

# THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST – A STUDY ON A MUSIC-FOCUSED FAN CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is the biggest international contest of popular music in the world. Since 1956 the show has attracted a vast number of fans all over Europe. The focus of this study is on the characteristics of the German fan-community. The aim is to empirically verify the results of a study by Heinz Moser (1999) on the ESC fan culture in Switzerland with regard to their consistency and transferability to the ESC fan culture in Germany. Moreover the attempt is being made to acquire some knowledge and an insight of the characteristics of the Song Contest's fandom as a music-focused fan culture. The study is based on interviews with 208 Members of OGAE-Germany, the only ESC fan club in Germany at the time of the study. By means of an anonymous four-page questionnaire, data on the demographic structure of the German fan community was collected, and also information on the fan's requirements and expectations in respect to the Eurovision Song Contest and regarding the services of the network of ESC fan clubs.

Results: The majority of the people interviewed are between 30 and 40 years old. 94% are men. 55% obtained A-level degrees and of these, more than half are university graduates. The musical interest of this group focuses on national and international pop music. For the majority of members (84%) the fan club is used as a source of information. The possibilities of social interaction are regarded as important but only 25% of those interviewed actually take advantage of them. In 29% of the cases, an interest in the Song Contest was inspired by the fans' parents.

These results contradict the findings of Moser: All milieu-induced signs (age structure, level of education, general aesthetic attitude) indicate that the Eurovision Song Contest's fans belong to a "Self-made Milieu", to use Schulze's terminology. The high proportion of male members in the ESC clubs can perhaps be best explained by the Song Contest's specific structure as a "male TV programme" (as defined by John Fiske (1987)). For some of the self-proclaiming Song Contest fans, social interaction with other fans, respectively fan club membership, is not a necessity. The concept of being a fan still exists even with the individual having no contact to other fans. The influence of the fans' parents extends to an important degree in discovering an interest in the Eurovision Song Contest.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is the biggest international contest of popular music in the world. Up to 600 million people watch this annual TV-Show world-wide, not only in Europe, but also in Northern Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australia. Since 1956 when the show was broadcast for the first time,

the ESC, originally created to give the national European TV-stations a recurring opportunity to co-operate on a common television project, has become part of a collective consciousness in most of the participating countries. Many ESC entries may not have become major hits on an international scale, but are still remembered by the people of their respective countries of origin.

In addition, the ESC has through the years attracted a considerably high number of fans all over Europe. In the mid-nineteen-eighties the first ESC fan clubs emerged, partly due to a subsiding interest of the media in the event which resulted in a lack of information that the fan clubs tried to counterbalance with some of their own publications. In 1984 the OGAE (Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision) was founded in Finland to become the most powerful fan club of the Contest with national branches in more than 20 countries. The German branch of the OGAE was founded in 1987, and within the following 13 years the club managed to enlist more than 600 fans interested in the ESC and in European popular music generally. This study's focus is on the characteristics of the fan-community within the OGAE-Germany before the club split into two hostile clubs in 2000.

## 2. AIM

In 1999 Heinz Moser from Switzerland published a study on the ESC fan culture of his home country. His study, inspired by Henry Jenkins' work on fans of fictional television programs and based on qualitative interviews with six active members of the Eurovision Club Switzerland, was supposed to generate a new theory regarding fandom and results in the following statements:

- According to the terminology used by Gerhard Schulze (1992) the Song Contest fans can be assigned to the "Harmony Milieu" due to the presumed gentle nature of the Contest. This "Harmony Milieu" is characterised by the following milieu-induced signs: general aesthetic attitude close to "Trivial Scheme" ("Schlager" music<sup>1</sup>, trashy novels, gameshows), aged 40 and above, poor education.
- Eurovision Song Contest fans consist mostly of male homosexuals who specifically seek a sense of belonging and nearness within the closely-knit community of the fan club.

<sup>1</sup> The word "Schlager", originally a synonym for "hit song", is used nowadays to describe a particular type of German language music with intellectually undemanding lyrics and a rather simple music score.

- True fandom is limited to a broad form of social interaction which includes the establishing of a fan club as the "moment of revelation" and as the turning-point in any "true" fan's life.

The aim of the present study is to empirically verify the results of Moser's study with regard to their adequacy and adaptability to the Eurovision Song Contest fan culture in Germany. In addition, it is hoped to acquire some knowledge and an insight of the characteristics of the Song Contest's fandom as a music-focused fan culture. Finally the question of a corresponding socialising impact in the origins of the Song Contest fandom are being analysed.

### 3. METHOD

The study is based on interviews with 208 Members of OGAE-Germany (i.e. about 1/3 of the members of the club), the only Eurovision Song Contest fan club in Germany at the time of the study. By means of an anonymous four-page questionnaire, data on the demographic structure of the German fan community was collected, and also information on the fan's requirements and expectations in respect to the Eurovision Song Contest and regarding the services of the network of ESC fan clubs.

### 4. RESULTS

In order to verify whether the Song Contest fans can be assigned to the "Harmony Milieu", the milieu-induced signs – age structure, level of education and general aesthetic attitude– among the German fan community are being analysed. The results were as follows:

- The majority of the people interviewed are between 30 and 40 years old (see figure below).

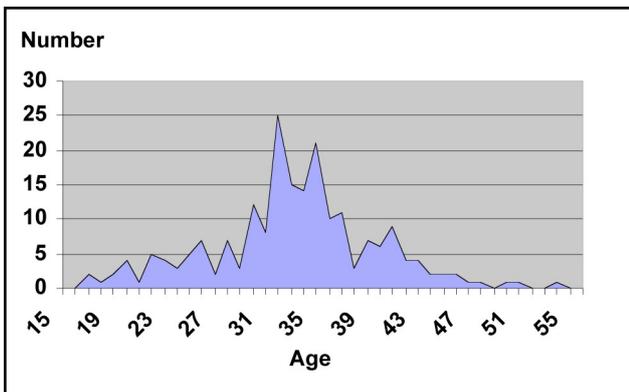


Figure 1: Age structure of OGAE Germany in May 2000

- 55% obtained A-level degrees and of these, more than half are university graduates.
- Musical interest focuses on national and international pop music. German "Schlager"-songs rank in 3rd place, with German folk music coming in last.

- The Eurovision Song Contest is not considered to be a "Schlager"-song contest ("Schlagerwettbewerb") by the majority of fans (68%).

With regard to an age structure that results in an average age of below 40 years, a high educational level and a general aesthetic attitude characterised by pop music, milieu-induced signs indicate that German Song Contest fans rather belong to the so-called "Self-made Milieu" (Selbstverwirklichungsmilieu) than to the "Harmony Milieu".

Moser's second thesis that most of the ESC fans are homosexual could not be verified as easily, bearing in mind that any questions regarding sexual preferences would probably not have been answered truthfully by most of the interviewed. It is nonetheless astonishing that 94% of the fan club members are male. Given the fact that the structure of television fan communities depends on the specific content and structure of the program (e.g. the fan community of fictional television programs examined by Jenkins was mainly female) the large number of male fans in OGAE Germany (and most of the other OGAE clubs) points to a specific "male" content of the Eurovision Song Contest as defined by John Fiske (1987). Fiske differentiates between "female" and "male" television programs, the latter being characterised by a linear, "suspense-packed" and competitive nature. Having a look at the key characteristics of the Contest named by the fans interviewed we find the voting procedure to be in the first place, followed by the international character and the variety of languages. Music is ranked in 4th place only which is quite surprising bearing in mind that the ESC is originally a music program. The voting procedure is of such interest to the majority of fans that this part of the Contest is subject to frequent "re-reading" (watching video recordings and analysing score-board results).

Moser's third thesis that fandom is limited to a broad form of social interaction was verified by asking the members of OGAE Germany what kind of fan club services they call on and how important they judge them. For the majority of the members (84%) the fan club is just used as a source of information. Ranking second and third are services connected to record and video sales (see figure below).

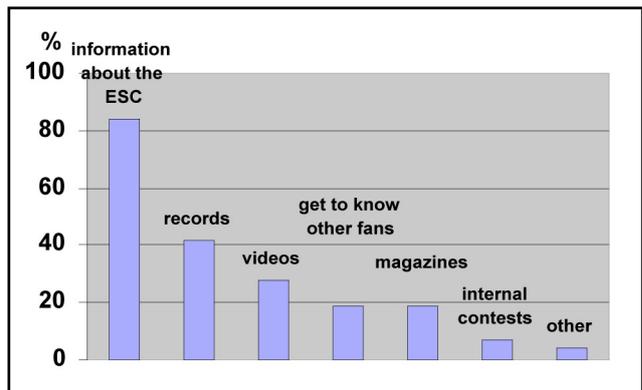


Figure 2: Main reasons for becoming a member in the fan club

The chances of social interaction are considered important but only 25% of those interviewed actually take advantage of them. In only 19% of all cases people entered the club in order to become acquainted with other fans. This coincides with the fact that certain expressions of self-proclaimed ESC fandom (collecting records and videos, drawing up and interpreting statistics etc.) can be observed in fans not belonging (and sometimes with no intention to belong) to any fan club. This shows that feeling and behaving as an ESC fan does not necessarily result in membership in a fan club. It is remarkable that some of the interviewed were thoroughly convinced to be the only ones interested in the Eurovision Song Contest in such a "frantic" way before they even heard about the fan club and became one of its members.

Regarding the origins of ESC fandom it is vital to point out that any interest for the Contest began in most cases prior to puberty. The following figure gives an idea at what age people watch the Eurovision Song Contest for the first time:

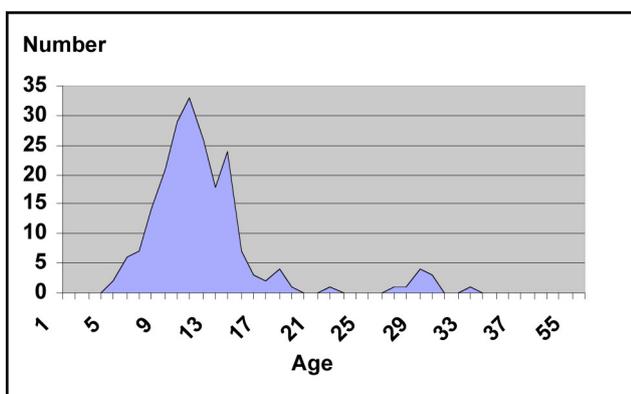


Figure 3: Age when watching the ESC for the first time

This early television experience is considered as a moment of revelation for many fans who identify it as the turning-point of their fan career. Bearing in mind that children tend to disapprove of their parents' tastes during and after puberty it is remarkable that in 29% of all cases interest was inspired by parents and lasted well into adulthood. Another interesting point is the fact that ESC fandom is maintained at any costs, in many cases even despite a sometimes massive rejection within peer groups (circle of friends, room mates, fellow students etc.) who tend to have a strong influence on an individual's taste and behaviour.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study shows a picture contradictory to that of Moser:

- All milieu-induced signs (age structure, level of education, general aesthetic attitude) indicate that Eurovision Song Contest fans do not belong to the "Harmony Milieu" but to the "Self-made Milieu", to use Schulze's terminology.

- There is no evident scientific connection between Eurovision Song Contest fandom and homosexuality. The high proportion of male membership in the club can perhaps be explained by the Song Contest's specific structure as a "male TV programme", according to the definition of John Fiske (1987).
- For some of the self-proclaiming Eurovision Song Contest fans, social interaction with other fans respectively fan club membership is not a necessity. The feeling of being a fan even exists with the individual having no contact to other fans. The fan club only offers additional activities pointed at social interaction (e.g. karaoke contests).
- Watching the Eurovision Song Contest for the first time is a vital childhood experience for most of those interviewed, and also the starting point of their fan career.
- The parents' socialising impact is of considerable importance. The holding on to ESC fandom despite the rejection within peer groups can be interpreted as a distinction of a fan's own personality by risking to become an "outsider".

A scheduled study comparing the different ESC fan cultures in Europe could throw light upon regional differences in the establishing of fan clubs and in the various individual styles of expressing fandom.

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