieldwork observations and interviews with participants, these chapters will provide a rich, detailed account of the interactions, perceptions, and experiences of Polish women and Korean men at these events. The second chapter will explore how gender roles are negotiated and performed within the unique context of K-pop parties, examining issues such as stereotyping, exoticization, and the influence of K-pop imagery on expectations and behaviors. The third chapter will delve into the intercultural aspects of these gatherings, analyzing how K-pop fandom facilitates cultural exchange and bridges between Polish and Korean participants, while also highlighting the challenges and tensions that arise from language barriers and cultural differences. Both chapters will contextualize the ethnographic findings within relevant academic literature on topics such as soft masculinity,

cultural hybridity, and interethnic relations. Additionally, they will incorporate insights from analysis of Polish online discourse about K-pop and Korean culture to provide a broader perspective on the phenomena observed at the local events. While the focus will be primarily on the Polish context, comparisons with global K-pop fandoms and events will be made where relevant to situate the Wrocław case study within the wider landscape of K-pop's international impact.

The discussion chapter will bring together and examine the main discoveries from the ethnographic study of K-pop events in Wrocław, Poland. The study will delve into the intricate dynamics of interethnic and intergender relationships observed at these events, analyzing the impact of idealized perceptions, cultural stereotypes, and language barriers on interactions between Polish and Korean participants. The chapter will explore the development of community identity within the K-pop fandom and the significance of shared interests, specifically dance, in promoting cultural exchange. We will delve into the theoretical implications of the findings, drawing connections to concepts like social identity theory, gender performativity, and cultural hybridity. Event organization and safety will also be discussed, focusing on practical implications. The chapter will discuss the study's limitations, such as the sample size and potential researcher bias, and suggest future research directions to build upon this work. Ultimately, this analysis will place these K-pop events in the larger context of cultural globalization and localization, emphasizing their importance as distinct platforms for navigating identity and promoting intercultural comprehension in today's society.

2. Methodology

The research aimed to conduct an ethnographic study of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop parties in Wrocław. The primary goal was to understand the social dynamics and cultural interactions between Korean and Polish youths who attend K-pop events organized at Liverpool Club by CheonCheonHi. Factors influencing these relationships, such as aesthetic intrigues, the desire for socialization, interests in cultural/ethnic differences, and sexuality, were identified as key aspects to investigate. Additionally, the study aimed to define the role of K-pop in promoting post-gendered patterns of "soft masculinity" (Lee et al., 2020) and post-racial, hybrid patterns of "Asianness" (Oh, 2014) and explore how these patterns could potentially shape cross-cultural relations at K-pop events.

Given the focus on the relatively new phenomenon of K-pop parties, the research contributed to the broader field of K-pop studies, which had predominantly focused on online and offline communities of fandom (Jung, 2012). The study also addressed the limited academic attention given to K-pop parties, as mentions of them could only be found in a handful of academic texts published in recent years (Keith, 2019), (Hübinette, 2019).

The methodology employed an exploratory idiographic approach to understanding the social and cultural context of relationships among K-pop party attendees. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the specific context and unique characteristics of interethnic and intergender relationships at these events.

Existing literature addressing topics such as gender (Moon, 2019), Korean/Asian ethnicity, and immigrant identity in Poland (Kuźnik, 2022) served as a foundation for the study. By focusing on interethnic relations with Asian/Korean immigrants, the research aimed to contribute to the broader discussion of Polish interethnic relations, which has primarily centered on historical events or cultural differences in professional cooperation. Additionally, the study addressed the potential impact of K-pop events on the Polish-Korean integration process in Wrocław, considering the reported isolation of the Korean minority in Poland (Kuźnik, 2022).

Through this methodology, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of interethnic and intergender relations at K-pop events, contribute to the emerging field of K-pop event research, and deepen current understanding of Polish interethnic relations with Asian/Korean immigrants.

2.1 Research Design

This study chose a qualitative research design to explore inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events in Wroclaw. The decision to use a qualitative approach was based on the need for an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural dynamics in this context. Qualitative research offers a unique set of tools and methodologies that allow for rich descriptions, explorations of meaning, and inductive approaches to data analysis, which are highly relevant to the chosen research topic.

K-pop parties are complex social events that bring together participants from diverse backgrounds, and their interactions are influenced by various cultural, social, and gender-related factors. By employing a qualitative research design, this study aims to delve into the intricacies of these relationships and understand the underlying motivations, perceptions, and experiences of the participants.

The qualitative research methods used during the study include participant observation and interviews, which provide an opportunity to capture the nuances of social interactions and the cultural context in which they occur. Participant observation involves immersing oneself in the K-pop party environment and actively observing and documenting behaviors, interactions, and cultural practices. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics, non-verbal cues, and contextual factors that shape inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at these events.

In addition to participant observation, interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences, motivations, and perceptions. Open-ended and exploratory interviews were employed to capture the diverse perspectives and individual narratives of both Polish and Korean participants, shedding light on their personal experiences, beliefs, and the meanings they attribute to their involvement in K-pop events.

Furthermore, this study includes secondary data analysis, which involves analyzing online discourse and existing literature on the topic. Analysis of online discussions on social media platforms and online forums provides insight into the broader conversations and narratives surrounding K-pop fandom, interethnic relations, and perceptions of Korean and Polish culture. Additionally, analysis of existing literature provides a theoretical framework for discussion and helps contextualize the findings within the broader research landscape.

The qualitative research design aligns well with the exploratory nature of the study, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the social and cultural dimensions of interethnic and intergender relations at K-pop events. By employing qualitative methods, this study aims to uncover the multifaceted aspects of these relationships, including aesthetic intrigue, socialization, cultural/ethnic interests, and sexuality, while addressing the post-gender and post-racial dimensions specific to K-pop. Through rich descriptions, nuanced interpretations, and inductive analysis facilitated by qualitative research, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of interethnic relations and provide insights into the emerging phenomenon of K-pop parties in Poland.

2.2 Methods Used

2.2.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation was employed as the primary method in this study to comprehensively understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events in Wrocław. As the researcher, I regularly attended CheonCheonHi's organized events in Wrocław, immersing myself in the K-pop environment. This active participation enabled me to consistently observe the behaviors, interactions, and cultural practices of the K-pop event participants.

Throughout a period exceeding one year, I regularly attended multiple K-pop events at Club Liverpool in Wrocław, Poland, assuming the roles of both a researcher and a devoted K-pop enthusiast. While attending these events, I actively engaged in brief conversations with participants and diligently documented my observations in field notes. The dynamics between Polish and Korean youth held significant importance during my fieldwork, and I specifically focused on their interactions, communication patterns, and shared experiences. Utilizing this method allowed me to capture the intricate nuances of these relationships and the cultural factors that shape their formation. Consequently, this approach provided me with profound and detailed insights into the social and cultural aspects of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events held in Wrocław.

2.2.2 Interviews

A complementary method utilized in this study involved conducting interviews to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, motivations, and perceptions of attendees at the CheonCheonHi event. The interviews were conducted to gather individual perspectives and personal narratives, which could potentially provide insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions at K-pop events.

For the individual interviews, a diverse group of participants was selected. The sampling for these interviews was based on members of the CheonCheonHi Facebook group who had declared their participation in K-pop events in Wrocław and expressed willingness to be interviewed, as well as individuals I met during fieldwork who were open to engaging in longer conversations. This group included individuals from different age groups, as well as various typologies of attendees identified during the study, and diverse ethnic backgrounds. During these interviews, participants were presented with open-ended questions regarding their experiences at K-pop events, motivations for attending, perceptions of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations, and their perspectives on the role of K-pop fandom, as well as potential cultural and ethnic differences between Koreans and Poles. By conducting these interviews, I aimed to capture individual perspectives and gain insights that might not have been revealed through observation alone.

2.2.3 Secondary Data Analysis

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I conducted secondary data analysis to enhance my understanding of interethnic and intergender relations at K-pop events. This involved analyzing existing literature and online discourse pertaining to K-pop fandom, cross-cultural interactions, and mutual cultural understanding.

I examined published academic works that delve into K-pop fandom and its implications in various contexts, encompassing both online and offline communities. Furthermore, I analyzed online discourse platforms, such as social media and online forums, to gain insights into the broader conversations and narratives surrounding not only K-pop events but also interethnic relations, specifically within the venue of Wrocław. This approach allowed me to contextualize the findings within the existing body of knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the wider

social and cultural context of K-pop fandom, as well as its impact on interethnic and intergender relations.

By utilizing participant observation, interviews, and secondary data analysis, my study provides a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to comprehending the social and cultural dynamics at K-pop events in Wrocław. These methodologies enable a thorough exploration of the interethnic and intergender relationships that arise in this particular context, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural context of these relationships.

2.4 Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was conducted to understand the social-cultural content of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events in Wrocław. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that involves identifying and exploring recurring themes and patterns in the collected data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The data analysis process began by immersing myself in the collected data, which included field notes from participant observations and interview transcripts. This immersion phase entailed repeatedly reviewing and reading the materials to gain a holistic understanding of the context, participant behavior, and interactions.

Next, an open coding process was employed to generate initial codes by labeling and categorizing meaningful data units related to interethnic and intergender relationships. This preliminary coding phase facilitated the identification of important themes that emerged from the collected data.

Following the initial coding, the analysis proceeded to the axial coding process. This involved examining the relationships between the identified codes and organizing them into broader themes or categories. This step allowed for the identification of connections, patterns, and associations between codes, thereby enabling a deeper exploration of the social and cultural dynamics at K-pop events.

Throughout the data analysis process, an iterative and reflective approach was adopted. This involved constant comparison and contrast of new data with previously analyzed data, potentially leading to the modification or refinement of codes and themes. Additionally, a

reflection journal was maintained to document thoughts, observations, and interpretations, ensuring transparency and accountability in the analysis process.

By utilizing thematic analysis and an iterative approach, the study successfully identified and explored the socio-cultural content of inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events in Wrocław, Poland. The analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the themes, patterns, and dynamics that shape these relationships, contributing to a broader discussion of Polish interethnic relations and the integration of Korean immigrants into the Polish context.

2.5 Validity and Reliability

Ensuring the validity and reliability of the research is crucial to establishing its credibility and the validity of the results it contains (SÜRÜCÜ & MASLAKÇI, 2020). In this ethnographic study examining inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events in Wrocław, several strategies were employed to increase the rigor and credibility of the research.

First, long-term engagement was a key aspect of data collection. By regularly attending K-pop events held in Wrocław, I had the opportunity to develop relationships with participants and gain a deeper understanding of their behavior, interactions, and cultural practices. Long-term involvement allowed me to explore social dynamics in a more comprehensive and thorough manner, contributing to the richness of the collected data.

To enhance the depth, complexity, and validity of the findings, a triangulation of data sources was employed in this study. This approach, fundamental to anthropological research, goes beyond mere validation to achieve "thick description." It involved comparing and cross-referencing various types of data, including participant observations, interview responses, secondary data analysis, online discourse, and existing literature. This multi-faceted approach allowed for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study, capturing both observable behaviors and underlying cultural logics. By examining the K-pop events in Wrocław through multiple lenses, I was able to construct a rich, multidimensional portrait of the complex social and cultural dynamics at play.

In addition, member checking was employed as a means of verifying interpretation and ensuring accuracy. After the initial analysis, significant findings or interpretations were shared with participants, and their opinions were solicited. This process allowed participants to review

and verify the researcher's understanding of their experience, enhancing the credibility of the study.

Moreover, a reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process to record personal reflections, biases, and potential influences on the research. By critically analyzing and acknowledging the role and perspective of the researcher, potential sources of bias were identified and addressed, further increasing the credibility of the study.

Through the use of these strategies, including long-term engagement, triangulation of data sources, member checking, and reflective journal keeping, the validity and credibility of the study examining inter-ethnic and inter-gender relations at K-pop events were strengthened. These steps were designed to ensure that the results accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of participants, contributing to the overall credibility of the study.

2.6 Positionality

Positionality refers to how an individual's social position, such as their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of their identity, influences their perspectives, experiences, and understanding of the world around them. It recognizes that individuals have different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that shape their understanding and interpretation of events and phenomena.

The concept of positionality is often used to encourage researchers to reflect on their social position and how it influences their perspectives and actions (Lønsmann, 2016). It is also used to highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences and to challenge dominant narratives that marginalize certain groups based on their positionality (Roberts, 2001).

Positionality is important in ethnographic research because it affects the way researchers approach and understand the cultural practices and experiences of the people they are studying. As Manohar (2017) points out, the significance of positionality lies in its potential impact on how researchers interpret and analyze their data, leading to different conclusions and insights. The concept of multi-positionality has enriched my studies, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of K-pop events, their culture, and their participants.

As an undergraduate researcher, my unique perspective on the world of K-pop music and its culture is shaped by several characteristics that inform my positionality when engaging with this subject area. Being a young, white, middle-class Polish woman, I bring my racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background into consideration. Additionally, my gender, age, and nationality also influence my understanding of culture and, therefore, my research. Growing up in a predominantly homogeneous society has likely shaped my understanding of cultural differences and may limit my ability to accurately interpret the ideas and actions of Korean men, particularly given the language and cultural barriers. Consequently, my research has been guided by the experiences and knowledge gained through my position, which might influenced my approach to the study and the conclusions I have drawn.

My age, social status, and prior interest in K-pop have allowed me to quickly connect with other female participants at the event. This connection facilitated rapport-building, as my familiarity with K-pop enabled me to engage in informal conversations with female attendees, making them comfortable enough to share their experiences with me. These interactions provided valuable insights and deepened my comprehension of the event and K-pop culture.

Moreover, being introduced as a researcher from a foreign university facilitated conducting interviews, as the respondents were eager to provide extensive and content-rich statements. The clear purpose of the study encouraged the interviewees to offer detailed answers, granting me access to all the relevant information needed for subsequent stages of the research.

However, I encountered limitations in my interactions due to my gender and background when engaging with Korean attendees, the majority of whom were male. It became evident that these men were primarily interested in interacting with white women for flirtation, which raised ethical and moral considerations for me. As a result, I chose to abstain from engaging in this type of interaction, which significantly restricted the opportunities I had to build meaningful connections.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The merging of positionality into ethical considerations, as well as the navigation of specific ethical considerations, raised the question of how to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants were respected and protected throughout my research. Ethical considerations are paramount in research, as they guarantee that informants are not exposed to

any potential harm or exploitation, thus highlighting the importance of adhering to rigorous ethical standards. Citing research from prominent scholars (Reyes, 2020), we can assert that ethical considerations are essential for responsibly conducting research. I had to consider ethical implications during my research to ensure responsibility in data collection and processing, while also respecting the culture, values, and beliefs of the people I studied.

To ensure that all participants were cognizant of the research and the potential use of the data, I acted openly in the role of the researcher during interviews and conversations during fieldwork. In these situations, I informed participants that their statements could be utilized, for what purpose, and to what degree, and I assured them anonymity. Conversely, in situations of assuming the part of a participant observer, I did not reveal that I was gathering data. Nonetheless, I preserved the anonymity of the participants I was observing and eradicated any data that could identify them.

To successfully conduct my research respectfully, I took several steps to consider the cultural norms and conventions of the K-pop fandom. Firstly, I paid close attention to the way people interacted with each other, noting their body language and facial expressions. Additionally, I made sure to not impose my own opinions regarding K-pop, parties, or the community in general, but rather take the time to learn about the community's attitudes, values, and beliefs, such as their music preferences, dress code, and language, opinion on parties and participants, etc. Furthermore, I formulated my questions in a way that would not be offensive, especially when mentioning controversial or personal topics. Finally, I participated in all attractions as a normal participant, including singing and dancing to play songs and taking part in prize lotteries. By following these steps, I could respect and understand the culture of the K-pop fandom and easily navigate the cultural differences at K-pop parties.

To ensure that participants were able to speak freely, I took various measures during the research. Firstly, I strove to be transparent about my role and the purpose of the research. Additionally, I listened attentively to the participants' stories and perspectives, showing respect for their opinions, even if they diverged from my own. Subsequently, I provided feedback to the participants after each interaction and kept them up to date on the status of the study, to give them confidence that their voices were heard and were relevant to my work. Lastly, I endeavored to create a space where participants felt safe by inquiring what form of conversation they

preferred and in what medium they would feel comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of judgment or retribution. By taking these steps, I was able to reduce power dynamics and ensure that participants participated equally in the study.

3. Decoding Intergender Dynamics at Wrocław's K-pop Soirées

My expectations for K-pop parties did not differ much from those I would have for any other club located in the city of Wrocław. K-pop parties have much in common with regular club parties, but they also stand out with several specific features. The similarities primarily include the party nature of the event; they take place in clubs that are crowded, loud, have a DJ, entry gates, cloakrooms, smoking areas, and special wristbands or stamps allowing re-entry. Just like at regular parties, K-pop parties also have a bar with alcohol.

However, the differences are noticeable. At K-pop parties, the music consists solely of songs from this genre, and dance holds a unique significance - many people try to recreate the choreography from music videos. Attendees are often K-pop fans, including many Koreans, which can be surprising. At such parties, you can also meet people under the age of 18, which is rare at regular club events.

The dressing style of the participants is also different - many people wear outfits inspired by K-pop, and some even dress up specifically for the occasion. Decorations are often related to the party's theme, and there is an additional dance area for those who want to practice choreography. Raffles and dance performances are often organised at such events.

The atmosphere at K-pop parties is more friendly and sociable. Participants often make new acquaintances and talk to each other, treating these parties as an opportunity to meet other fans. At regular parties, people usually come to have fun or seek short-term relationships.

After regularly attending K-pop parties for some time, I developed a sense of nostalgia for them. The consistency and lack of variation in terms of the venue, decor, staff, and even the attendees (many of whom are regular visitors) made this place feel very familiar to me as well. I also established a routine for participating in these events, usually attending once a month with a companion and aiming to arrive around 10 pm when the club is not yet full. There is also a chance to get a number that qualifies for the prize lottery.

However, regular attendance also allowed me to meet people who, like me, showed up at these events from time to time. I gained enough courage to meet them and participate in the events with them. In February, I entered the dance floor at the Liverpool club alone, searching for Angelika, with whom I had arranged to meet. I spotted her at a table fairly close to the room's

entrance, where she was sitting with her Korean husband, Seonwoo, and another Korean man whom I had not previously had the opportunity to meet.

During my research for my thesis, Angelika was one of my key informants, not only because of her relationship with a Korean man but also due to the insight and criticism with which she approaches K-pop parties.

After a quick greeting with my acquaintances, I was introduced to the previously noticed Korean man. Minhó turned out to be on a tour of Europe, and Wrocław happened to be one of the points on his map to visit, mainly due to the significant Korean minority living here. He learned about the K-pop party from a Facebook group that brings together Koreans living in Wrocław. At least that's the information Seonwoo conveyed, as he acted as a translator since my Korean is limited to basic phrases, and Minhó speaks neither Polish nor English.

As I took my seat at the shared table, Angelika leaned in and pointed out a couple on the dance floor - a Korean man and a Polish woman dancing closely together, their bodies moving in sync with the music. "Look at them," Angelika said, her voice tinged with a mix of fascination and disapproval. "Five minutes, and they're already all over each other. It's scary how quickly it happens." Her observation echoed a sentiment I had heard from many Polish women at these parties - a sense of unease about the pace and intensity of some interactions between Korean men and Polish women. Looking around the room, I noticed several other pairs consisting of Polish women and Korean men.

Angelika continued to point out couples, commenting on the seemingly young age of some of the girls. "Do you see that one?" she asked, subtly gesturing towards a young woman in a short dress, dancing closely with a Korean man who appeared to be a few years older than her. "She can't be more than 16 or 17." This time, her accusations were confirmed by the couple's differing wristband colors. The girl had a pink wristband on her wrist, which is intended to help staff and other participants distinguish who is of legal age and who is not.

However, as the night progressed, I also witnessed several interactions that presented a different narrative of the relationships between Polish women and Korean men. On the dance floor, I noticed a group of Polish girls joined by two Korean men, all appearing to be around 20 years old. The guys danced with them in a circle, occasionally playfully placing their fists in

front of one of the girls' faces, pretending it was a microphone, and encouraging her to shout the Korean lyrics louder. After the song ended, they applauded her in a friendly manner, showing admiration for her skills, and then amicably walked away, leaving the group of girls to themselves and not wanting to disturb them. I also noticed that some of the men did not attempt to talk to the female participants, whether at the bar, on the dance floor, or outside. They positioned themselves close to the stage or against the walls, away from the people dancing on the dance floor, to observe the girls who were dancing on stage, trying to accurately recreate the routines they knew from K-pop music videos. In such interactions, it was difficult for me to discern any ulterior motives, especially when observing the admiration and positive surprise that appeared on their faces while watching the dancers. Between songs, they often applauded as well.

As the night progressed and the crowd grew larger, I decided to join Angelika and Seonwoo on the dance floor. Like the rest of the participants, we immersed ourselves in the dancing. At one point, Seonwoo leaned closer to me and pointed his finger above the crowd on the dance floor. "Do you see them?" he asked, indicating a group of Korean men sitting at a table on an elevated platform that provided them with a perfect view of the dance floor. I nodded, following his gaze. "The Koreans who sit and watch the dance floor like that are dangerous," Seonwoo warned. "They come here to find girls for themselves. If any of them ever approach you, don't talk to them." He continued, adding, "Those who dance on the dance floor are fine," he explained. "They are here to have fun and won't harm you. But those who just sit and observe have other intentions." After his words, I glanced back at the group of Korean men. They seemed engrossed in their own conversations, occasionally scanning the dance floor with their eyes. "I heard them talking," Seonwoo continued, his voice barely audible over the music. "They deliberately reserve these tables to have a view of the dance floor. They just watch until they choose a girl they are interested in. Then they take action, invite them to their table, and buy them drinks." What Seonwoo says confirms the rumours and warnings about the behaviour of some Korean men at these parties from others. However, until now, it was only Polish women who had this perspective.

This particular K-pop party definitely drew my attention to the importance of the relationships that occur between participants, especially between Korean men and Polish

women. Different perspectives and circulating rumours created an unclear picture of these groups' intentions for participating in K-pop parties. Is it superficial partner-seeking, as in any club, or is it a desire to find one's community and an openness to meeting people from other cultures?

3.1 An Ethnographic Odyssey through Gender and Culture at K-pop Events in Wrocław

The foundation of my research is based on observations from K-pop events in Wrocław and interviews conducted with their participants. In the context of intergender relations, it proved particularly important to analytically examine these events through the lens of interracial dating patterns, gender stereotypes, and cultural perceptions, with special consideration given to the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism (Said, 1977), soft masculinity (Jung, 2011), and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). During my fieldwork, I participated in several K-pop events, where I engaged in conversations with various attendees, including Polish and Ukrainian women, as well as Korean and Polish men. Because I never encountered a Korean woman at these events and never heard of their presence at events in Wrocław, I was unable to gather their perspective. However, given their apparent low or non-existent presence, it is not essential for the purpose of discussing this study, although in the future and potential development of such research, it would be important to find this perspective and consider why Korean women do not appear at such events.

Given my previous experiences with K-pop events, I was aware of certain potentially emerging problems in the context of intergender relations, which were also confirmed by my initial observations and interviews. However, I also tried to include a wider range of perspectives and experiences to avoid presenting a biased or one-sided picture. This is important because, as a researcher, it is crucial for me to acknowledge and analyze my own position and how it may have influenced my observations and interpretations. As a long-time K-pop fan, I realize that my personal experiences and biases may have initially shaped the way I perceived these events. Early in my fieldwork, I realized that despite considering myself a critical thinker, I had, to some extent, idealized the world of K-pop and its associated culture. This realization prompted me to adopt a more reflective approach. To reduce potential biases, I actively sought diverse

perspectives from both Polish and Korean event participants to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities.

In some of the interviews with Polish women, concerns were expressed regarding the behavior of Korean men. Emilia stated that "Koreans think that all these Polish and Ukrainian women are easy, that it's easy to score with them," while Katia observed that Korean men "come there to find some girl they don't know, some pretty, Slavic girl, to drink with her, and if everything goes well, to go somewhere with her." Once, while attending an event, my companion and I were even warned about Korean men by one of the participants, who shared a story about having to rescue her friend from a drunk Korean man. She explained that some Korean men book all the nearby hotels to lure Polish girls there after the party. This suggests that some female participants hold significant prejudices against Korean men attending the events. Interestingly, these prejudices often spread like rumors.

In the context of this intriguing need for warning among some participants, I learned about the existence of a special, private Instagram account. This account served as a kind of "blacklist" of Korean men participating in K-pop events who behaved inappropriately towards female attendees. Photos and information about these men were published there to warn other girls. Although the initiative was met with positive reactions from the participants, running the account proved problematic due to difficulties in verifying the identities of people requesting access and threats of lawsuits from the Koreans featured on the account. As a result, activity on the account has significantly decreased, but the idea itself has contributed to increased caution and a sense of community among female event participants. Although I found this Instagram account, I cannot verify the information or judge its truthfulness, so I must approach it with a certain level of skepticism.

I also managed to talk to Polish women who were interested in Korean men and perceived K-pop events as a "safer space" compared to other events dominated by Polish men, where they feel "judged.". One of them said "At least I have this feeling that you are not judged at the event. That you go and dress how you want, look how you want and people are nice to you either way." For example, Moa, a Polish participant, expressed interest in meeting Korean men but admitted that she lacks the confidence to initiate conversations with them. She also admitted that she had more success with them when she dyed her hair a light color. Katya explained to me that at every

party, she is watched by some Korean man and then surrounded on the dance floor. Sometimes they even find her through the tags on event's Instagram and write to her on her private profile. She also admits that she had a personal unpleasant experience of hooking up with a Korean man who tried to get her drunk and initiated physical contact when she was not in a sober state. Her friend Daria, with whom I briefly spoke several times at events, said that she once met a Korean man at an event and dated him for about a month, but then he ghosted her and never contacted her again. Interestingly, it turned out that this man still sometimes participates in K-pop events.

I also conducted interviews with Korean men to gain their perspectives and understand their motivations for attending K-pop events. I met these men during the parties, where they usually approached me. Most of them work for Korean companies and are in Wrocław due to business reasons. One interviewee, Hugo, acknowledged that these events offer opportunities to meet women, but noted this isn't unusual for Korean men, as parties often serve as spaces for romantic or sexual encounters. Hugo stated, "To be honest, I would like to say this event is a way to connect with cultural roots and meet other Koreans living in the city, but [...] I think everyone is more or less interested in meeting a girl, I mean, that's what parties are all about, right?"

Hugo also mentioned observing a Korean man dancing to K-pop songs on stage and recreating choreographies, suggesting this might be his motivation for attending. While I didn't personally witness this or any other Korean man performing K-pop choreography during my repeated participation in these events, I was able to confirm this person's existence through a conversation with MOA. She recalled seeing him at an event once and suspected he might be a trainee (someone preparing to debut as an idol in a music agency). MOA added that their interaction was limited due to his poor English skills, consisting mainly of exchanging dance compliments, and he seemed uninterested in further conversation.

During my observations, the fact that Koreans often do not participate in dancing at the event was confirmed by other participants. M, with whom I attended one of the parties, noted that none of the Koreans were on the dance floor. They only looked at the people dancing, forming a kind of circle around the dance floor. Michał, with whom I conducted an interview, stated something similar, saying, "A lot of them sometimes surrounded the crowd of dancers, and they themselves didn't move much, they just stood and watched."

As I immersed myself deeper into the experiences and perspectives of both Polish women and Korean men, I realized the complexity of these interactions. For example, while some Polish women, such as Emilia and Katia, expressed concerns about the behavior of Korean men at these events, like Emilia's statement that "All kinds of things can happen, and you can simply find Korean men getting girls drunk and approaching them at every turn," and Katia's observation that Korean men "come there to find some girl they don't know, some pretty, Slavic girl, to drink with her, and if everything goes well, to go somewhere with her," others, like Moa, perceived K-pop events as an opportunity to meet and connect with Korean men in a safer environment compared to other parties. Agnieszka, another Polish participant, took a more neutral stance, stating: "And if girls want to have fun and have a good time with a Korean man... Then let them have fun, it's that simple." This highlights the need to consider the diverse attitudes and experiences of Polish women, rather than presenting a uniform picture of their interactions with Korean men.

Similarly, the presentation of Korean men's motivations for participating in these events largely relies on assumptions and opinions of outsiders. My interactions with Koreans confirm that these parties are well-known among the functioning Korean minority in Wrocław. Namjoon, whom I met at one of the first parties I attended, said that he had heard about them from friends at work and was intrigued by this event within the Korean community. From conversations with Seonwoo, Minhoo, and observations at events, I learned that there is also a special internet space designed for Koreans living in Wrocław where the K-pop event is advertised. It is also interesting and important to consider the reasons Korean men gave for participating in K-pop parties. As evident from the quotes above, many Polish participants believe that the reason is the desire to find a Polish partner (short-term). SeonWoo says, "Angelika told me she wanted to go here, and I went with her because I was afraid something might happen to her. Well, and in general, I had a good time, but you can see that Koreans also come here for one purpose...". This is an interesting observation because SeonWoo, as a Korean, is generalizing about the intentions of most Koreans attending K-pop parties. He presents the reason for his attitude, saying, "Generally speaking, I heard about various parties, not only in Poland, from my friends, and they told me what was happening there." Namjoon and Jongho, whom I met during one of the events, state that their motivation for participating was pure curiosity, and during the event, they mention several times that they are having a good time. However, they do not spend time

getting to know other Korean participants but instead join me and my companion, continuing conversations and dancing on the dance floor. At the end of the party, they ask us for our social media, which may suggest that they were interested in meeting white women and confirm what SeonWoo said. However, they might have simply met someone and become interested in them, and this did not have to be the goal and reason for participating in the party, which is worth noting and considering. Hugo also sheds light on the topic of Koreans' intentions in participating in parties, stating, similarly to Seonwoo, that it is the reason for most of them to attend. He also admits to participating in the hook-up culture taking place at the event. At the same time, he emphasized that this is not unique to Korean men and that parties generally serve as spaces for establishing romantic and sexual contacts.

I had an interesting interaction with Chang, who was from China. Chang openly encouraged his white roommates to participate in the event, hoping that it would be a place where he would have more success with women, which his roommates admits by saying “He wanted to see if he would have more luck here”. Chang himself reluctantly acknowledges that he had heard that Koreans attend these parties because they believe they have a better chance with K-pop fans than with other white women. However, Chang does not directly admit his motives for participating in this party, but he asks for my number at the end of our interaction. I got warned by his roommate “If he texts you, just ignore him.” Nevertheless, through conversations with Korean participants, such as Hugo, I gained a more nuanced understanding of their reasons for attending these events, which went beyond seeking casual encounters with Polish women.

Michał, a Polish participant who accompanied his girlfriend to a K-pop party, presented a different perspective on the behavior of Korean men, noting that "These Koreans clearly had one main reason for being there. You could feel it because many of them sometimes surrounded the crowd of dancers, and they themselves didn't move much; they just stood and watched." Although this observation aligns with some of the concerns expressed by Polish women, it is important to consider it alongside the more nuanced accounts provided by the Korean participants themselves. Similarly, Jan, a Pole who accompanied his Chinese roommate to the party, admitted that he showed up "to broaden his horizons." He acknowledged that "I guess only Korean men are successful here." Polish men I met during my research also tended to

comment on the reasons for the popularity of Korean men among Polish women, with one of them saying that interest in Korean men may have been influenced by curiosity about Asian culture, which is something foreign, even "exotic" in the West.

When approaching these intercultural relationships, it is important to understand the multitude and complexity of perspectives that exist among the participants. For Polish K-pop fans, the event is primarily a place where they can pursue their passion for K-pop. Some of them do this through dancing, some through the opportunity to listen to their favorite K-pop songs in a club environment, and some by meeting other fans.

My observations and interviews reveal an important fact: most of the Polish fans expected did not Koreans to be present when they first attended the K-pop party, which suggests that the desire to establish relationships with them was not the primary reason for participation. However, some of them, like Katia and Moa, who are regular attendees, admitted to being interested in Koreans and even attempting to form relationships with them. Every Polish woman I spoke to at the event shared warnings or negative experiences related to Korean men at these events. It is worth noting that many of these stories were second-hand and not from their own experiences.

Koreans at the events seemed more initially interested in establishing relationships with Polish women, but it was often the idea of what they could achieve at the event rather than actively pursuing this goal. Interestingly, none of them admitted to being a fan of K-pop, and all were more passive listeners of the genre. For Koreans, the event also served a social function for meeting and hanging out with other Koreans, as evidenced by the fact that they reserve tables at the club where they always meet in groups and drink alcohol. For example, Namjoon and Jongho came to the event together, while Seonwoo met Minhoo at the party and immediately became friends.

The perspective expressed by white men is very interesting and the most direct. All the white men I spoke to clearly stated that Koreans use these places for casual encounters.

However, each of these perspectives must be analyzed critically and not taken as a statement of fact. Nevertheless, the repetition of certain facts can serve to demonstrate certain patterns and contribute to further research and understanding of intercultural relationships.

3.2 The Interplay of 'Soft Masculinity' and Gender Dynamics in K-pop Fandom: Insights from the Literature

My study foregrounds gender dynamics between Korean males and Polish females at K-pop events, the influence of K-pop iconography on these interactions, and the potential for stereotyping, objectification, and cultural misapprehensions. The starting point for the analysis of gender dynamics at k-pop events will be an analysis of how existing research and academic work addresses this issue.

As delineated in the antecedent chapter, while K-pop gatherings (parties) are acknowledged within scholarly discourse (Cicchelli et al., 2023), a comprehensive analysis of these phenomena remains absent. Nevertheless, analogous offline events, such as ephemeral dance gatherings and festivals, have been examined (Swan, 2021). Despite the scarcity of literature explicitly addressing gender dynamics at K-pop events, a plethora of studies interrogating gender within similar milieus exists. These inquiries underpin the present research, addressing themes of sexualization and orientalization of Korean individuals within the K-pop industry and wider cultural spheres. For understanding the phenomenon under study, analyses of gender representation in the K-pop industry and their consequences for fan perceptions and interactions are also important.

Central to understanding the complexities of gender representations in K-pop are the concepts and critical analysis of 'soft masculinity' and androgyny (Lee et al., 2023). Male idols are often characterised as 'soft' and 'feminine', while female idols are portrayed as 'sweet' and 'innocent' (Almqvist-Ingersoll, 2019). This dichotomy in representations of gender in K-pop reflects wider debates and negotiations about gender identities, roles and expectations in an increasingly globalised environment (Fuhr, 2016). While "soft masculinity" in K-pop may challenge hegemonic forms of masculinity, its impact on challenging or reinforcing traditional gender roles among fans is complex. Paneru (2021) found that media representations that deviate from traditional gender norms can prompt viewers to reflect on and potentially reshape their own gender attitudes. However, Choi and Kim (2017) argue that such representations can also reinforce existing stereotypes if viewers interpret them through a lens of traditional gender beliefs.

As Jung (2013) points out, the appeal of K-pop as a genre is largely due to its complex representations of gender, which reflect broader social trends, challenges and cultural shifts that extend beyond South Korea to a global context. K-pop often challenges established gender norms, offering more fluid and diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity (Oh, 2014). What is needed, however, is a critical assessment of the extent to which 'soft masculinity' subverts gender stereotypes and the extent to which it merely leads to the commodification of new patterns of masculinity constructed in contrast to male hegemonicity. K-pop struggles with the issue of commercialisation of gender and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Mōri (2020) argues that the androgynous aesthetic of K-pop idols can perpetuate existing power structures and heteronormativity, rather than fundamentally challenging gender norms. Moreover, the global commodification of 'soft masculinity' raises concerns about cultural appropriation and the fetishisation of marginalised masculinities (Chen, 2019). It is worth citing the work of Elfving-Hwang (2018) and Leung (2012), who warn that while K-pop undeniably challenges dominant forms of traditional masculinity, it may at the same time reinforce certain restrictive gender stereotypes and contribute to the commodification of the male figure and personality.

The portrayal of 'soft masculinity' by male K-pop idols also has key implications for the identification of gender dynamics at K-pop fan events in Wrocław, the main ethnographic site of this study. More than a year of active participant observation at these events has provided me with ample evidence that the perceptions and attitudes of Polish women towards Korean men are influenced by the 'soft', seemingly feminised images of masculinity prevalent in K-pop media. Polish women at these events often use terms like 'cute' or 'adorable' to describe Korean men—words that carry feminine connotations in Polish culture. One participant mentioned that she finds Korean men to be more 'sensitive' than Polish men. These language choices suggest that the 'soft masculinity' seen in K-pop influences Polish women's views and expectations of masculinity. As a result, the way gender is portrayed in K-pop seems to shape how Polish women interact with and relate to Korean men at these social gatherings. In support of this thesis, research on the relationship between the 'soft masculinity' embodied by K-pop idols and female fans' perceptions and expectations of masculinity and gender roles can be cited. For example, Jong's (2018) research indicated that media exposure to alternative masculinities can influence audience attitudes and challenge conventional gender norms. As Kim and Lee (2020) note, the impact of such representations depends on cultural context and pre-existing beliefs. It is

necessary to analyse how Polish women's perceptions of the 'soft masculinity' of Korean men are coloured by their indigenous cultural conceptions of gender and masculinity. I will discuss these issues in detail in later sections of this thesis.

In K-pop, gender dynamics enter into intersection with exoticisation, essentialisation and racial stereotypes. This combination significantly influences how international fans perceive and interpret gender representations in K-pop. The links between racial and gender stereotypes are highlighted by research on Asian-American men (Nemoto, 2008). They are often confronted with stereotypes that portray them as effeminate, asexual or submissive, which negatively affects their self-esteem and social interactions. These stereotypes stem from historical and cultural narratives that feminise Asian men in Western contexts, often portraying them as subordinate and less masculine compared to white men (Huynh & Woo, 2014). In turn, research on inter-ethnic dating and relationships shows how such stereotypes and perceptions can influence the dynamics between Asian men and non-Asian women. Chua and Fujino (1999) and Chun (1996) explored how cultural myths and expectations surrounding Asian masculinity can affect Asian men's romantic attraction and experiences with non-Asian female partners.

Lee et al. (2020) showed how US fans may essentialise 'soft masculinity' as an inherent Korean cultural attribute, leading to the reinforcement of racial stereotypes. Such essentialisation can manifest as a form of Orientalism that views Asians through the lens of exotic prejudices about their culture, often simplifying and homogenising their identity (Said, 1978). However, it is important to remember that the application of the concept of Orientalism – originally formulated within the framework of Western colonialism and imperialism – to contemporary global K-pop consumption, brings with it certain limitations. While essentialisation and exoticisation deserve attention, interpreting Western engagement with K-pop solely from an Orientalist perspective may neglect the agency of Korean cultural creators and the complexities of transnational cultural exchange (Lie, 2015). Furthermore, the assumption that all Western K-pop fans homogeneously essentialise Korean masculinity ignores the diversity of fan perspectives and experiences (Jung, 2021) (Lee, 2019). By essentialising 'soft masculinity' as quintessentially Korean, Western fans may disregard its diverse manifestations and the impact of globalisation and cultural amalgamation on contemporary expressions of masculinity.

In the case of K-pop parties in Wrocław, comparisons between Korean and Polish men are quite common. One of the girls I had the opportunity to talk to at an event stated that they are "more caring and able to show emotions." Such statements suggest the essentialization of certain traits as inherently Korean, potentially reinforcing stereotypes and exoticization.

Furthermore, some Polish female participants expressed fascination with the appearance of Korean men, often mentioning that they can boast smooth skin, are "well-groomed," and fashionably dressed. However, I also heard unfavourable comments about their appearance, such as from Emilia, who often attended these parties with me and stated that "they have big heads." Such discourse may reflect orientalist fantasies and fetishization of Asian bodies (Nemoto, 2009).

My observations of K-pop events also revealed another important issue: how Polish female participants negotiate their gender identity in interactions with Korean men? Korolczuk (2014) and Grabowska (2012) discuss how young Polish women balance traditional values with modern aspirations for independence and equality. This balance may be seen in the attitudes and behaviours of Polish female participants at K-pop parties, potentially shaping their interactions with Korean men. Some may actively challenge traditional gender dynamics, while others may adopt more submissive roles, reflecting the flexible and evolving nature of gender identity. These two attitudes were evident in my research. Speaking about her relationships with the Korean guests of the researched events, one participant said: "I don't come here to find a boyfriend. I just want to have fun and meet new people". Such attitudes may reflect the changing aspirations of young Polish women, who are increasingly focused on independence and self-realisation. On the other hand, during some interactions with Korean men, I noticed some Polish women adopting more submissive and stereotypically feminine roles. For example, they seemed to expect men to initiate conversations, invite them to dance or buy them drinks, which I observed at every party I attended.

These different attitudes can have a significant impact on the interactions of Polish female participants with Korean men. Girls who actively contest traditional gender roles may be perceived as more assertive and independent, which may attract men with similar views. In turn, those who adopt more submissive roles may unconsciously reinforce stereotypical expectations about gender relations.

However, it is important not to view these attitudes as static and dichotomous. Research by Grabowska and Korolczuk show, the negotiation of gender identities by young Polish women is a dynamic and contextual process. The same person may present different attitudes depending on the situation and interaction. Moreover, K-pop parties themselves, as a space where global trends and local norms meet, can serve as a catalyst for reflection and change in participants' attitudes towards gender roles.

An important and frequently discussed topic that emerged during my research is the problem of objectification and sexualization. In the K-pop industry, this often concerns female idols, and as Kim (2011) notes, the industry transforms young women into "cultural content," emphasizing their sexuality through ambiguous representations and "resexualization" tactics to increase popularity and profits. Although my research focuses mainly on Korean men who attend K-pop parties in Wrocław, observations suggest that objectification also occurs in their relationships with Polish K-pop fans.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed situations where some Korean men appeared to treat Polish women as objects. One particularly disturbing incident involved a group of Korean men sitting at an elevated table with a good view of the dance floor. As my informant Seonwoo described: "They are here to find a girlfriend. They just look until they choose the one they are interested in. Then they take action, invite her to the table, buy drinks." Such behaviours can be seen as a manifestation of an objectifying and sexualizing approach to women. However, while these observations point to disturbing instances of objectification, they cannot be clearly linked to Korean men as a monolithic category. The objectifying attitudes described are likely to stem from broader patriarchal structures and the normalization of the male gaze, rather than being unique to this group or inherent to their cultural background (Hasinoff, 2014).

At the same time, the reactions of Polish female participants to such behaviours varied. Some girls seemed to accept and even desire this kind of male attention. However, others expressed discomfort and opposition to the objectifying treatment. Such diverse reactions suggest that although commercial gender representations in K-pop can potentially promote objectification and sexualization, the ultimate impact of these representations depends on how they are interpreted and negotiated by fans in specific cultural contexts. Polish female participants in K-pop parties are not merely passive recipients of these messages but active

agents who can accept, contest, or transform them. Moreover, objectification can also manifest in the exoticization of Korean men by Polish female attendees of K-pop parties. Viewing them primarily through the prism of racial difference may not only lead to treating them as mere stereotypes but also, as Pyke and Johnson (2003) argue, shape intimate relationships between Asian men and white women.

The overview of existing research on gender dynamics in the context of K-pop presented above shows that the K-pop world both rejects and reinforces conventional gender roles. The analysis introduces concepts such as 'soft masculinity' and androgyny. These concepts, while potentially challenging stereotypes, also run the risk of simultaneously objectifying, sexualising and ultimately reinforcing those same stereotypes. More importantly, they correspond with the collected research material and can provide a very good theoretical basis for the analysis of gender interaction and cross-cultural experiences observed at K-pop events in Wrocław.

3.3 Unveiling the Tapestry: Reflections of Korean-Polish Relations in the Digital World

This part aims to set the broader socio-cultural context for the data collected during my own research and through the literature review. I was keen to provide a background to the discussion and to embed the themes revealed from the collected material in order to better understand and interpret gender and national-cultural relations in Polish K-pop fandom.

To this end, I referred to publications on Polish-Korean relations and the ways in which Koreans are presented on the Polish Internet. The research material included both published newspaper articles as well as comments and other statements by Internet users. This approach allowed for a broad perspective and the inclusion of diverse voices in the discourse on relations between Poles and Koreans.

In this chapter, I will present and describe the themes that emerge from the discourse examined in this way, paying particular attention to gender issues. The analysis of online content will enable the identification of key themes, stereotypes and attitudes related to gender relations between representatives of the two nations. In addition, aspects of idealisation and potential sexualisation occurring in these relationships will also be addressed.

The first topic that emerges in the online discourse is the stereotypes existing between Poles and Koreans about each other. A particularly interesting stereotype from the perspective

of my analysis is the idealized image of the 'K-Drama Oppa'—the handsome, sweet, and caring man often portrayed in Korean dramas and media. As highlighted in the article '4 Untrue Stereotypes About Korean Men,' this stereotype fosters unrealistic expectations among both Korean and foreign women towards Korean men: 'Unfortunately, K-Drama has raised Korean women's expectations, often leading to disappointment and an endless search for the perfect man who remains elusive' (Myślewski, 2021). The presented "K-Drama Oppa" stereotype is somewhat an embodiment of the aforementioned concept of "soft masculinity." Both concepts are associated with portraying Korean men as tender, caring, and emotionally expressive. In reality, however, these perceptions do not always align with the facts. Korean men, like men in other countries, are diverse and do not always fit the mold of "soft masculinity" promoted in popular culture. As Myślewski (2021) notes, "The truth is that this is a big problem for Korean men. Korean men, like all other men in the world, also come in all shapes and forms."

It is worth noting that the stereotypes regarding the "K-drama oppa" often stem from an Orientalist perspective of the West. Moreover, it contributes to the construction of a division between "traditional masculinity," which is assumed to be present in white men, and "emotional/sensitive masculinity," which pertains to Asians. However, such a division is a definite oversimplification of cultural nuances and ignores the pluralism of coexisting and dynamic masculinities that challenge rigid cultural stereotypes (Connell, 2005). As Roman Husarski notes, in Korea, there exists both the macho stereotype and the "kkonminam, the flower boy: delicate, sensitive, androgynous" (Urbaniak, 2021), highlighting the diversity of masculine expression.

The discourse also revealed that the idealized perception of Korean masculinity is further reinforced by the romanticization and exoticization of Korean men. On her YouTube channel, the Korea-born video blogger "Koreanka" admits that she receives numerous questions and comments about how handsome Korean men are and their alleged resemblance to K-pop idols. She responds to them in a sarcastic manner, saying, "Yes, Koreans really look like idols! In general, you know, I've been to Korea; I mean, you know, I've lived in Korea, and really idols can be found on the street everywhere... well, and they all look like idols, because most Koreans get plastic surgery". Later in the video, she explains how absurd the presented comments are, while also emphasising that Korean men, like in other parts of the world, are diverse. She

suggests that the belief in the homogeneity of Koreans may stem from two main factors: the significant influence of fashion and trends in Korea, which causes many people to dress similarly to keep up with them, and the ignorance and racism with which Poles sometimes view Asians.

The digital conversation extends to the subject of Korean men's perspectives on romantic involvements with non-Korean, specifically Polish, women, alongside the scrutiny of their motives in purported relationships. Especially within the examined commentary, numerous insinuations arise concerning their disingenuous intentions. A video surfaced on the preeminent Polish-language YouTube channel, 'Pyra w Korei,' which delves into South Korean life and culture, in which the vlogger suggests that some Koreans may treat relationships with foreign women as non-committal or temporary. One of the commenters under this video stated: "In this context, within Korea, such men frequently eschew enduring relationships. They do not intend to pursue a lasting union with these individuals (white women); rather, they seek transient amusement before committing to a relationship with a Korean woman." Other comments under the video confirm this observation, for example: "I also encountered the presumption that my Western origin equated to being 'open-minded' – interpreted as permissive – and that a date necessitated accompanying them to a motel." and "Unfortunately, I was deceived once—a young man I encountered claimed that the images on KakaoTalk (online communicator) were of his sister, and it was (and still is) his longtime girlfriend, whom he notoriously cheated on using Tinder. There are many of those." The Korean Instagram influencer residing in Poland, known as 'jedawpolsce,' alluded to a comparable disposition among Korean men in one of her posts: "But be warned: if you hear that your Korean friend likes girls who are, and I quote, 'open-minded,' this mostly means easygoing in matters of, well, you know!" Although such opinions may not apply to all Korean men and may be hurtful to most, these views and comments largely shape the attitudes of female fans of the Polish K-pop fandom towards them. This perception could potentially affect the propensity of Polish women to enter into liaisons with Korean men, fostering a sense of wariness or mistrust.

Such an approach of Koreans towards women from Poland may stem from a form of exoticization and orientalization of Polish women. It is also possible that some Korean men may perceive relationships with foreign women as an opportunity for infidelity or casual sexual

interactions. Such attitudes may be rooted in the stereotypical perception of Western women as being more sexually open and available. However, there is a lack of scientific research on the attitudes of Asian men towards Slavic women, and most discussions on this topic are anecdotal and not based on rigorous research. Nevertheless, there are certain stereotypes and media portrayals that may contribute to the sexual perception of women from Eastern Europe. Wioleta Błazucka, a Polish influencer living in Korea, observes: "Koreans are attracted to women from other parts of the world. The Slavic type of beauty is considered very attractive there. A lot of Slavic women, including girls from Poland, come to Korea for modeling contracts" (Gomułka, 2022). The influencer "jedawpolsce" on her Instagram notes that: "It's fantastic that Polish women have so many different hair colours, eye colours, and skin tones. Koreans find it exotic and super interesting, but the most interesting are the light hair and eyes of a colour other than brown or black. The reason is simple: these colours are just rare in Korea."

On the other hand, one of the bloggers on her blog Korea Online describes experiences with Korean men expressing interest in Polish women: "We moved together towards the subway station. Suddenly, I realised he was trying to take my hand. I wouldn't call it Korean boldness, not even exceptional confidence or tradition, either. I think it is more related to showing affection or respect" and "During the festival, we attended with the hosts, and the host grabbed my hand. Although this sounds quite significant, there was nothing special about it. On the streets, many friends hold hands, whether they are guys or girls. I thought it was quite normal; after all, we were close to becoming friends."(KoreaOnline, 2022).

Interestingly, Koreans are usually not open to touch, especially from strangers (Feng, 2014). In Korean culture, touch is often perceived as intimate and reserved for close relationships, such as family or romantic partners (Nelson & Yon, 2019). The author of online blog describes her interaction with a Korean man during a club visit, which took on a romantic character: "We leave an hour later. Like a girl from a Korean drama, I analyze every detail. I decided that I would experiment. The following situations occur in the club: we are dancing together to K-pop, we are sober, everyone is dancing along with us, I ask him what he thinks about kissing in dramas, and a Korean couple puzzles us about how long we have been together and wants us to kiss in front of their eyes. As a result, we kiss under the cover of darkness. On my initiative, of course. It's awkward and adorable, like in a drama." (KoreaOnline, 2022).

However, texts highlighting a different perspective on male-female relations in Polish-Korean relationships can be found online. For instance, interviews by Gomułka (2022) and Wojas (2023) with Polish women in relationships with Korean men reveal that these interactions can be rooted in genuine interest, curiosity, and mutual understanding. These relationships challenge prevailing stereotypes and demonstrate that gender dynamics in intercultural and interracial relationships are not merely superficial or based on exoticism but can be founded on authentic connections and shared values.

The voices and perspectives cited in this section of the thesis, drawn from online sources, align with the issues previously discussed. The gender dynamics in Polish-Korean relationships are influenced by stereotypes, socially constructed perceptions, and prejudices that shape the image of Korean men in Poland. On one hand, there is the idealization and exoticization of Korean masculinity, embodied by the K-Drama 'Oppa' who represents the allure of soft masculinity. On the other hand, some portray Korean men as exploiting their ethnicity and the global popularity of K-pop for sexual conquests. However, there are also narratives of positive experiences and interactions between Polish women and Korean men found online. These examples suggest the potential to transcend prejudices and foster more harmonious relationships.

3.4 Synthesizing Insights: Bridging Research, Literature, and Online Discourse

Investigating gender relations and cultural dynamics at K-pop events in Wrocław allowed me to show the various factors that influence interactions between Polish and Korean participants. Combining the ethnographic results of a nearly year-long ethnographic fieldwork, theorising their findings by confronting the academic literature on similar topics, and plugging into the broader context of gender dynamics in Polish-Korean relations revealed by an analysis of this topic on the Internet allowed me to tease out some leading themes that frame the phenomenon under study.

Several key themes emerge from the club surveys and interviews that organise male-female relationships at k-pop parties. Firstly, the research conducted allows us to build a categorisation of k-pop party attendees and present their main characteristics. At the heart of these gatherings are Polish k-pop fans, mainly young women, whose enthusiasm for Korean pop

culture fuels the energy of the party. They come alive on the dance floor, relishing the opportunity to immerse themselves in their favourite music and connect with like-minded individuals. For many, these events provide a safe haven where they can freely express their passion without judgement.

Interspersed with this core group are Korean men, whose presence adds authenticity and intrigue to the events. They often arrive in close-knit groups, forming their own social bubbles within the larger event. Some actively engage in the party atmosphere, while others maintain a more attentive demeanour, with motivations ranging from genuine curiosity to the pursuit of romantic encounters.

In addition to these two main groups, events also attract other participants. Non-Korean and Asian participants navigate a unique situation, often balancing between different groups. Polish men, usually accompanying female friends or partners, find themselves in the role of observers. There are also curious onlookers in the crowd, attracted by the novelty of the K-pop phenomenon. These individuals, both local and international, bring an outsider's perspective to the events, and their presence is a testament to the growing influence of Korean pop culture. Behind the scenes, event organisers and staff working at the event can be found.

Tension arises between the two main categories of attenders as a result of mutual cultural stereotypes and interest in each other, but also resulting misconceptions or prejudices. Participants come to events equipped with the baggage of their own beliefs and perceptions, which guide their actions towards others. These stereotypes apply to both Polish female k-pop artists and Korean men. They combined gender issues with issues of ethnicity and culture. For example, it was found that some Korean men sought casual encounters with Polish women, often perceiving them as 'easy' due to stereotypes about Western women. Korean party-goers, on the other hand, were seen as either challenging traditional, 'hard' masculinity patterns or as dangerous seducers who mainly expect sex from women.

The research also demonstrates the role of language and cultural barriers, which significantly affect gender interactions. Limited English proficiency among some Korean participants hindered effective communication and exacerbated cultural divides, contributing to misunderstandings and reinforcing stereotypes.

Another interesting element revealed by the research is the varied perspectives on how the event is perceived and the motivations for participation. There is a kaleidoscope of interests, including a fascination with Korean culture and K-pop as a music genre, a desire for fun and adventure, a search for social identity by connecting with like-minded people, and even an attraction to cultural differences and overtly sexual undertones. The orientation toward Korean culture and K-pop acts as a magnet for participants, making K-pop parties similar to other club events but with their own unique specificity and social dynamics.

From these tensions, the most interesting issue for me is the dynamics of gender and ethnicity that give K-pop parties their unique character. K-pop parties become a stage and context where Polish female and Korean male attendees, through references to stereotypes and the ingrained gender elements in K-pop, negotiate and enact their gender roles in pursuit of their motivations for attending. My research has provided material to describe this dynamic.

In turn, the literature review provided tools to better describe and understand the observed phenomena. The concepts of soft masculinity, androgyny, and 'girl crush' aesthetics, above all, helped to establish a framework for discussing and analyzing the collected data. Within this framework, gender dynamics can be analyzed as attempts to challenge or uphold traditional gender roles. These negotiations are further influenced by ethnic and cultural differences, which can enhance mutual attraction but also create barriers and prejudices.

A broader perspective is illuminated by analyzing web content. In general terms, it confirms the validity and relevance of the interpretations and theories put forth, highlighting that the idealization of masculinity among K-pop idols and its utilization by both men and women is one of the central issues within the K-pop realm. This specificity extends to the microcosm of K-pop parties as well.

4. Cross-Cultural Play: Interethnic Encounters at K-Pop Parties

K-pop parties entertained me during my research, especially in the fall and winter. I eagerly awaited my next visit to the Liverpool club and the chance to dance to old songs. In winter, the streets around the club became deserted, making it hard to spot smokers outside the entrance. Surprisingly, more people attended the parties, filling the hall and dance floor.

I went to a party with Emilia, and we arrived around 10 PM, but we couldn't get wristbands with numbers for the prize lottery. The first 150 people got them, so at least that many were already inside.

"No number?" Emilia exclaimed. "It's extremely crowded today," said our ticket seller.

The owner of the CheonCheonHi organization, which organized K-pop events in Wroclaw and other Polish cities, sat next to her. His appearance suggested middle age.

He asked, "Which bands?" in English. "Without drinks," she replied.

We descended into the club after receiving the wristbands. From the threshold, we had to push through to the dance floor. The bar queue extended beyond its room and onto the dance floor. Some participants watched the stage from the hall's sides. We passed a Korean man holding a drink. Though Emilia was loud and said "excuse me," the man blocked our way. Emilia used force to pass him. We surprised the slightly pushed man, who smiled and said, "Oh, sorry." Emilia grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor, ignoring him. "Geez, so many of them came again and are standing like poles," she exclaimed.

After a few dances, we saw Katie and Daria, whom we had met at previous parties. We immediately joined them. Ever since meeting at a K-pop party, the girls had attended almost every party together. Both loved dancing and partying, and Katya could brag about knowing some dance choreographies. We enjoyed each other's company, but after a few songs, a Korean man approached us, or rather Emilia.

He asked, "Drink?" and gestured to drink from it. "No, thank you," she said quickly.

However, the Korean man stayed with us. He kept dancing with us from afar. After two songs, he approached Emilia again. "Drink now?" he repeated. "No, I don't drink," Emilia said.

"Can I have your Instagram?" he asked. Emilia looked at us, sighed, and gave him her info. After saying "Thank you," he left our group.

Katya said, "I wouldn't come here without my friends. These Koreans ruin my fun." After my questions about why she had such an opinion, she said they were intrusive. Emilia agreed, saying, "They want something from me, and they don't even speak English." Katya said it was worth talking to them if they would buy you a drink.

I met Hugo, a Korean, at the party. We had looked at each other while dancing, and he joined us. Hugo spoke English well, so we could communicate. Hugo resided in London and occasionally jetted to Wroclaw for K-pop parties, surprising me. Our relationship was friendly.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked.

"No, I don't drink," I said.

"Like, at all?"

"Stomach issues," I admitted.

"Okay, let's go out to talk then."

"Sure," I concurred.

Worried, Emilia stopped me. I told her I was just talking for research and would be back soon.

Despite the huge crowd, the club's internal rules prohibited us from going outside. We had our "conversation" at a table near the cloakroom and ticket booth.

"You're really pretty," Hugo said.

"Thanks, but I have a boyfriend," I said.

"Oh really?" he said, confused. "Let's be friends," he said.

I explained my research and asked for an interview, which he granted. After a few minutes, I told Hugo that I didn't want to worry my friends and would love to dance again.

"Okay, but let's take a picture first!" he said.

"Why?" The proposal surprised me, so I asked.

"As a memory," he said.

I reluctantly agreed, thinking it was fair since he had agreed to an interview.

"Do you take pictures with people you don't know?" I asked curiously.

"It's just to prove to my friends it's fun here and they should come with me next time," he said.

After taking me back to my friends, Hugo said goodbye, saying he would find his friends.

"What did he want from you?" Emilia asked.

"Not sure, but I told him I have a boyfriend... He wanted to take a picture," I said.

"Ah, they do that often," Katya said. "They later brag among themselves about which girls they talked to."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen them do it among themselves," she said.

We extended our party stay. Even though we were tired, we didn't want to miss the prize lottery at one in the morning, as always. Despite entering the lottery, Daria and Katya failed to win.

Their disappointment was evident when a Korean man whose number had been called earlier approached us and gave Daria the bag he won. He said, "Take it, take it," and left. Daria was surprised to find Korean snacks in the bag.

"Ah, he probably didn't want them because it's nothing special for them," she said, and we all nodded.

As Emilia and I were leaving the party, Daria gave us some snacks, and we said goodbye.

I passed Hugo talking to a blonde-haired white girl as we pushed through the still-packed dance floor to the exit. We exchanged goodbye waves. Emilia and I left the club.

4.1 Observations from the Dance Floor: Research Findings from Field

K-pop events in Wrocław provide a unique platform for exploring contemporary interethnic relations. As dedicated to K-pop fans on the one hand, and open to people of different cultures on the other, they bring Poles and the Korean minority in the city together. They therefore provide a field for observing Polish-Korean interaction networks, allowing us to see how they shape mutual perceptions, break stereotypes and create new challenges for communication and mutual understanding.

The K-pop scene fosters an immersion into Korean culture and international cultural exchange. Many Polish participants in the fandom have a deep appreciation for Korean culture that goes beyond just music. Observations show that many attendees at K-pop events are learning the Korean language and are interested in other aspects of Korean pop culture, such as dramas, comics, and makeup.

Hugo, a Korean attendee, remarked, 'It's really amazing that people around the world are so interested in my culture.' However, while K-pop events create a space for Poles and Koreans to meet, language barriers often emerge. Hugo noted, 'Some girls even tried to talk to me in Korean until I told them that I actually speak English.' Other Korean participants sometimes needed translators due to difficulties speaking English.

At these events, Koreans often come in groups and tend to isolate themselves because of communication problems with other attendees. Therefore, social accessibility is significantly affected: there is not only a language barrier to 'getting along,' but also a social barrier to initiating interaction.

However, participants strive to communicate effectively with each other despite these obstacles. They use English as a lingua franca, Polish fans trying to speak Korean, and non-verbal cues and shared interests such as dance and music create a special communication environment.

However, participants strive to communicate effectively with each other despite these obstacles. They use English as a lingua franca, Polish fans trying to speak Korean, and non-verbal cues and shared interests such as dance and music create a special communication environment.

The role of alcohol is worth noting here. It often allows Korean and Polish participants to share a drinking ritual without language barriers. Korean participants often offered alcohol to Polish participants to start the interaction during the field observation. As one of Polish participant joked: "The Slavic soul will not refuse alcohol". What we have here is a manifestation of cultural stereotypes (and expectations) about alcohol consumption, which shared by different participants create a common context for communication and interaction building between Polish and Korean women.

This drinking culture has its drawbacks. Given that people under the age of 18 can participate, some participants worry about the prevalence of alcohol and its risks.

My research shows that Polish K-pop fans tend to idealize Korean culture. Fans of K-pop and Korean dramas may unconsciously oversimplify and incompletely represent Korea. Hugo, a participant, noted, 'You know, I feel like a lot of girls here may somehow have an idealistic perspective because of K-pop and dramas.'

This idealisation can turn into a fetishisation of Korean culture in which certain aspects are exoticised or overly romanticised, especially in the context of romantic and sexual relationships. Also, in cross-cultural interactions, physical characteristics can be objectified, leading to stereotypes and oversimplifications. One participant, Katya, noted: "Well, you know, certainly when it comes to them, Koreans look at everyone here and assume that every white person, especially with light hair and light eyes, is either from Poland, Ukraine or Russia, and there is no other option". Such objectification of racial and ethnic features may explain romantic and sexual interactions discussed in previous part of this work. As Katya mentioned, Koreans may prefer girls with light hair and eyes, which emphasizes that certain physical features may be fetishized in cross-cultural romantic interactions.

Interesting data on the role of stereotyping in the establishment of intercultural relationships comes from an interview with Michael. He notes that "In Poland, there is often a stereotype that Koreans mainly work in LG or as IT professionals". At the same time, there are beliefs about Korean culture in the public space, which form the perception of the products of the Korean culture and entertainment industry, especially k-pop music and Korean romantic films described as k-drama. Michal said: "People have a stereotype that it's shallow and stupid music, and its listeners are seen as not very intelligent." This leads to a certain marginalisation

of the k-pop scene: "In Poland, most people don't take it seriously, they laugh at it and don't want to understand the phenomenon."

On the other hand, there is the instrumentalisation of k-pop culture by Koreans for the purpose of creating male-female, sexually motivated relationships that go beyond the realm of culture and music. Field research and interviews showed that Korean men perceive K-pop parties as an opportunity to date Polish women. Hugo, a Korean participant, said: "I think we know we have more chances at such parties", suggesting that some Korean men may use their ethnicity to their advantage in romantic relationships. From Angelika's, Polish participant, words, however, it is clear that it is not only Koreans who have this attitude "There are a lot of nice people, nice girls who come up to you looking for some interaction.... there are a lot of girls who come there for one purpose and boys who also come for one purpose'.

This observation aligns with the thesis presented in the previous chapter: mutual cultural and ethnic stereotypes are further fueled by gender dynamics. For both Korean men and Polish women, perceptions closely intertwine gender aspects with cultural images of racial difference, often reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes and potentially limiting genuine cultural understanding. In this context, cultural differences are perceived as elements that foster mutual interest and attraction, rather than barriers to overcome.

Against the backdrop of cultural-racial and gender dynamics, an imbalance in power relations becomes apparent. This imbalance is particularly evident in age disparities and potentially risky social situations, often involving young Polish K-pop enthusiasts and older Korean men.

Michal observes: "I've seen situations a couple of times where these young people, even if they're 18, they've just turned 18 and they're hanging around some older guy and, well, it kind of raises my concerns." This statement highlights the potential vulnerabilities associated with age and experience gaps between participants, especially when involving young adults who have recently reached the age of majority.

Hugo expresses similar concerns: "To be honest, I'm a bit surprised that they can go there at all, because it's not safe for them." This comment underscores the perceived risks in these social environments, particularly for younger participants.

The role of alcohol further complicates these interactions. Katya notes: "Their main way of starting a conversation is usually to offer to buy alcohol." This practice can place younger or less experienced participants in potentially compromising situations, as it introduces substance use into an already complex social dynamic. Katja's statement likely reflects a common perspective within the research community on this issue: "I don't think it's a good or appropriate thing, but on the other hand, you know, I don't interfere in other people's decisions".

An interesting example is the 'Random Play Dance' challenge, which unites and challenges K-pop fans. In this activity, snippets of different K-pop songs are played in random order, and participants must quickly recognize the song and perform the corresponding choreography. It tests fans' knowledge of K-pop dances and creates an energetic, interactive atmosphere where participants can showcase their skills and bond over their shared passion for K-pop.

My field observations indicate that Dance and Performance are an important element of the events studied. They also play a significant role in building a bridge between Polish and Korean participants. Dance allows communication barriers to be crossed as a universal language. My research shows how distinctive K-pop choreographies unite diverse participants as a common cultural text. As I observed during fieldwork: "The people on stage, as usual, reproduce the movements from the song video almost perfectly. This synchronicity extends to the entire dance floor: "From the side, it looks impressive when almost the entire dance floor and the dancers on stage are dancing exactly the same movements." During field research, Korean participants often admired the dancing skills of Polish fans. Some Koreans even take out their phones to record people dancing.

However, dance culture is not without tensions and hierarchies. One important division is based on skill: between those who can dance proficiently and those who cannot - essentially separating active fans from passive observers. As one participant noted, 'half the dance floor stops dancing and instead watches people dancing on stage'.

Amelia's experience is an example of this exclusion. She started learning choreography from YouTube tutorials and eventually joined dance classes, significantly improving her skills. However she recounted feeling stigmatised on the dance floor because of perceived inconsistencies in the choreography she was recreating. She noted that the other dancers did not give her adequate space, which further made her feel excluded and unaccepted. This situation

also suggests that dance is more than just entertainment. Rather, it becomes a way to connect with the k-pop culture and environment and to build one's identity around them.

Dancing at these events reflects stereotypes and cultural identities. One participant said: 'I'm not ashamed of what I like, but I don't talk about it all. I prefer to see how someone will react, because a negative reaction would be unpleasant for me.' This can be interpreted as revealing the difficulty K-pop fans face in navigating their identity within a social context where their interest in this music and dance can be misinterpreted or criticized.

The theme of alienation due to K-pop interests is a constant in my research, appearing in various forms. Simultaneously, K-pop parties emerge as enclaves - safe spaces where fans can cultivate and manifest their fascinations freely. This duality underscores the complex social positioning of K-pop fans, caught between potential social stigma and the desire for authentic self-expression.

In Wrocław, K-pop events form a distinct community and subculture, uniting fans from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The materials collected during my research show how these events help participants feel accepted and manifest their k-pop fan identity in a relaxed atmosphere.

Field observations highlight the strong community that forms at these events. Moreover, participants themselves (e.g. Katya) confirm that K-pop events have become a regular social outlet, fostering lasting relationships and a sense of belonging.

For the local K-pop fandom, these surveyed events as physical gatherings hold great significance. This is particularly noteworthy considering that Polish K-pop fandom has existed primarily, and almost exclusively, online for years. Consequently, these events offer rare opportunities for fandom interaction, fostering a sense of community and connectedness.

The gatherings under study have produced their own distinctive formal and informal rituals. Formal rituals include the forementioned 'Random Play Dance' challenge, the 'Prize Lottery' and cultivated dance practices. The informal ones involve interactions within and between different categories of participants, with the characteristic context for the phenomena studied being the presence of Koreans at the events. This moves the dimension of actual

interactions with representatives of Korean society into the realm of symbolic and culturally mediated experiences of K-pop culture.

The intersection of actual experiences with stereotypical perceptions creates a unique dynamic in intercultural and interethnic relations. Moreover, the fact that the two main categories of attendees at these events tend to be female K-pop fans and older Korean men creates additional tension at the level of interethnic interaction.

As a result, K-pop events become a fascinating area where different social worlds intertwine and merge, offering a complex landscape of cultural exchange and social interaction.

4.2 K-pop Fandom, Fusion, and Cultural Frontiers in Scholarly Discourse

In hand with the rise in global popularity of k-pop, there is also a growing body of scholarly work devoted to the phenomenon. Of particular interest to academics is the issue of emerging k-pop fandoms around the world. Research conducted in this area addresses, among other things, issues of ethnicity and the cultural differences that have grown out of this. Thus, they can provide an important counterpoint to the findings emerging from my research.

K-pop is now a powerful medium for transnational cultural exchange. Therefore, as Yoon (2019) notes, K-pop culture creates a unique space for analysing contemporary interethnic relations. What we have here is a process in which the global popularity of K-pop leads to its local specific adaptations, which can be observed in K-pop events in different parts of the world. Yoon's (2019) research on K-pop fans in Vancouver shows how young fans interact with K-pop and cope with its cultural differences, for example by learning Korean, taking an interest in Korean fashion and cuisine, and thus delving deeper into Korean culture. Similar transnational foandoms can be found all over the world. In Sweden, for example, Hübnette (2018) explored the identity and characteristics of Swedish K-pop fans. He observed that the majority of fans in Sweden are young women who see K-pop not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a way to express an alternative cultural identity. He also noted that engagement with K-pop often leads to an increased interest in other aspects of Korean culture.

These findings coincide with observations I have made about Polish female K-pop fans. My research confirms that the Polish adaptation of the global K-pop phenomenon follows a similar pattern. The researched events become a link between Poles and the Korean minority

living in the city, creating a space not only for fans of K-pop music, but also for representatives of other cultural identities. I observed that an interesting aspect of this cultural exchange is the mutual curiosity and appreciation that each category of participants expresses in some way. Polish K-pop fans show an interest in Korean culture beyond the strictly musical sphere. For the Korean participants, on the other hand, the events provide a specific insight into Polish culture.

My research also provides data to support other findings from international studies on K-pop fandoms. Sun (2020), studying the work of K-pop fans in China, noted that fans actively participate in the creation and distribution of K-pop-related content, leading to the emergence of an alternative creative industry. The very existence of CheonCheonHI, a company that organises K-pop events in Wroclaw and beyond, shows that Polish fans, like Chinese fans, are engaged in creative and active participation not only in the distribution of music, but also in the creation of spaces for their fans.

Yoon (2022), studying transnational K-pop fandom, focused on the role of social media in communication between fans. He observed that platforms such as Twitter and Instagram become spaces where fans from different countries can share their interpretations of K-pop songs, discuss the meaning of lyrics, and even organize international fan projects. Yoon also noted that these platforms often serve as informal spaces for learning Korean, where fans help each other translate and understand Korean texts.

My observations in Wroclaw confirm these phenomena. I noticed that Polish fans often use social media to communicate with Korean event participants, using a combination of English, Polish, and basic Korean phrases.

However, my field research also reveals challenges related to communication. I observed that language barriers lead to the formation of separate groups in the event space. This phenomenon was not directly addressed in the studies by Touhami et al. or Yoon.

Another issue widely discussed in the literature is the question of dance, which is often seen as a 'universal language'. Dance and performance are at the center of K-pop events and play a key role in intercultural communication and building fan communities. Oh (2020) studied the migration of Korean cover dance and the performance of diasporic youth on social media, focusing on the Danish K-pop dance group CODE9. His research highlights how rapid cultural

exchange, facilitated by the internet, influences the spread of dance styles and ideas. Oh notes that digital platforms contribute to the global spread and transformation of dance practices, particularly in the context of K-pop cover dances and diasporic youth engagement.

Referring to the research of Byczkowska-Owczarek (2019), she proved that there is a fundamental link between dance movement and culture. The author analyzed different dance genres and, on this basis, showed how culture is linked to the human body expressed through dance movements. In this perspective, dance should therefore be seen as its social manifestation of the specificity of the particular culture within which it is produced. This perspective allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon of arrangements in the K-pop domain and the importance of their reproduction by members of different fandoms. K-pop dance is becoming a universal language and that K-pop choreographies function as a common cultural text, connecting participants from different backgrounds. For example, Septiani et al. (2022) examined the significance and implications of the presence of K-pop dancers in Indonesia, particularly in relation to the experiences and perceptions of Muslim women. This study demonstrated the cultural dynamics involved in the process of adopting K-pop dance culture in the Muslim women's world.

In the events I researched, I observed that dancing and recreating K-pop choreography creates a sense of unity and community among the participants. Dancing together and knowing the choreography indicate the possibility of cross-cultural connection, creating a specific form of collective action that requires knowledge of the specific cultural context that characterises the K-pop domain. However, on the other hand, experience and specialisation in this field becomes a tool of segregation that drives a specific power dynamic. Professional dancers gain (as experts) both the power to judge others and the appropriation of the dance space, from which they shun less skilled dancers.

An important strand of research on K-pop fandom is the study of the identity formation of its participants. This is also an issue that emerged in my research.

Research shows that involvement in K-pop fandom can have a significant impact on an individual's identity, leading to complex processes of cultural negotiation. Laffan (2020), who studied positive psychosocial effects and fandom among K-pop fans from a social identity theory perspective, observed that strong identification with K-pop fandom was positively

correlated with higher self-esteem and overall psychological well-being. Fans who actively participated in the activities of the fandom (e.g. attending events, interacting online) reported higher levels of life satisfaction. The researcher highlighted that a sense of belonging to a global community of K-pop fans can have a positive impact on an individual's social identity development.

Similarly, findings were made by Yoon (2022), who studied the adolescence of Korean-Canadian youth during the Korean Wave. He noted that young people often used K-pop as a way to reconnect with their Korean heritage. At the same time, he pointed to the existence of social pressure felt by some participants in his study to be 'Korean enough' in the eyes of other K-pop fans. In this view, K-pop could be both a facilitator and a source of tension in the process of ethnic identity formation.

Jenol and Pazil (2020), on the other hand, in their study of the effects of being a K-pop fan on wellbeing and sense of identity, noted that K-pop fandom often serves as a form of escape from everyday stresses. They noted that fans often described their involvement with K-pop as a source of motivation and inspiration in their personal lives. The researchers also noted the development of strong parasocial relationships between fans and K-pop idols, which influenced the formation of fan identities. These researchers also highlighted the importance of a participatory culture in K-pop fandom, observing how fans actively create and share content, which contributes to a sense of community and group identity.

The above findings are also reflected in their research. Many of the attendees stated that they often faced negative reactions or prejudice from others because of their affection for K-pop. Negotiating the identity of a K-pop fan within the wider social context is complex, as interest in this subculture can be met with misunderstanding. Consequently, as my research has shown, K-pop events become a space for expressing and negotiating these identities. I observed that participants often expressed a sense of relief and acceptance at these events, which corresponds to Laffan's (2020) observations of the positive impact of identification with fandom on psychological wellbeing. I also observed that these events become regular social outlets, fostering lasting relationships and a sense of belonging, confirming Jenol and Pazil's (2020) observations on the importance of participatory culture in K-pop fandom.

The aforementioned stereotypes, concerning both K-pop and its fans, also turn out to play a significant role in shaping interethnic relations. Song and Velding (2019) examined how young Americans perceive masculinity in K-pop compared to other racial and ethnic groups, particularly white men, and showed that the image of masculinity presented by K-pop artists is often perceived as "softer" and "gentler" compared to traditional Western standards of masculinity. Zhang (2023), studying the impact of K-pop music on Americans, observed that K-pop contributed to breaking down some stereotypes about Asians in the United States, presenting them as attractive, talented, and charismatic.

Hübinette (2018), in his research on Swedish K-pop fans, observed an interesting phenomenon of "orientalization" of Korean culture. He noted that many Swedish fans initially perceived Korea through the lens of exoticism and difference, which sometimes led to simplified or stereotypical notions. However, Hübinette also noted that deeper engagement with K-pop culture often led to a more nuanced and realistic perception of Korea and its culture.

The tendency to idealise Korean culture that I observed Korean participants talking about and that I observed among Polish participants corresponds with Hübinette's observations.

At the same time, my research revealed that stereotypes can work both ways, and Koreans also have a simplified and inaccurate image of Poles, especially Polish women.

In the context of K-pop events, the research by Lewis et al. (2007) on gender-specific normative misperceptions regarding risky sexual behaviors may also be relevant. They showed that young people often overestimate the occurrence of such behaviors among their peers. This, in turn, can lead to increased engagement in risky activities, especially in social contexts where alcohol is present. In cross-cultural K-pop-related meetings, cultural norms regarding sexuality and alcohol consumption can differ significantly, potentially exacerbating these misperceptions and their consequences. Also Hittner et al. (2016), in their research on the impact of social environment on risky sexual behaviors, observed that factors, such as alcohol availability, level of supervision, and social norms, can significantly affect the likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors.

Analogous themes emerge in my research. My informants suggested that K-pop parties are perceived by some attendees as an opportunity to make romantic or sexual connections.

While this phenomenon (as well as the issue of alcohol discussed) is not unique to nightclubs, it manifests itself in a specific context within the K-pop domain. My field study found that some Koreans capitalized on their ethnicity and cultural affiliation, believing that they were more likely to have success in romantic interactions at K-pop events. Thus, they treated their Korean identity as a special asset that becomes particularly valuable precisely in the context of the K-pop scene.

K-pop events are also a place where unique communities and subcultural identities are formed, connecting K-pop fans from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Sung (2014), in his research on K-pop reception and fan culture in Austria, observed a significant increase in the number and scale of K-pop events following the success of Psy's "Gangnam Style". The researcher noted that fans actively organized various events such as K-pop auditions, dance festivals, club meetings, quiz contests, and dance workshops. Sung observed that these activities not only contributed to building a strong fan community but also served as platforms for cultural expression and creative engagement. The researcher also emphasized the role of these events in promoting Korean culture in the broader Austrian context.

In turn, Kim and Hutt (2021) examined K-pop as a social movement using BTS and their ARMY fandom as an example, and found that fan engagement goes beyond simply listening to music. Their study showed that BTS fans, inspired by the group's message, often engage in social and charitable activities. They also claimed that ARMY fandom has built international networks by organising charity fundraisers, social campaigns and educational programmes. Such social engagement strengthens the sense of community among fans and improves K-pop's image in the wider community. K-pop fandoms therefore aim to create a cohesive collective that actively creates the forms of its social functioning. Here we are not only dealing with activities directly related to the K-pop scene, but also going beyond its domain. In both cases, they serve to integrate and preserve the internal cohesiveness of the fandom community.

The functioning of Wrocław's K-pop parties can also be interpreted in these terms. This is indicated by direct accounts from participants, who often emphasised that these events foster lasting relationships and a sense of belonging. In this way also, for example, my observations of activities such as the 'Random Play Dance' and the 'Prize Lottery', correspond with Sung's

(2014) observations on the role of participatory events in building fan communities. They function as rituals of community, reinforcing group cohesion.

4.3 K-pop, kimchi and Corporate Ties. The Cultural Collisions of Polish-Korean Interactions in Wrocław.

Like the analysis of gender relations presented in the previous chapter, reading the ways in which Polish-Korean relations are talked about online can provide a better background for understanding the ways in which this issue manifests itself at K-pop parties. In this section, I will analyse newspaper articles, reports and commentaries appearing in the Internet space on Polish-Korean relations, in particular mutual perceptions. This will allow me to identify stereotypes and cultural cripples that may be reproduced in intercultural interactions occurring during the events under study. Such a context will allow me to better understand what happens at K-pop parties in the area of intercultural and interethnic relations.

In Wrocław, the spread of K-pop culture, which encompasses not only music but also other cultural industry products, including films, fashion, body aesthetics, and cosmetics (so-called K-beauty), goes hand in hand with major Korean investments in the city. More than 500 companies with predominantly Korean capital are registered in Poland, of which more than 280 are located in Lower Silesia (Nałęcz and Czerwińska, 2023). The significant presence of Korean companies, especially in the area of Wrocław, has created a distinctive economic environment conducive to regular professional interactions between Poles and Koreans. Wrocław is emerging as the largest Korean economic center in Europe, further solidifying the city's position as a hub for Korean business (Bartuś 2023). Also, a substantial Korean minority has formed in the city and its suburbs, creating a so-called 'Little Korea in Poland' (LG Energy Solution Wrocław, 2023).

In Wrocław, the influence of Korean minority and culture on the local community is recognised in various ways. A report by Radio Trójka notes that 'Korean films, K-pop, are now very popular in Poland, especially among young people. Statistics from the University of Wrocław confirm this growing interest. Korean Studies is one of the most popular fields of study' (Nałęcz and Czerwińska, 2023). Another manifestation of the importance of yego process culture is Korean cuisine. As Gładczak (2020) notes, 'Korean flavours have penetrated quite

heavily into Wrocław's gastronomy, and I don't just mean the addition of kimchi to many dishes in trendy places'.

The ongoing discussion of Polish-Korean interaction in Wrocław often highlights significant cultural differences and the resulting difficulties in integration. These differences become apparent in various aspects of daily life, work environment and social relations.

One frequent topic of discussion is the sense of isolation experienced by the Korean community. According to Martyna Jersz (2023), South Koreans do not seem willing to integrate into Polish culture. This observation is reflected in other sources. For example, one online article indicates that there is an 'informal ban on assimilation with Poles' (Kuźnik, 2022). In the text, we find a rather surprising account of one Polish mother who recounted her surprise when her child's invitations went unanswered by a Korean woman. 'She barely noticed my son's presence' - the mother stated. Differences in cultural norms are thus reproduced even among young children.

Differences in social norms and public behaviour are also highlighted. Marcin Jacob writes about the significant contrast between Koreans and Poles in terms of public behaviour and social norms (Sobańda, 2019). Poles are used to independent and often rebellious thinking. Government orders are often met with resistance as people choose to defy them. However, according to Sobańda (2019), such behaviour does not exist in Korea. Thus, we have a fundamental contradiction in the perspectives of power and social conformity.

A similar tension can be observed in the approach to work. The implementation of Korean corporate culture patterns among employees of factories located in Poland is also becoming problematic. Although the Korean work ethic is often praised as effective, Polish employees find it difficult to accept the accompanying stress of expectations and management style (Kuźnik, 2022). In an online comment on the O2.pl portal, a Pole employed by a Korean company claims that "[Koreans] have a distinct work culture and tend to introduce a lot of stress".

Koreans are attributed with a strong work ethic and the ability to cope with challenges (Park et al., 2005). However, this perception can sometimes result in assumptions about their social lives. According to one article, brothels and casinos seem to be the main activities they

engage in, and interestingly, they feel a lot of shame about this. It is suggested that these activities are also the main reason for their lack of success. This finding highlights a stereotype that simplifies and possibly distorts Korean social behaviour.

Often a language barrier is identified as the main obstacle to integration. Despite attempts to break it, such as the establishment of Korean-language newspapers in Wrocław (PolsatNews, 2016), effective communication and mutual understanding remains a challenge in Polish-Korean interactions. Rather, interactions and attitudes are driven by common stereotypes and the resulting prejudices. They occur on both sides and are often rooted in limited information or media portrayals.

One Polish influencer in Korea said: "It's interesting how some people here in Korea mistakenly associate Poland with Finland". It is worth noting that the names of the two countries sound similar in Korean' (MSI, 2023). This, however, illustrates how limited the average Korean's knowledge of Poland may be. | On the other hand, positive comments by Koreans about Poland and Poles are common on the Internet: 'Poles are known for their warm hearts', 'Amazing neighbours', 'Poland is the best' (Kolczanska, 2022). In online media, one can also find arguments pointing to the self-reinforcement of certain, even negative, stereotypes. For example, one youtuber notes that when Poles interact with foreigners at work, they tend to create an image suggesting that they drink a lot (Koreanka, 2021).

The issue of physical appearance also recurs in the discussion of stereotypes. As it seems, the Slavic physicality of women is attractive to Koreans. In one Instagram post, one can read: "Slavic women have such beauty that even when working in the fields they resemble idols".

Reading online reports confirms that Polish idealistic ideas about Korea and Koreans are in turn largely, especially by the younger generation, shaped by the prism of k-pop and Korean dramas (Kuźnik 2022).

Sometimes the stereotyping of Koreans by Poles is characterised by elements of racism. For instance, one Korean living in Poland described his experiences of alienation and even hostility: "People watch me and exchange words in hushed tones, sometimes expressing amusement and even resorting to offensive language when they see me..." (Godzinski, 2019).

However, arguments can also be found for the thesis that these stereotypes are being challenged. As interaction between Poles and Korean culture increases, there is clear evidence of a growing and deeper understanding. As Roman Husarski notes in the interview, 'Koreans have a remarkable lack of hostility towards other cultures and religions, but this is the result of their diligent work; this tolerance did not just magically appear' (Urbaniak, 2021).

Nevertheless, the discussion also highlights changing perspectives and initiatives towards inclusion. The increasing fascination with K-pop and Korean culture among young Poles is opening up fresh opportunities for cultural exchange. According to Dorota Kuźnik (2022), it was uncommon to see Polish-Korean couples dancing or kissing in front of a club a few years ago. Today, these are the stories we are observing. This trend aligns with the broader increase in interethnic marriages in Poland. While specific data on Polish-Korean marriages is not available, statistics from GUS (Central Statistical Office) show a significant rise in binational marriages overall, from 1.7% of all marriages in 2012 to 3.2% in 2019. Although this increase is largely attributed to marriages between Poles and citizens of Eastern European countries, particularly Ukraine, it reflects a growing openness to interethnic relationships in Polish society. These changing dynamics suggest a potential for more Polish-Korean romantic relationships and marriages in the future, especially as cultural exchange through K-pop and other mediums continues to grow.

Summarizing the above analysis of the discourse around Polish-Korean interactions in Wrocław, several important themes can be identified. The growing fascination with Korean culture, especially K-pop, is changing perspectives and opening up new possibilities for cross-cultural interaction. Nevertheless, this cultural fascination exists alongside persistent stereotypes and difficulties with integration. At the same time, the cityscape and the labor market have been significantly shaped by new Korean-Polish economic ties. This has brought new dynamics to the workplace culture, but has also increased the fields for mutual interaction between representatives of the two nations.

Despite such exposures, it is not possible to speak of openness and direct cultural mixing. The Korean community in particular remains closed and distrustful of the challenges of integration. This integration is further hindered by the language barrier. However, symptoms of

social change can be observed, and the space of K-pop parties seems to be one field where better cultural understanding and the development of contacts can take place.

Ultimately, the constantly changing gender dynamics and intercultural relations shown in both the research and Internet content reflect the complex balance between traditional values and evolving social norms in both cultures. The intersection of these forces creates a unique environment where cultural exchange and adaptation are taking place, albeit with challenges and limitations.

4.4 Bridging Cultures. A summary.

The emergence of K-pop parties in Wrocław has created a unique space that facilitates intercultural contact between Polish and Korean participants. These events not only serve as a platform for mutual curiosity and appreciation but also reveal stereotypes, cultural barriers, and power imbalances. The dynamics of social action observed at these events are closely linked to the broader context of Polish-Korean relations in the city, characterized by significant Korean investments and the formation of a substantial Korean minority.

Academic discourse on K-pop fandom provides considerations and theories that offer a point of reference for the phenomena observed at the Wrocław events. The role of K-pop as a powerful medium for transnational cultural exchange is evident in the local adaptations of the K-pop world, which emerge in the form of these events within the Polish fandom. A specific feature of these events is the presence of not only girls fascinated by K-pop but also Korean men. However, the study reveals communication challenges and cultural barriers that separate these two distinct groups within the event space. The observed problems of integration, along with attempts to break down these barriers, are also present in the broader dimension of Polish-Korean relations in Wrocław.

Research conducted in the club has shown the importance of dance and performance in intercultural communication and fan community building at K-pop events in Wrocław, reflecting international research on the subject. The notion of K-pop dance as a universal language connecting participants from different backgrounds is evident at Wrocław events. However, the hierarchies and tensions that arise from dance skills and expertise reflect the power

imbalances and cultural differences that characterize Polish-Korean interactions in the city. Of particular relevance are the findings on the impact of K-pop fandom on identity formation. These results correspond with findings in the academic literature. The complex process of negotiating the identity of a K-pop fan within a broader social context, where interest in the subculture may be met with misunderstanding or prejudice, may reflect (albeit in different aspects and contexts) the difficulties of integration experienced by the Korean minority in Wrocław.

Despite the challenges of persistent stereotypes and integration difficulties, the changing perspectives and initiatives for deepening intercultural relations in Wrocław are closely linked to the growing fascination with K-pop and Korean culture among young Poles. The potential of K-pop events to break down barriers and promote cultural understanding is intertwined with changing social norms and growing engagement with Korean culture in the city.

In conclusion, the complex cultural dynamics playing a role in K-pop events in Wrocław are inextricably linked to the broader context of Polish-Korean relations in the city. The findings of the Wrocław study resonate with insights from international research on K-pop fandom, highlighting the potential for cultural exchange and adaptation, as well as the challenges and limitations of stereotypes and integration difficulties. As young Poles continue to engage with K-pop and Korean culture, the prospects for greater cultural understanding and improved intercultural relations in Wrocław become stronger.

5. Discussion

The study I conducted aimed to investigate and elucidate the complex dynamics of interethnic and intergender relationships at K-pop events in Wrocław, Poland. After spending a year and a half conducting ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analyzing public discourse and academic literature, I discovered that K-pop events in Wrocław are a place of rich and intricate networks of cultural exchange, identity development, and social interactions.

These events present a unique blend of local and Korean culture. They not only provide entertainment for K-pop enthusiasts but also serve as significant spaces for direct interaction between Polish fans and the Korean minority living in the city. My research highlights the diverse roles these events play. They serve as platforms for cultural learning, opportunities to challenge and negotiate stereotypes, places where potential romantic connections can form, and environments where new subcultural identities are shaped.

Through an in-depth analysis of the unique context of Wrocław, I explored the fascinating ways global phenomena, such as K-pop, are embraced and acquire a local character. This exploration shed light on how these processes influence social relations and cultural perspectives within the community.

My research uncovered several key themes that illuminate the complex dynamics between idealization and reality in cross-cultural encounters. I found that shared interests, such as music and dance, play a crucial role in bridging cultural divides and that navigating language barriers and cultural differences can sometimes be challenging. Another significant observation was the formation of distinct community identities within the K-pop fandom.

In this discussion section, I will explore these themes further, analyzing their impact on both theoretical understandings of cultural exchange and practical aspects of promoting positive intercultural relations. I will also discuss the limitations of my study and propose directions for future research in this rapidly developing field.

5.1 Key Findings of the study and Their Implications

5.1.1 Intergender Relations at K-pop parties in Wrocław, Poland

My research on K-pop events in Wrocław revealed the complex and diverse dynamics of relationships between individuals of different genders, especially in interactions between Polish

women and Korean men. These relationships are shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and the specific social environment surrounding these events.

One of the key findings was that many Polish women participating in these events held idealized perceptions of Korean men. This perception seems to be a result of K-pop and Korean dramas, where male characters are often depicted as romantic, caring, and embodying “gentle masculinity.” This indicates that K-pop events are not immune to the influence of media on cross-cultural perceptions (Jung, 2011). These idealized expectations often clash with harsh reality. I discovered that the behavior of Korean men at these events often differed from the idealized image. For instance, some Polish women shared experiences where they were objectified or approached casually, which contradicted the image of Korean men they had previously envisioned.

Another complication in the dynamics of gender interactions is often language and culture. I noticed that some Korean participants had limited English proficiency, while Polish participants generally could not communicate in Korean beyond basic phrases. This lack of effective communication often led to misunderstandings and relied on non-verbal cues.

In the context of these events and the relationships occurring within them, the role of alcohol also proved significant. I observed that Korean participants often used offering drinks as a way to initiate interactions with Polish women. Although some may see this as a cultural tradition rooted in hospitality, it is important to consider potential safety and consent issues, especially given the involvement of underage participants in these events.

The power dynamics in these interactions can be quite intricate and often imbalanced. Some Polish women, especially the younger ones, may be more susceptible to exploitation due to their admiration for Koreans and their culture. On the other hand, it seems that some Korean men viewed these events as opportunities for casual encounters, possibly objectifying Polish women based on stereotypes about the willingness of Western women to engage in casual relationships.

It is worth noting that not all interactions followed this pattern. Many participants engaged in warm and polite conversations that effectively bridged different cultures. These enjoyable

interactions often revolved around shared interests in K-pop, dance, and Korean culture in general.

5.1.2 Interethnic Dynamics at k -pop parties

Delving into intergender relationships from an interethnic perspective, it turns out that promoting cultural exchange is particularly significant. Many Polish participants show genuine interest in Korean culture that goes beyond just K-pop music. This is very positively received by the Korean attendees of these events. Polish fans have shown great interest in Korean culture, learning the language, enjoying Korean cuisine, and immersing themselves in various forms of Korean pop culture such as dramas and comics.

As I mentioned before, language was a fundamental obstacle in the development of these relationships. The basis for their interaction was English, although some Polish fans tried to use Korean phrases, communication was often difficult due to limited language skills on both sides. In my research, I noticed that distinct groups formed in the event space, and Koreans and Poles functioned within their own circles, also for the sake of communication convenience. Dance proved to be an extraordinary means of communication that transcended language barriers. Dance routines performed by participants connected them as they offered opportunities for both intense practice and relaxed performance, as well as admiration and recording, which sparked interest in all groups participating in the event.

Another important outcome of these interethnic interactions was the development of a distinct community identity. Regardless of cultural differences, a shared passion for K-pop fostered a sense of integration that transcended ethnic divides. This supports Laffan's (2020) research on the positive psychosocial effects of identifying with the K-pop fandom.

5.1.3 Community Formation and Identity

K-pop events in Wrocław serve as a central hub for building a sense of community and shaping the local subcultural identities of K-pop fans. These events offer valuable opportunities to explore the impact of global cultural trends on the formation of individual identities in a specific location.

Analysis of field studies indicates that K-pop parties are characterized by a strong sense of community. Participants express similar sentiments, emphasizing that these events serve as

meeting places for K-pop fans from Wrocław. For some attendees, these events transform into regular social gatherings, fostering the development of deep bonds and a sense of belonging. The shared experiences and rituals at these events are crucial for strengthening the bonds within this community. Activities such as the "Random Play Dance" challenge and "Prize Drawings" act as collective rituals that enhance group cohesion. These shared actions create a sense of unity and emotional connection among group members, reinforcing social ties. The synchronicity observed during these activities demonstrates remarkable adaptability and increased energy levels in participants' dance movements.

The K-pop fan community in Wrocław is an open space where participants can freely share their love for K-pop without fear of judgment. These events are particularly significant given the widespread negative opinions about K-pop in mainstream Polish society. Participants mentioned that in their daily lives, they often faced ridicule and disrespect from others due to their affinity for K-pop. This shows that the identity shaped through participation in these events often differs from societal norms in Poland.

5.2 Limitations

Despite providing valuable insights into the dynamics of K-pop parties in Wrocław, my study does have certain limitations that could impact the interpretation and generalization of the findings.

Foremost among these limitations is the issue of sample size and composition. Despite conducting extensive fieldwork over the course of a year, my study primarily focused on events held at one venue, Club Liverpool, in Wrocław. It's important to note that this narrow focus may not fully capture the diversity of K-pop fan experiences in Poland, or even within Wrocław itself. Additionally, my interview data is qualitative and based on in-depth interviews with a limited group of seven participants. While this approach allowed for deep and comprehensive insights, it limits the generalizability of my findings. Given the small sample size, appropriate for qualitative research, it's crucial to emphasize that my results may not precisely reflect the views and opinions of the entire K-pop fan community in Wrocław or Poland as a whole.

Moreover, language barriers posed significant challenges in my study. While the majority of participants were proficient in English, there were instances where language proficiency limited the depth of interviews and interactions, particularly among some Korean participants

with limited English or Polish skills, that resulted in limited data on their perspective. Due to the nature of translation processes, certain nuances or profound insights may have been overlooked or not fully conveyed. Considering the cultural lack of openness that characterize Koreans it was also challenging to gather enough emic data on their perspective. Potential risk of putting myself into position of their object of interest, what aligns with my study results, also played a role that resulted in this limitation.

It's also important to consider how my perspective as a researcher may have influenced data collection and analysis. As a Polish woman and a K-pop fan, my presence and perspective naturally shaped the research process. Despite maintaining reflexivity throughout the study, it's essential to recognize that my personal background may have influenced participants' responses and my interpretation of events.

The timeframe of the study, although comprehensive, focuses on a specific moment in the development of K-pop fandom in Wrocław. Given the dynamic nature of popular culture trends, the dynamics observed during the research period may change over time. Long-term longitudinal studies would be essential to capture these changes fully.

Additionally, the study primarily focuses on K-pop parties, which provide valuable insights into these specific events. However, it's important to acknowledge that there may be a broader range of K-pop fan activities and interactions in different contexts that were not fully explored. For instance, online interactions, which were not deeply analyzed in this study, have a significant impact on K-pop fandom.

These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the presented results and indicate the need for further research. By acknowledging these limitations, the aim is to provide a clear framework for understanding the scope and significance of the study. Additionally, I hope to inspire future research that can address these gaps and enrich academic understanding of K-pop fandom and dynamic intercultural relations in various contexts

5.3 Future Research Directions

Due to the limitations of my conducted study, I have identified several potential directions for future research that could provide valuable insights into the world of K-pop fandom, shed light on dynamic cross-cultural interactions, and examine the influence of global popular culture

on local communities. I believe conducting long-term longitudinal studies tracking the development of K-pop fandom in Wrocław or other Polish cities could be crucial. Such studies would offer deeper insights into the formation of fan identities, social dynamics, and cross-cultural relationships over time.

Given the lack of existing academic literature on K-pop events, there is an opportunity to expand research to other cities in Poland or even across Europe, providing valuable comparative data. This could help distinguish elements specific to Wrocław from those representing broader trends. While my work primarily focused on physical events, an interesting avenue for future research could explore the relationship between online and offline fan activities. This could include examining how online interactions impact offline meetings and vice versa.

In future studies, it would also be beneficial to incorporate a broader range of Korean voices to achieve a more diverse understanding. Additionally, conducting in-depth research on how being a member of a fandom influences the development of romantic relationships formed within it could yield valuable insights. Furthermore, quantitative studies with larger samples could contribute to validating and generalizing the findings I have obtained. These future research directions have the potential to make valuable contributions to ongoing academic discussions on cultural exchange, identity formation, and the social impact of popular culture.

5.4 Conclusion

The ethnographic study of K-pop parties in Wrocław sheds light on the intricate dynamics of interethnic and intergender relationships within a distinct cultural environment. Through the analysis of these events using anthropological and sociological theories, I have acquired valuable perspectives on how global cultural phenomena influence local identities and interactions in our interconnected world.

Through my research, it becomes evident that K-pop parties play a significant role beyond just being places of entertainment. They serve as important spaces for cultural exchange, shaping identities, and fostering a sense of community. The dynamics I observed between Polish and Korean participants shed light on the broader themes of cultural globalization, emphasizing the possibilities for cross-cultural understanding and the difficulties that come with navigating cultural differences.

This study reveals the intricate dynamics of intergender relations, specifically between Polish women and Korean men, highlighting the profound impact of media portrayals and cultural stereotypes on actual social interactions. These findings add to the ongoing discussions surrounding the influence of global media on gender dynamics at a local level and the dynamics of cross-cultural romantic encounters.

In addition, my analysis of community building among K-pop enthusiasts in Wrocław showcases the power of shared interests in global cultural products to go beyond national and ethnic divisions, giving rise to fresh forms of social identity and a sense of belonging. This phenomenon highlights the evolving nature of community in a world of global cultural exchanges, questioning conventional ideas of cultural identity.

The study also highlights the significance of embodied practices, specifically dance, in promoting intercultural communication and fostering a sense of community cohesion. The shared experience of K-pop choreographies has proven to be a powerful way to connect people from different backgrounds, surpassing language and cultural differences.

Although my research has yielded valuable insights, it also indicates the necessity for additional investigation. Future exploration can delve into the complexities of cultural hybridity, the long-term impacts of K-pop fandom on intercultural relations, and the potential for these events to foster broader social integration in Wrocław.

Ultimately, this analysis of K-pop parties in Wrocław provides a glimpse into the broader dynamics of cultural globalization and localization. It offers a glimpse into the ways in which young individuals navigate their sense of self and connections in environments where different cultures come together, offering a detailed insight into the complexities of modern intercultural interactions. As K-pop gains more and more fans around the world, the knowledge gained from this research could be really helpful in promoting positive cultural exchanges in different parts of the globe.

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