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K-pop Fandom(s): Divergent Understandings
of Narrated Authenticity

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Mathieu Thomas Berbiguier

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

K-pop Fandom(s): Divergent Understandings of Narrated Authenticity

by

Mathieu Thomas Berbiguier

Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Christopher P. Hanscom, Chair

This dissertation analyzes power dynamics within K-pop fandom(s)—a term encompassing fans within and beyond Korea—and examines how these dynamics contribute to nuanced perceptions of authenticity. Situated at the intersection of Media Studies, Area Studies, Gender Studies, Digital Humanities, and Ethnomusicology, this project employs online and offline ethnographic methods. By gathering insights from fans and professionals, my dissertation exemplifies a humanistic social science arguing for a nuanced understanding of cultural phenomena. In contrast to the dominant framework of the “Korean Wave,” which leverages K-pop's global popularity for nationalist ends and risks exoticizing Korean popular culture by often omitting the national context, this research project uses a combination of global and national perspectives as its main theoretical framework. It argues that the various perceptions of K-pop within its fandom(s) converge toward an imaginary concept of what

“authentic” K-pop is. Utilizing its interdisciplinary framework, my ambition is to assert K-pop as a legitimate object of study within Korean Studies.

The dissertation of Mathieu Thomas Berbiguier is approved.

Ju Hui Judy Han

Denise R. Mann

Timothy Tangherlini

Christopher P. Hanscom, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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Intro

K-pop, Korean Studies, and the Aftermath of the Korean Wave: An Interdisciplinary Discussion

Is the Korean Wave still “Ongoing” ?¹

2011 was a crucial moment in the history of K-pop in Europe. In June, the SM TOWN Live in Paris, as part of the “Visit Korea Year,” was the first K-pop concert ever held on the continent. K-pop fans from France and Europe rushed to secure tickets for the event, and the show sold out in less than fifteen minutes.² A few days after the ticket sale, many fans who could not get tickets gathered in Paris in front of the Pyramide du Louvre and held a flash mob to ask for a second date.³ Their demands were heard, and another concert date was added on top of the initial date of June 10th, 2011. The next fall, more than 200 students—the author of this thesis was one of them—began their BA in Korean Studies at the Université Paris Diderot (now known as Université Paris Cité). The department, which was more accustomed to promotions of 30 students, had been flooded with new applications, to the extent that they had to put people on waitlists and reject a third of the candidates.

When the word Hallyu—a term referring to the Korean Wave—was coined in the late 1990s to describe the growing popularity of South Korean (hereafter, Korean) popular culture content outside of the country, the metaphorical connotation of the term suggested that this phenomenon would not last very long.⁴ Yet, we have been swamped by the Korean Wave for

¹ The author recommends the reader to read this dissertation along with its visual companion, accessible here: <https://tinyurl.com/MBPHD-Viz>.

² Yonhap News, “French Fans Demand Extension of Sold-out K-Pop Concert,” *The Korea Times*, March 3, 2011, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/05/398_86328.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hae-Joang Cho, “Reading the ‘Korean Wave’ as a Sign of Global Shift,” *Korea Journal* (2005): 147–82.

more than thirty years. This cultural phenomenon has periodically been framed by the mainstream media as an “ongoing,” “growing,” or “new” phenomenon.⁵ If we look at K-pop’s popularity over the period 2011 to 2024, what has changed? K-pop songs are available on all of the main streaming platforms. Buying a K-pop album has become as easy as going to the closest bookstore or even—for some places in the world—the supermarket. There are so many concerts outside of Korea that fans must make strategic choices depending on their schedule and finances. In the last demographic survey of K-pop fans published on the—no-longer-existing—blog of Twitter Korea, the top three countries in the world with the most K-pop fans as of 2022 are Indonesia, Japan and the United States.⁶ Coming up just after the top three, Korea is only ranked at the fourth position.

Early studies on K-pop fandom in the Korean Wave primarily aimed to locate reasons justifying the increase of interest towards Korean popular culture and tended to focus on a single type of fan based in a single country. More recent studies have argued that we need to move beyond asking why this phenomenon happened. Rather, as Seok-Kyeong Hong holds in her book *Segyehwa-wa Tijit’öl Munhwa Sidae-üi Hallyu*, there is a pressing need to look at its consequences.⁷ More recent studies have also become concerned with terms such as “transnationalism” in an attempt to move beyond the single-country model; yet, in order to frame the borderless K-pop fan community as a consequence of the Korean Wave, such studies often overlook effects on the domestic fan community. Is the global popularity of K-pop a reason to downplay the importance of Korean fans, the initial audience of Korean

⁵ Irina Lyan, “Shock and Surprise: Theorizing the Korean Wave Through Mediatized Emotions,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 29–51.

⁶ YeonJeong Kim, “#KpopTwitter Reaches New Heights with 7.8 Billion Global Tweets,” *Twitter Korea*, January 27, 2022, https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/insights/2022/-kpoptwitter-reaches-new-heights-with-7-8-billion-global-tweets.

⁷ Seok-Kyeong Hong, *Segyehwa-wa Tijit’öl Munhwa Sidae-üi Hallyu: P’ul Hausŭ, Kangnam Sŭt’ail, Kŭrigo Kŭ Ihu [Hallyu in Globalization and Digital Culture Era: Full House, Gangnam Style, and After]* (P’aju: Hanul Ak’ademi, 2013), 30.

popular music? This project argues that the popularity of K-pop is not a reason to focus on solely international fans.

In addition to its topical focus on fandom, with *K-pop fandom(s): Divergent Understandings of Narrated Authenticity* I also aim to be self-conscious of the disciplinary status of the project. It is possible to ask: though many students get their start in Korean Studies because of their interest in Korean popular culture—and especially K-pop—why does the field not reflect more of this interest in the scholarship it produces? This project is the result of continual reflection on how to build an interdisciplinary bridge between Korean Studies and other fields. As a result, my dissertation attempts to fill the gap regarding the lack of studies on the relationship between Korean and international fandoms of K-pop on the one hand, and the lack of studies about K-pop established in the field of Korean Studies on the other. My dissertation interrogates how K-pop fan communities based inside and outside Korea interpret K-pop differently by looking at their interactions in the online and offline spheres. It argues that the divergence of opinions among fan communities converges into a debate around an “authentic” image of K-pop that the entertainment companies create. In this introduction, I will develop the three main goals of the dissertation and explain how each goal will contribute to three different levels of academic discourse.

Project Goals and Contributions

- (1) Detach K-pop from the Framework of the Korean Wave for New Directions in K-pop Studies

My first goal in this dissertation is to separate K-pop from the outdated framework of the Korean Wave. In *New Korean Wave*, Dal Yong Jin used shifts in government policies and followed the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism’s historical breakdown to draw the line

between Hallyu 1.0 (1997-2007) and Hallyu 2.0 (2008-2016).⁸ In 2015, the edited volume *Hallyu 2.0: the Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media* was published as a way to emphasize the influence of K-pop and social media in this new stage of the Korean wave. Yet Hong warns against this tendency to periodize the Korean Wave because it frames these stages as distinctive when they are actually interrelated. According to her, Hallyu 2.0 would not have happened without Hallyu 1.0, and is a continuation of the former.⁹ Those terms were brought up collaboratively in academic discourse and circulated/used by the Korean government through their policies. For example, the “Hallyu 3.0 policy” was introduced in 2011 by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, while the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) even coined the term “Hallyu 4.0.”¹⁰ The fact that the government used the development stages of Hallyu to orient their policies of promotion of Korean culture abroad also influenced the discourse on the Korean Wave and vice versa. This chronological approach to the Korean Wave, and its reclamation from the government, led to a feeling of skepticism towards the phenomenon and the sense that it was transitory, a passing fad. A surge in studies about the Korean Wave and K-pop, especially with the unexpected popularity of PSY's “Gangnam Style” in 2012 and BTS’ global ascension to fame starting 2018 led to a similar opinion in the academic sphere. Nevertheless, academics interested in the Korean Wave tried over the last twenty years to show that, if the Korean Wave was utilized by the Korean government as a tool of soft power, it did not contribute *per se* to its expansion. As a result, I argue that this overlapping between government and academia to establish a timeline

⁸ Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 118.

⁹ Hong, *Segyehwa-wa Tijit’ŏl Munhwa Sidae-ŭi Hallyu*, 11.

¹⁰ Seok-Kyeong Hong et al., “Geography of Hallyu Studies: Analysis of Academic Discourse on Hallyu in International Research,” *Korea Journal* 59, no. 2 (2019): 111–43.

of the Korean Wave is the exact reason why the argument that the Korean government fully contributed to the Korean Wave persists.

Rather than adding infinite steps to the development of the Korean Wave, in my dissertation I want to consider Hallyu as a completed process. This hypothesis will help me create distance from the Korean government-shaped vision of the phenomenon, which is, in my opinion, perpetuated by the chronological approach discussed previously. I also want to detach K-pop from the framework of the Korean Wave. If we refer to the step-approach of the Korean Wave, K-pop only appears as the driving force of “Hallyu 2.0.” The disparities between the chronology of K-pop as “generations” and those related to Hallyu also interrogates whether it is still relevant to consider K-pop and the Korean Wave as interrelated.

Overall, I argue that instead of rigidly dissecting the Korean Wave and K-pop into predefined time frames, we should explore the motivations and perspectives that shape such practices. In June 2020, the notorious fan-run Korean webzine *Idology* published its “*K-pop sedaeron*” (케이팝 세대론, *K-pop generational breakdown*), offering a unique fan-created perspective on K-pop’s historical evolution.¹¹ This breakdown intersected with academic accounts of the Korean Wave and K-pop by addressing issues of territorial reach and content circulation. However, it provided a more nuanced and thorough approach, incorporating transitional steps such as “generation 2.5” or “generation 3.5.” Contrary to mainstream media narratives that often rely on government policies to demarcate shifts in the stages of Hallyu, *Idology*’s generational breakdown focused on the exportation strategies of the K-pop industry itself. This fan-based initiative of dividing K-pop into several generations is an

¹¹ Squib, “Aidol Sedaeron: (1) 2020 Aidol P’ab Sedaeron [Idol Generational Breakdown: (1) 2020 Idol Pop Generational Breakdown],” *Idology*, June 12, 2020, <https://idology.kr/13070>.

indicator of how fandoms perceive and comprehend the industry's history, offering a perspective distinct from academic or official narratives.

Suk-Young Kim, in *K-pop Live* argued that “for most fans, K-pop is not at all about political or historical burdens. It is about here and now and the creation of unprecedented connections with the rest of the world.”¹² From my observation of the online sphere, K-pop history matters a lot for the fans who are very savvy about those details and want to know the historical context of a group before choosing to support it. Moreover, the rising discourse on nostalgia among K-pop fans, in discussion with the chronological approach that has been used towards the Korean Wave, helps incorporate into the debate other conceptions of time that are not necessarily linear. José Esteban Muñoz, in his representative work *Disidentifications*, saw melancholia as a “productive space of hybridization that uniquely exists between a necessary militancy and indispensable mourning.”¹³ I will argue that this nostalgic feeling, and those instances referring to times when K-pop was not as mainstream as it is now, emphasize the sentiment that K-pop gained global exposure at a speed older fans were not ready to handle. This sense of nostalgia towards K-pop has a queer dimension to it, especially in the Korean context, and challenges the usual way hybridization and chronological order is interpreted in the discourse on the Korean Wave.

(2) Challenge American Hegemony in Popular Culture while Contributing to Area/Korean Studies

In a survey of previous scholarship produced about the Korean Wave over the last twenty years, Hong et al. showed that “globalization” and “cultural hybridity” were the most

¹² Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 25.

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 74.

recurring theoretical concepts.¹⁴ When it comes to the Korean Wave, many scholars have used the theoretical framework of the “glocal,” (portmanteau of global and local) to highlight the duality of the circulation of cultural content outside of Korea. This over-emphasis on glocality led to a congratulatory approach to the phenomenon that over-emphasizes the reasons behind it, at the expense of an analytical one that would instead look at its consequences.

In *New Korean Wave*, Dal Yong Jin sees the spread of the Korean Wave as a direct application of “cultural hybridity,” which highlights at the same time elements of glocalization—appeal to both internal and external audiences—while also providing an opportunity to ask about the importance of Koreanness.¹⁵ He pointed out that “contemporary K-pop is struggling in making an authentic local culture through the hybridization process, regardless of burgeoning attempts to make a hybrid popular culture.”¹⁶ While Jin’s emphasis on transnationality and hybridity contributes to a congratulatory approach to the Korean Wave, it has the advantage of shedding light on an essential dichotomy of Koreanness and Korean “authenticity” that has been seldom discussed in the context of the Korean Wave.

Hong takes a more cultural studies-oriented approach to transnationality by looking at the audience over the industry. In opposition to Jin's emphasis on digital technology, she focused on the global circulation of content and cultural identities. Instead of adopting a congratulatory approach, Hong saw Hallyu 2.0 as an “inevitable consequence.”¹⁷ She highlighted the problematic aspect of some studies constantly searching for signs of “Koreanness” to justify the popularity of the content outside of Korea. Focusing on the

¹⁴ Hong et al., “Geography of Hallyu Studies.”

¹⁵ Jin, *New Korean Wave*, 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁷ Hong, *Segyehwa-wa Tijit’öl Munhwa Sidae-ŭi Hallyu*, 12.

consequences of globalization on the consumers—defined as “omnivores” à la Bourdieu—and their broader access to content, she provided what was at the time of publication a refreshing account of the Korean Wave in the European context. Similarly to Jin, Hong explained how western media had deeply influenced the discussion and how the theory of convergence, another framework often mentioned when it comes to Hallyu, consistently pointed towards North America. To counter this North American-driven hegemony, she introduced the notion of multi-directional flow.¹⁸ In the recent non-academic discourse about the Korean Wave and especially K-pop, there is still this sense of American hegemony regarding its media coverage.

In this dissertation, I am interested in showing how K-pop and Korean entertainment companies often understand globalization as Americanization. There are two different layers to be considered in this statement. First, there is a sense that, when a group becomes popular in the United States, it is directly considered as famous “worldwide.” Second, it shows a mirroring practice, whereby Korea is essentially placed at the center of the world through globalization. One example of this phenomenon is the popularity of BTS. The fact that they gained popularity outside of Korea brought attention back to the group and towards the local audience, demonstrating that there still a sense of American hegemony when it comes to popular culture. This is also visible in recent academic discourse about BTS. Cho used a framework of “American nostalgia” to analyze BTS’ recent performances in American talk shows. According to her, “the group is subcultural because of its foreignness, but its crossover success in the US owes to the group’s singular focus on remixing familiar genres and narratives of American pop music and entertainment.”¹⁹ Appadurai, in his account of globalization, emphasized how nostalgia is often used in an American context as a “central

¹⁸ Hong, *Segyehwa-wa Tijit’öl Munhwa Sidae-ül Hallyu*, 48.

¹⁹ Michelle Cho, “Nostalgia for Nostalgia: BTS on American TV,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 16, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/nostalgia-for-nostalgia-bts-on-american-tv>.

feature of modern merchandising.”²⁰ While the approach of nostalgia is useful because it partially points out where BTS succeeded—while others failed—it does not acknowledge the specificity of nostalgia when it comes to capitalist strategies and the inherent power dynamics in place. Is BTS using nostalgia to appeal to the American market? Or are we using an American-centered lens of nostalgia to interpret BTS’ performances?

In my project, I argue that giving all the credit and agency to the American public does not challenge any discourse regarding the Korean Wave. On the contrary, it complies with reinforcing America’s hegemonic power in terms of popular music. Overall, this phenomenon is just a reflection on a smaller scale of Korean mainstream media's tendency to allocate a great deal of importance to international (i.e., American) discourse (해외 반응, *haeoe panŭng*) about Korea. Using my own positionality as a Korean studies scholar, I see resonance between the field of Area Studies dealing with central issues of the nation-state—which always ends up in some ways inscribed in a broader framework of globalization—and K-pop, an object of study that has an ambivalent relationship with globalization, through its circulation process, and nationalism, through its original audience.

(3) New Concepts to Build Broader Theoretical Contributions

In this section, by explaining the main two keywords of the title of this dissertation, “K-pop fandom(s)” and “narrated authenticity,” I emphasize how the project challenges existing discourse and contributes to broader theoretical discussions.

²⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 76.

K-pop fandom(s): Highlighting Power Dynamics of Insider/Outsider

The diversification of the K-pop fandom should be considered an aftermath, not a part, of Hallyu. Given the over-diversified scope of cultural products included in the Korean Wave, it is no longer relevant to use the same lens to look at different audiences and production processes. In my project, I use the term “K-pop fandom(s)” to emphasize this collateral consequence. On the one hand, we can see K-pop fandom as a broader, single entity that became so diverse it is very challenging to establish proper demographical data to define it. On the other hand, this term also alludes to an inside-outside binary, constructed by fans of idol music in Korea, as a direct response to this new phenomenon. Korean fans—often self-referencing as “domestic fans” (국내 팬, *kungnae p’aen*)—refer to those “new” fans as “overseas fans” (해외 팬, *haeoe p’aen*), and in some instances “fans from outside the country” (외국 팬, *oeguk p’aen*). K-pop fandom(s) stands out of from other cultural elements of Hallyu because it encourages interaction between local and international audiences.

One example is X/Twitter, a social media platform which will extensively inform this project in terms of network and textual analysis.²¹ It has been used by K-pop fandom(s) as a hub of information and content sharing, and has the specificity to depict direct interactions between fans based inside and outside of Korea—interactions which would be less organic if they were to be observed in real life. In this sense, this dissertation challenges an existing literature that has taken for granted the appurtenance of K-pop to the Korean Wave, and will contribute to the ongoing debate in Hallyu studies.

Such interactions highlight power dynamics, which is the second reason to take K-pop fandom(s) as an object of study for this project. Along with its increasing popularity, K-pop also saw its audience widening in terms of scale to an extent that makes it harder and harder

²¹ This is the first and only time in this dissertation that X—Twitter’s new name—will appear. The rebranding of Twitter failed miserably, and its former name is still used by all users.

to consider K-pop a “sub-culture.” In a former project, I focused on how Korean fans of idol music reacted to the sudden gain of attention their artists were receiving on a worldwide scale.²² Those reactions were materialized through a process of “othering” the international fans, which created a hierarchical perception of the fans outside of Korea, depending on how committed they were to the idols, and how faithful they were sticking to the strict rules of the Korean idol fandom culture. At first, international fans were called out and discriminated against for “violating” those rules. For examples, in the early stages of the Korean Wave, most international fans were interested in K-pop as an entity, without really supporting a specific artist/group. Moreover, the difficulty of accessing K-pop outside of Korea through legal means also led fans to download and stream the music illegally, and thus, not economically contributing to the K-pop economy.

In 2024, Korean entertainment companies are aware of the wider audience they can reach. Fans based in Korea may no longer be the center of attention when it comes to producing new content. As K-pop became more widely available, international fans also got more exposure to Korean idol fandom culture. Rules—such as the obligation to officially commit to one artist/group—began to be acknowledged and transmitted among international fans, who do their best to comply and earn respect from the original fans of those K-pop artists. Yet Korean fans’ initial feeling of frustration often resurges when international fans are perceived of falling short of these cultural norms. This frustration can also be translated through nationalist practices, a process through which Korean fans use their national identity as a tool of self-assertion to show superiority over international fans. This framework will help situate K-pop as a relevant object of study in the context of Korean Studies by dealing with issues that are relevant to the Korean context, such as Korean nationalism or Korea’s

²² Mathieu Berbiguier and Younghan Cho, “Understanding the Korean Fandom of the K-pop: Focusing on Its Perspectives on Foreign Fans,” *Korean Journal of Communication & Information* 81, no. 2 (2017): 272–98.

position in globalization. Such an approach also contributes to broader debates in Area Studies, such as the dichotomy of the global/local or the sense of Western/American hegemony that emanates from the field.

Finally, the third element that justifies the use of the term K-pop fandom(s) is the connection between K-pop being inherently difficult to define, and how its growing popularity brings up a discussion on what constitutes its authenticity. In the academic, fan, or even media sphere, there has been an ongoing debate on what should—and what should not—be considered K-pop. Even a statement such as “as of 2024, BTS is the most famous K-pop band,” can be considered highly controversial in the K-pop fandom(s), not because the popularity of BTS is arguable, but rather because there is a tendency among their fans to dissociate them from other K-pop groups. Wondering what motivated BTS fans to declare their independence from a general K-pop fandom during the “ARMY Independence Day,” on October 14th, 2018, previous interviews with K-pop fans highlighted a lexical field of terms such as “unique,” “genuine,” and finally “authentic,” to qualify the group.²³

Narrated Authenticity: Divergent Understandings of Genuineness and Identity-Making

When mapping the genealogy of authenticity, Nathaniel Lewis highlighted two different layers contained within the term. First, he focused on the relationship between authenticity and the self. Citing the cultural philosopher Charles Taylor, he relates authenticity with values of “self-fulfillment” or “self-realization.” Second, through Miles Orvell’s “culture of authenticity,” he saw authenticity as a process that gets “beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions.”²⁴ Using inauthenticity as a point of

²³ “Army Independence Day,” Urban Dictionary, last modified October 4, 2020, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Army%20Independence%20day>.

²⁴ Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2003), 3.

comparison, Lewis argued that authenticity does not exist by essence, but is conceived through cultural practices that relate to the self.²⁵ In this context, Lewis' definition of authenticity matches well with Stuart Hall's constructivist approach of representation, who saw it as "process by which members of a culture use language ... to produce meaning."²⁶ Straub's definition adds a reception aspect, by arguing that authenticity is also "reached by means of being full of effects which are geared at an audience."²⁷

If representation and authenticity have the commonality to be approachable via production and reception lenses, they also have a similar relationship with circulation. When discussing authenticity in terms of brand culture, Banet-Wiser mentioned Raymond Williams' structure of feeling to explain how "consumer capitalism is a nuanced, multilayered context for identity formation—as such, it is an explicitly cultural space."²⁸ Similarly, Hall coined the notion of "circuit of culture" to refer to this process of construction of identity through the circulation of content.²⁹ When providing an alternative to his constructionist approach to representation, Hall also highlights how representation can be a process in which "the speaker, the author ... impose his or her unique meaning on the world through language."³⁰ In the same vein, Straub acknowledged that authors sometimes use authenticity as a marker of authority, and as a substitute for markers of social status or nationality.³¹ Representation and authenticity are inextricably linked to the circulation of

²⁵ Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West*, 6.

²⁶ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Culture, Media, and Identities (London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), 61.

²⁷ Julia Straub, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Authenticity," in *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, ed. Julia Straub (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2012), 24.

²⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 216.

²⁹ Hall, *Representation*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹ Straub, *Paradoxes of Authenticity*, 18.

cultural products and the construction of identities, as the processes of production, representation, and consumption within the “circuit of culture” shape how meanings are encoded, negotiated, and decoded by various actors, including authors seeking to assert authenticity as a marker of authority.

Ana María Sánchez-Arce elaborated more on this connection between authority and authenticity, by explaining how it could be a criterion to evaluate subjectivity.³² Alluding to Foucault’s “discourse of truth,” she describes authenticity as a tool of self-assertion. In this context, Sánchez-Arce’s definition fits in with Lewis’ discussion of authenticity and the self. Inspired by this framework, she provided her own definition of “authenticism,” a term that already reflected the relationship between authority and authenticity. For her, authenticism refers to “the discourse or grand narrative that legitimizes knowledge on the grounds of it originating from essential identity characteristics or subjectivities. It permits and precedes the ‘celebration’ of difference whilst enforcing a repressive discourse that restricts the articulation of those differences.”³³ Drawing from Spivak’s canonical essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” this last sentence in Sánchez-Arce’s definition highlights the intrinsic power dynamics of authenticity. In another work, Spivak, when discussing accounts of migrant experience, argued that the accounts that are usually seen as “authentic” are those of the hegemonic voices.³⁴ In the context of K-pop, the authoritarian aspect of authenticity also embodies the notion of soft power that is often attributed to the Korean Wave, while also having a racial connotation.

³² Ana María Sánchez-Arce, “‘Authenticism,’ or the Authority of Authenticity,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40, no. 3 (2007): 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴ Gayatri Spivak and Sarah Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 61. An excellent example is Banet-Weiser’s description in *Authentic TM* of how yoga was shaped as an “authentic” practice of Indian religion through its imbrication in “discourses of whiteness.”

In this dissertation, I complicate this by showing how the authority of authenticity operates in fandom communities through the relationship between Korean and international fans. This binary of “Korean vs. international,” in the K-pop fandom(s) will be, at the same time, the starting point but also the common thread of the dissertation. By looking at why this binary exists and how it is problematic through several layers of analysis, I will discuss how those groups’ different interpretations of K-pop shape a sense of authenticity that is “narrated” by the entertainment companies. The diversity hiding behind the term “K-pop Fandom(s)” alludes to how this sense of community is built and divided based on divergent understandings of this “narrated authenticity.”

In *Representation*, Hall used a “circuit of culture” to map the production of meaning through language, and observed how this process shaped factors of identity and distinction between different groups.³⁵ In previous work focusing especially on the notion of cultural identity, Hall discussed identification as a constructive process, in parallel with the constructive approach to representation that we explored earlier. According to him, “language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal.”³⁶ We will focus on identity and the shaping of community in the Chapters 2 and 4 of this this dissertation.

In his description of global flows of cultural, Appadurai defines mediascapes as “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality ... out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives.”³⁷ Drawing from De Certeau, Hall, and in conversation with Appadurai, the fandom studies scholar Henry Jenkins used self-identification through ideological values to justify how fans identify with their object of interest and provide new

³⁵ Hall, *Representation*, 3, 15.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 2.

³⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 35.

interpretations of it.³⁸ In an essay on RPF (Real Person Fiction), Judith Fathallah also emphasizes this dichotomy between creating a new narrative and using existing value to identify with the content, by arguing that “RPF is conceived as a form of postmodern fiction that is both explicitly concerned with facets of identity and playfully manipulative of them.”³⁹ Jenkins and Fathallah’s notion of fan discourse and ideological values leads to Banet-Weiser’s discussion on the ambivalence of authenticity in terms of brand culture. In the introduction of her monograph, the author argued that “we need to believe that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture.”⁴⁰ Inspired by Raymond Williams, she applied the “structure of feeling” to brand culture and argued that brands create “an ethos of intangible qualities that resonate in different ways with varied communities.”⁴¹

Banet-Weiser is interested in how brand culture erases the commercial aspect of their marketing strategies with the performative aspect of authenticity. I argue that this is the exact strategy that Korean entertainment companies use, motivated by K-pop fans’ demand for an “authentic” relationship with K-pop idols. King-O’Riain used the term “corroborated authenticity” to qualify how repetitive interactions between K-pop idols and fans through live streaming platforms influence how those interactions are perceived as authentic (or inauthentic).⁴² Through these repeated performances of authenticity, the author highlighted the emotional connection with the idol as one of the factors that asserts authenticity in the K-pop fandom. Similarly, in her analysis of liveness in reaction videos, Michelle Cho argued

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 34.

³⁹ Judith Fathallah, “Reading Real Person Fiction as Digital Fiction: An Argument for New Perspectives,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 6 (2018): 570.

⁴⁰ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain, “‘They Were Having so Much Fun, so Genuinely...’: K-Pop Fan Online Affect and Corroborated Authenticity,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2020): 1–19.

that “reaction videos capture liveness as both the claim to the ‘first time’ watching, and as a spectacle of spontaneous affective experience.” According to her, by filming and uploading themselves reacting to K-pop related content, fans also performed a certain sense of authenticity by showing performances of identity.⁴³

In his contribution to the debate on the construction of cultural identity, cultural studies scholar Laurence Grossberg mentioned two different models. He associated the first model with an essentialist understanding of identity—defined by essence with specific characteristics—while the second “denies the existence of authentic and ordinary identities based in a universally shared origin or experience.”⁴⁴ The question that emerges is: how can we relate the discourse of authenticity to a discourse of identity when consensus seems to converge towards a constructivist approach to that identity? I will argue that K-pop is a specific example that shows how “authentic” interpretations of narratives helps us link those different concepts.

Focusing on authenticity helps situate my project in a broader context of Korean Studies and Area Studies by putting it into parallel with notions of cultural essentialism. Moreover, authenticity works as a flexible theoretical concept that coincides with a vision of my project as trans/pluridisciplinary, thereby building a bridge that enables the theoretical conversation between disciplines.

⁴³ Michelle Cho, “Three Ways That BTS and Its Fans Are Redefining Liveness,” *Flow Journal*, May 29, 2018, <http://www.flowjournal.org/2018/05/bts-and-its-fans/>.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies – Is That All There Is?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 89.

Methodology

(1) A Self-Reflection on the Positionality of Being an “Aca-Fan”

As someone whose first step into Korean Studies was motivated by an interest in K-pop, I developed this dissertation project inspired by the experiences and observations that I made over the last fifteen years as a K-pop fan. As a starting point of the discussion regarding the methodology, it is important for me to note the incorporation of my positionality in this project, and to review the definition of what an “aca-fan” (academic fan) is, and how the complexity of such a definition is intrinsically related to my work.

Though the term “aca-fan” started gaining wider exposure in the discourse on K-pop with the exponential rise of academic interest on BTS, it has actually been discussed in fandom studies for the last thirty years. This term describes academics who combine their interest as a fan with their scholarly training to produce studies. Henry Jenkins, a pioneer in the field, was one of the first to position himself at the intersection between the academic sphere and fandom, by theorizing fan behaviors in his 1992 book *Textual Poachers*.⁴⁵ In 2002, Matt Hills’ *Fan Cultures* theorized this tendency by discussing the duality of the term. He distinguishes “scholar-fans,” those who have fan knowledge to the extent that it could be considered scholarly knowledge, from “fan-scholars,” scholars that happen to have fan knowledge. For Hills, both identities go hand in hand, which is why he insists on the hybridity of such concepts. He highlights the power dynamics that are in play between the authority of academia, and the representation of fandom that it could provide.⁴⁶

In relation to the notion of authority between both the fandom and the academic sphere, Cristofari and Guitton, in their analysis of aca-fans and fan communities, see the aca-fan as “a crucial node where knowledge from the community is passed on into the academic

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

⁴⁶ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).

world.”⁴⁷ Finally in a more recent roundtable published on Henry Jenkins’ blog amusingly named “Confessions of an Aca-Fan,” Matt Hills thinks of acafandom as “an ideal, always still to come, rather than finished and outmoded.”⁴⁸ This resonates with Cristofari and Guitton’s argument that, given the variety of positions an academic and a fan can take, it is a difficult task to give it a firm definition.⁴⁹ This utopian vision of defining of the aca-fan’s identity relates in another aspect to the theoretical framework of this project.

As the field of K-pop studies has grown, it has become common for some scholars to identify themselves as “aca-fans.” Attending various conferences where those in attendance were mainly aca-fans, and monitoring discourses of the growing aca-fan internet community on social media, I realized that sometimes a lack of objectivity towards the object of study could be counter-productive. For example, I argue that the discourse produced by some BTS aca-fans is an inherent consequence of the “narrated authenticity” created by their entertainment company. In their work, BTS is often mentioned as the only K-pop group that participates actively in the making of their own music. This argument is repeatedly used to emphasize BTS’ “authenticity” or “uniqueness,” in comparison to other K-pop groups.⁵⁰ However—as we will see in Chapter 3—BTS members have collaborated with producers from all over the world, while there are also other K-pop groups in the industry whose members are involved in the production process. Finally, for those scholars, BTS is often their first gateway into K-pop, and this discourse of “uniqueness,” often shows lack of awareness regarding other K-pop groups.

⁴⁷ Cécile Cristofari and Matthieu J. Guitton, “Aca-Fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (2017): 713–31.

⁴⁸ Henry Jenkins, “Aca-Fandom and Beyond: Jonathan Gray, Matt Hills, and Alisa Perren (Part One) — Pop Junctions,” Confessions of an Aca-Fan (blog), August 29, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/aca-fandom_and_beyond_jonathan.html.

⁴⁹ Cristofari and Guitton, “Aca-Fans and Fan Communities,” 716.

⁵⁰ This phenomenon grew to the extent that the term “BTS exceptionalism” started to make its appearance in the K-pop academic sphere.

To address the anxieties that could come out from imagined subjectivity and being an aca-fan, this paragraph in Matt Hills' introduction of *Fan Cultures*, is particularly relevant.

I'd always felt awkward about studying Madonna and her fans (as if I wasn't one of them). Sometimes I worried that my job as an academic cultural critic disqualified me from real fandom... I also knew that being a Madonna fan in the context of the academy, especially as I was working on Madonna, would for some, disqualify me as a member of the real academy.⁵¹

In the paragraph above, if we replace "Madonna" with "BTS," it would then provide a description of the mental struggles some BTS aca-fans could go through when they write about them. The discussion on divergent understandings of "narrated authenticity" intersects with Hills' discussion of the acafandom. By applying Barbara Smith's concept of "imagined subjectivity" to the academic sphere, Hills explained how the identity of the aca-fan involved an "imagined" distance and positionality.

Regarding positionality, Cristofari and Guitton emphasize that aca-fans would often avoid autoethnographic methods to keep distance from the community. Instead of undermining my positionality as an aca-fan, I would like to embrace it and show that it is possible to identify as a fan, but also be critical and aware of what is happening among the community. After all, in this discussion I also contribute to the phenomenon that I am describing, because I am providing my own interpretations of the dynamics in the K-pop fandom(s).

For this reason, the dissertation includes three short ethnographic vignettes, located between the Introduction and Chapter 1, between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, and between Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. These vignettes are snippets of the fieldwork I conducted in Seoul, South Korea between August 2021 and December 2022, and in Los Angeles between January and August 2023. They all focus on issues that are relevant to the chapters. Written in the first person, they mark the change of voice between the voice of the fan and the voice of the

⁵¹ Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xxviii.

academic, and play with the positionality of the aca-fan by contrasting with the critical tone of the chapters.

(2) Data collection in the Online and Offline Spaces

In their account of fan communities, Cristofari and Guitton resist the established binary between the “real-life” field, popularized in anthropology, and digital ethnography. Instead, they advocate for an interactive approach inclusive of both spaces.⁵² Similarly, in *Shadows in the Field*, Cooley et al. emphasize their conception of cyberspace as “a part of everyday life, not apart from it” and their vision of “virtual fieldwork [as] a means of studying real people.”⁵³ In my dissertation, I follow a similar approach by using ethnographical methods that are applicable to both online and offline spaces.

Internet ethnography is a qualitative method of study which consists of participant observation of the Internet by analyzing content such as Internet community postings or social media conversations. According to Cho Yŏngghan, Internet ethnography helps “through the use of various qualitative methodologies to obtain a large description of cultural practices, an inter-objective understanding of the Internet sphere and knowledge adapted to various situations.”⁵⁴ A majority of the primary sources of this dissertation are based on an archive of tweets compiled during a constant participant observation of Twitter.

Twitter is the only platform that shows direct interactions between fans inside and outside of Korea. Even if it is not broadly used in Korea in comparison to the worldwide

⁵² Cristofari and Guitton, “Aca-Fans and Fan Communities,” 719-720.

⁵³ Timothy J. Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Syed, “Virtual Fieldwork: Three Case Studies,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

⁵⁴ Yŏngghan Cho, “Int’ōnet Minsokchihak Sŏlgyehagi: Kanŭngsŏng-gwa Han’gye [Designing Internet Ethnography: Possibilities and Limits],” in *Midiŏ Munhwa Yŏn ’gu-ūi Chiljŏkpangbŏmnon [The Qualitative Research Methods of Media Studies]*, H. Cho, Y. Kim, K. Lee et al. (Seoul: Culture Look, 2015), 353.

number of users, it still appears in the Korean fandom culture as a fan-oriented platform.⁵⁵

Through Twitter, fans can interact with other fans with similar interests, while keeping updated on the latest news. Another important point is that Twitter allows fans to remain anonymous. Interactions between Korean and international fans that take place online would be rarer and more difficult to observe in an offline setting.

Regarding such a methodology, concerns might arise regarding whether those snippets of self-expression on social media would be relevant enough to be used as primary materials. As Lu Chen explains in his choice of looking at the online sphere to understand Chinese fans' nationalistic narratives, offline activities are rather apolitical and do not display any strong nationalist resentment. If offline fans focus more on their interest as consumers, they are more vocal in their nationalist sentiment online.⁵⁶ Similarly, my previous study of the Korean fandom made me realize that fans were more vocal in their nationalist sentiment on Twitter.⁵⁷ This might be because of the design of the platform, which makes it possible to engage in real time through hashtags, retweets or even quoting tweets from other people and reacting to them. My participant observation of Twitter, based on several issues that are related to the different chapters of this project (see the chapter breakdown below) will lead to the constitution of different archives of tweets that will act as primary sources. Each archive was materialized into a CSV file providing the content of the tweets, and includes details such as the date of posting, the ID of the author, the localization, or even quantitative data such as the number of retweets and likes.

⁵⁵ According to "Leading countries based on number of X (formerly Twitter) users as of April 2024," dataset by Statista Research Department, April 29, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries>.

⁵⁶ Lu Chen, *Chinese Fans of Japanese and Korean Pop Culture: Nationalistic Narratives and International Fandom* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2018), 13, 84.

⁵⁷ Berbiguier and Cho, "Understanding the Korean Fandom of the K-pop."

To supplement the archive of tweets, I conducted a total of five in-depth interviews between August 2021 and December 2022. For Chapters 2 and 4, I interviewed three fan-turned-industry professionals: Kim Do Heon, Oh Seyeon and Mano.⁵⁸ Kim Do Heon (김도헌) is a popular music critic currently running *Zenerate*, an online magazine. He also wrote columns for a variety of popular music media such as *Rolling Stones Korea*, *Billboard Korea* or *Weverse Magazine*. Oh Seyeon (오세연) is a film director who became famous for turning her passion for K-pop and disappointing experience with the solo artist Jung Joon-young in a 2021 documentary called *Fanatic* (성덕, *Sōngdōk*). Mano (마노) is a long-time K-pop fan, working as a writer for *Idology.kr*, a renowned online fanzine providing extensive analysis of idol music. She also performs DJ sets for the “Sad K-pop Party,” an initiative that we will explore in further detail in Chapter 2. For Chapter 3, focused on K-pop producers, I interviewed two Korea-based producers and one LA-based producer. Kebee/키비 (배이삭, Bae Yi-sak) is a Korean rapper, songwriter and record producer who worked with several K-pop idols such as TWICE, Wanna One and AB6IX. Jeon Dasol (전다솔) is a Korean singer-songwriter signed to the publishing company Sol-si-re who worked with artists such as DAY6 and Ong Seongwoo. Alina Smith is a Russian American pop singer, songwriter and co-founder of the producing company LYRE Music Production.

More details on the interview process and the interviewees will be provided throughout the dissertation as needed. Previous experiences with interviewees showed me that in order to get the most out of an interview, it was very important to assert right at the beginning one’s positionality in the project. Inspired by Myoung-Sun Song’s interview process in her book *Hanguk Hip-Hop: Global Rap in South Korea*, each interview was

⁵⁸ In this dissertation, McCune-Reischauer is the default system used for romanization. However, for names of people and celebrities, I decided to prioritize their own/the official spelling.

structured in two parts.⁵⁹ First, I asked broader questions as a way to make the interviewee comfortable and identify the topics they were willing to discuss with me. The second part consisted of a “reaction interview” in which I showed the interviewees snippets from my online observations and asked their views on them. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded.

(3) Critical Discourse Analysis as Method

In parallel with a systematic analysis of the tweets/transcripts that helped me draw preliminary observations, I also used a more qualitative method, inspired by Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).⁶⁰ According to Fairclough, CDA has three main properties: relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary. In this sense, those three properties are also applicable to how I evaluated the discourse that serves as primary sources for my dissertation.

First, my data highlights power dynamics among K-pop fandom(s), so it is relational. For Fairclough, CDA does not only mean an analysis of discourse in itself, but also looks at “dialectical relations between discourse and other objects ... as well as analysis of the ‘internal relations’ of discourse.”⁶¹ When it comes to the dialectical aspect, he discusses a dual character of textual analysis, mentioning interdiscursive analysis—putting different types of discourse together—and linguistic analysis, which would be the repetition of patterns within the discourse. My dataset falls into this category since it is interested in those two characteristics. Moreover, in the first chapter of my thesis dealing with different types of K-pop narratives, a systematic approach to language was crucial in order to find patterns of

⁵⁹ Myoung-Sun Song, *Hanguk Hip Hop: Global Rap in South Korea* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶⁰ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁶¹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 4.

analysis. That systematic approach is also applicable to data collected both in the online and offline sphere. Finally, Fairclough's vision of CDS as a way of "using the dialogue between different disciplines or theories as the source of the theoretical or methodological development of each" resonates with the vision of my project as a conversation between different fields of study.⁶² Interestingly, CDA advocates for "the re-scaling of relations between different scales of social life—the global, the regional, the national and the local" and "include[s] imaginaries for change and for new practices and systems," resonating with the different scales of meanings produced within K-pop fandom(s).⁶³

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1, "K-pop Fandom(s) and K-pop Narratives: Instrumentalizing Authenticity" is a direct application of "narrated authenticity," and explores how narratives of authenticity became essential to ensure K-pop's popularity. It deals with two layers of content. First, K-pop-related content produced by entertainment companies, and how that content is circulated; and second, a broader approach engaging with metatext that deals with K-pop as a phenomenon. Those two layers contribute to two different categories of metatext: first, K-pop-themed novels, webtoons, and movies, building on existing fan fiction and mainly targeted at young adults; and second, metatext that erases the boundaries between K-pop idols and fans as much as possible, thus creating a sense of genuineness inspired by influencer marketing. Ultimately, this chapter highlights how entertainment companies utilize K-pop fans' desires for authenticity as a marketing tool. It also stresses an emerging usage of mental health as a tool to increase the relatability of the K-pop idols. By showing that the desire for authenticity relates to an America-centered understanding of popular culture, it

⁶² Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 6-7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11, 18.

identifies “narrated authenticity” as one of the main reasons behind the mainstream-ization of specific K-pop artists.

Chapter 2, “Becoming, Being, and Beyond: Gender, Nationalism, and Queer (Dis)identifications in K-pop Fandom(s),” evaluates how well the narratives mentioned in Chapter 1 resonate among K-pop fans. It describes how K-pop and all the content related to it convey a set of values and characteristics that encourages the identificatory practices of K-pop fans. Focusing especially on issues of gender performance, gender identity, and sexuality, it explores and compares how those narratives resonate differently given the diversity of cultural background in the K-pop fandom(s). This chapter not only looks at differentiated interpretation inside the K-pop fandom(s) but also brings into the discussion the opinion of the general public (i.e., who do not identify as K-pop fans, but are observants of its growing popularity) as a point of comparison.

Chapter 3, “Mapping the Authenticity of K-pop: The Reality of the Production Network vs. How The Fans Understand It” aims to fill a gap in the scholarship by considering the different assumptions K-pop fans—BTS fans included—have regarding the song production process and the reality of this process. Since BTS gained popularity on a worldwide scale, a controversial and heated debate has emerged: Is BTS really “K-pop”? The question emanates from the coverage of K-pop perpetuating a stigma towards both idols and fans. Using a digital humanities approach, this chapter aims to map K-pop's authenticity through an analysis of a graph database gathering the meta-information of K-pop songs and a network analysis of the relationship between the producers.

Chapter 4, “*Kukppong* and Authenticity: A New Wave of K-nationalism in K-pop Fandom(s),” explores the intersection of nationalism and authenticity within K-pop fandom(s), focusing on the phenomenon of *kukppong*, a term signaling an overwhelmingly positive Korean nationalist discourse. Grounded in a theoretical framework that juxtaposes

transnationality and nationalism in Korean/Area studies, it provides a fresh perspective on the complex dynamics of K-pop fandom. Both Korean and international fans influence and generate their own nationalist discourses, as seen in Korean fans asserting their national identity for legitimacy within the fandom and international fans' concerns about K-pop's “de-Koreanization.” Interestingly, while K-pop fandom is often portrayed as a community defying borders, it is fundamentally rooted in nationalism. Despite not having Korean heritage, international fans perpetuate nationalist discourse by reappropriating Korean fandom culture, thereby creating their own version of *kukppong*.

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Ethnographic Skit

An ATINY and Me

Usually, entering a concert venue in Korea, especially if I am in the reserved seats, is always an awkward moment. Most of the people in the venue are women, and younger than my age range. I always end up sitting down and feeling a little bit embarrassed, almost as if I should not be there. This time, for some reason, it was different. As soon as I entered the venue and sat down, the person next to me waved to me energetically. She greeted me, in Korean. Surprised, I felt like I needed to start the conversation. “Wow, the seats are way better than I thought! We will see very well.” I said. “You're right, I'm so happy! It's my first concert as an ATINY.” She answered. My researcher instinct was immediately activated, and I thought to myself: “This is the best moment to ask questions!” So, I engaged in the conversation. “How long have you been a ATEEZ fan?” I asked. “To be honest, my mom is the one who turned me into an ATINY. I used to be an EXO and TWICE fan, but recently, my mom showed me videos of them, and I became a fan... Oh look, she's over there!” Her mother was sat a few rows from us. They couldn't get a seat together because of the competitive ticket sales process. She returned the same question to me. “I do like ATEEZ a lot, but I don't know them very well. I came here because one of my good friends in France is a fan and told me to go to their concert if I had a chance. She said their performances are really good.” I admitted. She kindly nodded “Yes! ATEEZ is all about performance! Their performances are real.” I decided to ask her about the popularity of the group outside of Korea, as I remarked that a lot of fans in the venue were not from Korea. “You know... aren't Korean fans a bit disappointed that ATEEZ is so popular overseas and doing a lot of concerts there?” She almost cut me off and says: “Oh no! Not at all! It's more of the contrary. We're happy if they are doing well outside of Korea, because they need to get themselves higher.

After all, they've only been around for 4 years.” I am surprised by this answer, because this is not the type of discourse that I use to read online when it comes to other artists. “Maybe it's different because it's ATEEZ?” I started wondering, as more and more people were getting into the venue. I then remarked that there were a lot of Japanese fans in the crowd, so I decided to ask my new friend about it. “It's because of *anime* and Japanese culture! ATEZZ is all about *anime* and their concepts are very similar with Japanese animation.” She kindly explained. I then remembered ATEEZ’s first comeback was pirate themed—maybe a nod the famous Japanese anime *One Piece* that I didn't realize? I then asked her what made her an ATEEZ fan.

She answered, “I was going through hard times when I was in school, and ATEEZ helped me go through those.” Very typical answer, I thought to myself. But when I think more about it, music has always been a way to go through hard moments for a lot of people, no matter the genre. Finally, I told her about how it was new for me to chat with my neighbor like this before a concert. “Usually, people stare at me, and get very shy.” I told her. She laughed and added “Well, it's not very common to see a guy here, and on top of that, a foreigner! I lived overseas, so I understand what it could be.” The lights suddenly went off, the concert was about to start.

Chapter 1

K-pop Fandom(s) and K-pop Narratives: Instrumentalizing Authenticity

Is K-pop a “Celebration of Our Inauthenticity” ?

In the introduction of her book *Authentic TM: the Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Banet-Weiser notes that, “in the US, the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that feels authentic.”¹ Inspired by Raymond Williams' concept of “structure of feeling,” she is interested in how brand culture erases the commercial aspect of their marketing strategies with the performative aspect of authenticity. Banet-Weiser's account on American brand culture and authenticity is useful, but is set in a timeline where influencers were not yet dominating brand culture.

In December 2020, The New Yorker uploaded to their YouTube channel a video aiming at explaining K-pop's popularity in America. One of the interviewees, the philosopher Simon Critchley, said:

“I think average inauthentic existence is where it's at, and pop music is the kind of symphony of that existence.” ... “What I take from Heidegger is to celebrate inauthenticity, to celebrate the messiness and curiosity, ambiguity and chattiness of popular culture. So, K-pop is a kind of wonderful celebration of our inauthenticity.”²

Here, Critchley enthusiastically celebrates K-pop's “inauthenticity,” reasserting the cliché of mainstream media that depicts the K-pop idol as a highly controlled and shaped persona. As an answer to Critchley, Stephanie Choi—an ethnomusicologist—explains how authenticity has been used as a tool of authority in music genres such as rock or hip-hop. She states:

“Authenticity is an argument, not a fact.”

¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 3.

² The New Yorker, “Experts Explain How K-Pop Exploded in America | Expert Perspectives | The New Yorker,” YouTube, December 8, 2020, 18:18-18:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCOG19p08rg&ab_channel=TheNewYorker.

This chapter argues that K-pop, through its narratives of authenticity, strategically responds to the global demand for relatable and genuine personas, particularly catering to the North American audience. The concept of “narrated authenticity” serves as a marketing tool, crafted by entertainment companies to present idols as both approachable and authentic, thereby bridging the gap between the idol and the fan. This instrumentalization of authenticity not only challenges traditional perceptions of K-pop as inauthentic but also positions K-pop idols as influencers within the broader scope of global popular culture.

As BTS began to gain more attention in North America, such as charting on the Billboard 200 and being invited for longer interviews on more mainstream talk shows, a multitude of reasons were offered to “justify” their popularity. The top reasons cited were the significance of storytelling and the group's genuineness or authenticity. BTS debuted in 2013 under the label “hip-hop idols.” While they were not the first group to use hip-hop as a way to stand out from other K-pop groups, it marked their entry into the industry. Straub sees the authentic as “double bind[ed].” According to her, “it sends off signals both of immediacy and mediation, genuineness and performance, spontaneity and staging.”³ In her overview of BTS' pre-debut era, Song explains how the notion of authenticity, which was originally heavily discussed in hip-hop, gradually became a necessity in the K-pop industry. By mentioning the heated debate around BTS' initial label of “hip-hop idols” and how the members had to prove themselves to underground rappers questioning the legitimacy of such categorization, she coined the term “conditional authenticity.”⁴ This term intriguingly embodies a prejudice that views K-pop as inauthentic and manufactured. Another tendency of the discourse about K-pop and BTS is to emphasize each of the group's features as unique, in comparison to other

³ Julia Straub, “Introduction: The Paradoxes of Authenticity,” in *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, ed. Julia Straub (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2012), 10.

⁴ Myoung-Sun Song, *Hanguk Hip Hop: Global Rap in South Korea* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 129.

K-pop groups who have not the same amount of popularity. For example, music critic Yōngdae Kim coined the term “narrative authenticity,” to qualify the strategy that led BTS to their fame status in the United States.⁵ Ironically, by advocating for the authenticity of the way BTS introduced themselves to the US-market, he sets boundaries between BTS and other K-pop groups, reinforcing the prejudice of K-pop as inauthentic.

In her attempt to challenge existing discourse of musical authenticity, Tina K. Ramnarine warns against the inherent power dynamics of assessing authenticity. She uses Hegel to emphasize that “authenticity is linked with the concept of alterity; and especially with constructions of ‘others’ and ‘aliens.’”⁶ By highlighting how concepts such as “hybridity,” build on the acknowledgment that pure culture exists, she makes us wonder about the relevance of using cultural hybridity to unpack the popularity of Korean cultural products such as K-pop. It is important to understand how the celebration of authenticity could reinforce hegemony instead of challenging it. It does not provide a complete picture of how entertainment companies blur the line between manipulation and genuineness by “crafting”—using the same vocabulary as Euro-American media—the authenticity of their artists.

In this chapter, I explain the origins of “narrated authenticity,” the central concept of this dissertation. Starting with an historical and analytical account of the storytelling fabricated by Korean entertainment companies, this chapter explores how narratives of authenticity became essential to ensuring K-pop's popularity. As the audience of K-pop switched from the local to the global, there has been a necessity to produce stories that are more “relatable.” By playing on the diverse connotations of the authentic—sometimes

⁵ Yōngdae Kim, *BTS THE REVIEW: Pangt'an Sonyōndan-ül Ribyuhada [BTS THE REVIEW]* (Seoul: RHK, 2019), 115.

⁶ Tina K. Ramnarine, “Hegel and Sibelius on the Starship Enterprise: Beyond the Frontiers of Musical Authenticity,” in *Critique of Authenticity*, ed. Thomas Claviez, Kornelia Imesch, and Britta Sweers (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020), 120.

understood as “unique,” and other times as synonymous with the genuine—I will inquire how authenticity is constructed through an ensemble of “K-pop narratives,” a term I coin specifically for this chapter. This term encompasses two layers of content. The first layer consists of K-pop related meta-texts, such as novels, webtoons, movies, and musicals built on existing fan-created content, primarily targeting young adults who may—or may not—be familiar with K-pop. The second layer is made up of content produced by entertainment companies and targeting fans directly.

Through the analysis of a database combining both layers of content, this chapter argues that entertainment companies aim to erase the boundaries between K-pop idols and fans, creating a sense of genuineness inspired by the rising monopoly of new media generated by influencer marketing. This analysis of trends in new content will shed light on how entertainment companies instrumentalize authenticity by demonstrating their responsiveness to emerging trends, such as mental health.

Ultimately, through a textual analysis of K-pop narratives, this chapter aims to demonstrate how entertainment companies capitalize on K-pop fans' desire for authenticity as a marketing tool. By revealing that this phenomenon relates to a Euro-American-centered understanding of popular culture, I will identify how this imaginary sense of authenticity is one of the main factors behind the mainstreaming of specific K-pop artists. This chapter positions itself as an effort to diversify a saturated and exoticizing discourse on the Korean Wave. Instead of emphasizing the uniqueness of K-pop fandom(s), it will illustrate how the attraction to authenticity is a global trend not only among K-pop fans but also in popular culture at large.

K-pop related Texts: Between Fiction and Reality

The Origins of Self-Referencing: Dream High

The self-referencing of K-pop as a global phenomenon in media started as early as in 2011 with the drama “Dream High,” produced by JYP Entertainment.⁷ The 16-episode drama broadcast on KBS tells the story of Go Hye-mi, an aspiring opera singer who is forced to find her way in mainstream pop to pay her father's debts. She is accepted into the famous Kirin High School, well-known for fostering the careers of very famous K-pop idols. Set in the second generation of the conventional K-pop chronology—where K-pop is one of the catalyzers of the Korean Wave—the storyline takes into consideration the fact that K-pop is already a global phenomenon. Moreover, the director of Kirin High School is played by none other than Bae Young-joon, the main actor who starred in *Winter Sonata*, one of the strongest symbols of the Korean Wave.⁸ *Dream High* represents the worldwide popularity of K-pop while at the same time contributing to the launching of rising stars. Season 1 of the drama launched the acting careers of actors such as Bae Suzy (aka Suzy of miss A), Kim Soo Hyun, or Lee Ji-eun (aka the solo artist IU). Season 2 was the gateway to acting for Kang So-ra and Park Seo Jun, but it was also a way for JYP Entertainment to soft launch two of their new trainees, Park Jinyoung (formerly known as “JR,” to differentiate him from JYP Entertainment founder and the main producer of the show, who has the same name) and JB (Im Jae-beom). Both trainees later debuted in the K-pop group GOT7.

Cho, in her analysis of *Dream High*, explains how its reliance on the “reversal of the relation between artifice and authenticity” contributed to “a discourse and ideology of Hallyu

⁷ JYP Entertainment was part of the original “big three” entertainment companies, along with SM Entertainment and YG Entertainment. It is still considered one of the biggest entertainment companies producing K-pop idols.

⁸ Michelle Cho, “Domestic Hallyu: K-Pop Metatexts and the Media’s Self-Reflexive Gesture,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2308–31.

success and the national triumph of Korean culture industries.”⁹ This approach is useful in understanding the congratulatory discourse surrounding the Korean Wave and how it is framed as national pride both inside and outside Korea. While we will focus on the nationalist discourse on the Korean Wave as a tool of identification in the next chapter, here, I would like to dig deeper into what Cho calls the “blurring of the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional K-pop discourse” by looking at different types of metatexts.¹⁰

Two Schools of Thought: Fantasy vs. Realistic Storytelling

Echoing the phenomenon described in the introduction of this chapter, there is a tendency to attribute every specificity of K-pop to BTS, because they are arguably the first K-pop group to have accomplished total globalization. This trend emerged mainly because much of the scholarship released on BTS rarely mentions other K-pop groups as points of comparison. BTS was a gateway to K-pop for many people—including scholars—and is often considered as a separate entity from K-pop by its fans.¹¹ As a result, the uniqueness of BTS’ storytelling has often been cited as the reason behind its popularity.¹² Of course, BTS is a relevant example because it fits well into the theoretical framework of transmedia storytelling that has been developed in the scholarship on the Korean Wave over the last twenty years.¹³ However, there are two reasons why we should be cautious when it comes to emphasizing the uniqueness of BTS’ storytelling.

⁹ Cho, “Domestic Hallyu: K-Pop Metatexts and the Media’s Self-Reflexive Gesture,” 2311, 2313.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2325.

¹¹ Jimmyn Parc and Yeogeun Kim, “Analyzing the Reasons for the Global Popularity of BTS: A New Approach from a Business Perspective,” *Journal of International Business and Economy* 21, no. 1 (2020): 15–36.

¹² Courtney Lazore, “Success Story: How Storytelling Contributes to BTS’s Brand,” *Asia Marketing Journal* 22, no. 4 (2021): 47–62.

¹³ Dal Yong Jin, “East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling | Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of Digital Media: East Asian Perspectives — Introduction,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2085–93.

First, BTS actively started using storytelling during their “The Most Beautiful Moments in Life” (화양연화, *Hwayang Yŏnhwa*) era (2015-2016), and then slowly took some distance from it. As explained in their memoir-like interview with the journalist Kang Myeongseok, the “Best Moments in Life,” was an era when BTS members were “in synch,” with the Korean youth.¹⁴ In tandem with this timeline, some critics associate “DNA” as the turning point in BTS' popularity in the United States, a song that was released few years after the end of the “Best Moments in Life” era. Second, storytelling has typically been understood as an important element of every K-pop group. In the K-pop context, the word “storytelling” extends beyond its initial definition of merely “relating a narrative.” The concept of storytelling is intrinsically tied to the “concept” of each comeback. Each new release features a specific concept that tells a unique story, shaping the overall atmosphere and thematic direction of the song and its associated promotions.

Jo and Chung analyzed the storytelling strategies of EXO and BTS, two groups that respectively debuted in 2012 and 2014.¹⁵ Their comparison draws the line between two schools of K-pop storytelling and how adopting the keyword of *seggyegwan* (세계관, “worldview”) became a necessity to stand out in a fiercely competitive K-pop world. EXO is a group that debuted under SM Entertainment in April 2012. Inspired by Frye’s concept of “narratology” as the study of narrative structures and the recurring mythic patterns that shape stories, Jo and Chung explained how EXO was created by taking inspiration from exoplanets—planets existing outside our solar system. According to them, SM Entertainment uses a framework of “romance.” In Frye’s narratology, the “romance” framework refers to a

¹⁴ Myeongseok Kang and BTS, *Beyond the Story: 10-Year Record of BTS*, trans. Anton Hur, Slin Jung, and Clare Richards (London: Macmillan, 2023).

¹⁵ Cho Minsŏn and Ŭnhye Chŏng, “Han'guk Aidol K'ont'ench'ŭ-ŭi T'ŭraensŭmidiŏ Sŭt'orit'elling Yŏn'gu- EXO-wa BTS-rŭl Chungshim-ŭro [A Study on the Transmedia Storytelling of Korean Idol Content: focusing on EXO and BTS],” *Inmunk'ont'ench'ŭ [Humanities Contents]* 52 (2019): 223–46.

specific mode or genre of literature where the hero is superior in degree to other humans and the environment, and the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended. In EXO, each of the members holds a superpower, helping their individual identities as well as their group identity to stand out.¹⁶

This narrative was constructed in a way that justified the fact that EXO was actually the combination of two groups (or “units,” in K-pop lingo). EXO-K—geared towards the Korean market—would sing in Korean, while EXO-M (“M” for Mandarin)—created for the Chinese market—would sing the same songs but in Chinese. Although all EXO-K members were Korean, not all EXO-M members were Chinese. At that time, there were no issues regarding THAAD, and the Chinese audience was still very important for the Korean entertainment industry.¹⁷ Each member of EXO-K had an alter-ego in EXO-M. They were singing in a different language but dancing to the same songs, using complementary superpowers.¹⁸ This narrative was introduced through a series of no less than 23 teasers. It was a very risky move for SM Entertainment. Even though some fans had fun trying to understand the story behind those teasers, many fans were losing their patience.¹⁹ The first teaser was unveiled in December 2011, and the pre-release songs “What is Love” and “History” were only released three months later in March 2012, before the group's official debut in April of the same year.

The storytelling of EXO was the premise of what Lee Soo-man (founder of SM Entertainment) called the SMCU (SM Culture Universe). Although this term was only coined

¹⁶ Cho and Chŏng, “Han'guk Aidol K'ont'en'ch'ŭ-ŭi T'ŭraensŭmidiŏ Sŭt'orit'elling Yŏn'gu,” 229.

¹⁷ The deployment of the US THAAD missile defense system in South Korea in 2016-2017 led China to ban K-pop artists from performing in the country for several years as economic retaliation against Seoul.

¹⁸ For more information about EXO's *Segyegwan*, refer to this link, <https://namu.wiki/w/EXO/%EC%84%B8%EA%B3%84%EA%B4%80>.

¹⁹ Guest, “EXO Planet: Pre-Debut Summary and Potential,” *Seoulbeats*, January 29, 2012, <https://seoulbeats.com/2012/01/exo-planet-pre-debut-summary-and-potential/>.

in 2020 with the debut of the girl band *æspa*, it is part of Lee Soo-man's vision of K-pop as part of “culture technology.” In a keynote speech in 2016, he explained that he wanted K-pop to reflect technological developments by making fans more involved in the production process.²⁰ During the same keynote speech, he played an introductory video that had similar cinematic elements to the EXO debut teaser, to announce SM Entertainment's new project: NCT, Neo Culture Technology.²¹ The group was supposed to have an infinite number of members that would be put in an interactive network of units covering the world and beyond. However, in 2023, the company finally gave up on the infinite expansion of the group, likely as a way to gain some of the fans' sympathy over the difficulties the company was facing.²²

Using the same theory of narratology, Jo and Chung categorized BTS storytelling as “low mimetic.” In Northrop Frye's theory of narrative modes, the “low mimetic” refers to a category of fiction where the protagonist or hero is an ordinary person, on the same level as the reader or audience. The videos released during “The Most Beautiful Moment in Life” era are not music videos *per se* but are meant to provide a supplementary narrative to the succession of songs. For example, the first video “화양연화 on Stage: Prologue” (The Most Beautiful Moment of Life on Stage: Prologue, *Hwayang Yŏnhwa* on Stage: Prologue) uploaded on the official YouTube channel of BigHit Entertainment official on October 1st, 2015, shows the radical change of direction. No more streetwear outfits or low, angry voices. Here, the emphasis is put on softer rhythms and emotional storylines. Although it is clear that

²⁰ SMTOWN, “SMTOWN: New Culture Technology, 2016,” YouTube Video, February 1, 2016, 36:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky5NvWsXnn8.Song&ab_channel=SMTOWN.

²¹ Suk-Young Kim, “Disastrously Creative: K-Pop, Virtual Nation, and the Rebirth of Culture Technology,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 64, no. 1 (2020): 25.

²² SMTOWN, “The Era of SM 3.0, Fans Ask and SM Answers,” YouTube Video, February 24, 2023, 16:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyBXqIkdeFY&ab_channel=SMTOWN.

BTS did not invent storytelling in K-pop, they were indeed the first to successfully use a low mimetic mode of narration.²³

By crafting a storyline between the members that is completely fictional, the production company deliberately blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to leave room for interpretation by the fans, which aligns with Henry Jenkins' seminal theory characterizing fans as "textual poachers," who reinterpret and reimagine the source material they engage with.²⁴ By tracing the origins of fanfictions as we know them—*Star Trek* and the "Trekkies" who were publishing their imaginary narratives in fanzines in the 1960s—he explored how fans identify with their object of interest and provide new interpretations of it.²⁵

Fanfictions are narratives constructed by fans involving characters from existing television shows, movies or other popular culture content. They used to only involve fictional characters, however, a sub-genre of fanfictions, the RPF (Real Person Fiction), started to emerge. Fathallah, in her essay on RPF, emphasized the lack of academic discourse on the sub-genre. Even though it used to be highly controversial, it has flourished with internet culture.²⁶ In an attempt to incorporate RPF into digital literature, she suggests a "multimodal" form of analysis that looks at "the construction of a text, and ... three stories: the primary narrative, the story within the story, and the story about the construction of a story."²⁷ Inspired by the way she gives importance to the "meta-story," I want to use a similar lens to look at K-pop related narratives. Of course, the narratives that I gathered are not all RPF, but they are heavily influenced by it. Even if the text is also important, its existence and the

²³ Cho and Chŏng, "Han'guk Aidol K'ont'ench'ŭ-ŭi T'ŭraensŭmidiŏ Sŭt'orit'elling Yŏn'gu," 233.

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ Judith Fathallah, "Reading Real Person Fiction as Digital Fiction: An Argument for New Perspectives," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 6 (2018): 569.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 569.

context in which it is constructed tell us more about fandom practices and how they influenced fans' sensitivity to authenticity from K-pop artists.

When it comes to K-pop, according to Kwon, the circulation of fanfictions started in the 1990s with the first online communities in South Korea.²⁸ Fans shared not only information and pictures of their favorite artists but also their own narratives. In the same way that Fathallah deplored the lack of scholarship on RPF, it is quite difficult to find extensive academic accounts on K-pop RPF. While there are a few on the ways domestic communities use RPF to play with their sexuality, it is interesting to note that it is challenging to find how the practice of the Korean fandom was transmitted to the international fandom or when exactly fans outside of Korea started writing fanfictions as well.²⁹ Thankfully, Hong's study of K-pop RPF provides some elements of an answer, arguing that platforms such as Tumblr and AO3 (Archive Of Our Own) saw a significant rise in K-pop related fanfictions at the beginning of the 2010s, as a consequence of the debut of groups such as EXO and BTS.³⁰ As of March 2023, there are more than 500,000 unique stories under the keyword “K-pop” on AO3.³¹

The spread of K-pop fanfiction from Korea to an international audience showcases the deep engagement of fans, who not only consume K-pop content but also actively participate in creating their own narratives. It underscores how K-pop fandom(s) construct and negotiate authenticity, as fan-created content becomes an integral part of the K-pop narrative

²⁸ Jungmin Kwon, “Queering Stars: Fan Play and Capital Appropriation in the Age of Digital Media,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 95–108.

²⁹ See, for instance, Jimi Kwōn, *Alp'esŭ x K'wiŏ [RPS Queer]* (P'aju: Owōl-ŭi Pom, 2022).

³⁰ Sooyun Hong, “The Real K-Pop Idols of Fanfiction: Reclaiming ‘Real Person’ Fanfiction as K-Pop Industry Practice” (McGill University, 2020).

³¹ Number found after looking at the tag “K-pop” on the search portal of AO3, <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/K-pop/works>.

ecosystem. By examining this global fan engagement, we can better understand the dynamics of authenticity in K-pop and how fan practices contribute to the genre's international success.

A database of “K-pop Narratives”

Fathallah emphasizes the dichotomy between creating a new narrative and using existing values to identify with the content by arguing that “RPF is conceived as a form of postmodern fiction that is both explicitly concerned with facets of identity and playfully manipulative of them.”³² It is precisely for this reason that I am not actually interested in fanfictions, and instead use the alternative term “K-pop narratives” to refer to the texts I am looking at. In this project, K-pop narratives are texts that were produced in a context of collateral consequences of K-pop's popularity and published on platforms that aim to attract not only fans but also people who are not familiar with the genre.

K-pop narratives is more inclusive term and hint at a practice in which authors use an existing system—the K-pop industry—and its codes to create a parallel world with fictional characters. The success of these narratives lies in their realness and how effectively they help readers immerse themselves in the new universe, satisfying their fantasies. K-pop narratives also incorporate texts created by entertainment companies themselves. These companies conveniently blur some details to avoid backlash while using the acquired popularity of their celebrities to attract fans into consuming the content.

In line with my methodology of fan digital archiving, and in order to quantify the amount of K-pop-related metatexts released in recent years, I created a database of K-pop narratives.³³ Initially, I added them as I came across them. Although my intention was not to compile every single piece of K-pop-related content available, I was able to gain a good grasp

³² Fathallah, “Reading Real Person Fiction as Digital Fiction,” 570.

³³ The database is publicly available on: <https://tinyurl.com/KpopNarrativesDB>.

of some categories without needing additional tools. However, during my archiving process, I realized that there was an overwhelming majority of novels—mostly self-published—available on digital platforms. To better understand the diversity of content available in terms of novels, I used a web scraping tool called “Goodreads Scraper.”³⁴ Goodreads is a social cataloging website and app that allows users to search, rate, review, and discuss books. Thanks to the web scraping tool, I obtained a CSV file with 4,002 entries from Goodreads related to the keyword “K-pop.” However, there were many irrelevant entries, such as stationery items (due to Goodreads' connection with Amazon), or entries that used K-pop in their title to attract a readership without any relevance to the topic. I used OpenRefine to filter the results and was able to retain 109 relevant entries. The total number of items in the database was 149 entries.

Each item in the database includes the title, author, publication date, “format of the narrative,” “label of the narrative,” a synopsis/description, the artist it is related to (if any), and any information I could find related to the entry such as reviews (from Goodreads), news articles or interviews. These metatexts are essential because they can also provide information on content that is not yet available. In my analysis of the database, I will particularly use the categories “format of the narrative” and “label of the narrative.” Explaining my choices of categorization will help us understand the emerging topics in K-pop narratives and the expectations of consumers/producers when it comes to this content.

Genre and Subgenres of *K-pop Narratives*

Through my archiving process, I was able to gather data under the following categories: webtoon, web novel, manhwa, novel, podcast, video game, drama, movies, animation, tv series, musical, and graphic novel. The possibility of establishing such a diverse

³⁴ epctex, “Goodreads Scraper,” Apify, March 26, 2021, <https://apify.com/epctex/goodreads-scraper>.

database serves to reinforce the idea that it is irrelevant to group K-pop, K-drama, K-movies, and other cultural elements under the label of “Hallyu.” In fact, it is possible to find all of the former entities under the single label of “K-pop.” The genre and subgenres of the database itself demonstrates the infinite reach of using the term Hallyu, with the prominence of webtoon, web novels, and graphic novels. Another interesting category of textbook-style narratives, using the popularity of Korean popular culture as a way to teach young Korean readers, was also intriguing, but will be analyzed more deeply in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Although there was a wide diversity of categories, the database showed a majority of Young Adult (YA) novels, either self-published using independent companies or digital platforms such as Kindle Unlimited. The creation of Kindle Unlimited and the ease it provides for authors to self-publish—and even self-print—their stories has contributed to this trend. According to numerous resources guiding freelance writers in their journey to self-publishing, YA literature is one of the twelve most popular fiction genres on Amazon.³⁵

This connection between young adult literature and K-pop is worth exploring. Due to its status as an alternative to “real” literature, YA literature has grown in prominence and relevance, often serving as a means for young readers to explore and understand complex themes such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. By incorporating K-pop into YA literature, authors can tap into the existing popularity of both K-pop and YA literature while also expanding the cultural relevance and impact of their narratives.

³⁵ “What Are the Most Popular Book Genres on Amazon?,” November 18, 2021, <https://self-publishingschool.com/most-popular-book-genres-on-amazon/>.

Recurring Topics in K-pop Narratives

Many YA novels in the database address the K-pop industry as a whole, rather than focusing on a specific group. If they do focus on a specific group, they often use substitute names for the companies and artists, alluding to famous K-pop artists. Under the category “Format of Narrative,” I labeled as “Industry-Fiction” the YA novels that capitalize on the unknown, obscure, “dark” aspects of the K-pop industry. Industry-Fiction YA novels can be divided into two distinct styles.

The first style positions the reader as a spectator of events unfolding in the industry, like in *K-pop Confidential* by Stephan Lee, which tells the story of Candace Park, who dreams of becoming a K-pop star and unexpectedly secures a spot in a top K-pop label's trainee program.³⁶ The story follows her journey through the competitive world of K-pop, where she faces strict rules, intense training, and potential scandal while trying to achieve her dream.

This first style has a sub-category that I term “Insider Industry-Fiction,” which includes one of the texts that inspired this entire project on “K-pop narratives,” a novel written by former K-pop idol Jessica Jung from Girls' Generation. *Shine*—published in September 2020—tells the story of Rachel Kim, a Korean American teenager who becomes a trainee at one of Korea's top K-pop labels, DB Entertainment.³⁷ The novel follows Rachel's journey as she navigates the challenges and pressures of the competitive K-pop industry while trying to achieve her dream of becoming a K-pop star. What sets this story apart from the earlier example is that it is partly inspired by Jessica Jung's own experiences in the K-pop world. When the novel was released, many people suspected Jung had used fiction as a way to settle accounts regarding her “forced departure” from Girls' Generation in 2014. In an

³⁶ Stephan Lee, *K-Pop Confidential* (New York: Point, 2020).

³⁷ Jessica Jung, *Shine* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2020).

interview with TIME magazine, Jung confirms that the book is based on her experience as a trainee, while still incorporating speculative elements. When asked if the main character's love interest, Jason Lee, is a real person, she answers: "Jason may or may not be based on a real person. But that's up to the reader's imagination."³⁸

The second sub-genre of "Industry-Fiction" depicts a relationship between a fan—usually non-Korean—and an artist. Instead of placing the reader as a third party, this style utilizes the narrative of the "fan" becoming a lover, providing readers with a persona to identify and fantasize with. Here, we circle back to the discourse on fanfiction, where one of the sub-genres, called "y/n fiction," positions the reader as the narrator. The fact that most of the time the "non-Korean" main character is a female from a Euro-American country also relates to the discourse on the influence of romantic desire for Korean men on Hallyu tourism.³⁹ K-pop narratives using a fan-artist romance plot can be an addition to what Min Joo Lee refers to as "transnationally emotive intimacy formulated through ... viewers' personal experience of immersing themselves in the mediatized cultures through tourism."⁴⁰

Along with the appeal of romance, there is also a diasporic aspect. Many of these stories feature a Korean American main character. This diasporic dimension serves as a perfect gateway for increased visibility of these YA novels, as some even have the opportunity to be adapted as Netflix original series. For example, the adaptation of *Somewhere Only We Know*, from Maurene Goo's novel depicting a romance between a K-pop star and a journalist in Hong Kong, has been announced.⁴¹

³⁸ Kat Moon, "How K-Pop Star Jessica Jung's Life Inspired Her Novel 'Shine,'" *TIME*, September 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5892708/jessica-jung-shine-interview/>.

³⁹ Min Joo Lee, "Touring the Land of Romance: Transnational Korean Television Drama Consumption from Online Desires to Offline Intimacy," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18, no. 1 (2020): 67–80.

⁴⁰ Lee, "Touring the Land of Romance," 11.

⁴¹ Mia Galuppo, "K-Pop Rom-Com 'Somewhere Only We Know' Set at Netflix (Exclusive)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/k-pop-rom-com-somewhere-only-we-know-set-at-netflix-exclusive-1234972067/>.

In my categorization of narratives, I incorporated a label called “challenging narratives,” shedding light on narratives that try to go against the mainstream discourse on K-pop. An example could be *I'll Be The One*.⁴² In Lyla Lee's debut novel published in June 2020, Skye Shin defies societal expectations to pursue her dream of becoming the first plus-sized K-pop star, entering an internationally televised competition. Amidst intense practices, reality TV drama, and navigating the Korean pop industry's beauty standards, Skye remains determined to win without losing herself. In comparison to fanfiction that is heavily queer-coded, the database I compiled does not really reflect this trend, with only 8 entries categorized (according to their synopsis and reviews) as “queer.” Having queer-related narratives when it comes to K-pop is often considered taboo. Kwon explains how SM Entertainment was one of the first K-pop entertainment companies to engage with fanfictions by organizing a competition inciting fans to write more fanfictions about their artists. She stressed the paradox between the company not allowing fans to submit fan fictions with homoerotic content, while constantly using the queering appeal of their artists in their own content. She argues that “fans territorialize stars by queering them, and the entertainment companies reterritorialize the queering culture.”⁴³

In November 2021, HYBE created a stir among fans by announcing that they were launching an official Wattpad account.⁴⁴ Wattpad is a platform, similar to AO3—introduced earlier in the chapter—where fans can write their own fan fictions and share them. Wattpad has a paywall system, and HYBE would use it to publish their official web novels. In the database, I have labeled this type of content as “Company Metaverse.” In these narratives,

⁴² Lyla Lee, *I'll Be the One* (New York, NY: Katherine Tegen Books, 2020).

⁴³ Kwon, “Queering Stars,” 105.

⁴⁴ “WEBTOON and Wattpad Unveil a Slate of HYBE Original Content Featuring BTS, TXT and ENHYPEN,” wattpad, accessed May 30, 2024, <https://company.wattpad.com/blog/webtoon-and-wattpad-unveil-a-slate-of-hybe-original-content-featuring-bts-txt-and-enhypen>.

where the plot takes some distance from the K-pop industry but are crafted by entertainment companies, main characters are alternative personas of the members of the related group. One example is the webtoon/web novel *7FATES: CHAKHO*, starring members of BTS.⁴⁵ What is interesting is how the title mentions “with BTS,” when the only thing that relates the work to BTS is the soundtrack. Later, other artists of the label, ENHYPEN, LE SSERAFIM, and &TEAM also had their own web novel/webtoon duo, the former uploaded on Wattpad, and the latter on the platform Naver Webtoon. Related to what Kwon was saying about the ambiguous relationship between fan-driven and company-driven content, it is notable to see that in *Chakho*, one of the characters—persona of Jungkook, the youngest member of BTS—was queer-coded. This detail created a debate within the community, between the fans who were not enjoying seeing the company “playing around” with Jungkook's sexuality and trending the hashtag #FreeJungkook.

Even if another part of the fandom tried to claim that it was only a fictional character and that this issue had nothing to do with Jungkook's sexuality, this phenomenon shows the complexity surrounding K-pop narratives. There is a need to see the K-pop idols as fictional characters for the sake of originality and stand out from the multitude of groups that are debuting, but at the same time, fans want them to be “human” and “genuine,” to fight the prejudice of “inauthenticity.” The complexity of K-pop narratives highlights the delicate balance between fiction and reality that both fans and entertainment companies must navigate. While fans appreciate originality and creativity, they also crave genuine connections with their favorite idols. Entertainment companies, on the other hand, face the difficult task of maintaining an authentic image while simultaneously capitalizing on the fictional aspects of their artists' personas.

⁴⁵ “7FATES: CHAKHO,” [www.webtoons.com](https://www.webtoons.com/en/fantasy/7fates-chakho/list?title_no=3784), accessed May 30, 2024, https://www.webtoons.com/en/fantasy/7fates-chakho/list?title_no=3784.

When Speculating is not Enough: Authentic Narratives from K-pop Entertainment Companies

As observed in the previous section, the way entertainment companies approach storytelling in K-pop has evolved. Traditionally, storytelling in K-pop involved fictional elements, such as vampires and fantasy. However, an additional layer intentionally blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to stimulate fans' speculations. New groups face the challenge of creating an appealing storytelling narrative while preserving an approachable image and an authentic persona to assert their popularity.

Stories that delve too deeply into the “romance” genre, where idols are portrayed as extraordinary heroes, can sometimes make it challenging for fans to connect on a personal level. In contrast, stories that employ a “low mimetic” approach, portraying idols as ordinary individuals facing relatable struggles, tend to foster a sense of authenticity. The pressure on companies to constantly find imaginative storytelling ideas often leads them to push the boundaries of creativity. Ultimately, the success of these storytelling efforts in creating an authentic image depends on the balance between the fantastical and the real. Stories that resonate most authentically with fans are those that combine imaginative elements with genuine, relatable aspects of the idols' personalities and experiences. By understanding this balance, companies can better navigate the fine line between crafting compelling narratives and maintaining the authentic personas that fans cherish.

A recurring question that has surfaced repeatedly since the beginning of my project in 2018 was, “Why did BTS succeed in the US market, where so many other K-pop acts failed?” The answer lies in the evolution of storytelling in K-pop and its impact on the industry. This new layer of storytelling seeks to present idols as genuine and approachable, reflecting a shift in focus from the mere necessity of storytelling to the crafting of

authenticity. This approach justifies an idol's popularity while cultivating a relatable image that resonates with fans on a personal level.

Authenticity as Inherently Praised in American Popular Culture

Emily Hund's opus, *The Influencer Industry: the Quest for Authenticity in Social Media*, validates Banet-Weiser's statement that authenticity is a US-coded value, arguing that “the notion that rewards await those who craft an authentic-seeming public image ... has been particularly salient in American entrepreneurial culture.”⁴⁶ She shows how the manufacturing of authenticity is prevalent in media industries, especially during a time when content creators—a term encompassing everyone who is “looking for an audience”—have minimal risks and significant potential benefits by presenting a specific type of genuineness on the internet.⁴⁷ It is this exact strategy that Korean entertainment companies use, motivated by K-pop fans' demand for an “authentic” relationship with K-pop idols. Marwick and boyd coined the term micro-celebrity to explain that every individual who has a social media account potentially has an audience for whom they produce content. According to them, micro-celebrity implies an “intrinsic conflict between self-promotion and the ability to connect with others on a deeply personal or intimate level.”⁴⁸ K-pop idols have to deal with a double-label when it comes to their social media presence—they have to deal the expectations of their fans to behave like a micro-celebrity, without breaking the fantasy of the “narrative” that was created for them by the entertainment companies. In this chapter, I argue that thriving K-pop groups like BTS found a way to use the American audience's attraction to

⁴⁶ Emily Hund, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁸ Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 128.

the concept of authenticity. BTS is one of the first groups to perfectly use the codes of micro-celebrity with their fans. With a well-crafted narrative that shows the different steps that led them to fame, they satisfied their fans' desire for authenticity and realness.⁴⁹

Be real while Being the Person Everyone Wants You to Be

In the context of K-pop fandom(s), numerous studies look at the intimate public and parasocial relationships between idols and their fans. King-O’Riain used the term “corroborated authenticity” to describe how repetitive interactions between K-pop idols and fans through live streaming platforms influence how authentic those interactions are perceived.⁵⁰ Focusing on the presence of BTS on VLIVE—a livestreaming platform created by Naver—she picked emotional connection with the idol as one of the factors that measures authenticity in the K-pop fandom(s).

As we briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, by embracing an underdog narrative and promoting a message of self-love, BTS dispelled doubts about their genuineness and fostered a strong connection with their audience. Indeed, as Song noted, BTS documented a lot of their evolution during their pre-debut days and used to keep the “Bangtan Blog” updated, a blog created in 2012 and uploaded on the Korean platform Tistory.⁵¹ By doing so, they crafted an underdog narrative that will be extremely beneficial to satisfy the craving of authenticity regarding K-pop idols from the North American audience.

In order to explain how BTS were the pioneers in terms of providing behind-the-scenes content, I will explore the category of the blog entitled “LOG.” In this category, each

⁴⁹ Courtney McLaren and Dal Yong Jin, “‘You Can’t Help But Love Them’: BTS, Transcultural Fandom, and Affective Identities,” *Korea Journal* 60, no. 1 (2020): 100–127.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain, “‘They Were Having so Much Fun, so Genuinely...’: K-Pop Fan Online Affect and Corroborated Authenticity,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2020): 1–19.

⁵¹ Song, *Hanguk Hip Hop*, 131.

post is titled the same way, starting with a YYMMDD format and the name of a member.⁵² Each post is simply a video embedded from their personal YouTube channel “Bangtan TV.”⁵³ Each video presents a similar format—it shows one of the members of BTS, talking alone in front of the camera, telling the audience about what happened on that day. What is worth noticing is the way members use the plain form (usually reserved for writing)—as if they were literally writing a diary. This practice of diary writing is common in the Korean education system and is often given as holiday homework by teachers. By updating those short videos and using such a tone, it gives fans the impression that they are reading the idols' personal diaries. As the years passed by and the relevance of blog posts decreased, BTS became more active on VLIVE, logging in very frequently. They would even sometimes log on VLIVE and spend time with their fans after an awards ceremony, rather than attending the after-party. In their analysis of the transcultural fandom of BTS, McLaren and Jin emphasize the importance of the group's “construction of an authentic narrative ... mediated by digital technologies.”⁵⁴ The fact that BTS' rise to fame has been thoroughly documented and is still available up to this day completely aligns with the broader interest in meritocracy and the global appeal of authenticity.

Under BTS' influence, live streaming sessions—once considered a singularity—have slowly become a commonality, or even a necessity for K-pop idols. Sometimes impromptu, other times for specific events—such as birthdays, award ceremonies, or milestones in the artists' careers—livestreams showcase idols in their “ realest” way. However, behind the camera or phone, there are often staff members present to ensure there are no issues. VLIVE once had the monopoly on livestreaming, but with the growing capital of HYBE and their

⁵² I accessed to the older version of the platform <https://btsblog.ibighit.com/> by using the WayBackMachine from the Internet Archive.

⁵³ “BANGTANTV,” YouTube channel, created on December 16, 2012, <http://youtube.com/BANGTANTV>.

⁵⁴ Courtney McLaren and Dal Yong Jin, ““You Can’t Help But Love Them.”” 112.

numerous attempts to dominate the K-pop industry, the platform was sold to the company and rebranded as Weverse LIVE.⁵⁵ While non-HYBE artists have made the switch, others have preferred to use other “mainstream” platforms such as Instagram or YouTube. SM Entertainment also has its own fan-platform called DearU, which encompasses Lysn, an app hosting the messaging service Bubble. By way of a monthly fee, Bubble allows fans to directly talk with their favorite artists. The artists supposedly have access to the messages sent by the fans.⁵⁶

The increasing popularity of behind-the-scenes content, such as trainee life and idols working part-time, is another example of the desire for authenticity. One noteworthy example is Beomhan's TikTok account, Beomhanfm, which showcases his life as a trainee and his interactions with fans. Created in 2020 a little before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the account showcases the life of Beomhan (real name: Harald Wu), a Chinese American trainee who was preparing to debut as a K-pop idol in Korea under Fly Music Entertainment in the pre-debut project M.O.N.T. Using English as a way to appeal to an international audience, he takes us through his daily life, filled with dance, singing, rapping, and Korean lessons. Beomhan takes relatability and approachability to another level when, after gathering enough audience and releasing two pre-debut songs, his company sends him to the US for a K-pop Rookie-Trainee show, from August 2021 to January 2022, along with his co-label trainee Jay Chang.⁵⁷

Beomhan and Jay also held “barista events,” where they would work in bubble tea or coffee shops while handing out autographs to fans. All of this would be documented on

⁵⁵ “Notice on V LIVE Services Unification and Rearrangement,” VLive.tv, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://unified.vlive.tv/notice>.

⁵⁶ Naŭn Yi, “Ch’inmirhwansang-ŭi Chaktong Pangshik: P’aenp’ŭllaetp’om ‘Pöbŭl’ Iyongja-rŭl Chungshim-ŭro [How the Intimacy Fantasy Works],” *Midiŏ, Chendŏ & Munhwa [Media, Gender & Culture]* 37, no. 2 (2022): 157–200.

⁵⁷ Jay Chang is another American trainee of Fly Music Entertainment. Initially a member of the pre-debut group M.O.N.T Arena, also appeared in the Mnet survival shows *Boys Planet* and *Build Up*.

TikTok, where it was interesting to see how fans enjoyed the proximity to the “K-pop idols” (even if they had not yet debuted). Later, in September 2022, Beomhan and Jay even “worked” in a K-pop record shop, giving recommendations to customers about their favorite K-pop albums. Like his seniors, Beomhan often livestreams either on his own TikTok account or on Twitch. In his streams, Beomhan talks about various topics. He sometimes reacts to content made by fans, takes BuzzFeed tests, and provides updates on the progress of his training.

In one of the live streaming sessions, Beomhan passionately shared the story of his journey and his entertainment company, FM Entertainment.⁵⁸ In the beginning of 2023, survival shows were regaining popularity despite previous bribery scandals. FM Entertainment faced numerous challenges, including scams and the departure of trainees. However, the trainees' determination and hard work led them to compete in two popular survival shows at the time, with Bitsaen and Roda participating in *Peak Time* (JTBC) and Jay Chang competing in *Boys Planet* (MNET). Beomhan also shared his personal story of arriving in Korea to pursue his dream of becoming a K-pop idol just as the COVID-19 pandemic began. Despite being offered the opportunity to return to the US, he chose to stay and continue his journey in Korea. This strategic approach, which mirrors BTS' method of engaging fans through social media, creates the impression that Beomhan is easily approachable and relatable. Furthermore, his story emphasizes the theme of meritocracy, resonating with fans who appreciate the narrative of overcoming adversity through hard work and perseverance. By sharing their personal stories and struggles, K-pop idols like Beomhan and BTS are able to foster a sense of authenticity and genuine connection with their fans, which in turn strengthens their fanbase and contributes to their success in the industry. This

⁵⁸ Izabella (@bestieizabella) “(Part 1) The 'hypothetical' story of MONT and FM entertainment @beomhanfm @official_m.o.n.t #beomhan #beomhanfm #beomhanmont #twitch #twitchclips #mont #peaktimejtbtc,” TikTok, March 3, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRvttUaN/>.

trend of nurturing parasocial relationships through livestreams and social media platforms has become increasingly important in the K-pop industry, as fans are drawn to the idea of getting to know their idols on a more personal level, reinforcing the desire for authenticity in the idol-fan relationship.

Mental Health as an Authentic Gateway to Genuineness

As mental health becomes a less taboo subject and influencers continue to be more open about their struggles, it is important to examine how this shift has influenced the K-pop industry. In February 2023, a clip of another of his livestreams that was widely shared on TikTok started raising concerns about Beomhan's mental health. In the long clip, Beomhan is sharing that he went to the psychiatrist with his boss (Fly Music Entertainment's CEO) and that he was going through several mental health-related issues. During the live event, he even casually shared that he had made a suicide attempt a few months before.⁵⁹

In the K-pop narratives database, we can find podcasts from Dive Studios, a podcast production company created by Brian Nam, brother of the K-pop artist Eric Nam. This project started with Eric's idea to host a podcast about K-pop, called *K-pop Daebak*. Slowly, the project grew, and more podcasts were added, which led to the creation of Dive Studios as an entire production company. Dive Studios' main objective, according to its tagline is “positively impacting culture and society through authentic storytelling and story sharing.”⁶⁰ Dive Studios is the combination of two trends. First, there has been considerable discussion concerning the fact that content creators have been using podcasts more and more in order to feel closer to their audience, and buy into this attraction for relatability developed in this

⁵⁹ Raven (@ravendeskings) “He was so real for this love you #beomhan #mont #fyp,” TikTok, March 1, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@ravendeskings/video/7205771971072675115?_r=1&_t=8aIrEg1a7xK/.

⁶⁰ “Dive Studios,” Official Website, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://www.divestudios.io/>.

chapter.⁶¹ In a sarcastic video, the French influencer Louis Cznv mentions that now, all YouTubers have their own podcast, where they talk about “imaginary mental health problems.”⁶² Jokingly mentioning the recurring appearance of topics such as “the imposter syndrome,” he explains how mental health can be leveraged as a tool for appearing more relatable, with some influencers potentially exploiting the topic to justify their success or earn sympathy from their audience. Second, the use of the word “authentic storytelling” on Dive Studios' homepage shows that there has been a rise of interest in authenticity—and reflects the growth of influencer marketing.

While increased openness around mental health struggles can foster connection and destigmatization, there are also concerns about the commodification and strategic leveraging of mental health narratives by influencers and content creators. The rise of “authentic storytelling” podcasts and influencers candidly discussing issues like imposter syndrome points to a trend of monetizing relatability and personal vulnerability. As the K-pop industry follows this trajectory, it raises questions about whether mental health disclosures by idols are primarily motivated by genuine advocacy versus being calculated persona management tactics to cultivate parasocial relationships with fans. The blurring of sincerity and strategy in this realm warrants critical examination of how mental health narratives circulate as forms of microcelebrity self-branding and emotional labor within the attention economies of social media. Nuanced perspectives are needed to navigate the potential upsides of destigmatization while remaining attuned to the commercialization of personal struggles as marketing ploys.

One of the first podcasts of Dive Studios, *Get Real*, was launched in 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It stars three people who have been, or are still, active in

⁶¹ Produit Internet, “Quand les youtubeurs ne sont plus accessibles | Le culte toxique de l’authenticité,” YouTube Video, August 5, 2022, 15:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dGzE8YWo2w&ab_channel=ProduitInternet.

⁶² Louis Cznv, “Podcasts et santé mentale, les nouvelles passions des influenceurs...,” YouTube Video, February 1, 2023, 20:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3t347J4-SG0&ab_channel=LouisCznv.

the K-pop industry: Ashley Choi (former member of the girls' band Ladies' Code), Matthew Kim (also known as BM, member of KARD), and Peniel Shin (member of the boys' band BTOB). *Get Real* was first promoted as a podcast that was giving an opportunity for the listener to dive into the behind-the-scenes of the K-pop industry. Some episodes do align with this narrative goal, as some discuss life in the dorms or what is happening when idols are getting hair and makeup. However, as the episodes go by, the main tagline of the podcast has started to be “get real with our thoughts and all things about life.”⁶³

This shift in the podcast's focus towards discussing personal experiences, including mental health struggles, reflects the changing landscape of the K-pop industry and its relationship with authenticity. By opening up about their own challenges and providing a platform for authentic storytelling, K-pop idols and influencers can connect with their audience on a deeper level, further solidifying the bond between idols and fans. This evolution towards more genuine and relatable content shows the increasing demand for authenticity.

Many Dive Studios podcasts, as well as numerous famous podcasts in general, have been sponsored by BetterHelp. BetterHelp is a mental health platform created in 2013 with the aim of providing alternatives to in-office therapy, thereby making therapy more accessible to people. It was acquired in 2015 by Teladoc, a telehealth company. The association between BetterHelp and podcasts, particularly those on Dive Studios, highlights the growing prominence of mental health discussions in both influencer marketing and broader society. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified concerns around mental health, with many individuals experiencing increased stress, anxiety, and isolation due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. As a result, podcasts have become a popular medium for

⁶³ DIVE Studios, “pH-1 on Living a Solo Life | GET REAL S3 Ep. #30,” YouTube Video, March 16, 2023, 50:38, https://youtu.be/d_7FjZXjRPE.

addressing mental health issues and providing support to those in need. The partnership between BetterHelp and podcast platforms like Dive Studios reflects this trend, emphasizing the importance of mental health in contemporary conversations and the role of influencers in shaping these discussions. However, it is important to note that there has been a growing discourse online about the potential dangers of platforms like BetterHelp, even as they have contributed to the mainstreaming of therapy and increased accessibility for many individuals. These concerns particularly focus on the way BetterHelp disposes of their users' data and the complexity of having therapy sessions that could occur in all types of communication.⁶⁴

In 2021, Dive Studios launched their own mental health platform, called Mindset. At first, Mindset provided paid podcasts, mainly from K-pop celebrities, but not exclusively. As the app developed and gained followers' interest, by 2023, it was marketed as “a daily self-care app” that now offers an annual subscription for \$15.99/month, along with “Celebrity Mindsets” additional services such as “AI mental health check-ins,” expert-led advice, and daily reflections/check-ins.⁶⁵ The “Celebrity Mindsets” category provides a catalog of paid podcasts featuring a variety of artists. Some of them are K-pop idols (for example, Jay B from GOT7, Soyeon from G(I)-DLE), but some are outside of this scope, like actor Paul Wesley or singer-songwriter Maggie Lindemann. Each collection offers the same type of content, a story in different episodes, each focusing on a different theme. For K-pop idols, recurring themes include “the importance of the group for them,” “working out and its effects on mental health,” and “dealing with negative thoughts and negative feedback.” The collection episodes are accompanied by “boosters,” which are motivational short audio clips intended to help listeners gain a boost of motivation depending on the mental health issues

⁶⁴ “FTC says online counseling service BetterHelp pushed people into handing over health information – and broke its privacy promises,” Federal Trade Commission, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/blog/2023/03/ftc-says-online-counseling-service-betterhelp-pushed-people-handing-over-health-information-broke>.

⁶⁵ “Mindset,” Official Website, accessed April 10, 2023, <http://getmindset.com>.

they are dealing with. Through “authentic storytelling and story sharing,” Mindset aims to present K-pop artists as relatable individuals who also experience mental health challenges, further reinforcing the idea that idols are “just like us” and fostering a deeper connection between artists and fans.

The examples of Beomhan's livestream and the rise of “authentic storytelling” podcasts from companies like Dive Studios illustrate a broader shift in the K-pop industry toward cultivating a sense of realness and relatability. By openly discussing personal struggles, particularly around mental health, idols are able to forge deeper parasocial connections with fans who view them as authentic, vulnerable human beings rather than mere manufactured celebrity personas. However, this trend toward “getting real” also raises critical questions about the potential commodification of mental health narratives and the strategic leveraging of vulnerability as a marketing tool within attention economies. As K-pop content moves away from the traditional constraints of highly produced television toward more candid social media and podcast formats, there are increasing tensions around where the boundaries lie between genuine self-disclosure and calculated self-branding tactics aimed at monetizing relatability. The following examples from Dive Studios' mental health-focused podcasts and platforms highlight how this dynamic is actively playing out and evolving within the K-pop sphere.

Taking Distance from Television: The Key to Authenticity?

By presenting idols as genuine, approachable individuals who share similar struggles with their fans, this new storytelling approach has successfully deepened the bond between K-pop artists and their audience. As idols and influencers adopt more transparent and relatable personas, fans feel a stronger connection, leading to increased engagement and loyalty.

Interestingly, even during a two-to-three-year period that could have impacted the connection between artists and their fans, the K-pop entertainment industry found ways to foster this connection rather than losing it. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the migration of fansign events—where idols sign albums and engage with fans—to an online format. This change in dynamics has enabled international fans to participate and share their “genuine” interactions with idols on platforms like TikTok. Moments where idols show less “scripted” behavior have been especially popular, with fans enjoying instances of idols appearing confused, irritated, or even cursing, as shows the incredibly high number of views under the section “kpop idol swearing.”⁶⁶ These less expected behaviors from K-pop idols, who are trained from their early days to always be aware of their surroundings, help highlight this shift. Fans want K-pop idols to show their “true” side.

K-pop entertainment companies must find the perfect balance so that their artists can express themselves in a way that is not detrimental to their reputation. Recently, the growing popularity of YouTube variety shows has offered less restrictive environments for idols to express themselves. These shows allow idols to “break” their image while still adhering to certain boundaries. In the past, it was common for K-pop idols to appear on TV in “scripted” variety shows; however, K-pop entertainment companies have slowly started to interact more with content creators as a way to disrupt the “ungenuine” image of the content. Alongside K-pop idols interacting more with influencers, we also see the resurgence of *chajak k'ont'ench'ŭ* (자작 콘텐츠, Self-produced content), which is created directly by the entertainment companies and uploaded mostly on YouTube. Once again, BTS are pioneers in terms of *chajak k'ont'ench'ŭ*, leading the way for other K-pop groups to follow suit.

⁶⁶ “kpop idols swearing,” TikTok, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/kpop-idols-swearing>. 638.2 million views as of April 2023.

As BTS gained increasing popularity, their presence on Korean television decreased, while their appearances on talk shows and other programs in the US increased. Instead of relying on traditional media outlets in Korea, the group focused on creating and distributing content through their own channels. Their YouTube channel, for instance, features a wealth of BTS-related content, allowing fans to stay connected and engaged with the group. One prime example is their show, Run BTS, which initially aired exclusively on VLIVE but has since expanded to Weverse and YouTube. With over 150 episodes, Run BTS offers fans an abundance of content and showcases the group's dedication to connecting with their audience through their own platforms. This strategic shift in content distribution not only allows BTS to maintain a strong presence in the media landscape but also gives them greater control over their brand and narrative.

This shift not only coincides with a desire to control the narrative but also with the declining relevance of TV and the fact that younger generations, who are more likely to be interested in K-pop, do not engage with television anymore. Even though Kim mentions the importance of TV programs and their significant role in the 90-00s, these programs now have very low ratings.⁶⁷ In Korea, 예능 (*yenŭng*, variety shows) have faced a total shift from TV to mobile platforms, with the emergence of YouTube variety shows.⁶⁸ K-pop entertainment companies fully understood this and now aim to make their artists appear on YouTube variety shows rather than the “traditional” ones broadcasted on TV.

Among these YouTube variety shows, many of them use alcohol as a way to inhibit the discourse. Although this trend started with a show broadcasted on the TV network TvN, it

⁶⁷ Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 57-59.

⁶⁸ Nayŏn Kim, Jehŭi Im, Subin Hwang, and Chipyo Kim, “Yut'yubŭ Wep Yenŭng-ŭi Sŏnggwa Chip'yo Yŏn'gu [A Study on Performance Metrics of YouTube Web Variety Shows],” *2022-nyŏn Taehansanŏpkonghak'oe Ch'ugyehaksultaehoe [2022 Korean Association of Industrial Business Administration Fall Conference]* (2022): 3161-3172.

developed further on YouTube through the form of *sul mökbang* (술 먹방, alcohol mukbang). In these videos, idols who used to be told to maintain a “clean” image are shown drinking. One of the pioneers in the genre was when rapper Lee Youngji started her channel *Ch'arin'gõn Chwippul-to Öpchiman* (차린거 쥐뿔도 없지만, It's not that much...). Even though she had a variety of different celebrities on her show, her young age (21) and her status as a representation of the MZ Generation make her the perfect interviewer for a K-pop idol. I will examine the influence of the “performance of authenticity” in artists' behavior through a close content analysis of one of the episodes of the show featuring BTS' oldest member Jin (real name: Kim Seokjin) and uploaded on YouTube on October 20, 2022.⁶⁹

At the beginning of the episode, Youngji announces that this is the last episode of the season, and to celebrate, they are welcoming a “superstar”—none other than BTS' Jin. She has prepared a bottle of 58-proof Chinese alcohol for the occasion. Upon arrival, Jin appears uncomfortable and struggles to match Youngji's energy, who has already had two shots of the strong alcohol. He explains that this is his first “outside” content in 5-6 years and that he feels embarrassed. Youngji finds the situation amusing, believing she should be the one feeling more embarrassed.

After a few shots of alcohol, Jin starts to feel more at ease and opens up. An interesting moment occurs when the topic of authenticity is brought up.

Lee Youngji - As I looked you up more, I really felt that you are a genuine person.

Jin - What do you mean by “genuine”?

Lee Youngji - A person who shows genuine sincerity. Do I need more explanation?

Jin - No need. I guess it's just obvious just from my appearance.

Lee Youngji - I guess so, but aside from your beautiful appearance, you are a very sincere person. I feel that you are pouring your everything into this work.

⁶⁹ 차린건 쥐뿔도 없지만 [It's not that much...], “[SUB]속보 방탄 진, 얼굴 자체가 진수성찬 ✨ 차취뿔 근본 잃어버려... [차린건 쥐뿔도 없지만] EP.13 #이영지 #진 (ENG/JPN/SPA) [It's not that much... EP 13 #LeeYoungJi #Jin],” YouTube Video, October 20, 2022, 32:49, <https://youtu.be/wlmKkCKu7H4>.

Jin - That's true, because of this work, my relationships are just all over the place, they are ruined now. (15:48 - 16:18)⁷⁰

Youngji compliments Jin's authenticity, stating that his behavior is genuine and seems like his true self. Paradoxically, just a few minutes—and a few more shots—later, Jin mentions that he sometimes refrains from appearing on too many shows because he is afraid of showing fans behaviors they might not like.

Jin - “When people give me attention, I come to think there's something to lose. Because showing a lot of different sides of me could be what people would want, but I also think it might show a side of me they don't want to see. ... I'd like to avoid showing my weaknesses as much as possible. Because as an otaku who likes many things such as games, I empathize with that and only want to show the appearance that fans want to see. For example, I don't want to show things like bad language on a broadcast or such appearances, and I don't want to show the fans things they probably wouldn't like.”
(27:37 - 28:29)⁷¹

Here, it seems that Jin is explaining indirectly the reason why BTS has been so absent of all Korean variety shows in comparison to other K-pop acts. He then offers a refreshing perspective on BTS' success, one that has not been mentioned before: he believes that what makes BTS special is that no one tries to stand out, and everyone knows how to “concede” space to let the other shine.

⁷⁰ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Dialogue in Korean:

이영지 - 서칭을 하면서 하면서 느낄수록 정말 진정성 있는 사람이라는 걸 저는 많이 느꼈어요.

진 - 뭐가 진정성

이영지 - 사람이 진정성이 있다. 뭐 이런 설명이 필요한가요?

진 - 필요 없죠. 생긴 것부터 그냥 드러나잖아요.

이영지 - 그런가 생긴 건 너무 수려하게 생기셨지만 그거랑 별개로 좀 되게 사람이 진정성 있다. 이 일에 당신의 모든 것을 쏟고 있다라는 느낌을

진 - 그건 맞지 내가 이 일 때문에 진짜 인간관계도 그냥 다 제가 다 받았네 이거 지금 박살 났어 지금...

⁷¹ Transcription in Korean: 진 - 사람이 관심을 주면은 이제 저는 그렇게 생각해요. 잃을 게 있다고 생각해요. 왜냐하면 사람들이 이제 나를 보고 싶어 한다고 해서 내가 많은 것들을 보여주면은 사람들이 보고 싶어 하는 느낌을 줄 수도 있지만 보기 싫은 모습도 보여준다고 생각해요. ... 저의 단점들은 최대한 보여주고 싶지 않아요. 왜냐하면 저도 게임이나 이런 거 많은 것들을 좋아하는 이제 오타쿠로서 이제 저도 그거에 감정 이입을 해서 팬들이 보고 싶어 하는 모습만 보여주고 싶다.라는 마인드가 있어서 예를 들면 제가 방송에서 나쁜 말을 한다거나 이런 모습들은 보여주고 싶지 않고 팬들한테는 좋아하지 않을 법한 모습들은 별로 보여주고 싶지 않아하죠.

Jin - This is really important. One of the reasons why we are doing well is that even though the members have things they want, we concede to each other. If someone thinks they're better and only behave the way they want, it's very difficult to maintain the team. However, I think the team is maintained because we don't cross the line and concede to each other as members. (28:36 - 29:06)⁷²

In this excerpt, he shows how members are conscious of the consequences their personal behavior could cause to the team if “a bad side of them” had to be revealed. It is fascinating to observe Jin practically say the same thing and its opposite in the same video, expressing fear of showing “faces of himself” that would not please fans, while those same fans often use the rhetoric of genuineness and authenticity when talking about BTS.

Conclusion: “Let's Not Switch the Narrative.”

With the rise of content that showcases the “genuineness” of idols, along with fans increasingly demanding this type of content, we have also seen the increasing prevalence of “raw” footage on entertainment companies’ YouTube channels, for example, SM Entertainment, with their “UnCut” series. As the title of the series suggests, these videos have very little editing: no sound effects, just cuts of different moments. They simply show the artists working: recording in the studio, rehearsing performances and practicing their dance moves, but also during meetings where they discover the songs for the first time. Ironically, even if this type of content is supposed to provide “authentic” glimpses into the lives of the idols, these videos are often clipped and vided by the fans. According to Oh, vidding consists of “creat[ing] new narratives and editing ... original sources.”⁷³ For example, in one of the clips showing the members of NCT DREAM listening to the guide track of their

⁷² Transcription in Korean: 진 - 이게 되게 중요하거든요. 저희가 잘 나가는 이유 중 하나가 멤버들끼리 원하는 것들이 있어도 서로 양보해서 누가 자기가 잘 난다고 생각해가지고 자기가 한다 원하는 걸로만 이제 행동을 하면 팀 유지가 굉장히 힘들거든요. 근데 서로 선을 안 넘고 서로 서로가 멤버들한테 양보를 해줘서 팀 유지가 된다고 저는 생각해요.

⁷³ Chuyun Oh, “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: The Androgynous Male Dancing Body and Western Female Fandom,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 68-69.

upcoming single Beatbox, fans have taken the reaction of member Jisung, who seemed focused, out of context and deduced that his facial expression showed that he didn't like the song.⁷⁴

Even though it is rare to find instances of this, some idols—especially those fluent in English—have started to be vocal about this issue and have asked fans to refrain from doing so. In a clip featuring one member of P1Harmony, Keeho (real name: Yoon Kee Ho, also known as Stephen Yoon), he scolds fans because they keep sharing and laughing about a clip of him from a VLIVE streaming where, while trying to show the stage of an upcoming fan-meeting, he suddenly rapped a line of a Nicki Minaj song.⁷⁵ He lamented how, after all, fans have been more interested in him suddenly performing this action rather than the performances that he prepared with his groupmates.

“I regret saying that so much. ... The reason why I regret saying it is because I hate when someone tries to be funny, you know. When someone intentionally tries to be funny just how to have like a ‘viral’ moment ... not shading anyone because I don't know who does that, but I'm scared that people might think that I would be like that.”⁷⁶

Keeho, during a VLIVE (emphasis added)

What is truly interesting here is how Keeho is very cautious with the language he uses while expressing his thoughts and dislikes about this practice of taking excerpts from videos out of context. The fact that he is afraid of being perceived as someone “who intentionally tries to be funny just to have a ‘viral’ moment” but instead wants to be taken seriously for his performance underscores the complexity and irony that surrounds the discourse of authenticity in K-pop. Of course, the reason Keeho is so cautious in the way

⁷⁴ NCT DREAM, “[Un Cut] Take #4 | 'Beatbox' Recording Behind the Scene,” YouTube Video, June 27, 2022, 30:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WC95NpTYX4>.

⁷⁵ mya (@mya.pop) “lets go to the beach #p1harmony #fanmeeting #kpop #keeho #keehoyoon #myapop #fyp シ #bts #ateez #straykids #choitaeyang #theop1harmony #vlive,” TikTok, July 17, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mya.pop/video/6986140187961134341>.

⁷⁶ Alexander (@alexanderbinh) “He made several points! #p1harmony #kpopfyp #keeho #fyp #kpop #foryou #кпоп #parati #foryoupage,” TikTok, July 22, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRvWjSHo/>.

he speaks is that he knows that, while it might convey a facet of his personality that is not entirely accurate, it still helps the group gain recognition and visibility for their careers.

Through this chapter, we demonstrated that no matter how hard K-pop entertainment companies try to make more relatable and genuine content, the evaluation of its authenticity simply rests in the hands of the fans, whose interpretation prevails. In the next chapter, we will dive deeper in this phenomenon by demonstrating how attempts to engage with K-pop-related content reflect a desire for fans to identify or (dis)identify with K-pop.

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Ethnographic Skit

My Söngdök Moment

The word 성덕 (söngdök) comes from 성공하다 (söngkonghada, to succeed) and 덕후 (dökhū, a “stan” / a fan) and refers to a fan that has achieved the ultimate assignment of every K-pop fan, being noticed by their favorite idol.

It was a normal Monday afternoon. I was excited because the next day, I was about to go see NCT DREAM, one of my favorite K-pop groups. They were having a concert in Anaheim. Before that, I had to do some work to make up for the day I would miss. After doing some translations, I was mindlessly scrolling on Twitter, when I saw the following tweet on my timeline.

#NCTDREAM #NCTDreaminUS
#starstruck #스타스트럭
see you here at the santa monica beach !!! we serve addiction
You wanna join us?
@NCTsmtown_DREAM – April 17, 2023

My first thought was “well that's nice, but I have to write this thesis.” I shared the tweet with one of my fellow colleagues with whom I was going to the concert the next day. They immediately scolded me. “Hey, you're studying K-pop and you're not even going to go take a look?” As soon as I read their message, I was already in an Uber en route to Santa Monica. I didn't even think of changing my outfit—I was wearing workout clothes—but at least, I packed my fanny pack with my NCT light stick in it!¹ On the road to Santa Monica, I was weirdly feeling anxious. Almost as if I was regretting this impulsive decision. Once I was dropped off, I saw some fans walking in direction to the Rental shop indicated by the NCT DREAM members in their tweet. Some of them were holding their light stick: I knew I was in the right place.

¹ A light stick is—as the name may suggest—a portable lamp that symbolizes appurtenance to a specific K-pop fandom. With technological improvements, most of them now have a Bluetooth function that helps the light stick sync with the concert venue light system. Before light sticks, balloons of different colors were used.

As soon as I arrived, I saw the food truck from the tweet. There were a lot of staff members, and fans were starting to make a line in front of a fence that delimited the boundaries of the shooting set. The food truck appeared to be part of it. As I was starting to chat with other fans—they were as clueless as I was—two staff members were walking around. We tried to ask them what was happening, if there was a line where we were supposed to wait, but they kept giving mixed signals. I was already feeling content, as we already got to see the members who came out briefly to take pictures in front of the food truck.

Ten minutes later, someone came and told us, “If you want to try something, you should go over there. Good luck!” He was pointing to a waiting area with a sign that simply said “ENTRANCE.” Even though we did not completely understand what he meant by “try something,” we listened to him and moved with a handful of other fans. As we were waiting, we were getting to know each other. I was waiting with two sisters who had called-in sick of their work to be able to go to California for the concert. They had been awake since 2AM, as they had come from New Jersey on a red-eye flight. The other person waiting with me was on a business trip to LA, when she suddenly saw the tweet. She was worried because she had an important meeting at 5PM, and it was already 3:45PM.

After a few minutes, a security guard came up to us and asked if we had “big cameras.” We reassured him and he let us go through. We were now inside the waiting area, pass the entrance sign. Another staff member came up to us and asked if we consented to be filmed. Seeing our clueless faces, she explained further: “You are going to play games with the members of NCT DREAM. If you win, you can stay in the game and you can get a *kōpbap*, (컵밥, a bowl of rice with various toppings) from them as a gift. If you lose, you will have to leave.” In a normal setting, I would have completely freaked out and bailed out from this crazy idea. However, something inside of me was just telling me that it would be worth it

to stick it out, fighting with the part of my inner self which was telling me to leave immediately. My companion on a business trip was still anxious. “Do you know when it will end? I have a meeting at 5.” The staff member answered, “well, we’re supposed to shoot for two hours, but...” As we were advancing in the waiting area, another staff member was going back and forth through us, making sure we did not have any “big cameras.” One of them saw my light stick and jokingly said “wow, you came prepared! That’s awesome.” Her work was actually to make sure there were not any *sasaeng* (사생) in the crowd.

A *sasaeng* is a person who follows their favorite idol everywhere, to the extent that they violate their private life—hence the use of the word *sasaeng* to allude to 사생활 (*sasaenghwal*), the Korean word for “private life.”² There were *sasaeng* rumored to be among the fan waiting to play games with NCT DREAM, and one of the (many) tasks of the staff members was to find them and kick them out of the line.

The wait was finally over, and we were directed to sit on puzzle mat pieces placed on the sand, while staff and shooting crew members were making final adjustments. A translator started to explain what was going to happen. He was basically saying the same thing as the staff member who greeted us in the waiting area. We were also strictly prohibited from taking any pictures or video with our phones. If we did not cooperate, we would be asked to leave.

The members came out and the atmosphere was very amusing. Everyone was stressed but also excited to see their idol. With the help of the translator, the members started explaining the first game to us. Here, the lack of preparation and the difficulty of communication between the different staff teams definitely stood out, and it took a few minutes for everyone to be on the same page. We understood that this first game would

² A *Sasaeng* used to be referred as a “*sasaeng* fan,” but the word fan has been removed to separate them from “real fans.”

require us to dance, and when the music stopped, we had to strike a pose based on a keyword related to a member of the group.

If our pose was the same as the designated member, we would win. In the other case, we would have to leave the game area. At first, I was OK with this game, because I thought that everyone would play at the same time. However, a few seconds after, we understood that NCT members would pick people in our group to play in front of everyone. I was a bit bummed—it didn't seem like something I would usually enjoy. I was joking with the people behind me, saying that NCT DREAM was really playing with our social anxiety. The first member started to pick five people in the crowd. I was avoiding making eye contact. I wasn't ready yet. At first, it seemed like members had some time to kill, so they were asking the people to introduce themselves, which made the whole process less stressful. As we were having a good time looking at people dancing with NCT and getting handed out *kōpbap* as a reward for their dancing, I was starting to think about my strategy. Should I try to play this game? Would there be other games? If yes, what kind of games would they be? My waiting buddy, who had her meeting at 5PM, did not think that much. She was already far far away, having interacted with her idol and with her *kōpbap* secured. I decided that I would just try to come out when it was my favorite member's turn to pick people in the crowd.

Mark—my favorite member—stood up from his bar stool and started asking for people to come out. I raised my light stick right away. He pointed at somewhere in my direction, but I wasn't sure. But then, our eyes met as he was saying “you! yes, you—with the light stick,” with a smile. Along with four other fans, we were walking towards the members, and got to say hi to them. This seemed unreal—I was literally standing next to my favorite K-pop idol of the moment, along with one of my favorite K-pop bands, in front of a crowd of other fans... and dozens of cameras. Since time was already running out, we did not have the luxury of extended introductions. Mark just told us to have fun and enjoy the moment. As the

music started, we all began to dance awkwardly. Someone next to me also had their light stick, so we started making some movements with it. Mark even joined us and did some moves with us. The music stopped and the keyword was “Spiderman.” There has been a private joke among NCT fans that Mark was secretly Spiderman, because of his good reflexes. We all did the famous pose, and Mark started making fun of us because it wasn't very accurate. To be honest, I had already forgotten that we had to do a pose when the music stopped. After thinking of it for half a second, Mark decided that we all won the game, and handed each of us a small bag with the famous *kōpbap*, along with some snacks. We exited the game zone and said goodbye and thank you to the staff members. In the waiting area, there were dozens of people in line, hoping to get a chance to also play the game. I took a few steps aside and tried to process what was happening to me... I had just my moment. My *sōngdōk* moment, as they say.

Chapter 2

Becoming, Being, and Beyond: Gender, Nationalism, and Queer (Dis)identifications in K-pop Fandom(s)

Introduction

Oh Seyeon was a fervent fan of Jung Joon-young, a solo artist who gained fame through Superstar K, Korea's equivalent of American Idol. His rivalry with another contestant, Roy Kim—who ended up winning—served as the season's central narrative. Initially drawn to J (the name she gives him now) as a middle school student, Seyeon found his authenticity refreshing in the world of K-pop idols. Despite being a *chibangrŏ* (지방러, a fan from the countryside) as a Busan-based fan, Seyeon committed herself to attending as many events as possible such as fan meetings and concerts to see J in person whenever she could. Her devotion led to an appearance on a variety show, where she attributed her outstanding academic achievements to J's positive influence. Her mom, initially concerned about her *tŏkchil* (덕질, fan activities), had permitted her to engage in fandom so long as she maintained strong academic performance. During that episode of *Star Gazing* (별바라기, *pyŏlbaragi*) broadcasted in 2014, Seyeon was able to talk directly to J and tell him how strong of a positive influence he gave her. Seyeon was having her *sŏngdŏk* moment.

However, the 2019 Burning Sun scandal drastically influenced her journey as a fan. Lee Seunghyun known as SEUNGRI from the renowned K-pop group BIGBANG, was implicated in sex trafficking and other criminal activities.¹ Jung Joon-young, identified as a close friend of SEUNGRI, was revealed to be a participant in a chatroom sharing explicit videos. The scandal was devastating for Seyeon, long recognized as J's most devoted fan.

¹ CedarBough Saeji, "K-Pop Politics: Burning Sun Club Scandal Scorches South Korea's Image." *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2019): 16–19.

Consequently, she made the painful decision to *t'aldök* (탈덕, leave the fandom). When J's trial was happening, Seyeol was a college freshman aspiring to become a film director. She decided to channel her emotional turmoil into a documentary. One of the first lines of her work, *Söngdök* (English title: *Fanatic*), starkly states: "My *oppa* became a criminal."² During my fieldwork in Seoul, I had the privilege of interviewing her, enriching my understanding of the complex emotional landscapes that characterize Korean fandom culture.

While numerous studies on K-pop have engaged with gender studies or fandom studies independently, interdisciplinary works addressing these topics are notably absent. Paradoxically, a scant number of studies on K-pop or the Korean Wave align with the framework of Korean Studies. Han and Chun, in the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Korean Studies* focused on Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea, called for fresh approaches to gender dynamics that extend beyond the analysis of traditional topics such as the military and the sex industry.³ By exploring how fans identify or disidentify with K-pop, I will show how their journey can be qualified through a three-step process of becoming a fan, being recognized as a fan, and leaving the fandom. Throughout this process, fans are actually influenced by their views on nation, citizenship, and identity—this connection will help us creating a conversation between Gender Studies, Fandom Studies, and Korean Studies.

Inspired by Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community," fandom studies scholar Matt Hills cautioned against the dangerous inclination to erase boundaries, proposing that "fandom and national identity might have a more complex relationship."⁴ I contend that scrutinizing the relationship between Korean and international fans of K-pop

² *Söngdök* (*Fanatic*), directed by Oh Seyeon (AUD, 2021), 04:10.

³ Ju Hui Judy Han and Jennifer Jihye Chun, "Introduction: Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 245–55.

⁴ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

could be a method to counterbalance the prevailing overemphasis on transnationality and tether K-pop more firmly to the field of Korean Studies. Ethnomusicologist Michael Fuhr noted that “the rising popularity of Korean cultural products abroad endowed Koreans with a self-assertive view of their own culture and their country.”⁵ Concurrently, sociologist Shin Gi-Wook's concept of “embedded nationalism,” emphasizing the interconnectedness of the nation with social relations and history, could shed light on how the construction of Korean nationalism may have shaped the nationalist and chauvinist tendencies of Korean fans.⁶ This would suggest that Korean fans' perception of the nation is intricately woven into their relationships with international fans, and how they engage with K-pop. In the same publication, Shin argued that “Korean nationalism is not a rigid ideology and adapts to changing situations.”⁷ I propose to extend this notion by applying it to the study of K-pop fandom(s).

To understand this, we can examine the commonalities between fandom and nationalism. According to Duffett, fans are “auto-didacts, self-taught experts.”⁸ The journey towards becoming a fan involves a personal process of accumulating knowledge, thereby leading to an individualized interpretation of a specific text. Sandvoss posited that fans could exhibit a form of narcissism by incorporating their object of interest into their identity—simultaneously rejecting possible alternative interpretations.⁹ The process of being recognized as a fan—*Sōngdōk* (성덕) in Korean—feeds into this dynamic of narcissism. This

⁵ Michael Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding out K-Pop* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 150.

⁶ Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 26.

⁹ Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Malden: Polity Press, 2005).

term refers to a moment when a fan finds one's way in their fandom, generally when they get recognized as a fan by their favorite idol through a direct interaction. Fandom narcissism intertwines with essentialism, defined by Duffett as “the idea that the essence or meaning of an object is located within the object itself.”¹⁰ When this framework of fan-centric narcissism is applied to the Korean fandom of K-pop, Korean fans perceive their fandom culture as an integral part of their Korean identity.¹¹

According to Seyeon, K-pop extends beyond just music and performances; it's about “selling someone's dreams and aspirations.” This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of identification, encapsulated by the term *iptŏk* (입덕). The English equivalent might be “falling down a rabbit hole.” While my current research focuses on interviews with fans turned industry professionals, previous conversations I had with fans for different projects often touched upon this notion of *iptŏk*. Fans define this as an irresistible pull when they encounter an artist or group they resonate with. After experiencing a compelling performance or hearing a particularly engaging song, they feel obligated to delve deeper. Typically, the first step involves exploring the artist's entire discography and watching all available *chajak* content (cf. Chapter 1) in order to grasp a nuanced understanding of each member's persona, or at least the version presented through media channels.

Morimoto and Chin observed that fandom studies traditionally maintain a segregated approach to the field, leading to the marginalization of discourse surrounding non-Western and non-English-language content. They advocated for a “transcultural” analysis of fandom

¹⁰ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 77.

¹¹ Mathieu Berbiguier and Younghan Cho, “Understanding the Korean Fandom of the K-pop: Focusing on Its Perspectives on Foreign Fans,” *Korean Journal of Communication & Information* 81, no. 2 (2017): 272–98.

rather than a purely transnational one to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups.¹²

Similarly, I argue that confining the analysis of the K-pop fandom(s) to a solely transnational entity also marginalizes discourse around non-western fandom, along with non-English-language discourse on fans. It is necessary to connect this transnational approach with the national context.

My initial approach to diversifying the transnational discourse on Korean popular music is examining identifications and disidentifications among K-pop fans. Here, “identification” refers to the process of *iptōk* I discussed earlier. Conversely, “disidentification” is a term I borrow from José Esteban Muñoz's seminal book released in 1999. Muñoz defines disidentification as “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”¹³ This perspective illustrates how a queer reading of K-pop intervenes in the relationship between Korean and international fans of K-pop.

Firstly, they highlight a contrast between a majoritarian public sphere and a minoritarian group, paralleling the central debate within fandom studies concerning the positioning of fan groups as minorities. Secondly, the concept of citizenship constructs a nexus between Fandom Studies, Gender Studies, and Korean Studies. Fandom studies scholar Ashley Hinck perceives citizenship as a “mode of public engagement.”¹⁴ She asserts that performances of citizenship reveal its connection to power and identity. In the realm of Gender Studies and Korean Studies, Seungsook Moon analyzed gendered citizenship within

¹² Lori Morimoto and Bertha Chin, “Reimagining the Imagined Community: Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 174.

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁴ Ashley Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019), 4.

the context of military conscription in Korean society, framing masculinity as a pillar of what Muñoz terms “normative citizenship.”¹⁵ These two perspectives on citizenship are complementary. Moon’s commentary on gendered citizenship, supplemented by Shin’s analysis of Korean nationalism, aids in understanding Korean K-pop fans and their identifications with their affiliation to Korean society. Conversely, Hinck’s association between fans and their experiences as citizens illuminates how international K-pop fans locate themselves distinctly within the same community. This leads us to the “phantasmatic” facet of citizenship.

Building on the pivotal concept of this thesis that I introduced in the previous chapter, I propose that international fans’ queer interpretation of K-pop content is actually linked to “narrated authenticity.” Here, I employ this term to suggest that fans harbor a perceived sense of agency by creating their own narratives and offering interpretations of what they perceive to be queer content. They might not acknowledge the possibility that their actions might align with the anticipations of Korean entertainment companies and, consequently, be the result of marketing strategies. This argument can be juxtaposed with previously mentioned elements, such as nationalism and citizenship, as Moon emphasized the potential of imagination as an instrument of authority in the “rise of militarized modernity.”¹⁶

As I conclude this theoretical introduction, I would like to address some reservations and cautionary points regarding my use of identification and disidentification as a primary framework. Muñoz, in his work, addresses practices from minority subjects. As K-pop continues to gain visibility within popular culture, it becomes somewhat challenging to view K-pop fans as a minority in the strictest sense. However, Muñoz also underscored that

¹⁵ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

disidentification occurs at both the production and reception levels.¹⁷ I aim to examine this from the opposite perspective, investigating how a group interested in a cultural product once considered niche finds itself propelled into the mainstream, along with the ramifications of this shift.

When examining instances where the discourse of K-pop fans within and outside Korea diverges, there is a recurrent thread of issues regarding the interpretation of K-pop. Here, I consider K-pop as a holistic concept that encompasses the music, the industry, and any related metatext. The ongoing debate concerning what constitutes K-pop and how it should be interpreted provides a relevant bridge between the analysis of K-pop and queer theory, which has always grappled with issues of taxonomy, definition, and identification.

I draw a connection by using the processes of becoming, being recognized and quitting being a fan—what I call here the three steps of (dis)identification. Consequently, I intend to use this chapter as a platform to explore ways we can diversify the discourse about K-pop by incorporating concepts from other disciplines. Through specific case studies related to time/nostalgia and gender identities/sexualities, I will explore how fans utilize K-pop as a tool for identification and disidentification.

(Dis)identifications in Time and Nostalgia: Queering K-pop Chronologies

“Queerness is not yet here,” proclaims Muñoz in the opening line of *Cruising Utopia*.¹⁸ For him, queerness must be conceptualized as an ideal of “doing and being” situated in the future. We have not yet reached a state of “queerness,” and we may never fully achieve it. However, in the journey towards it, he champions a “theory of queer futurity that

¹⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present.”¹⁹ As the history of K-pop continues to expand, two trends in relation to temporality and K-pop discourse have become prominent.

Integrating K-pop's Ascending Popularity into a Nationalist Discourse

Main Korean broadcast channels, such as SBS's *Archive K* or KBS's *Modern Korea* K-pop special episode, have emphasized a new trend of archiving and documenting the evolution of K-pop. In 2021, YouTube produced its own K-pop-related documentary, *K-pop Evolution*.²⁰ In 2023, Korean OTT platforms such as Tving followed suit with *K-pop Generation*. It is worthwhile to question the motivations behind these programs and how they may be perceived as components of nationalist discourse. The tendency in South Korea to overemphasize the international recognition of any Korean cultural product is often referred to in the Korean media landscape as part of the *kukppong* discourse.²¹ This blend word of *kuk* (국, country) and *ppong* (from *philopon*, a Japanese slang for methamphetamine) can be translated as “intoxicated with nationalism.” In *From Factory Girls to K-pop Idol Girls*, Gooyong Kim mentions Appadurai’s “production fetishism,” applying it to the disparity in coverage of K-pop artists' media appearances outside of East Asia during the early stages of the Korean Wave.²² For instance, he notes the contrast between the congratulatory narrative of Korean media and the skepticism of French media regarding the coverage of the first European K-pop concert, SM Town Live '10 World Tour, held in Paris in June 2011.

¹⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 18.

²⁰ YouTube Originals, “K-pop Evolution S1 E1, The Birth of K-pop,” YouTube Video, March 31, 2021, 23:55, <https://youtu.be/HerU6GznO4>.

²¹ Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin, “Oegugin Influencers and Pop Nationalism through Government Campaigns: Regulating Foreign-Nationals in the South Korean YouTube Ecology,” *Policy & Internet* 14, no. 3 (2022): 551.

²² Kim, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls*, 51, 57.

I argue that focusing solely on media coverage does not fully illuminate the significance of this event. Upending widely accepted narratives of K-pop's popularity in East Asia, this concert symbolized a new phase for the Korean Wave. The SM Town concert in France not only triggered a surge in registrations for Korean language classes but also stimulated interest in Korean Studies programs in French universities.²³

Indeed, when K-pop and nationalism are discussed together, it is often in the context of South Korea's soft power, a narrative initially propagated by the government, which has, in turn, triggered a high degree of skepticism from the Korean public. However, an often-overlooked point is that Korean fans regularly employ this same nationalist discourse to connect their Korean identity to their fan activities.

Back in 2016, as K-pop was still inching its way into the mainstream and before the BTS boom, it wasn't uncommon for Korean fans to self-congratulate upon seeing international celebrities publicly appreciating K-pop on platforms like Twitter or bulletin boards such as *Instiz*.²⁴ In the same vein, but on a narrower scale, music critic Kim Youngdae in his book *BTS: The Review*, asserts that BTS' performance at KCON 2014 in the United States marked a turning point for their popularity in Korea.²⁵ In a column chronicling his experience at one of the biggest conventions for the Korean Wave, he detailed how the enthusiastic engagement of American fans benefitted BTS' visibility back home. Through this performance, many Korean fans were introduced to BTS. Both phenomena suggest that, in the years preceding K-pop's exponential popularity, the international fandom wielded significant influence over the Korean fandom. Now, as K-pop has become a more integral

²³ As stated in the introduction, the author started his Korean Studies degree in September 2011, two months after said concert, and heard from the director of the department at that time that they have had a surge of 300% in the number of applications to review for the school year 2011-2012.

²⁴ Berbiguier and Cho, "Understanding the Korean Fandom of the K-pop," 282-284.

²⁵ Yöngdae Kim, *BTS THE REVIEW: Pangt'an Sonyöndan-ül Ribyuhada [BTS THE REVIEW]* (Seoul: RHK, 2019), 17-18.

part of mainstream popular music, one could question whether Korean fans might wish to challenge this hegemony.

Through their press releases, K-pop entertainment companies have explicitly expressed their aspiration to challenge American dominance in popular entertainment. In their communication about recent achievements and successes, they often use the expression *Han'guk kŭrup ch'oego* (한국 그룹 최고, lit. “the best Korean group”) or *Han'guk kasu ch'oech'o* (한국 가수 최초, lit. “the first time for a Korean singer”).

Tweets from BigHit Entertainment (now HYBE Labels), the company that launched BTS in 2013, illustrate this clearly. In 2020, they tweeted the following in a span of four days:

[Article] #BTS “7” First Korean Singer to be twice 1st of the UK Official Album Chart 'A new record'

@BigHitEnt on Twitter, posted on February 28, 2020.

[Article] #BTS “7” Best record by a Korean group with the song “On”, 4th on America's Billboard Hot 100

@BigHitEnt on Twitter, posted on March 2, 2020.

[Article] #BTS “7” Three songs of the album on America's Billboard Hot 100... First Korean Singer.

@BigHitEnt, posted on March 3, 2020.

These posts emphasize the company's pride that no other Korean group or singer has achieved such recognition. In fan communities like *Instiz*, it's common to find numerous posts from people stating that they realized BTS' popularity while traveling outside of Korea.

Interestingly, even non-BTS fans are aware of these press releases highlighting BTS' nationality, as shown in a YouTube video from DKDKTV where the two hosts interview people on the streets of Seoul about their opinions on BTS.²⁶ When asked, “Out of all of BTS' many achievements, which achievement are you most proud of?” all respondents pointed to

²⁶ DKDKTV, “What Koreans Think of BTS? (2020),” YouTube Video, February 21, 2020, 17:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJahTfLg8cM>.

BTS' chart achievements, noting that they were the first Korean artists to do so. In this context, it seems that both the general public and the fans' narratives align in a sense of Korean pride and identification.

Nostalgia for Times when K-pop was Not “This” Popular

At times, the nationalist discourse can also prompt an unexpected discourse of disidentification. One instance of this is the movement within the BTS fandom to dissociate the group from the K-pop label. In May 2021, the hashtag #FreeBTS started trending on Twitter, with fans advocating to “Free BTS from the K-pop discourse.” This was triggered by a news segment on the television program *Good Morning America*, in which BTS was grouped together with other K-pop acts and presented as part of a “new phenomenon.” The fact that BTS, a group about to celebrate its eight-year anniversary, was introduced alongside rookie groups such as SM Entertainment's *æspa*, immediately incited backlash from ARMY—BTS' fanbase—who voiced their discomfort. A fan even mentioned the so-called “ARMY Independence Day,” which according to Urban Dictionary is the day when ARMY decided to disassociate itself from the K-pop fandom. Several of BTS' speeches at the United Nations have led to a memefication of BTS' leader, RM, as the president of this independent nation. Unlike Korean fans who use the group's Korean identity as a tool for identification, international fans use similar national symbols like an “independence” movement or a flag in a dynamic of disidentification. ARMY's desire to disidentify from K-pop fandom could also be seen as a direct consequence of the Korean Wave, as K-pop becomes increasingly mainstream and blends into the global popular music soundscape.

According to Muñoz, queerness is a “temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”²⁷ This

²⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 16.

notion is echoed in the concept of *yŏkjuhaeng*, which refers to the re-emergence of an older song's often performing better on the charts than during its initial release. A concrete example of *yŏkjuhaeng* is Brave Girls' song “Rollin,” released in 2017, which achieved an all-kill—taking the top spot on all music charts—in March 2021.²⁸ This resurgence was triggered by a YouTube video. In this compilation of performances of “Rollin’,” taken from the official YouTube channel of the Korean Ministry of Defense, Brave Girls are performing the song in front of various crowd of soldiers. In parallel with the performance, screenshots of comments from Korean men reflecting on how the song provided emotional support during their mandatory military service are featured on the screen.²⁹ “Rollin’” serves as a fitting metaphor for this discussion. Initially popular within the Korean LGBTQ+ K-pop fandom—an act of disidentification—it suddenly became a symbol of identification for Korean men whose mandatory military service positions them firmly within a “militarized modernity.”³⁰

A potent symbol of this nostalgic approach to K-pop is the YouTube channel MMTG's project, *K-pop Renaissance to Hidden Gems*. MMTG, initially created by the Korean broadcaster SBS as a platform for digital content on various cultural phenomena, quickly gained popularity due to the charismatic personality of its main host, Jaejae (Lee Eun-jae). Influenced by the concept of *yŏkjuhaeng*, Jaejae brought together a team of various K-pop celebrities to revisit older K-pop songs they believed were released ahead of their time and therefore deserved a second chance.³¹ Interestingly, the songs chosen were released between 2007 (the era of Wonder Girls, BIGBANG, Super Junior) and 2015 (the era of

²⁸ According to iChart, a ranking Twitter account run by *Instiz*, a Korean online community gathering K-pop fans. https://twitter.com/instiz_ichart/status/1370140623605436419?s=20 (uploaded on 11 March 2021; accessed 3 May 2024).

²⁹ Viditor, “Brave Girls, Rollin', Compilation of Comments,” YouTube Video, February 23, 2021, 3:19, <https://youtu.be/cfHWIqJkEf4>.

³⁰ Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*.

³¹ MMTG, “K-POP Renaissance I Great songs that should make a comeback / [MMTG ep.178],” YouTube Video, April 1, 2021, 22:01, <https://youtu.be/7NLT5UcbvOo>.

Infinite, BTS, B1A4, EXO), stopping right at 2016, when the popularity of BTS began to skyrocket.

Reflecting on fans' engagement with queer temporalities, Aguas suggests that “fans see queerly in backward, lateral, and rhizomatic movements—drawing on the past to evaluate queer representation in the present and to speculate about the future.”³² This nostalgic feeling and recurrent instances of *yŏkjuhaeng* seem to hark back to a time when K-pop wasn't as mainstream as it is now, suggesting a sense of discomfort with the rapid global exposure K-pop has gained. Importantly, *yŏkjuaheng* first occurs in Korea—as exemplified by the video that reignited the popularity of “Rollin’”—and then resonates with international fans. This highlights the significance of seniority and timeframe in understanding the dynamics between Korean and international K-pop fans. International fans often use their longevity as fans as a self-assertion tool, whereas Korean fans assert their supremacy by referencing their shared nationality/language with K-pop artists.

Gooyong Kim argues that “when produced and proliferated by a mainstream media institution like MBC, nostalgia plays an ideological role by provoking reminiscence for a specific period that has a constructed and glorified sociocultural meaning and definition.”³³ In the context of MMTG, however, the dynamics appear to be reversed. Here, fans express a longing for a time when K-pop was not as globally successful as it is today.

When I met with Mano in person for our interview, I was already familiar with her work. I had been following her on Twitter due to my admiration for her contributions to *Idology*, a Korean webzine where writers dissect the latest K-pop releases. She, along with other Ideology columnists and contributors, participated in the edited volume *Queerdology*, a

³² Evangeline Aguas, “The Queer Temporalities of Queerbaiting,” in *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans through Homoerotic Possibilities*, ed. Joseph Brennan, Fandom & Culture (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 57–59.

³³ Kim, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls*, 110.

pivotal work in queer K-pop scholarship. Together with Squib, her co-writer at *Idology*, Mano developed a “queer chronology of K-pop,” detailing generational shifts among K-pop artists. Their seminal essay “Reading K-pop’s Queerness through a Framework of Generations,” offers a historical survey of K-pop through a queer lens.³⁴ They propose a distinct timeline of K-pop generations, observing how “queer aesthetics” resurfaced in the so-called 2.5 generation of artists like G-Dragon, 2NE1, SHINee, and f(x).³⁵ The authors distinguish between Korean and international fan interpretations of K-pop, noting that international fans tend to search for “hints of representation,” while Korean fans display more nuanced identifications.³⁶ Mano has been covering K-pop for over a decade and identifies as a lifelong fan—making her an ideal authority figure on the subject. As we began our conversation, she humorously stated she has been a K-pop fan since its embryonic stages.

In addition to her writing, Mano also sometimes DJs for an organization colloquially known as *Sŭlk’ep’a* (슬픔의 케이팝 파티, 슬케파) which roughly translates to “The Sad K-pop Party.” I was intrigued by the evocative name. Mano explained that the formation of *Sŭlk’ep’a* became a sort of folk tale within the Korean fandom, originating from Twitter accounts that posted short clips of older K-pop songs primarily from the '90s and early '00s. Despite the songs not inherently being sorrowful, they often elicit a twinge of melancholy upon listening. A poignant example is the song “Dreams Come True” by the first-generation K-pop group S.E.S., which features the lyric: “I will no longer listen to sad songs” (슬픈 노래 더는 듣지 않을 거예요, *sŭlp’ŭn norae tŏnŭn tŭtchi anŭl kŏyeyo*). This juxtaposition of

³⁴ Mano and Squib, “Sedaeron-ŭro Ingnŭn K’eip’ap-ŭi K’wiŏnisŭ [Reading K-Pop’s Queerness through Chronology],” in *K’wiŏdolloji: Chŏnbok-kwa Kyoran, Yongmang-ŭi Nori [Queeridology]*, ed. Hyewŏn Yŏn (P’aju: Owŏl-ŭi Pom, 2021), 30–73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

nostalgia and sadness served as an inspiration for this chapter's exploration of the relationship between older K-pop and melancholia.

Lothian, in her exploration of the “Queer Temporalities of Fannish Love,” contends that “looking queerly at fannish temporalities is to attend to moments in which they ... use the affective technology of fannish love to build spaces that both reproduce and subvert dominant economies.”³⁷ When we juxtapose fannish temporalities with Muñoz’s conceptualization of melancholia as a “productive space of hybridization that uniquely exists between a necessary militancy and indispensable mourning,” it becomes evident that this sense of nostalgia toward K-pop carries a queer dimension, particularly in the Korean context.³⁸

As previously discussed, the international success of K-pop initially met with skepticism—even among its fans. With K-pop's global influence now undeniable, fan sentiments have evolved, sometimes fueled by disappointments or discomfort as the genre shifts its focus from a Korean audience to a global one.

The concept of *Sŭlk'ep'a* (슬픔의 케이팝 파티, “The Sad K-pop Party”) gained traction as fans humorously suggested gathering to revel in “sad K-pop.” The inaugural event at *Myŏngwŏlkwan* (명월관), an old club in Hongdae, was a hit, leading to subsequent parties. Mano later joined *Sŭlk'ep'a* as a guest DJ after participating in a workshop aiming at training more women DJs. Her involvement marked a turning point for the organization, culminating in a collaboration with the conglomerate Hyundai and its culture department Hyundai Card—where she got to perform at the *Understage* concert hall in Itaewon, Seoul. Even amidst the

³⁷ Alexis Lothian, “Sex, Utopia and the Queer Temporalities of Fannish Love,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 239.

³⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.

COVID-19 pandemic, *Sŭlk'ep'a* continued to thrive through weekly sets on the web radio platform Naver Now.

Moreover, *Sŭlk'ep'a* serves as a platform for social advocacy. Mano emphasized their mission to create a “safe clubbing environment to enjoy K-pop without feeling guilty,” addressing the stigma generated by the Burning Sun scandal and the involvement of YG Entertainment's CEO Yang Hyun-suk. By prohibiting any music from scandal-affiliated artists and inappropriate behavior, the organization promotes responsible fan engagement. Following *Sŭlk'ep'a*'s lead, other organizations have also emerged to offer guilt-free K-pop clubbing experiences. During the event at *Understage*, the organizers made a point in prohibiting any dangerous or obscene behavior. Further, *Sŭlk'ep'a* has engaged in various protests, including a 2022 initiative against SPC Group in light of incidents at the Shany Factory, and a movement against the unjust closure of the OB Bear bar in the Euljiro district.^{39 40}

Sŭlk'ep'a epitomizes the complex (dis)identification process within the K-pop fandom. It reveals a yearning for a “problem-free” K-pop era and highlights the fans' acute self-awareness in their consumption of the genre. Mano underscored how K-pop often serves as a guilty pleasure, illustrating that fans cannot divorce their personal values from their K-pop engagement. For Korean fans, K-pop has long been a means of identification and an avenue for aspirational living, highlighting its deeply personal resonance.

³⁹ The Korea Times, “Worker dies following accident at bakery factory,” *The Korea Times*, August 10, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/09/113_356811.html.

⁴⁰ Hae-rin Lee, “Decades-old pub in Euljiro fades into history,” *The Korea Times*, May 6, 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/08/113_328614.html#:~:text=On%20April%2021%20at%204, eviction%20of%20Eulji%20OB%20Bear.

(Dis)identifications of Gender Identity and Sexuality

K-pop paradoxically appears as a tool of identification within the LGBTQ+ community for international fans, while it is perceived as a symbol of heteronormativity for the Korean LGBTQ+ community, serving as a tool of disidentification. In this section, we will use BTS as a case study to approach this paradox.

Identification Part.1 – The “Boyfriend or Girlfriend” Gate

In an interview with *Entertainment Tonight*, BTS was asked about the meaning behind the concept of their trilogy “Love Yourself,” and what true love meant to them. BTS’ leader RM answered: “When we don’t have boyfriends or girlfriends, we always say like ‘ah I’m so lonely, I wanna date ... I thought the biggest love we are all searching is the love for oneself.’”⁴¹ This single mention of “boyfriends OR girlfriends,” provoked a heated debate in the comments – arguing whether RM was referring to people as a general “we,” or if the pronoun was referring directly to the members of BTS.

By interpreting discourse through a queer lens, fans speculate on the sexuality of K-pop idols. This is a common practice in the K-pop fan sphere, as shown by practices such as shipping, where K-pop fans invent relationships between members of a same group.⁴² A way to practice shipping is through vidding. According to Bourdaa, “vidding is another popular form of creation where fans do a video montage of their favorite scenes set to music.”⁴³ If Bourdaa's definition mainly relates to fans of TV shows, Oh specifies that K-pop fans, by compiling videos of K-pop idols outside of their context, “not only create their alternative

⁴¹ Entertainment Tonight, “BTS on Dating and What True Love Means to Them | Daily Denny EXCLUSIVE,” YouTube Video, November 15, 2017, 4:56, <https://youtu.be/xPLWoL6u5vc?si=8LoUBtbvUc4SC7SE>.

⁴² Thomas Baudinette, “Idol Shipping Culture: Exploring Queer Sexuality among Fans of K-Pop,” in *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop*, ed. Suk-Young Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 249.

⁴³ Mélanie Bourdaa, “‘May We Meet Again’: Social Bonds, Activities, and Identities in the #Clexa Fandom,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 394.

narratives but also openly, actively and playfully express desire and engage in their ways of finding sexual pleasure in a public space.”⁴⁴ Vidding, such as other fannish practices that Franklin calls a “celebrat[ion] of queerness without confirmation,” shows the demand from fans for more representation of queer people in the public sphere.⁴⁵

In this specific case of the interview, it is a bit different since it is—supposedly—not scripted. As a result, it adds another dimension to these speculations. As a YouTuber user highlights in the comments, “saying that we’re happy about RM’s statement on love and relationships and the use of the word ‘boyfriend’ is not about the fact that we are interested in knowing what their sexuality is. It is about the fact they are giving representation to the LGB[TQ]+ community in an indirect way.” Bourdaa, Oh and Franklin’s discussion of vidding explains how this identificatory process through such a small detail shed light on K-pop fans’ desire for more queer representation in their object of interest.

Identification Part.2 – Being Recognized through the Mention of “Gender Identity”

On September 24, 2018, BTS’ leader RM (real name: Kim Nam-jun) delivered a speech in front of the UN General Assembly launching the “Generation Unlimited,” a UNICEF program “seek[ing] to get every young person prepared for future employment by 2030.” A part of his speech mentioned:

“Tell me your story. I want to hear your voice, and I want to hear your conviction. No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin colour, **gender identity**: speak yourself.”
- Kim Nam-jun, at the UN general assembly, September 24th, 2018
(emphasis added)

⁴⁴ Chuyun Oh, “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: The Androgynous Male Dancing Body and Western Female Fandom,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 72-3.

⁴⁵ Monique Franklin, “Queerbaiting, Queer Readings, and Heteronormative Viewing Practices,” in *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans through Homoerotic Possibilities*, ed. Joseph Brennan (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 43.

The fact that RM encouraged the youth to “speak [them]selves” is not very surprising, as it has always been one of the main ideas conveyed through BTS’ songs. However, it was more puzzling to see how Kim Nam-jun—as a representative of South Korea—briefly mentioned the issue of gender identity. In Korea, it is quite difficult to speak out on the topic of gender identities, since legal gender change is only permissible if done as a way to conform to gender norms.⁴⁶ Similarly, endorsing LGBTQ+ human rights in Korean society is a fraught undertaking.

This one single line was quite inspirational for many BTS fans all over the world who relayed it through social media—making BTS almost appear as worldwide advocates of LGBTQ+ human rights. In the same vein of the “boyfriend or girlfriend gate” introduced earlier, international ARMY used RM’s mention of “gender identity” to resonate with their own background to identify and feel a sense of community. As a result, the ARMY fandom appears as an inclusive space that provides comfort.

In recent academic discourse, BTS is often picked as a group that challenges “gender norms.” We might want to pause a bit and ask ourselves what does “gender norm” here actually mean? In her canonical work *Masculinities*, Cornell argues that “‘masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’” and warns against “essentialist definitions [which] usually pick a feature that defines the core of the masculine and hang an account of men’s lives on that.”⁴⁷ Sun Jung, in *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, has coined the term “soft masculinity” to discuss how Korean male artists who gained popularity through the Korean Wave conveyed a type of masculinity that seemed softer as an

⁴⁶ Tari Young-Jung Na, Ju Hui Judy Han, and Se-Woong Koo, “The South Korean Gender System: LGBTI in the Contexts of Family, Legal Identity, and the Military,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 363.

⁴⁷ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 68.

alternative to hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁸ This stance favors the production of an essentialist definition of masculinity based on Western standards of masculinity as hegemonic and promotes an essentialist vision of Korean masculinity proper to Korean celebrities. It has already been nuanced and contested as soon as it started getting traction.⁴⁹ Similarly, in mainstream and academic discourse, BTS has often been presented as a symbol of “alternative masculinity.”⁵⁰ However, this is mainly from the point of view of the international fandom, which gets a lot of inspiration from the versatility of the ways gender identity is expressed in K-pop.

Alex Jong-Seok Lee highlighted how the dynamics of globalization influenced Korean society’s visions on masculinity. For him, “cisheternormative Korean masculine authority is enhanced by ... proximity to embodiments of ‘authentic origin[s] of modernity’—white male and female US Americans—while concomitantly sanctioning the boundaries of this enhancement.”⁵¹ The only reason why K-pop is seen as a medium that conveys “alternates” conceptions of masculinity is that it is put in opposition to the Euro-American-centered vision of hegemonic masculinity. In “Negotiating Masculinity across Borders,” Stephen Cho Suh provided an account of the experiences of Korean American men who returned to South Korea. When it comes to dating, seeing how Korean American men positioned themselves, but also seen as more manly compared to the “soft” Korean men – highlights the problematic aspect of Sun Jung’s soft masculinity framework. This could also explain the disparity that I observed through many conversations I had about the

⁴⁸ Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

⁴⁹ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture” (paper presented at 7th KSAA Biennial Conference, 2011).

⁵⁰ Seok-Kyeong Hong, *BTS: Kil Wi-esō* (Seoul: Across, 2020).

⁵¹ Alex Jong-Seok Lee, “Manly Colors: Masculinity and Mobility among Globalizing Korean Men,” *Kalfou* 6, no. 2 (2019): 209.

consequences of BTS' popularity in the dating sphere. In their survey of the perception of "K-pop Masculinities" among American college students, Song and Velding showed how effeminate interpretations of Korean masculinity through K-pop could affect cis-hetero Korean American men in their assessment of the phenomenon.⁵² On the other hand, the Korean Wave actually helped to increase the level of desirability of cis-hetero Korean men.⁵³ The only reason why K-pop is seen as a medium that conveys alternative conceptions of masculinity is that it is put in opposition to the Euro-American-centered vision of hegemonic masculinity.

As we can see, the question of masculinity within K-pop and its implications for gender identities is a complex one, shaped by a variety of cultural and societal factors. The alternative or soft masculinity presented by K-pop idols challenges and reinforces normative gender expectations, eliciting mixed reactions from different audiences. This tension is especially pronounced when considering the perceptions and interpretations of queerness within the K-pop sphere. If the queering interpretations of K-pop idols' gender identity inspire international fandom in expressing their own identity, it has a less clear role among the Korean audience. While we transition from the discussion of masculinity, it is crucial to explore the peculiar and paradoxical ways K-pop interacts with notions of queerness, offering a realm of interpretation and representation for some while perpetuating heteronormativity and inviting critique from others.

Regarding the UN speech, the Korean fandom of BTS was more silent regarding the part on "gender identity." This shows a fundamental paradox that surrounds K-pop: an

⁵² Kirsten Younghee Song and Victoria Velding, "Transnational Masculinity in the Eyes of Local Beholders? Young Americans' Perception of K-Pop Masculinities," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 28, no. 1 (2020): 3–21.

⁵³ Min Joo Lee, "Touring the Land of Romance: Transnational Korean Television Drama Consumption from Online Desires to Offline Intimacy," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18, no. 1 (2020): 67–80.

industry inscribed in a heteronormative and conservative society on the one hand, which is also seen as challenging gender dynamics on the other hand.

As Kwon remarks, “the conceptualization of queering/to queer cannot be applied to how the entire Korean society understands the world.”⁵⁴ If Euro-American fans grew up in societies where gender fluidity is more openly debated, Korean fans grew up in a less open political climate. In her overview of the Korean fanfictions, Kwon particularly emphasizes this difference in cultural background and notes that the fanfictions were censored in 2000 by the Korean government, considered as vectors of homoerotic content that could be harmful to the youth. Even when SM Entertainment, considered as one of the three biggest entertainment companies, tried to take advantage of the fan fictions by organizing a contest, any content implying homosexual relations between the members of the group was prohibited.

In opposition to the non-Korean fans that regularly bring up BTS’ UN speech as a powerful and proud moment in the history of their idols, I had to go over the period right after the speech to access to tweets uploaded by Korean fans. Among all the tweets, his announcement uploaded a few days after the speech by a Korean graduate student at Columbia University particularly caught my attention:

@c***** — Hello, I am a communication major graduate student at Columbia University, and will graduate in 2019. I am looking to interview Korean females that were uncomfortable or worried after the “7-minutes speech” of BTS on September 24th at the American headquarters of the United Nations in New York. If you answer to this tweet, I will send you a direct message. Thank you.
- Twitter, posted on September 27th, 2018. (translated from Korean)

This tweet directly provoked strong reactions (more than 2,481 retweets) – most of them being from ARMYs trying to understand why “Korean females” would be particularly uncomfortable or worried after such a speech. Most of the reactions remind the original

⁵⁴ Jungmin Kwon, “Queering Stars: Fan Play and Capital Appropriation in the Age of Digital Media,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 96.

poster of the main reason why this speech was held, and try to dismiss any relationship between its content and gender equality/identity. To protect BTS from potential backlash from the UN speech, fans insist in the fact that the Love Myself campaign mainly focus on issues that are not related to gender. Here we are facing a totally opposite reaction from the Korean fandom. If the non-Korean fandom of BTS assimilated the UN speech as an act of LGBTQ+ rights activism, the non-Korean fandom prefers to distance this act from the issue of gender, as a way of protection for their idol.

Some Twitter users also showed support to the students' project. Indeed, a part of the LGBTQ+ and feminist online community felt uncomfortable seeing BTS advocating for gender and sexual minorities. Several times and especially at the beginning of their career, BTS has been accused of writing misogynist lyrics. A fan even created an exclusive Twitter account to denounce those.⁵⁵ Those past issues could be a reason why BTS is not that popular among the LGBTQ+ community.

During my stay in Seoul, I came across a Twitter account of LGBTQ+ Korean fans of BTS united under the name of Rainbow ARMY Scouts (무지개 아미단, *Mujigae Amidan*). According to the interview they kindly agreed to take part to, everything started in October 2018. At that time, one of the two founders, K, saw at the Busan Queer Festival other LGBTQ+ fan bases of other groups such as *Mujigae Mumu* (무지개무무, Rainbow Moomoos) or *NCT Kwiō* (엔시티퀴어, NCT Queer). These groups are slowly starting to diversify and are all gathered under the same label of *K'eip'ap Kwiō Yōnhap* (케이팝 퀴어 연합, K-pop queer fans) immediately thought there was a necessity to shed light on the existence of queer fans of BTS during the different Queer Festivals occurring throughout the

⁵⁵ Hyeri Ko and Eunkyung Yang, "Namsōng Aidol Kūrub-ūi Yōsōnghyōmo Nollan-gwa Yōsōng P'aendōm-ūi Punyōl [Korean Boy Groups Misogyny and Division between Female Fandom]," *Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 17, no. 8 (2017): 506-519.

year, but also during any BTS related event such as concerts or fan meetings. The other founder, J, also emphasized that, given the influence of BTS inside and outside of Korea, it was important to create such a community.

When asked if BTS is popular among the LGBTQ+ community in Korea, both founders emphasize the fact that ARMYs in the Korean LGBTQ+ community constitute a sub-minority.

In the LGBTQ+ community, it is even more difficult to speak up about being a BTS than our own queerness. Because we are part of a sexual minority and part of the ARMYs. It feels like being discriminated twice.⁵⁶
- K (*founder of the Rainbow ARMY Scout*)

Disidentification – K-pop as a “Separate World” of Queerness

On November 30, 2020, a fan survey on Twitter from international K-pop fans ranked the “gayest idols of K-pop.” Holland, the first openly gay K-pop artist, came at the 10th position.⁵⁷ The singer amusingly reacted to his 10th position by begging fans to “plz admit that [he] is gay.” The lack of recognition towards the only K-pop idol—until this day—who publicly came out is quite revealing. It shows that fans are more satisfied with their own speculations on the sexuality of K-pop idols and, thus, their imagined narratives. On another note, Holland has often been the target of hate comments by the K-pop fandom, who blame him for using his sexuality as the only way to stand out among emerging K-pop artists. In June 2023, Holland—who does not have a management company—launched a crowdfunding for one of his projects. He partnered with *Chingusai*, a gay men’s human rights group, and pledged that he would donate 15% of the profits to the association. The high price of the t-

⁵⁶ K, Personal communication with author through email, June 2021.

⁵⁷ SCMP Reporter, “‘Plz admit that I’m gay’ – out and proud K-pop singer Holland upset at coming only 10th on gayest K-pop artist survey,” *South China Morning Post*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/k-pop/news/article/3111898/plz-admit-im-gay-out-and-proud-k-pop-singer-holland-upset>.

shirt and the sweatshirt created a debate within the Korean LGBTQ+ community discussing whether this was adequate for him to partake in such practice.⁵⁸

This notion of queer interpretation within the public space is nuanced with Jungmin Kwon's discussion of Korean straight female's engagement with fan fiction. This second medium reflects most of K-pop's queer readings. In her book *Straight Korean Female Fans and their gay fantasies*, Kwon used the word “FANtasy” to refer to a “fantasy that a straight woman fan of gay romance creates and actualizes.”⁵⁹ Here, in her argument, Kwon distances herself from Bourdaa and Franklin in a way that, for her, the readers of fan fiction create their own space, aside from the public sphere, in which they play with heteronormativity. She also warned against the fact that the conception of queerness is deeply linked to the cultural background and that Korean women—her object of study—do not have the same sensibility to queer-related issues. Her brief, yet, refreshing discussion on the dynamics between Korean women writing/reading gay stories between K-pop idols and how those texts are perceived as objectifying by the LGBTQ+ community in Korea shows the importance of cultural background to queer interpretations of K-pop content. Queer interpretations mainly resonate in Korea among heterosexual fans who use them to generate “gay fantasies”—to use Kwon's wording—while queer interpretations of K-pop are often seen as queerbaiting among the LGBTQ+ community in Korea. However, when it comes to international K-pop fans, as we saw with the UN speech and the interview, they use these stories to advocate for visibility.

Now that K-pop has gained more exposure on a global level, Korean entertainment companies are capitalizing on those misinterpretations. It is also interesting to see a problematic discourse on international fans asserting that they are more open-minded than

⁵⁸ For details regarding the “Holland Is Pride” campaign, refer to https://twitter.com/HOLLAND_vvv/status/1680200674792050693 (Accessed May 30th, 2024).

⁵⁹ Jungmin Kwon, *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 4.

Korean fans and would be more accepting if any K-pop idol came out as part of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, during a concert in Amsterdam, solo artist Sunmi (Lee Sunmi) saw a rainbow flag in the audience, took it, and wrapped it around her. That night, she proclaimed that she was an “LGBT queen.” Fans thought she was coming out as queer and started congratulating her on social media. It led her to clarify that it was not a coming-out and that she was expressing her support for LGBTQ+ human rights.⁶⁰ As Yim Hyun-su highlighted in his interview with the organizers of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival, even if there are more and more issues in which K-pop artists voice their support to LGBTQ+ issues, those instances mainly happen outside of Korea.⁶¹ BTS’ UN speech or Sunmi’s strong message for LGBTQ+ human rights definitely fall in this category.

Conclusion: Queer K-pop is ‘Yet to Come’

On November 8th, 2022, *Weverse Magazine*—an online media platform run by HYBE Entertainment—published an article entitled “Talking K-pop with the LGBTQ+ Community.”⁶² The article integrated the perspectives of various K-pop fans to illustrate queer interpretations of concepts from songs by BTS, TOMORROW X TOGETHER (TXT), and SEVENTEEN. It also portrayed how the respective fan communities they belong to serve as safe spaces for expressing their queerness. The concluding part of the article pointedly references BTS leader RM’s speech at the United Nations in September 2018, where he pronounced the sentence, “No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin colour, gender identity: speak yourself.” A Korean Twitter user reacted, tweeting: “HYBE is

⁶⁰ The Korea Times, “Sunmi: ‘I Support LGBT, but Don’t Get Me Wrong,’” *The Korea Times*, June 6, 2019, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/06/732_270158.html.

⁶¹ Hyun-su Yim, “LGBT Support Growing in K-Pop,” *The Korea Herald*, June 10, 2019, http://kpopherald.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=201906101452119456437_2.

⁶² Minji Oh, “Talking K-pop with the LGBTQ+ community,” *Weverse Magazine*, November 8, 2022, <https://magazine.weverse.io/article/view?lang=en&colca=&artist=&searchword=lgbt&num=566>.

probably the first entertainment company that publicly recognizes their queer fandom.”⁶³ This claim seems somewhat exaggerated.

Even though the article was uploaded simultaneously in English and Korean, the glaring absence of Korean fandom is immediately striking upon first reading. The article neither provides background knowledge on LGBTQ+ human rights in South Korea nor includes interviews with Korean fans. Another Korean user on Twitter, quoting the previous tweet, lamented: “If we’re going down that road, then the first would be SM since BoA went to the Pride [parade] in San Francisco. Such faint ‘recognition’ doesn’t count. Queers are not second-class citizens.”⁶⁴ This statement embodies the frustration of the Korean queer fandom of K-pop, witnessing in real time the pink-washing of K-pop by an entertainment company towards an international audience. Furthermore, using the term “second-class citizen,” the Twitter user helps us circle back to the concept of “normative citizenship” that we presented at the start of our chapter. In their queer chronology of K-pop, Mano and Squib emphasized that “K-pop was never an ‘alternative’ in the context of South Korea.”⁶⁵ They further add that since K-pop was already part of the mainstream, Korean queer fans didn’t always have access to the same safe spaces mentioned in the Weverse article and were often immersed completely in the music rather than anything else.

Within the delicate dance of representation and expectation, the potential of K-pop as a powerful medium for expressing diverse identities and experiences is evident, albeit tangled in the realities of sociocultural contexts. This idea of the openly queer K-pop highlights an essential aspiration among fans—a desire for authentic representation, acceptance, and a safe

⁶³ Original text in Korean: 하이브가 퀴어 팬덤을 공개적으로 인정하는 첫 기획사가 된듯.

⁶⁴ Original text in Korean: 이판걸로 치면 차라리 샌프란시스코 퀴퍼 간 보아 소속사인 SM 이 먼저임. 겨우 이판걸로 “인정” 퀴어는 2 등시민이 아닙니다.

⁶⁵ Mano and Squib, “Sedaeron-ŭro Ingnŭn K’eip’ap-ŭi K’wiŏnisŭ [Reading K-Pop’s Queerness through Chronology],” 61.

space within the fandom. This desire stems not only from international fans but also from the Korean LGBTQ+ community, which currently grapples with feelings of being overlooked in favor of international appeal. However, the questions remain: will this vision of K-pop materialize in the form of idols publicly identifying as queer or through more explicit queer themes in music and performances? And more importantly, will the industry and fans, domestically and internationally, be ready to embrace such changes? It is essential to keep in mind that the evolution of K-pop towards this vision must be done thoughtfully, ensuring that it does not merely become another facet of queerbaiting or tokenistic representation but a genuine expression of diverse identities. Will fans be able to see someday the concretization of their speculations? For sure, an openly queer K-pop is still “yet to come.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; BTS, “Yet to Come,” Track 19 (CD1) on *Proof*, Big Hit Music, 2022, compact disc.

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Chapter 3

Mapping the Authenticity of K-pop: The Reality of the Production Network vs. How The Fans Understand It

Introduction: “BTS does not have producers!”

Organized by CJ E&M—a subsidiary of CJ, a conglomerate related to Samsung—KCON has emerged over the years as one of the references for Hallyu-related events. One aspect of KCON that distinguishes it from many other music events is its inclusion of panels on which professionals and academics discuss various facets of Korean popular culture. When the schedule was released a few weeks prior to the convention, one panel, in particular piqued my interest. Entitled—“Behind the Scenes with the Producers of BTS,”¹ this panel was promoted as a Q&A session featuring an MC and three US-based producers who had collaborated with BTS on several songs. Even before the panel took place, the prospect of three non-Korean producers discussing BTS’ music made the fanbase quite discontent about it. Online comments indicated that many fans felt that these producers lacked legitimacy and were exploiting their association with BTS to promote their own work. Before this “panel incident,” Melanie Fontana—an LA producer who worked on numerous BTS songs, including “Boy with Luv”—had been involved in various controversies with BTS ARMY, and had been accused of claiming BTS’ achievements as her own.

In my interactions with BTS fans, a recurring theme that often came out to justify what was “unique” about BTS was that they were making their own music. While this is technically true—the members do actively participate in the making of their music—they, like other K-pop artists, collaborate with a combination of in-house and external producers based in Korea and other parts of the world. I started to wonder: why are BTS fans

¹ “Behind the Scenes with the Producers of BTS,” KCON USA, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.kconusa.com/timetable/event/behind-scenes-producers-bts>.

particularly receptive to the fact that they make their own music? Do fans of other groups also react similarly? While journalistic articles occasionally highlight some “renowned” K-pop producers, this chapter aims to this discussion and develop an overview and comprehensive understanding of K-pop's production process from a musical perspective. Who are the producers? How should the contributions of K-pop idols to their music be assessed? Does the artists’ level of involvement in the production process make some K-pop idols stand out more than others? The chapter explores the K-pop production process and its potential visualization, while also examining why fans value idols' input and if it can be quantified. Ultimately, it will show that international fans who distance BTS from K-pop align with the notion of authenticity as a marker of authority, favoring a “handcrafted” K-pop sound by idols and Korean producers over a more globalized concept involving international collaborations.

As we saw in Chapter 1, as part of their fabrication of a “narrated authenticity,” K-pop entertainment companies have started to provide more content to the fans, showing the “backstage” of the producing process. In an era where mainstream media often portrays K-pop as manufactured through a “perfect recipe,” and where authenticity is increasingly valued, entertainment companies are adapting their strategies. Instead of being as secretive as possible, they start to reveal some snippets of their creative process within the limits of what is permitted.

This chapter ultimately argues that fans prefer to construct their own understanding of K-pop's production process. Utilizing network analysis and interviews, I will show that fans—despite this “backstage” access to the creative process—prioritize a narrative that emphasizes the authenticity of K-pop not only as a musical genre but also as a Korea-based phenomenon, particularly if they themselves are not based in Korea. Such a preference clearly reflects global shifts occurring within the industry, and gives us an opportunity to

think critically about spaces of production and reception through the key concept of authenticity.

Literature Review: K-pop and its Production Process

To delve deeper into the K-pop industry, we need to look at the sources written in Korean. The journalist and popular music critic Park Hee-a—also known as Joy Park—has published two monographs that explore the creative process behind the idol industry.

Aidol meik'ō, published in 2017, arrived at a time when the K-pop industry was at a pivotal moment.² BTS was gaining significant popularity in the United States, and K-pop had never had as much global exposure. Park aimed to celebrate the individuals behind this phenomenon, offering a collection of interviews with various professionals—including a vocal trainer, a personal trainer and a music video director. Park also interviewed two songwriters/producers, BUMZU (real name: Kye Bum-joo) and Choi Jae-hyuk. BUMZU, known for producing numerous songs for SEVENTEEN, is now a renowned in-house producer at HYBE Entertainment.³ Choi Jae-hyuk, who produced several hit songs for the girl group Oh My Girl, established his own K-pop creative agency based in the United States called The Key Artists Agency (TKAA). These interviews provide fascinating insights into the producers' success stories and their paths to music production for K-pop idols. However, they do not extensively address the fandom's reception of their work.

Aidol-ūi chagōpsil published a year later, follows a similar format to *Aidol meik'ō*.⁴ Here Park interviewed idols known for having the title of “idol-producer.” Though many of

² Hee-a Park, *Aidol Meik'ō [Idol Maker]* (Seoul: Media Sam, 2017).

³ Raphael Rashid, “From Tuna Fishing to Tell Love: the Producer behind K-pop’s Biggest Stars,” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/24/bumzu-producer-behind-k-pops-biggest-stars-south-korea>.

⁴ Hee-a Park, *Aidol-ūi Chagōpsil [Idol’s Studio]* (Goyang: Wisdom House, 2018).

the idols interviewed in the book are no longer active and some have fallen into controversy,⁵ Park work provides valuable materials including an extensive interview with Woozi, a SEVENTEEN member with significant role in the producing process who often collaborates with BUMZU. In the introduction, Park explains her motivation for spotlighting idols involved in music production stemmed from frequently being asked about the extent of idols' input in K-pop. Seeing this tendency, we understand how this topic could be a source of debate among fans and non-fans of K-pop.

Another type of literature emerging from Korean-language sources on the K-pop production process focuses on lyric writing. Kim Eana, a prominent lyricist in the K-pop industry known for writing numerous hits, is also quite active in the entertainment industry. She frequently appears on variety shows and hosts her radio show, “Kim Eana's Starry Night.” Her book *Kim Yina-ŭi Chaksabŏp* is as an autobiographical account of her career and work ethic.⁶ Throughout the book, she reflects on the lyrics she has written, providing background stories and detailed annotations that reveal the hidden meanings behind some lines. The first chapter of the book, titled “The Language of Emotions, the Life of a Lyricist, and the Basics of Lyric Writing” (감정의 언어, 작사가의 삶작사의 기본기, *Kamjŏng-ŭi Ŏnŏ, Chaksaga-ŭi Samchaksa-ŭi Kibon'gi*) provides an interview with Lee Sung-soo, also known as Chris Lee. Lee, the nephew of Lee Soo-man (the founder of SM Entertainment) was at the time leading the company's producing team. In 2024, he became the CAO of SM Entertainment following family disputes that caused a major upheaval in the company's organizational structure. What is striking is Kim Eana's clairvoyant sense of the future of the K-pop industry. In her book, she describes the role of “A&R,” a position that was not very

⁵ For example, Ravi (real name: Kim Won-sik) has been found guilty of simulating epilepsy in an attempt to evade his military service.

⁶ Eana Kim, *Kim Yina-ŭi Chaksabŏp [Kim Eana's Lyric Writing Method]* (Paju: Munhak Dongne, 2015).

common in Korea yet at the time of writing. A&R stands for Artists and Repertoire and is the entity that acts as an intermediary between producers/songwriters and the artists.

“A&R is the first client for lyricists along with composers. Perhaps, more and more in the future, it will become more common for A&R to be the first client rather than composers.”⁷

Nine years later, her prediction has proven accurate, with the emergence of conglomerates like HYBE Entertainment where A&R roles have become crucial in managing a larger pool of talented producers and songwriters.

Another experienced lyricist, An Yŏngju, has published educational materials on lyric writing for aspiring lyricists. Her series of three books offers guidance on writing lyrics for K-pop songs. In her most recent work, *Yojŭm Aidŭl-ŭl Wihan Yojŭm K-POP Chaksa Suŏp*, she addresses the younger generation aspiring to write K-pop lyrics, providing a textbook-like compilation of resources and advice⁸ and guiding the reader from the basics of lyrics writing to the relationship between lyrics and literature. From a musical analysis perspective, musicologist Kim Yu-jin has examined the elements that contribute to K-pop’s popularity and success on international charts.⁹

While Korean-language scholarship has focused on idol producers and the lyrics writing process, the academic discourse in English rarely mentions the producing process. In *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-pop*, Michael Fuhr starts with a powerful quote, stating that “K-pop is the soundtrack (and K-pop idols are the faces) of Korea’s globalization process in the new millennium.”¹⁰ Using this globalization process

⁷ Eana Kim, *Kim Yina-ŭi Chaksabŏp*, 61.

⁸ Yŏngju An, *Yojŭm Aidŭl-ŭl Wihan Yojŭm K-POP Chaksa Suŏp [K-pop Lyric Writing Classes for Today's Kids]* (Goyang: The Difference, 2023).

⁹ Yu-jin Kim, *K-Pop-ŭl Punhaehada: K-Pop-ŭi Chosŏng-kwa Hwasŏng [Deconstructing K-pop: K-pop Composition and Harmony]* (Seoul: Yesol, 2022).

¹⁰ Michael Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding out K-Pop* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 8.

as a starting point, Fuhr addresses the debate on Koreanness in K-pop by analyzing the production and listening of Korean popular music in the 2010s. Fuhr focuses on the issue of identity-making and how national and international interests intersect in the circulation of popular music outside of the country. In his chapter titled “K-pop Tropology,” Fuhr investigates the Koreanness of 2010s K-pop songs using the notion of “Korean flavor” or *ppong* (뽕) in Korean.¹¹ According to him, *ppong* “serves an audible signifier for Koreannness, despite its assumed trajectories to compositional principles in early European song traditions.”¹² Fuhr’s interviews with K-pop producers reveal that even elements like *ppong* supporting the idea of the “Koreanness” of K-pop are part on an imaginative construct. This necessity to find something inherently Korean in K-pop to justify its existence is evident both among fans and within the industry.

Fuhr's concept of the “global imaginary” will be useful in this chapter, where I argue that international fans who try to dissociate BTS from K-pop are complying with this idea by advocating for an authentic side of K-pop that is “handcrafted” by idols or in-house Korean producers, over a more global concept of K-pop produced through international collaborations. While the literature review suggests that the reason behind international fans’ voluntary (mis)interpretation of the K-pop producing process might be a lack of English-language resources, the reality is quite the contrary. Increasingly, articles highlight the work of international K-pop producers.¹³

¹¹ Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea*, 102-103.

¹² Ibid, 105.

¹³ For accounts on the production of K-pop outside of Korea, refer to those articles by CNN, Rolling Stone and the New York times. Alicia Lee, “You know your K-pop stars. Now meet the American producers and songwriters behind them,” *CNN*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/29/entertainment/bts-blackpink-kpop-american-producers-trnd/index.html>.

Elias Leight, “How American R&B Songwriters Found a New Home in K-pop,” *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/how-american-rb-songwriters-found-a-new-home-in-k-pop-627643/>.

Alex Marshall, “Sweden’s Songwriters Dominated U.S. Pop. Now, They’re Looking to Korea,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/arts/music/sweden-kpop-bts-red-velvet.html>.

Additionally, there is a growing amount of online content about the K-pop production process. A notable example is the YouTube channel “React to the K,” which began with reaction videos from classical musicians and later included interview songwriters and producers.¹⁴ K-pop producers have also started to maintain a social media presence, making them more vulnerable to the sharp judgement of the fans, as we will explore in the following sections of this chapter.

Methodology: the Making of a K-pop Producing Database

This chapter employs a dual approach to answer two sets of questions. The first set asks: What does the K-pop production process look like, and is it possible to visualize it? The second set inquires: Why do fans value idols' input in K-pop, can this input be quantified?

Each set of questions incorporates both a data-drive approach to visualize what I call the “reality of the process” and insights gathered from industry professionals. First, we will gather detailed information on the credits of songs by specific artists, analyze this data and conduct a network analysis. For each group, we will analyze and compare the network of their producers to see if the findings align with fans’ interpretations of the production process. Additionally, we will discuss the results from this data-driven approach with insights from K-pop industry producers based in and outside Korea, collected during fieldwork in South Korea from 2022-2023. Both datasets will be supplemented with social media posts collected through internet ethnography conducted throughout the thesis's data collection period. This dual approach, combining data-driven analysis and industry insights, is particularly valuable as it allows for a holistic examination of the K-pop production process and the role of idols' input. By visualizing the reality of the process through data and supplementing it with perspectives from industry professionals, this method effectively

¹⁴ ReacttotheK, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@ReacttotheK>.

bridges the gap between objective realities and subjective interpretations, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how authenticity is perceived and negotiated within the K-pop industry and its fandoms.

First Dataset: K-pop Song Credits and Network Analysis

(1) Retrieving K-pop Song Credits and Data Cleaning

K-pop song credits are publicly accessible on every streaming service and can also be checked through the Korea Music Copyright Association (한국음악저작권협회, KOMCA).¹⁵ However, when it comes to being able to retrieve this information in a systematic way, the task is more complicated. Korean streaming services such as MelOn or Genie do not provide API access, hence, there is no way to retrieve the data they host on their server through a request system. Although Spotify—one of the main international streaming services that launched its service in South Korea in 2021—offers an API, it does not include song credits. Genius—initially known for song lyrics and their interpretation—emerged as a viable alternative, with free API access and providing extensive details about songs beyond lyrics.

I initiated a coding project using Python, which offers flexibility through libraries. Python libraries are pre-existing collections of code modules and functions that provide programmers with a vast array of tools and utilities to streamline the development process, enhance functionality, and leverage established algorithms and data structures without the need for extensive reinvention. I found used a library called LyricsGenius which connects to Genius API to create a collection of lyrics and other details from a specific artist. Provided

¹⁵ Korea Music Copyright Association, Official Website, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.komca.or.kr/CTLJSP>.

with the name of an artist, LyricsGenius retrieves all information available on the Genius website, compiling it into a .json file.

```
1 {
2   "alternate_names": [],
3   "api_path": "/artists/970192",
4   "description": {
5     "plain": "NCT 127, sub-unit to the group NCT, is a South Korea-based boy group, whose name derives from the longitude of Seoul.",
6   },
7   "facebook_name": "NCT127.smtown",
8   "followers_count": 648,
9   "header_image_url": "https://images.genius.com/4f7e694c8356a5d2a9c78a2e66e4b414.640x213x1.webp",
10  "id": 970192,
11  "image_url": "https://images.genius.com/281f5848377061808cb9419d53694a98.1000x1000x1.webp",
12  "instagram_name": "nct127",
13  "is_meme_verified": false,
14  "is_verified": false,
15  "name": "NCT 127",
16  "translation_artist": false,
17  "twitter_name": "NCTsmtown_127",
18  "url": "https://genius.com/artists/Nct-127",
19  "current_user_metadata": {
20    "permissions": [
21      "view_activity_stream",
22      "view_discography"
23    ],
24    "excluded_permissions": [
25      "edit",
```

Fig 1. The first 25 lines (out of 136503) of the .json file obtained after putting “NCT 127” as an input for LyricsGenius.

Using Pandas—another Python library—I transformed the .json file into a .csv file, retaining only the relevant characteristics for the project. The challenge was deciding whether to extract credits directly from the “producer_artists” and “writer_artists” categories or from the “custom_performances” category, which had a more detailed breakdown, including composers, arrangers, and other subtleties. However, after using the code to retrieve data from various K-pop artists, I realized that some artists' song credits in “custom_performances” were filled in an inconsistent way. The combination “producer_artists” / “writer_artists” was the most reliable. Moreover, those two categories also provided each producer/writer with a profile picture and a direct link to their Genius profile, which helped me gather more information about them individually.

The meaning of “writer” and “producer” differ in this specific context. Here, a writer refers to someone who participated in the writing of the song, whether it is in terms of melody or lyrics, while a producer refers to someone who oversees the whole process of writing the song. This distinction, crucial in the data cleaning process, was clarified by the

producers I interviewed. K-pop also differentiates between a trackmaker (who writes the music) and a topliner (who adds the melody and lyrics). Topliner often write the lyrics since, most of the time, songs are presented to entertainment companies as “demo,” in English. We will come back to this important specificity later in the chapter.

Through the conversion and data cleaning process, I obtained a table of songs with the following characteristics: language, page_views, image, genius_track_id, album, genius_album_id, release_date, written_by, writer_id, writer_picture, produced_by, producer_id, producer_picture.

	title	language	page_views	image	genius_track_id	album	genius_album_id	release_date	written_by	writers_id	writers_pics	produced_by	producers_pics	
1	Regular (English Ver.)	en	1281070		398089	Regular-Irregular	462176	2018-10-09	[MARK (마크), 'TAEYONG (태용) [964585, 537324, 963914, 655] [https://images.g...]			[Mike Deasy', 'Michael Owens']	[655073, 640098] [https://images.g...	
2	Highway to Heaven (English Version)	en	544040		4604775	-single-	none	2019-07-19	[VEDO', 'Gaelen Whitemor', ' [963914, 1714555, 1823214, 1] [https://images.g [VEDO', 'Sean Machum', 'Gaelen Whitemor']				[963914, 1823214] [https://images.g...	
3	Cherry Bomb	ko	156783		3118541	CHERRY BOMB	349556	2017-06-14	[MARK (마크), 'Lim Jung Hyeo', [964585, 1612830, 1020342, 3] [https://images.g [DEEZ', 'Dem Jointz']				[149069, 194501] [https://images.g...	
4	CHERRY BOMB (English Version)	en	138758		4035535	Up Next Session: ♪	471908	2018-10-21	[조민호 (Oh Min Joo)', 'Lim Jun [1020342, 1612830, 31474, 99] [https://assets.g [MZMC', 'Kevin White', 'Mike Woods', 'Bazzi', 'R [844560, 669399, [https://images.g...					
5	영웅 (英雄: Kick It)	ko	95823		5252713	Neo Zone	602310	2020-03-05	[Rick Bridges', 'WUTAN (우탄), [1509867, 266271, 688681, 57] [https://images.g [Dem Jointz', 'DEEZ', '유영진 (Yoo Young Jin)']				[194501, 149069, [https://images.g...	
6	Baby Don't Like It (사랑 2)	ko	85779		2948649	LIMITLESS	322933	2017-01-06	[MARK (마크), 'TAEYONG (태용) [964585, 537324, 2036901] [https://images.g []				[]	[]
7	Chain	en	74090		3701519	Awaken	513950	2018-05-23	[메가메 (MEG.ME)] [1457453] [https://images.g [Albin Nordqvist', '250']				[1060282, 207786] [https://images.g...	
8	Fact Check (평가사리: 不可思議)	ko	68013		9467253	Fact Check	1075505	2023-10-06	[나영아 (Na Jung Ah)', 'WUTAN [3341712, 266271, 1509867, 2] [https://assets.g []				[]	[]
9	Sticker	ko	56577		7130356	STICKER	808293	2021-09-17	[TAEYONG (태용), 'MARK (마크) [537324, 994585, 1453191, 18] [https://images.g [Ryan S. Jhun', 'Dem Jointz', '유영진 (Yoo Young [579231, 194501, [https://images.g...					
10	Simon Says	ko	55478		4089689	Regulate	479275	2018-11-23	[제이브 (JCB), 'DADA (dadaumi) [11835, 1647190, 1250759, 98] [https://images.g [Design Music', '유영진 (Yoo Young Jin)']				[984867, 129346] [https://images.g...	
11	소방차 (Fire Truck)	ko	55141		2810869	NCT #127	158824	2016-07-07	[TAEYONG (태용), 'MARK (마크) [537324, 994585, 1067425, 10] [https://images.g [LDN Noise']				[95391] [https://images.g...	
12	짱구 (2 Baddies)	ko	46540		8304630	짱구 (2 Baddies)	940992	2022-09-16	[u200bbeckodomo (스크도모), [1751506, 1480219, 1732022, [https://images.g [u200bbaron wyme']				[1831185] [https://images.g...	
13	Lemonade	en	43170		7131994	STICKER	808293	2021-09-17	[한미르비 (Han Yeumir) [153/ [2882211, 2836011, 3146637, [https://assets.g [Rikman']				[3146637] [https://images.g...	

Fig 2. Example of the first lines of the .csv file after data cleaning.

An additional step was needed to prepare the data for the network analysis. Still using Pandas, I created a supplementary .csv file where each song would be broken into as many lines as there are producers or writers associated with it. This process is important for the network analysis software to create the relationships and label them depending on whether the individual is a writer or a producer.

Title	Source_Label	Title_ID	Title_Date	Popularity	Language	Role	Name	Name_ID	Picture	target_label
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	MARK (마크)	994585	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	TAEYONG (태용)	537324	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	VEDO	963914	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	Mike Daley	655073	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	Mitchell Owens	640098	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	George Kranz	8144	https://as...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Written by	유영진 (Yoo Young Jin)	129346	https://im...	Writer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Produced by	Mike Daley	655073	https://im...	Producer
Regular (English Ver.)	song	3980889	2018-10-09	1281070.0	en	Produced by	Mitchell Owens	640098	https://im...	Producer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Written by	VEDO	963914	https://im...	Writer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Written by	Gaelen Whitemor	1714555	https://as...	Writer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Written by	Sean Machum	1823214	https://as...	Writer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Written by	Social House	1496400	https://im...	Writer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Written by	Richard Garcia	672023	https://im...	Writer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Produced by	VEDO	963914	https://im...	Producer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Produced by	Sean Machum	1823214	https://as...	Producer
Highway to Heaven (English Version)	song	4604775	2019-07-19	544040.0	en	Produced by	Gaelen Whitemor	1714555	https://as...	Producer

Fig 3. Example of a .csv file prepared for network analysis.

(2) Quantify and visualize Someone's Involvement in the Network

For the network analysis, I used Neo4j, software that uses Cypher queries. Neo4j's visualization tool, Neo4j Bloom, helps generate visual representations of the data called “perspectives.” To quantify involvement in a network, I utilized the PageRank algorithm, which measures the importance of each node based on the number and significance of incoming relationships.¹⁶ Neo4j's Graph Data Science Library facilitates the calculation of PageRank for each node. Using the Graph Data Science library and the .csv file prepared for network analysis, I went through a four-step process:

- Step 1: Loading the data in Neo4j from the .csv file, attaching as a property the different headers—during this step, and given the way the query is constructed, it is possible to filter the data with some criteria such as date of release or language.
- Step 2: Create a Graph and a Song - Producer/Writer network.
- Step 3: Generate PageRank and attach the result for each network node as a property.
- Step 4: Establish a Ranking of the producers based on their PageRank value.

With PageRank, I generated network visualizations using Neo4j Bloom. The rule-based formatting settings enabled the adjustment of nodes' sizes and colors, highlighting the most relevant nodes in the network.¹⁷

Second Data Set: Interviews with Producers

To better understand the reality of K-pop production, I interviewed two Korean and one LA-based K-pop producers.

Bae Lee-sak (배이삭), also known under the rap name Kebee (ㄱㅣㅣ), is a Korean rapper, songwriter, and record producer. He got his start in music as a hip-hop artist in the 2000s, releasing his first album in 2004 and founding the Soul Company, an influential independent hip-hop label in South Korea, in the same year. He was also famous for his duo

¹⁶ “PageRank,” Neo4j Documentation, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://neo4j.com/docs/graph-data-science/current/algorithms/page-rank/>.

¹⁷ For a detailed description of the coding process, including data retrieval and network analysis, refer to the Jupyter Notebook attached to this chapter, <https://tinyurl.com/ThesisChapter3Jupyter>.

ELUPHANT with Minos, another rapper from the Soul Company. His first step into K-pop song producing was in 2010 when he wrote rap lyrics for “미쳤나봐 (Going Crazy)” on TWICE's first mini-album. He became a more recurrent K-pop producer in 2017, working on “Beautiful” for the boy group Wanna One.

Jeon Dasol (전다솔) is a Korea-based singer-songwriter. She majored in producing, was in a band for a few years, and released a self-produced album. As she didn't get the desired results, she started doing what she called “commercial music” and publishing demos. In 2019, she signed a contract with the publishing company Sol-si-re (솔시레). The first artist she worked with was Day6 (2019), her producing debut.¹⁸ She also worked with Ong Seongwoo (actor and former member of Wanna One) in 2020 and YoungK (real name: Kang Young-hyun, solo artist and leader of the boy group Day6) in 2021.

Alina Smith is a Russian American pop singer, songwriter, and record producer based in Los Angeles. She is the co-founder of the producing company LYRE Music Production. Initially aspiring to write country music, Alina transitioned to K-pop after her J-pop demos caught attention. Her first significant K-pop success was with Red Velvet, produced by SM Entertainment. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 reignited her interest in K-pop, leading to the hit “Mafia in the Morning” for ITZY, marking a turning point for her creatively and professionally.

Interestingly, all three interviewees considered K-pop producing as a secondary occupation. Kebee was active in the hip-hop scene, Dasol in classical music but also as a singer-songwriter, while Alina was aspiring to thrive in the world of country music before she turned to K-pop producing. Their varied backgrounds and relationships with K-pop entertainment companies and idols provide diverse perspectives on the production process.

¹⁸ Interestingly, a producing debut for Korean producers is characterized as 입봉 (ipbong), following a similar logic as the term 입덕 (iptölk) in Chapter 2 above.

Kebee, as a rapper and a producer, has directly collaborated with K-pop idols, while Dasol was a fan of Wanna One and NU'EST fan. As a producer by training, she always imagined that someday she'd be able to write for them. She confessed to me that she had her *songdŏk* moment when she had the opportunity to work with Ong Seongwoo—a former member of Wanna One—in 2021. Finally, Alina offers an outsider's view as a non-Korean producer based in the United States. In her interview, she explains how shocked she was to discover the difference between Korean culture and “Korean show culture,” as she labels it.

How to Produce a K-pop Song

The first set of questions I asked my interviewees was: “What is the process when writing a song for K-pop? Are there any steps/elements that are particular to K-pop? Do you have a specific artist in mind when you write a K-pop song?” Kebee explained:

“When I am writing a song as a hip-hop artist, I have to talk about my story. However, when I am writing a song for a K-pop artist, the company has a specific set of expectations, and there is a lot of back-and-forth.”¹⁹

Dasol, as a member of a publishing company, usually receives “a lead,” which she described as an invoice stating “this company wants this type of song for this artist and before this deadline.” Similarly, Kebee noted that the expectations and initial requirements for a song are getting more detailed. Companies use leads to specify the conditions they want for a song, including lyrics that match the artist's “atmosphere.” In contrast, Alina—a producer based in the U.S., does not write for specific artists. She explained that it is impossible for her to know the exact type of songs the labels want, as they have a specific marketing strategy for their groups which are not made public. Additionally, labels often plan well in advance, and some songs are released years after they are written.

¹⁹ Kebee, Interview in-person with author, November 22, 2022.

Kim Eana, a prominent lyricist and author mentioned above, also observed a similar phenomenon in her interview with Chris Lee, current CAO of SM Entertainment and former head of the production team. She asked why the lyrics she wrote with the “SM touch” in mind were never selected, while the company chose to move forward with lyrics she wrote without any specific intention. Chris Lee explains that SM prefers lyrics that “gives you a lot of food for thought within three minutes.”²⁰

Alina expressed some frustration with the uncertainty of the production process: “It changes every time; if you had interviewed me a few months ago, I would've given a different answer.” She explained that some songs she got published and that were picked up by labels did not initially sound like K-pop to her, and that she recognized them as K-pop only after seeing the artists perform them. According to her, it is important to write “songs that are unique to the writer because it is what the labels want.” Despite her different perspective as a foreign producer, she emphasized the importance of “building a relationship” with the label, similar to Kebee and Dasol.

A good relationship with the label often leads to an invitation to participate in a song camp. A song camp is a workshop, usually held in the headquarters of the entertainment company, where producers from all over the world, including Korea, collaborate to write songs for specific artists. Kebee noted that Korean producers usually take on the role of “trackmaker,” focusing on the music, while foreign producers are mostly “topliners,” adding the melody and the lyrics. Alina noted that song camps are the only instances where she was told, “Today you are writing for XYZ.” She enjoyed participating in those as it provided an opportunity to build international camaraderie among K-pop producers. Even though she gets help to sell her songs through her publishing company, Dasol also mentions that song camps allowed her to work with other “foreign producers” while selling a lot of songs. Song camps

²⁰ Eana Kim, *Kim Yina-ŭi Chaksabŏp*, 72-73.

are not only happening in Korea; Kebee mentioned that many Korean producers collaborate with Chinese entertainment companies. He had just finished an online song camp in China, where he worked with other Korean producers to create a list of songs. Those songs would then be sold to Chinese entertainment and broadcasting companies to be sung by Chinese idols.

When retrieving the credits of K-pop songs, I had to make strategic choices regarding which categories to use for my network. Dasol explained that while the order of the names in the song credits was not important, it was more important to check if someone was credited both as the producer and the writer of the song. Since the producer is the trackmaker and the writers are usually toplineers, if the same person is in both categories, their contribution to the track is higher. It is also common for the toplineer to write the lyrics. Although foreign producers in song camps have the role of toplineers and lyricists—like Kebee—are commissioned to adapt the lyrics of the song, Dasol noted that many Korean producers now also write lyrics because the payment system differs for trackmakers and toplineers.

The Myth of the Artist Working Alone in the Dark, a Narrative of Fantasy for the Fans

Still, some people say, “If you can’t arrange on your own, you’re not a producer,” and sometimes even question, ‘Why are you labeled as a composer if you’re not working on your own music, using being busy as an excuse?’ But because of ‘too much promotion,’ or just because they don’t do all the work in person, I’d like to ask those who criticize their music because of a lack of authenticity: who gets to decide what is music producing? Are people who participate in Song camps not real musicians? I argue that there is also an issue regarding how the ‘composer’ and ‘producer’ label became a marketing tool. It is possible to say that the quality of music has deteriorated over the years. However, not only the idol industry but also the way of making songs in the Korean music industry is changing, and the younger generation of musicians who accept this flow and try to adapt to it should not be ignored. Especially if it’s just to be judged by such faint criticism, as simple as ‘not authentic enough.’”²¹

²¹ Park, *Aidol-ŭi Chagŏpsil*, 13. Emphasis added.

As we have seen throughout the producers' explanations, creating a K-pop song is far more complex than a group or solo artist working alone on their instrument. To promote YouTube Red—the former name of YouTube premium—the documentary “Burn the Stage” was available worldwide as exclusive content on the platform in March 2018. The documentary, showcasing the behind-the-scenes of BTS' North American tour in 2017, featured numerous scenes of members writing music in their hotel rooms between concerts.

Dasol explained, “It looks like making a song is about being alone in a dark room, but in fact, it works like a ‘normal company.’ It takes a whole village to make a K-pop song!” For Kebee, this specific production process helps K-pop produce results that are diversely understood and enjoyed worldwide. Dasol also mentioned that some artists attend and participate in song camps, providing opportunities to work directly with the artists themselves, especially solo artists. Alina notes that solo artists are more involved in writing and allowed to participate. She observed that younger artists are less involved in the process, recalling how younger trainees at labels showed her great respect during her visits to the headquarters.

Park's criticism of the overuse of “producer” and “composer” by entertainment companies when it comes to highlighting the specificity of an idol, along with our extensive exploration of the K-pop producing process with our three producers, gives us reason to ask: how, and why, does the vision of K-pop being created by the artists themselves prevail among fans?

Idol Producer: a Title to Assert K-pop's Authenticity

I asked Kebee to define “idol producer” because of his extensive work with Brand New Music, an entertainment company famous for training Lee Daehwi, a former member of

Wanna One and current member of the group AB6IX.²² Lee Daehwi gained attention on the in the survival show “Produce 101,” by performing “Hollywood” with his co-trainees, a song he had produced.²³ At the time of my interview with Kebee, Lee Daehwi had just won the music competition show “Listen Up,” where different producers would compete to become the best K-pop producer. Lee Daehwi was appearing as the representative of idol producers.

According to Kebee, an idol producer is someone who understands music deeply and can discuss the directions of the work with the artist. Instead of a one-direction relationship where the in-house producer gives specific directions to the idol, the idol producer acts as an intermediary in this process. In his interview with Park Hee-a, Woozi—a famous idol producer in SEVENTEEN—explained his special relationship with BUMZU, their in-house producer. “He inspired me not only daily but also technically. His passion for music ... I think this is the thing that I’ve learned from him.”²⁴ When asked if the other members participate in the songwriting process, he explains that even if that while other members are active in meetings, they often tend to rely on him and BUMZU due to their musical experience.²⁵

In *Beyond the Story: 10-Year Record of BTS*, journalist Myeonseok Kang compiles interviews with BTS members, revealing the background of BTS’ formation.²⁶ SUGA (real name: Min Yoongi) initially joined BigHit Entertainment as an in-house producer, attracted

²² For an extensive account about AB6IX and a deep dive into K-pop fandom practices by an aca-fan of Lee Daehwi, refer to Jungwon Kim, *Ŭmagillyuhakcha-ŭi K'eip'ap'agi: Taejungŭmak, P'aendŏm, Kŭrigo Chŏngch'esŏng [Ethnomusicologist's K-Popping: Popular Music, Fandom, and Identities]* (Seoul: Sech'ang Ch'ulp'ansa, 2022).

²³ Mnet TV, “PRODUCE 101 season2 Hollywood,” YouTube Video, April 17, 2017, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcp_BSavd78.

²⁴ Park, *Aidol-ŭi Chagŏpsil*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁶ Myeongseok Kang and BTS, *Beyond the Story: 10-Year Record of BTS*, trans. Anton Hur, Slin Jung, and Clare Richards (London: Macmillan, 2023).

by Bang Si-hyuk’s reputation.²⁷ However, his underground producer/dancer background from Daegu matched Bang Si-hyuk’s vision for BTS, leading to his selection as a BTS member.

The first chapter of *Beyond the Story*, “Seoul,” details how SUGA, J-HOPE, and RM (formerly Rap Monster) educated the other members—Jungkook, V, Jimin, Jin—so they could all start their careers as “hip-hop idols” at the same pace.²⁸

	Name	PageRank		Name	PageRank
1	Pdogg	4.865685517333538	12	ADORA	0.4618198676323676
2	RM	4.192377887463408	13	브라더수 (Brother Su)	0.4548791208791209
3	SUGA (슈가)	3.2401832903938104	14	Jung Kook (정국)	0.4000430819180819
4	j-hope	2.61705233801286	(...)		
5	Slow Rabbit	2.4209672619047597	18	V (뷔)	0.29914697802197804
6	“hitman” Bang	2.0561172161172143	24	Jin (진)	0.2682916666666667
7	Supreme Boi	1.4481740342990341	(...)		
8	Kang Minkook	0.68125	45	Jimin (지민)	0.20737500000000003

Table 1. PageRank of BTS producers/writers for songs written between June 2013 and November 2019 — BTS members are in bold.

²⁷ Bang Si-hyuk—also known as Hitman Bang—is the main producer of BTS. He worked in the entertainment industry as an in-house producer before establishing his own company and starting his career with the launching of BTS. He is currently the CEO of HYBE Entertainment, a conglomerate of labels producing K-pop idols.

²⁸ Kang and BTS, *Beyond the Story*, 26.

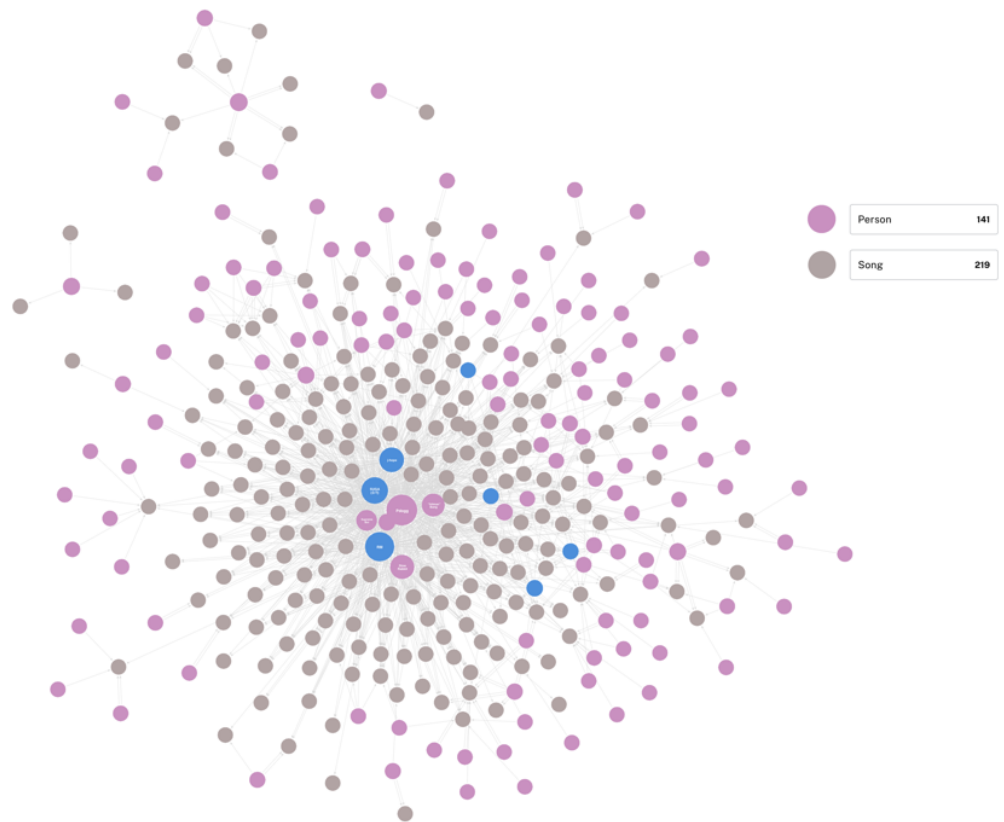


Fig 4a. Overall network of BTS producers/writers (from June 2013 to November 2019).

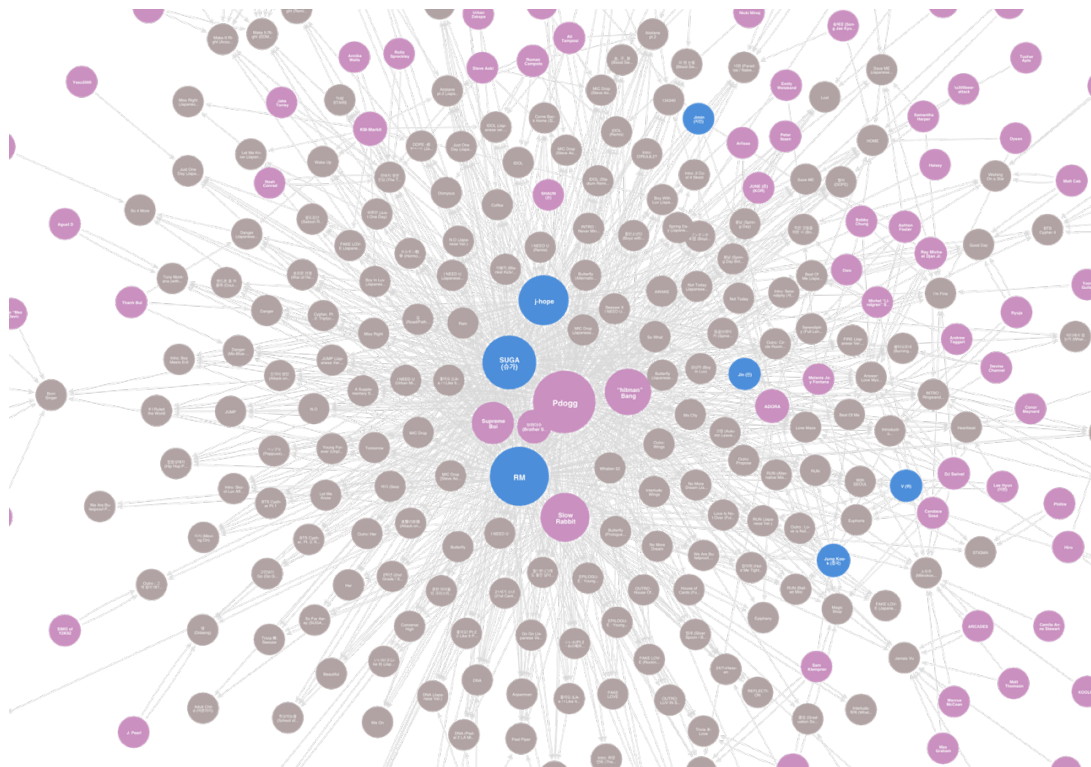


Fig 4b. Zoom-in with rule-based formatting applied: size of the node 1x to 4x depending on PageRank (BTS members are in royal blue).

Table 1 shows the PageRank of BTS producers and writers from June 2013 to November 2020. With the data from figures 4a and 4b, we can verify that all members participated heavily in the producing of the songs, with a divide between three members who participated most heavily—RM, SUGA, and j-hope—and four others who participated a bit less: Jung Kook, V, Jimin, and Jin. The data also reveals the in-house producers who worked with BTS at their debut: PDOGG, Slow Rabbit, ‘Hitman’ Bang (Bang Si-hyuk’s producer tag), and Supreme Boi. When the panel “Behind the Scenes with the Producers of BTS” was announced at KCON, featuring Candace Sosa (who worked on a total of 10 songs with BTS), DJ Swivel (9 songs), and Krysta Youngs (4 songs), a Twitter user angrily posited: “Who are these people flying a** f***? The only PRODUCERS I know are Pdogg, Slow Rabbit, Hitman Bang, Adora, Hiss Noise, RM, Suga and J-hope.” Such a reaction shows a puzzling phenomenon where fans are more inclined to understand the concept of in-house producers but less to recognize the outsourcing of entertainment companies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the popularity of BTS has a lot to do with the focus on storytelling and the narrative of the underdog from a smaller entertainment company, which was religiously documented by the members through textual and video blog posts. According to Kang, in the content BTS uploaded before their debut, “BTS members were not just idols. They were rappers who released mixtapes and YouTubers who gave tutorials on music production and dance.”²⁹ BTS members used the hip-hop culture as their special trait, but since hip-hop is—in essence—all about talking about one’s experience, as we saw with Kebee’s interview, it naturally involves the member’s participation in the making of the songs.³⁰ The connection was made organically, and BTS was seen—more than others—as idols who really participate in their own music. Learning about the etiquette of idol-producer

²⁹ Kang and BTS, *Beyond the Story*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

and how it was claimed by entertainment companies as a way to dismantle the prejudice that K-pop is over-fabricated and inauthentic, we can understand how fans could also maintain and defend the narrative that their idol are the only ones writing their own music. They want their artist to stay legitimate and get the recognition they deserve—even if that means denying the labor of numerous other people.

“K-pop idol culture is a culture of Fantasy”

In this section, we will explore the paradoxical relationship between fans' desire to accumulate information and insights about their favorite K-pop idols (“information hoarding”), and the phenomenon of rejection that occurs when the carefully curated fantasy surrounding these idols is disrupted or broken. Unlike the idol producer narrative explored earlier, which showcases idols' involvement in the creative process, there is a tendency among K-pop entertainment companies to selectively highlight and market the idols' participation in decisions regarding their music direction and image. This selective showcasing aims to foster a sense of authenticity and connection with fans, while still maintaining an idealized, fantasy-like portrayal of the idols.

SM Entertainment recently started uploading behind-the-scenes videos titled “UnCut” on their YouTube channels. This series showcases the entire process of an artist’s comeback. For this section, I will provide a short textual analysis of the “UnCut” series related to “Sticker,” the title song of the group NCT127, released on September 17, 2021. The “UnCut” series for “Sticker” consists of five videos, released from October 5, 2021, to October 18, 2021. Each video focuses on a different step of the song's promotion: the jacket photoshoot, the shooting of the main and other side tracks music videos, the dance practice, and finally the recording. A clip from the last video of the “Sticker” series, titled “[Un Cut] Take #5 |

‘Sticker’ Recording Behind the Scene,” generated much discussion among the fans.³¹ It begins with footage of a work meeting between the members of NCT127 and the production team. Seated around a table, they listen together to the title song they are going to promote.

According to Randy—writer at Idology.kr—“SM Entertainment has excelled by combining unconventional sounds with familiar elements. This song relies heavily on a flute-like synth that echoes the theme, building a delicate structure with minimal bass and drumbeats.”³² The experimental personality of “Sticker” has generated a lot of discussion among fans, particularly because of this “flute-like” synth. The editing of the reaction video highlights an amusing contrast between Taeyong, the team leader, who seems to completely enjoy the song, standing up and dancing alone to the music, while the other members remain stoic. They seem either concerned or extremely focused. This contrast did not escape the fans’ sharp eyes, who started isolating the members’ reactions one by one to emphasize how confusing it must have been to digest the news that they would have to record such a song and make it theirs.

As Oh explains in her canonical article on the queering vidding practices of K-pop fans, fans often use out-of-context clips to craft a narrative of identification.³³ Building on this concept, I argue that fans are playing with interpretations rather than completely buying into the narrative that the entertainment company is trying to sell them. By highlighting how the artists were dumbfounded during the first listen of the song, fans distance them from the production process. However, by praising the members for their energetic performance during the recording, the fans simultaneously emphasize the artists’ individual contributions.

³¹ NCT127, “[Un Cut] Take #5 | ‘Sticker’ Recording Behind the Scene,” YouTube Video, October 18, 2021, 27:03, https://youtu.be/zZwC3_2FrOM?si=_MzMmioQNmCkXls3&t=38.

³² Randy, “Monthly: September 2021 – Album,” *Idology*, October 17, 2021, <https://idology.kr/16428>.

³³ Chuyun Oh, “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: The Androgynous Male Dancing Body and Western Female Fandom,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 59–78.

This allows fans to craft a narrative that acknowledges the artists' involvement, using content provided by the entertainment company to suggest that the song's success and its alignment with the “neo-touch”—a word used to define the singularity of NCT—concept are thanks to the artists' dedication and effort.

During our interview, when asked what it feels like to work in the K-pop industry, Kebee explained that his duty is to “fill in the fantasy” of K-pop fans. He drew an interesting comparison: “In my job, I feel like I am working at Disneyland. When a kid goes to Disneyland, even though the characters do not exist, they must feel like everything is real and happy to be immersed in this world. It's the same thing with working for K-pop fans.” According to him, fans' passion for K-pop exceeds simply enjoying music: it is not only about listening to it anymore but also about understanding the whole universe. Indeed, even if fans craft their own narratives, they still remain very conscious of who works with their artists. Dasol has already received direct messages from international fans on her personal social media accounts asking for personal details about the artists. However, she cannot answer this type of inquiry due to the terms of her contract.

I discovered Alina's TikTok account during the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the app's algorithm. I remember finding her content quite refreshing—there weren't yet a lot of K-pop producers who were sharing information about what it was like to produce songs for the industry, especially on a platform like TikTok. Alina started making content about her work as a producer to get more visibility and create an audience. While making content and monitoring the reactions from the fans, she remarked on a disconnect between the fans' and the songwriter's perspectives. “They think that we have way more power than we do and really think that we can just DM them directly. I literally get messages that go like ‘Tell them this, tell them that’ ... but some fans are really young and probably don't understand how it works.” She is completely aware that fans want to believe that their artist created everything

but emphasizes—like Dasol—that it is impossible and that it takes a whole team to complete a K-pop song.

What was interesting in my conversation with Alina was that she also noticed how misinformation was easily spread in fan communities. “People believe something; just take it point blank and never take the time to research it.” When “Mafia in the Morning,” a song she wrote for ITZY, got very positive from the fandom and the general public, her TikTok account started getting visibility. She proudly started to upload small clips showing the process behind the creation of the song. Even if Alina is clearly credited as the sole producer of the song (under LYRE, the name of her producing company), a lot of fans had an issue with her “appropriating” the song, arguing that JYP—also known as Park Jin Young, executive producer of ITZY—was the one who wrote the song. Despite those reactions, she told me that these issues are part of her job. As a result, she is mindful of the vocabulary she uses. In her content, she purposely used phrases like “I co-wrote” and “the girls helped me.” She adds, “I am willing to say what I need to say to preserve this fantasy of the artist writing the stuff.” This statement sends us back to Kebee’s argument of K-pop as a culture of fantasy.

Alina explains that, in the end, even if they are only “credited” but not featured, she is extremely thankful for the attention. She acknowledges that this is a specificity of K-pop and that in “Western” music, they do not get that much credit. Amused, she mentions that sometimes, fans really think of them as idols, and that’s probably why they misunderstand her collaboration with other people. She also explains that while some of her colleagues enjoy getting this recognition as “K-pop producers,” others prefer to keep it private. Finally, Alina relates her positionality as a woman K-pop producer making content on TikTok. She had yet to see male producers accused of appropriating anyone’s success, while this has been historically the case for some women producers.

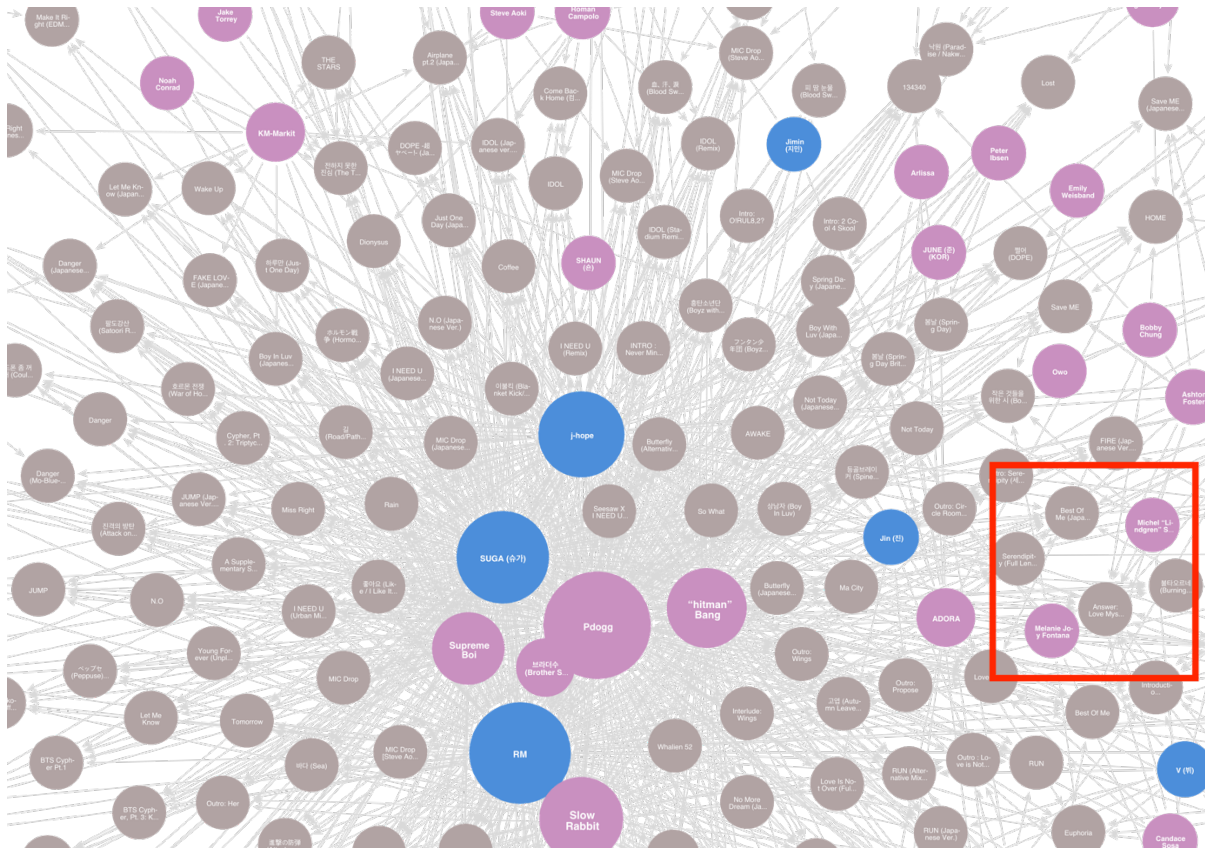


Fig 5. Part of the network analysis of BTS from 2013-2019 showing the presence of Melanie Joy Fontana and Michel “Lindgren” Schulz.

	Name	PageRank		Name	PageRank
1	Pdogg	5.784803212138733	8	David Stewart	1.0850000000000004
2	RM	5.044909064619587	9	Jung Kook (정국)	0.71095082001332
3	SUGA (슈가)	3.893663601749123	10	Kang Minkook	0.68125
4	j-hope	3.0338987207967425	(...)		
5	Slow Rabbit	2.5653582875457848	34	Melanie Joy Fontana	0.2773482142857143
6	“hitman” Bang	2.175265817515815	43	Michel “Lindgren” Schulz	0.2401607142857143
7	Supreme Boi	1.6697811771561772			

Table 2. PageRank of BTS producers/writers for songs written between June 2013 and June 2022 — BTS members are in bold.

Alina alludes to the case of Melanie Fontana, who we first mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. Fontana is a songwriter who works in tandem with the producer Michel Schulz, also known as “Lindgren.” If we look at the data from Table 2, which considers BTS' whole discography, we can see that Melanie Joy Fontana has a fair

PageRank—she ranks 34th out of 226 producers/writers. She has been writing K-pop songs since 2013 and was approached directly by Big Hit Entertainment to write songs for BTS. One of her big achievements was participating in writing the song “Boy with Luv,” released in April 2019. This song asserted the popularity of BTS in the United States—especially after it was performed first for Saturday Night Live, as the first K-pop act ever to attend the show as a musical guest.³⁴ Fontana used social media to express her gratitude and pride toward such an accomplishment. She had unfortunately faced the backlash from a part of the fandom who thought she was trying to focus the accomplishment on herself solely. She suffered from a severe wave of cyberbullying, and to this date, she does not engage in any interviews or public speaking events that are related to K-pop.³⁵

In summary, the “UnCut” series and the reactions it generated among NCT127 fans reveal a complex interplay between the fantasy constructed by the entertainment company—and the reality of the K-pop industry. The reactions to the “Sticker” recording highlight how fans navigate the tension between the constructed narratives presented by entertainment companies and their own interpretations. As we saw in Chapter 2, by selectively isolating moments showcasing idols, fans create their own narratives that both challenge and reinforce the official storylines. While producers and songwriters often work behind the scenes, their interactions with fans reveal a persistent desire to maintain the fantasy of idol involvement in the creative process. The case of Melanie Joy Fontana underscores the difficulties faced by those who are perceived as intruding on this fantasy, demonstrating the fine line that industry professionals must walk. Ultimately, this section demonstrates that K-pop fandom is characterized by a continual negotiation of authenticity and fantasy. But what are the fans so scared of? It seems that their fear lies in the potential loss of K-pop's Korean identity. As K-

³⁴ Lee, “You know your K-pop stars.”

³⁵ I tried to interview her for the sake of this thesis, and this is the answer that I got from her manager through a personal e-mail communication.

pop has become increasingly global, with significant contributions from foreign producers, fans worry that the genre might lose its distinct cultural essence. By maintaining the fantasy of strong idol involvement and a purely Korean production process, fans protect their perception of K-pop as a uniquely Korean phenomenon. This dynamic relationship between fans, idols, and industry professionals is central to the unique appeal and global success of K-pop, yet it also highlights the underlying anxieties about cultural authenticity in an era of global production.

What is Korean about K-pop?

In March 2023, Bang Si-hyuk held a press conference declaring that K-pop is “in crisis.”³⁶ Despite K-pop's explosive growth in recent years, its business expansion has slowed, with exports showing significantly reduced growth rates. Bang emphasized that K-pop, which accounts for only 2% of global music record and streaming sales, lacks an economy of scale. The hiatus of BTS, one of the industry's most influential acts, has also contributed to this slowdown. To address these challenges, Bang suggested that K-pop should evolve beyond its Korean roots and embrace a more global identity. He argued that diluting the “K” in K-pop could help resolve the crisis, as K-pop has become a culture that encompasses fans' behaviors, production, and the industrial system rather than just a music genre. In retrospect, it turns out that Bang Si-hyuk used this press conference to justify his attempt at taking over SM Entertainment.

When asked about his own definition of K-pop, Kebee says that he thinks that there is a reflection of Korean society in some aspects of K-pop. One example that he gave is “competition.” For Kebee, in the same way competition culture infiltrated the Korean hip-hop

³⁶ Se Eun Gong, “Why K-pop’s future is in crisis, according to its chief guardian,” *NPR*, April 8, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/08/1167946578/kpop-bts-hiatus>.

culture, K-pop is a competition system that, while based in Korea, is created *with* global artists. Dasol also noticed this aspect. For her, as K-pop became popular overseas, she had to “compete” with foreign producers. Kebee recalls that more than half of trackmakers are from outside Korea. For boy bands, there are no melody makers in Korea. More than 80% of melodies are based on an “English guide song” in order to be bankable. The situation explains how much K-pop is “craving” pop songs, which is quite ironic. According to him, the guide they receive when asked for songs also mentions where the music needs to be sold, influencing the focus. For example, if the song is for the North American market, the focus will be on dance music to allow for more performance aspects; if it's for Japan, they will ask for more melodies.

Parallel to the rise of “foreign” producers in K-pop, there is also a trend of non-K-pop artists featured in K-pop songs. These features appear as a two-way transaction. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a strategy to attract a new audience and show that those artists are “able” to obtain these features. An example of this is the variety of features the group TXT (Tomorrow X Together—under HYBE entertainment and considered as “little brother group of BTS”) did with the American pop-rock band the Jonas Brothers (in July 2023) and the Latin pop superstar Anitta (in September 2023). On the other hand, as K-pop is getting more and more recognized in mainstream pop music, pop artists can use those features to broaden their audience.

When Halsey—an American pop singer—was featured with BTS on “Boy With Luv,” it was interesting to see that Halsey did not get the same amount of hate as Melanie Joy Fontana, even if she also expressed the same pride regarding the good reception of the song. Maybe this is because Halsey was featured in numerous BTS videos, where she would appear as very close with the different members. There is even an unofficial picture of SUGA, one of the members, holding Halsey's child in his arms.

More recently, in May 2024, Stray Kids released “Lose My Breath” featuring the American singer-songwriter Charlie Puth. Stray Kids is a group that debuted under JYP Entertainment in 2018. They have been marketed as a “self-produced” group with songs mainly produced by a team of three members known under the name 3RACHA (Bang Chan, HAN, and Changbin). As we see in Table 3 attached below, 3RACHA participates in the producing and writing process of almost all the songs. If we had to find the most authentic K-pop group, this could be the one.

	Name	PageRank		Name	PageRank
1	BANG CHAN	5.152623980186477	9	HYUNJIN	0.5791548243423243
2	HAN (Stray Kids)	4.592221923909418	10	Trippy (트립피)	0.547375
3	CHANGBIN	4.2794421620046545	11	bearattack	0.5393303571428573
4	3RACHA	1.761151577589077	12	J.Y. Park	0.5079613095238096
5	베르사췌 (VERSACHOI)	0.8587426948051949	13	SEUNGMIN	0.4835298243423244
6	KM-Markit	0.8403720238095241	14	LN	0.4705314477189478
7	홍지상 (Hong Ji Sang)	0.6540297619047621	15	Stray Kids	0.4246153846153847
8	FELIX (Stray Kids)	0.6184673243423245	16	LEE KNOW	0.4155298243423244

Table 3. PageRank of Stray Kids producers/writers — Stray Kids members are in bold.

When the song with Charlie Puth was released, a discourse among fans started emerging, saying that the feature did not add anything to the song. However, since the song was written by Charlie Puth in collaboration with the 3RACHA members, fans had to tread carefully and framed it as an “exploration” to satisfy a broader American audience. In an intriguing Twitter conversation, a Stray Kids fan responded to an American journalist’s criticism of the song by saying: “I can agree that Charlie voice is kinda bland and that they are probably trying to attract more of the U.S. public with something more palatable for the general public. There will be releases that we don't enjoy as much, but I like to see them trying something different.” The fan attached an infographic entitled “SKZ Participation in

Music Production.” The first line says: “Production Participation in SKZ Albums — 100% Writing, 93.2% Composing, 33.3% Arranging” and provided a breakdown by album released. This type of infographic is common among fans who enjoy archiving the accomplishments of their idols. In this context, the fan seems to be less disappointed in the song—knowing that it was still a production of the Stray Kids members—than if it had been a song produced by an international producer.

When asked about her definition of K-pop, Alina says that a couple of years ago, she would refer to it as “Korea's pop music,” different than Western music, with parts in the songs reserved for each member. This part of Alina's definition echoes what Dasol shared about her writing process. When she is writing a song for K-pop, she has to take into account the personality of the artist/group and needs to make the artist “stand out.” Alina highlights that they need their moment to shine—which is why there are so many melodies and track changes to facilitate those special sections. However, now, she would argue that it's pop music in Korean. She remarked on how many aspects of Western music have “penetrated” K-pop. She sometimes gets on her TikTok comments that Western producers are ruining K-pop,

but she wants the fans to know that, in the end, the labels are the ones who choose the songs.

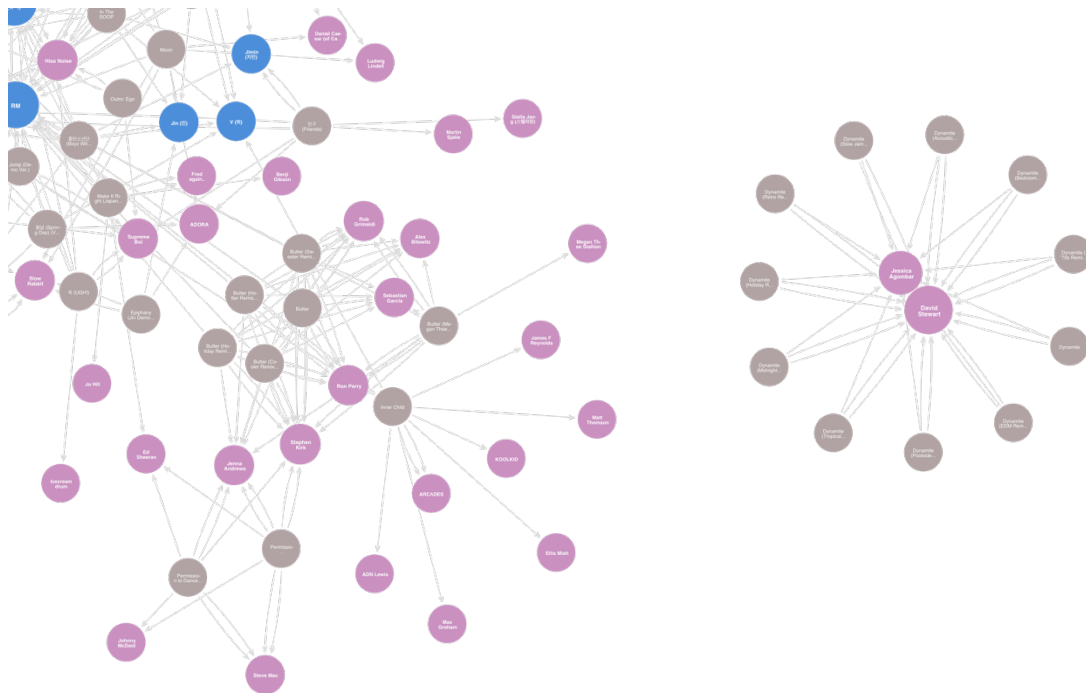


Fig 6. Partial representation of BTS' production network (from January 2020 to June 2022).

In this visual representation of BTS' production network above, the nodes representing the trinity of English-language releases are completely on the side. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of BTS did not decline, and the members released their first English song, *Dynamite*. The song, released on August 21, 2020, was a real hit—becoming the first South Korean act ever to top the Billboard Hot 100. “*Dynamite*,” written by Jessica Agombar and David Stewart, is one of the rare songs in which no in-house producer or BTS members credited. In an interview, the members mentioned that they received the guide song in English and initially intended to change the lyrics into Korean and adjust the melody accordingly, as often happens in the K-pop song-producing process. However, they liked the guide so much as it was that they decided to record it in English.³⁷ “*Dynamite*” was the start of a series of English releases for the group, followed by “*Butter*”

³⁷ Ana Monroy Yglesias, “BTS Talk Inspiration Behind ‘Dynamite,’ New 2020 Album, Gratitude For ARMY & More,” *Grammy*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/news/bts-dynamite-interview-new-album-army>.

in May 2021 and then “Permission to Dance” in July 2021. Putting this into perspective with Bang Si-hyuk’s press conference, we can then understand his intent in pushing English releases for BTS. However, the lack of Korean-language releases, along with an over-focus on the North American audience of the band, led to a severe drop in BTS’ Korean fandom.³⁸

Even though each K-pop artist’s network of song credits is different and unique, there is a common point. Each K-pop production process is a combination of in-house and international producers, with the artists also participating—depending on their seniority and desire to do so. Idols being involved in the production process is not necessarily unique to specific artists, but depends on how the entertainment company frames the idol’s image. The internationalized production process of K-pop is a concrete consequence of the Korean Wave, with producers who have been exposed to K-pop in the early 2010s being more aware of the genre. They can create songs that will attract entertainment companies. Fans’ reception of the production process leans towards accepting in-house producers but being defensive about non-Korean producers’ involvement. This defensiveness is likely due to fears of K-pop turning into just “regular” pop music and concerns that America’s position as the main market, now threatened by K-pop, might vampirize the K-pop industry.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I wanted to provide a deep dive into the production process of K-pop songs, a topic that has not been explored extensively in the academic sphere of scholarship on K-pop. To do so, I put two different data sets into conversation: a series of three interviews (two with Korean producers and one with a producer based in LA) and a network analysis of K-pop song credits. While I presented a limited number of results and visualizations of the

³⁸ John Yoon, “In K-pop’s Quest for Global Growth, Korean Fans Feel Cast Aside,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/04/business/sm-entertainment-kakao-hybe-kpop.html>.

network analysis in this chapter, the most significant contribution was the process of finding a systematic way to generate them.

I gathered interviews with people working directly in the K-pop entertainment industry and discussed their different perspectives and positionalities depending on their backgrounds, gender, nationality, and location. Along with this dataset, I created a system to obtain, at a certain moment, a current snapshot of the network of K-pop producers for a specific artist. I compared networks and established a list of the most influential individuals using the PageRank algorithm.

Along with the first two chapters, another paradox is highlighted after the analysis of the K-pop producer process and its reception in the K-pop fandom(s). Even though the fan community is portrayed as very passionate and as “information hoarders,” some overlook the reality of the production process regarding their favorite artist. By highlighting the artist’s participation and involvement in the writing/producing of the songs, they—often unintentionally—deny the labor of all those artists who are—equally—contributing to create the “perfect song.” One of my interviewees, Dasol—who is also a fan herself—mentioned the fact that Korean fans tend to attribute the artists’ accomplishments as their own because they worked so hard to help them in that process. In this process, a lot of the weaponizing goes to the entertainment companies. They are aware of this and weaponize the category of the “idol producer” into a narrative that gives more authenticity to the K-pop idols. By only putting the artists in the spotlight, they (sometimes) stage the way they contribute to the production process.

In a debate where the “K” of K-pop is becoming less and less obvious and where there are many conversations about the loss of Koreanness in K-pop, it is puzzling to see that, according to all the three producers I have interviewed, the only distinctly Korean aspect of K-pop is the language—especially given how there are also fewer and fewer Korean words in

the songs. This is a debate that even international fans are passionate about. While it was a common practice for fans to compare the line distribution of a K-pop song to ensure that each member had an equal share of lines, it is now possible to see language breakdowns on YouTube and TikTok, where the percentage of English, Korean and other onomatopoeia is measured.³⁹ This tendency reflects how the international fandom of K-pop reacts so heavily against the growing participation of non-Korean producers in K-pop. Once again, the responsible actors are the companies—since the producers’ interviews revealed that the companies are the ones choosing the songs. This sheds light on a curious phenomenon where international fans with no ties to Korea replicate a nationalistic discourse. In the end, what if what was *really* Korean about K-pop was the transmission of the nationalist tendencies of its fandom culture?

³⁹ Lylvz, “BABYMONSTER - Batter Up | Language Distribution,” YouTube Video, January 5, 2024, 3:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kI_uCA0cEgE&pp=ygUdbGFuZ3VhZ2UgYnJlYWtkb3duIGtwb3Agc29uZ3M%3D.

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Ethnographic Skit

My first “Pre-recording” at JTBC’s Music Universe K-909

Finally, another fan-activity I was able cross off my bingo card! September 19, 2022 was a special day because I was attending my first “pre-recording.” A pre-recording is when a small number of fans are selected to attend the recording of a performance. For some music shows, performances are not recorded live to prevent any major mistakes and ensure the best result. It is very hard to get into a pre-recording. At a specific time, a link is uploaded on the fan club app and fans have to be among the first 150 to fill out a form with their full name, phone number and fan club card number to apply.¹ After trying twice on my own and failing miserably, I decided to use a proxy or *taeri* (대리) in Korea. A *taeri* is a person you pay to do the application process for you. They usually have tricks to fill out and submit the form very quickly. Each *taeri* has their own process, but for mine, I had to suggest a “reward.” If they succeeded, they would get the reward, if not, they would just get a small process fee. I was very lucky because my *taeri* worked hard and got me in!

Not only it was my first time attending a pre-recording, but also it was also for a new music show. Music Universe K-909, broadcasted by JTBC, is different from other music programs. According to Kim, music programs in South Korea over the years had to adapt their format—since they slowly started to cater to a broader audience, following the flow of the Korean Wave.² Music Universe K-909 focuses on a smaller pool of artists, giving them the opportunity to perform several songs instead of just one.³ Music Universe is quite

¹ At the time of writing, the KWANGYA app does not exist anymore, and all services have been moved to Weverse.

² For an extensive account on Korean music shows, see Suk-Young Kim, “K-Pop from Live Television to Social Media,” in *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 53–92.

³ Confused about the reason behind the use of 909? Try to mirror “909.”

interesting because it is the first music program labeled as a show about “K-pop” and the MC is none other than BoA, widely known as the first K-pop/Hallyu star.

After seeing NCT127 a few days earlier for their comeback show, here I was again on my way to Ilsan on a Monday morning. While people were heading to Gangnam to start their work week, I was one of the few heading in the opposite direction. Once seated in the bus, I checked if I had everything. The announcement was very strict: to get in, you needed a light stick, the latest NCT127 album (with the CD inside), a fan club card and a valid ID. Even though I was excited to have this opportunity to see NCT members up close, I was also a little nervous. I was scared I might make a mistake and stand out too much because of it. I already expected that I would be the only male, and probably one of the few non-Korean fans there. On this September morning, the weather was still pretty hot. As I got off the bus and walked towards the JTBC studios, I saw some people sitting in the shade, holding their “neo-bong” (the NCT light stick). I decided to do the same and wait patiently for instructions. Suddenly, two employees came out and asked us to line-up according to the numbers we got.

When you fill out the form to apply for the pre-recording, you don't know right away if you got in. You have to do the *myōngdan hwagin* (명단확인, attendance verification), and everyone who gets in receives number from 1 to 150 depending on how fast they submitted the form. I was 79—not bad! I shyly asked people around me for their number and finally waited in line. The employees quickly checked that everyone had their light stick, album, and even verified that the phone number provided was actually ours by going in the settings menu of our phones! I was amazed at the speed of their checks but also the lack of flexibility. As soon as they started checking, anyone arriving late would be put at the end of the queue, regardless of their initial number.

After the first check, the employees told us to wait 45 minutes. While waiting, I looked around and saw people sharing snacks in small groups or alone. Amusingly, I ended

up sitting next to a group talking about 해외 팬 (*hae'oe p'aen*, overseas fans). They were saying that during the comeback show three days ago, the crowd was very agitated, and they were putting the blame on them. I even heard the famous slur some Korean fans use to refer to non-Korean fans, 외퀴 (*oek'wi*, “foreign” cockroach)... If only they knew that the person near them was understanding what they were saying!

After the 45 minutes, the employees came out again and told us we had to help another artist, Crush. He needed more people in his crowd, so he gently asked NCT to “borrow” their fans, which they accepted. “Two pre-recording in one day, nice!” I thought to myself, as I was also excited to see Crush's performance. Before entering, we are lectured on not bringing anything inside, leaving all bags outside, and not bringing our neo-bong inside, since we were not seeing NCT yet. As I entered the studio, someone told me to stand on the side. I understand it was probably because of my height. Even with my number, I ended up in the front row of the catwalk. After a few minutes of setting up, BoA come out and recorded some of the segments that introduced the show. I was surprised by the direction of the show: the music was introduced as “K-pop” with a big emphasis on the global aspect of it. The recording of the segments ended, and Crush performed two songs. After that, he and BoA recorded an interview, and we were told to leave. We had an hour break before hopefully finally seeing NCT127. I decided to use this hour break to have lunch, not knowing how long the recording would be.

Once I was back from my lunch break, I waited again in the shade. It was already 2 p.m., and I had arrived at 11 a.m. for the attendance check. The employees asked us to stand in line again and announced something, but I couldn't hear it well. It seemed to be good news since everyone was cheering. I made eye contact with someone behind me who told me—in Korean—that we were able to leave after seeing NCT127 perform. The announcement for the pre-recording had stated that once inside the studio, even after NCT127's performance and if

the recording wasn't over, we could not leave. Everyone was relieved that they wouldn't have to stand and wait for hours and hours even after the performance. While I was still processing the news, I suddenly heard: "Who is your favorite member?" Surprised that she started the conversation, I took a moment to answer but then told her my favorite in NCT127 was Mark. "Me too!" she happily replied. As we conversed in Korean, and we both wore face masks, I assumed that I was talking with a Korean NCTzen, but I later discovered she was a Vietnamese graduate student. She had spent the whole night awake and even attended the other pre-recording at 6 am in the morning. I had considered trying that one because it was the recording of the title song, but I could not choose NCT127 over my beauty sleep. As we enjoyed our conversation, another fan interrupted us. She shyly asked, "Who is your favorite in NCT?" "Mark, and you?" I replied. Surprisingly, her answer was... interesting. "Hmmm... I see... Well... I don't really know who my favorite is." I didn't have time to think too much about this, because we were finally about to get back to the studio to see NCT127! Once again, we were told to leave our bags, but this time, we are allowed to bring our neo-bong. As we got in, I was once again set aside. The other girls in the same situation seemed upset. "Oh no, I don't understand why they pull us aside... some of those people are taller than me!" I heard. "You know, here it's not that bad; we are front row! I was here for Crush's recording, and it was pretty good," I tried to reassure her. She didn't seem very receptive.

After a few minutes of waiting (again), NCT127 finally arrived on stage! There are not on the catwalk yet, so they were a bit far from where I was. The people near me did all they could to get their attention, while members tried to respond and show attention to everyone. The recording started, with BoA greeting them. I saw some people holding signs in the crowd. I was a bit surprised, since the fan club announcement strictly said that any signs with the members' name were prohibited. Prior to entering the studio, we were also asked to remove any sticker or distinctive signs on our neo-bong that would hint at who our favorite

member was. Apparently, I was not the only one because I even saw some fans alerting the fan managers. “It's forbidden, so why do they have it?” I overheard. “You're right, let me check with the production team, and I will get back to you,” the fan manager answered. After a few seconds, the employee came back and said, “The producing staff asked some of the people to have signs for the cameras. Sorry about that.” I found it interesting. The official fans were not allowed to hold signs, but the people who were selected through the broadcasting company could?

NCT127 performed their first song, and then advanced to the catwalk. Each member took a different position. We were warned by the producing team, “You will have a member very close to you; do not push and just stay calm.” Jungwoo, one of the members, came toward our direction and suddenly stopped. This is where he was going to be for the performance of “1, 2, 7 (Time Stops),” a ballad. As he looked into the crowd, I made eye contact with him. “Oh!” He pointed at me and energetically said, “Hello!” I said hello back and got very embarrassed. I could hear the people near me annoyed at me for getting attention from the member. It was an interesting experience—pleasant but also embarrassing at the same time. After the performance, the members left, and we thought they would return to be interviewed by BoA, as had happened for Crush, but for some reason, we heard the producing team screaming “Good job today!” putting an end to the day of pre-recording. Everyone was surprised... “Is it really over, like this? But... they didn't even say goodbye!” I heard the fan manager's voice from behind, “Okay everyone, the recording is over, thank you for coming!”

Chapter 4

Kukppong and Authenticity: A New Wave of “K-Nationalism” in K-pop Fandom(s)

Introduction

In his pioneering work on the participatory culture of fandom, Henry Jenkins pointed out that “the political effects of ... fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas but also through access to new social structures and new models of cultural production.”¹ While Jenkins highlighted the creative and critical capacities of fans as a crucial aspect of understanding contemporary mass media, there are still very few studies that focus on Korean fans and their response to the Korean Wave. Nevertheless, they remain the primary consumers of Korean popular culture. In a previous study, I examined Hallyu from a fandom perspective, observing how fans perceived the growing influence of the Korean Wave and their reaction to the influx of new international fans.² Self-conscious of their status as original consumers of K-pop, Korean fans continually compare themselves to international fans, displaying a collective sense of national belonging that emerges within what we have seen is a transnational model of cultural production. Indeed, Koichi Iwabuchi argued that “studies of fans should attend to show how the persisting dominance of the neoliberal and (inter-)national framework has limited the development of transnational dialogues.”³ More recently, Kyong Yoon noted that studies on transnational fandom focus too much on cultural translation rather than highlighting the power dynamics that may affect how fans interpret those texts.⁴

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 257.

² Mathieu Berbiguier and Younghan Cho, “Understanding the Korean Fandom of the K-pop: Focusing on Its Perspectives on Foreign Fans,” *Korean Journal of Communication & Information* 81, no. 2 (2017): 272–98.

³ Koichi Iwabuchi, “Undoing Inter-national Fandom in the Age of Brand Nationalism,” *Mechademia* 5 (2010): 96.

⁴ Kyong Yoon, *Digital Mediascapes of Transnational Korean Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

To address this gap concerning transnational dialogues in K-pop, this chapter aims to explore how nationality influences the perception of authenticity among K-pop fans. Engaged in an ongoing debate framed around what constitutes the “Korean essence” of K-pop, I argue that both its original audience (i.e., Korean fans) and the relatively new audience (i.e., international fans) are influenced by nationalist discourse in their consumption of K-pop content. This chapter challenges a unilateral view of the Korean Wave by explaining how the circulation of the Korean fandom culture contributes to an evolving and seemingly contradictory form of nationalism discourse.

In response to an article by Lee Eungchel, filling the gap regarding the perception of fandom practices in Korean society, CedarBough Saeji notes that “it is not only fandom of Korean idols that is spreading but also Korean fandom practices.”⁵ In my description of K-pop fans’ sense of authenticity, which is influenced by nationalist tendencies, I examine how international fans perceive K-pop as authentically created by Koreans. This perception is one of the consequences of the transmission of fandom practices. Transitioning from an initially Korea-based sub-culture to a “transnational” community often celebrated as transcending borders, the aftermath of the Korean Wave has slowly integrated K-pop into the mainstream sphere of global popular culture. Consequently, the scope of what encompasses “K-pop fandom(s)” has evolved tremendously over the last twenty years, largely due to the digital component of community-building and the rise of social media.

This chapter begins with a theoretical discussion of how the focus on transnationality adopted in much Korean Wave scholarship has reaffirmed the hegemonic position of America in terms of popular culture, while also providing tools to locate the North American audience of K-pop as a factor in assessing K-pop’s popularity outside of Korea. I will then explain how this focus on transnationality overlooks racial issues in fandom, resulting in an essentialist

⁵ CedarBough T. Saeji, “[Commentary] Always Fans of Something: Fandom and Concealment of Taste in the Daily Lives of Young Koreans, by Lee Eungchel,” *Korean Anthropology Review* 5 (2021): 79–83.

understanding of K-pop within the fandom. After establishing the theoretical framework, I will present three different categories of case studies to elaborate on what I mean by “a new wave of K-nationalism.” First, I will focus on the concept of *kukppong* and illustrate how a sarcastic understanding of Korean nationalism emerging in internet culture has been replicated verbatim by the international K-pop fandom. In the second section, I will explain how Korean fans of K-pop use their nationalism to assert their legitimacy over the “new” international fandom. Finally, by examining instances where the Koreanness of K-pop is—allegedly—at stake and the divergent reaction of fans inside and outside of Korea, I will highlight how nationalist discourse can also manifest through advocacy for racial purity among K-pop members and address the dangers of this tendency.

The Focus on Transnational in the Korean Wave Scholarship

In the early stages of the Korean Wave, employing a transnational theoretical framework was seen as beneficial for emphasizing the circulation of content and the diversification of the audience. It helped challenge an America-centric narrative of the production and circulation of popular culture, positioning the Korean Wave as a driving force that could provide an alternative to other hegemonic industries, such as Hollywood.

Advocating for a discourse on Hallyu that extends “beyond East Asia,” Seok-Kyeong Hong emphasized that “preexisting studies are inclined to rely on reports about the spectatorships of Hallyu targeting the audiences in East Asia.”⁶ In *New Korean Wave*, Jin contextualized “the meaning of the popularity of local culture through the lens of hybridity and contracultural flows,” yet did not consider the issue in terms of audience shift.⁷ I argue

⁶ Seok-Kyeong Hong, “Hallyu beyond Asia: Theoretical Investigations on Global Consumption of Hallyu,” in *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, ed. Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 73.

⁷ Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 10.

that there is a necessity not only to go “beyond East Asia,” but also to emphasize how entertainment companies now prioritize a global audience over the national audience of K-pop (i.e., Korean fans). Previously, a global audience was a bonus; now it has become the norm.

Overemphasizing the transnational aspect of the Korean Wave is counterproductive in challenging the incorrect assumption that Hallyu’s success is solely due to cultural policies. Lee and Zhang, in their analysis of neoliberal subjectivity motivated by the Korean Wave, proposed viewing it as an “implicit cultural policy.”⁸ This perspective is intriguing because, by showing how the growth of the Korean Wave generated a “template for ambitious young Koreans ... to pursue self-actualization, personal development and life-changing adventures,” the authors offer an alternative to the “government-based” Hallyu narrative perpetuated by mainstream media.⁹ This angle is also pertinent for this chapter, considering how this implicit cultural capital could influence Korean K-pop fans and their interactions with international fans.

Lionnet and Shih argued that “new immigrants in general have been placed in a paradoxical position with regard to the claims of authenticity and cultural nationalism that have fueled the development of ethnic studies.” They call for a shift in understanding transnationalism to go beyond “the binary of the local and the global,” suggesting that transnationality “can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities.”¹⁰ Naoki Sakai, in his monograph *Translation and Subjectivity*,

⁸ Hye-Kyung Lee and Xiyu Zhang, “The Korean Wave as a Source of Implicit Cultural Policy: Making of a Neoliberal Subjectivity in a Korean Style,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 521–37.

⁹ Lee and Zhang, “The Korean Wave as a Source of Implicit Cultural Policy,” 525.

¹⁰ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4–5.

emphasized similar political entanglements between theory and Asian Studies.¹¹ He critiqued the “untenability of the inside/outside opposition” created by the field, arguing that “students ... are already implicated in the practical relations that involve them in the social worlds of Asia by exposing them to those singular beings there.”¹² Arjun Appadurai, in the introduction of *Modernity at Large*, reminded us that “area studies is a salutary reminder that globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process.”¹³ As a Korean Studies scholar, I observe resonances between Area Studies’ central issues of the nation-state and K-pop, an object of study with an ambivalent relationship to globalization (through its circulation process) and nationalism (through its original audience).

It is essential to understand that this America-centered vision of globalization not only perpetuates the problematic West-East dichotomy but also directly influences the production of nationalist discourse inside the nation-state. Sakai provided an example with his discussion of the Japanese nation, arguing that it is “through the imitative relation to ‘the West’ that the Japanese ethnos that is merely a cultural identity produces itself as the Japanese nation as a political community.”¹⁴ He views concepts such as “Japanese culture” or “Japanese language” as historical constructs preserved by habit, even if outdated.¹⁵ Appadurai associates the creation of such concepts with fetishization, arguing that “the locality (both in the sense of the local factory or site of production and in the extended sense of the nation-state) becomes a fetish that disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process.”¹⁶

¹¹ Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.

¹⁴ Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 42.

This statement explains how, even by highlighting the blurriness of boundaries due to globalization and qualifying it as “one note of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes,” Appadurai still fights against the hegemonic position of the United States within this network.¹⁷ This notion of a network is emphasized by the argument that culturalist and nationalist discourse is not necessarily produced within the nation-state, but in zones defined as “diasporic public spheres.”¹⁸ Similarly, Sakai argued that “behind Westerners’ as well as Japanese insistence on Japanese cultural uniqueness looms an equally obstinate essentialization of the West.”¹⁹

The concepts of fetishization and essentialization on a global scale hint a tendency in mainstream media and academic discourse to seek something inherently “Korean” in K-pop. Early studies on the Korean Wave often focused on “cultural proximity” to explain how some elements of Korean culture resonated in other contexts, while others would use a framework of “cultural hybridity” to put a label the mix of Koreanness and globality.²⁰ In her survey of the impact of the Korean Wave in the Czech Republic, scholar Vladislava Mazaná quoted Koreanist Vladimir Pucek, who argued that “Koreans understand the term globalization as making the world focused on Korea.”²¹ Even though this statement was made in a context when the impact of the Korean Wave in Czech society was minimal, it demonstrates how the understanding of globalization cannot be dissociated from the nation state.

¹⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 147.

¹⁹ Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 17.

²⁰ See for example, Doobo Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia,” *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 25–44.

²¹ Vladislava Mazaná, “Cultural Perception and Social Impact of the Korean Wave in the Czech Republic,” in *The Global Impact of South Korean Popular Culture: Hallyu Unbound*, ed. Valentina Marinescu (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 61.

Transnationalism and Discussions of Fandom and Race in K-pop

While discussions around transnationalism in K-pop often focus on issues of cultural hybridity and flows, it is also important to examine how transnational fandom intersects with discourses of race, identity, and representation. Gil-Soo Han provided an overview of international K-pop fans' reactions to incidents of blackface by K-pop idols. Incidents of blackface and cultural appropriation remain common topics—the article was published in 2015—and continue to generate heated debate between Korean and international fans, as well as within the international fandom itself. Han first discusses the role of mainstream Korean media in propagating *tan'il minjok* (단일 민족, single nation) discourse before moving on to detail various types of reactions from international fans, ranging from accusatory to compassionate. Yet, though he covers the creation of ethnic-nationalist discourse in the Korean media and the often-critical reactions of international fans, those two aspects of Han's analysis fail to adequately problematize the discourse of racism embedded in K-pop due to its global popularity and transnational reach. As K-pop gains more international fans and exposure, the propagation of ethnic-nationalist narratives and incidents of cultural appropriation/insensitivity become amplified on a global scale, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes and marginalization. The global popularity of K-pop necessitates a more critical examination of how such racial discourses are constructed, circulated, and negotiated within transnational fandom spaces.

More recently, Kristin April Kim, in “Stifled, Invisible and Threatened,” analyzed the reactions of K-pop fans of color to repeated instances of cultural appropriation. She argued that “while hybridity is what has enabled K-pop to easily cross foreign borders, the same cannot be said of the way foreigners are embraced in reverse.”²² Her in-depth interviews with

²² Kristin April Kim, “Stifled, Invisible, and Threatened: Cultural Appropriation in K-Pop through the Lens of Identity-Negotiating Fans of Color,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 17, no. 1 (2024): 18.

fans from diverse background and their hopes for greater accountability from Korean entertainment companies highlight that “cultural appropriation in K-pop differs from contra-flow or a re-appropriation, in which local actors subvert or resist Western hegemonic media influences; rather, one marginal group exploits yet another.”²³ This statement perfectly exemplifies how theories of transnationalism, cultural hybridity and contra-flow have limits and are outdated in terms of examining the current state of the K-pop fandom(s).

Contrary to a discourse that emphasizes the globality of the internet as a space where race is erased, Nakamura sought to explore a “language of race and racialism” in the online sphere. She coined the term “cybertype” to define how the internet conveys and produces images that reinforce race and racism.²⁴ According to Nakamura, in spaces where communication mainly happens through written interactions, we observe “performative acts of writing and reading otherness.”²⁵ However, it is important to note that when Nakamura wrote these words, internet was still a relatively new concept, and that there were fewer platforms. It was this diversification of platforms that Rukmini Pande took as a starting point in *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*.²⁶ Using a postcolonial approach to global fandom, Pande mentioned that “even when individuals engage in online activities that do not have anything to do with their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity, they have to continue to negotiate with that identity in some way, whether by omission or commission.”²⁷ This statement is crucial to justify the focus of this chapter on racial and national dynamics in K-pop fandom(s), a situation that reproduces a kind of culturalism which, according to Sakai,

²³ Kim, “Stifled, Invisible, and Threatened,” 22.

²⁴ Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

²⁶ Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

²⁷ Ibid., 51.

“postulates cultural difference only between the interior and exterior of a certain national or ethnic community.”²⁸

***Kukppong* and the Korean Wave**

The term *kukppong* is a portmanteau derived from *kuk*, meaning “country,” and *ppong*, which originates from the Japanese slang *philopon*, a term for methamphetamine. Thus, *kukppong* can be interpreted as “intoxicated with nationalism.” This term carries a negative connotation, although it has been employed ironically by people in Korea over the years, often as a form of meme. An example of the memefication of *kukppong* is the “Do You Know” series, which compiles elements that Koreans might reference when inquiring about a foreigner's knowledge of Korea, such as “Do you know Yoon Yuh-jung?” or “Do you know League of Legends?”

Lee and Abidin's study on Korea-based influencers' involvement in government-led campaigns aligns with these observations. Their research centers on the impact of foreign influencers' content on shaping the image projected by the host country. Drawing on concepts of pop nationalism and ethnic nationalism, Lee and Abidin illustrate how foreign influencers produce content tailored for an audience already interested in Korean popular culture. By participating in the notion of “digital Korean cool,” these influencers contribute to the phenomenon known as *kukppong* in the Korean online sphere, referring to an excessively positive nationalist discourse surrounding Korea.²⁹

The Korean government's effort to incorporate the popularity of K-pop into a discourse of national pride has had quite mixed results with the general public. At the

²⁸ Naoki Sakai, “Nationality and the ‘Mother Tongue,’” in *Deconstructing Nationality*, ed. Naoki Sakai, Brett de Bary, and Toshio Iyotani (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 6.

²⁹ Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin, “Oegugin Influencers and Pop Nationalism through Government Campaigns: Regulating Foreign-Nationals in the South Korean YouTube Ecology,” *Policy & Internet* 14, no. 3 (2022): 551.

beginning of the Korean Wave, the proliferation of discourse in the mainstream media provoked skepticism among the population, who suspected the media of exaggerating the popularity of Korean popular culture outside of the country as part of *kukppong* discourse. However, the suspicions slowly faded with the increasing popularity of BTS.

In recent non-academic discourse about K-pop, there remains a sense of American hegemony regarding media coverage. A compelling example is the surging popularity of BTS. When BTS debuted in 2013, they had a modest beginning and a small fanbase. Introduced as “hip-hop” idols to differentiate them from the variety of new boy bands debuting simultaneously, it took significant trial and error for them to reach their current position.

I argue that this phenomenon reflects a smaller-scale tendency of Korean mainstream media to prioritize international (i.e., American) discourse, known as *haeoe panŭng* (해외 반응). As we saw in Chapter 2, when HYBE Entertainment share BTS’ achievement, they often use expressions *han’guk kūrup ch’oego* (한국 그룹 최고, lit. “the best Korean group”) or *han’guk kasu ch’oech’o* (한국 가수 최초, lit. “the first time for a Korean singer”) illustrating how crucial it is for the company to stress that no other Korean group or singer has achieved such recognition.

“When K-pop groups debut, only small to mid-sized agencies target the Korean market first. For them, the Korean market is very important, but for larger agencies, what is produced in Korea will be listened to all around the world. K-pop has grown to that level. Agencies need to pay attention to this; if they completely ignore it, there will be negative reactions eventually. Since they are Korean companies, pay taxes in Korea, and are listed on the Korean stock market, they have no choice but to consider Korean fans.”³⁰

This statement highlights the dual focus of K-pop agencies, especially larger ones, on both domestic and international markets. While global success is a significant goal, there is an inherent necessity to maintain a strong connection with Korean fans due to the companies’

³⁰ Kim Do Heon, Interview in-person with author, November 1, 2022.

economic and cultural roots in Korea. This duality creates a complex and ambivalent relationship between Korean fans and the phenomenon of *kukppong*. On one hand, Korean fans take pride in the international achievements of their idols, understanding the importance of global tours and the increased revenue they bring. On the other hand, as I will show below, there is a palpable apprehension about losing their status as the core of the fandom. This tension is particularly pronounced with groups managed by HYBE entertainment—such as BTS, ENHYPEN, and TXT (Tomorrow X Together)—which have garnered substantial American fanbases, often overshadowing their Korean fanbase. The balancing act that these agencies must perform—catering to a global audience while honoring their domestic commitments—reflects the intricate dynamics of modern K-pop fandom and the influence of national identity within this transnational phenomenon.

In our interview, Kim Do Heon mentions “I recently watched BTS’ concert and it didn’t feel like a Korean artist performance; it felt like The Weeknd or Harry Styles was performing in Korea after a long time.” Interestingly, Kim refers to BTS’ concert as *naehan kongyŏn* (내한 공연, “concert in Korea”) an expression usually used by Korean media when international stars perform in Korea. Oh Seyeon, from Busan, recalls the struggle of always having to travel to Seoul to attend events or concerts—especially when she was still a minor. Compared to other artists who tour within Korea quite often, performing in other big cities such as Busan, Daegu or Gwangju, it is very rare for K-pop idols to perform outside of Seoul. However, this began to change in June 2023, when renovations began on Seoul Olympic Stadium—the largest venue for K-pop concerts, with more than 70,000 seats.³¹ To compensate for the unavailability of the stadium until November 2026, some concerts were organized in large stadiums in the suburbs of Seoul, such as in Incheon or Goyang. In

³¹ Hee-chul Moon and Jung-woo Cho, “Jamsil Sports Complex Renovation to Begin in June,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 3, 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/03/03/national/socialAffairs/korea-jamsil-sportx-complex-seoul-sports-complex/20230303175654880.html>.

comparison, K-pop idols often perform in multiple cities when they tour in Japan or the United States.

“As a long-time fan, not as a producer or director, I have something to say. For example, when an idol performs in Seoul and then tours other major cities like Busan, Gwangju, Daejeon, and Daegu, it is not considered ‘cool.’ However, if they go to the U.S. and perform in ten different places, even in relatively unknown locations like some town in Texas, it feels different. Regardless of the venue’s size or location, just the fact that they performed ten times in the U.S. becomes a big deal. The promotional impact of saying that a Korean group had ten sold-out shows in the U.S. holds significant weight, simply because it was in the U.S.”³²

This underscores the pervasive influence of American hegemony on the perceived success and validation of K-pop artists. Despite the global reach of K-pop, the U.S. market continues to hold significant sway over the international recognition and credibility of these artists. This phenomenon is evident even within the K-pop fandom, where non-Korean fans often regard success in the U.S. as the ultimate achievement. This perception is reinforced by media coverage and promotional narratives that highlight U.S. tours and achievements as benchmarks of success. In an interview with Patricia Gosálvez in *El País*, BTS member RM was asked: “The cult of youth, of perfection, of overachievement in K-pop... Are these Korean cultural traits?” “In the West, people just don’t get it,” he responded.

Korea is a country that has been invaded, razed to the ground, torn in two. Just 70 years ago, there was nothing. We were getting aid from the IMF and the UN. But now, the whole world is looking at Korea. How is that possible? How did that happen? Well, because people try so fucking hard to better themselves. You are in France or the UK, countries that have been colonizing others for centuries, and you come to me with, “oh God, you put so much pressure on yourselves; life in Korea is so stressful!” Well, yes. That’s how you get things done. And it’s part of what makes K-pop so appealing, although, of course, there’s a dark side. Anything that happens too fast and too intensely has side effects.³³

While HYBE is indefinitely seeking recognition from the American media, here RM appears on Spanish media and uses a developmentalist narrative to “justify” the culture of

³² Oh Seyeon, Interview in-person with author, November 7, 2022.

³³ Patricia Gosálvez, “RM, the Leader of K-pop Band BTS: ‘We Work so Hard in Korea Because 70 Years Ago There Was Nothing’,” *El País*, March 15, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-03-15/rm-the-leader-of-k-pop-band-bts-we-work-so-hard-in-korea-because-70-years-ago-there-was-nothing.html>.

overachievement in K-pop. This tendency is dangerous as it provides the Korean media with more material to defend their *kukppong* narrative, instead of offering any counterflow that would challenge the hegemony of nationalist discourse.

K-Nationalism through Korean Fandom Culture

When International Fans Create Kukppong Narratives

Kim Do Heon mentions that one of the problems of being a music critic in Korea is that it is not a sustainable job—he needs to find ways to make money, and simply writing does not suffice. Thus, when entertainment companies ask him to write for their column, he inevitably writes positive reviews. When approached by mainstream media, he notes how oriented the questions are: “Do you think they will be first?” “Do you think they will get a Grammy?” “How will K-pop survive without BTS ?” For him, this is part of a culture where BTS needs to be praised. Lyan provided a groundbreaking example of “fan nationalism” by explaining how fans of the Korean Wave sometimes feel that they are invested in a mission to convey a positive image of Korea to people who were not especially familiar with Korean popular culture.³⁴ I argue that one of the main aftermaths of the Korean Wave is this tendency within the international fandom to reappropriate Korean fandom culture and use idols to perpetuate a discourse of Korean nationalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, Korean fans see their belonging to the K-pop fandom(s) as part of their national identity. Fandom culture becomes a way to assert the authenticity of their fan culture. What if fan nationalism was instead an inherent characteristic of Korean fandom culture that was incorporated in the set of values transmitted from Korean fans to international fans?

³⁴ Irina Lyan, “Welcome to Korea Day: From Diasporic to Hallyu ‘Fan-Nationalism,’” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 3764–3780.

Fortune, an American economics magazine, published a report suggesting that BTS would contribute a staggering 29 trillion dollars to South Korea's GDP over ten years. However, it was later revealed that this was a misinterpretation. Originally published in 2017, the report utilized data from the past five years to project the next five years' impact. Despite the error, the news quickly went viral and led to a conspiracy theory asserting that BTS played a crucial role in Korea's economic growth.³⁵ Even though most K-pop fans were critical of this assumption, it generated a nationalist discourse claiming that BTS was essential to maintaining sustainable economic growth for the country. Korean politicians even attempted to leverage the issue by proposing a military exemption for the members, despite their clear statements that they had no issue complying with mandatory military service. This phenomenon clearly shows here how the rhetoric used by the Korean government regarding the popularity of the Korean Wave sometimes resonates with the Korean nationalist tendencies of international K-pop fans.

However, while digitally literate fans may sometimes adopt *kukppong* discourse as part and parcel of their participation in international fandom, they may also be highly critical of this nationalism. During the same discussion of BTS' military enlistment, for instance, fans were acutely aware that South Korean politicians were using the exemption debate to promote nationalist discourse. Another aspect that highlights the complex dynamics between Korean and international fans, as well as the factors of inclusion and exclusion within the imagined K-pop fandom community, is the role of language.

³⁵ Hyeon-woo In, "'BTS Contributes \$29 Trillion to South Korea Over 10 Years?' The Truth Behind the American Fortune Magazine's Error," *Hankook Ilbo*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022101911310005314?190746247687&did=tw>.

Language as a Factor of Inclusion and Exclusion in K-pop Fandom(s)

A way to combine the discourse on race and language as factors of inclusion and exclusion in the imaged community of K-pop fandom(s) is to examine the complicated binary between Korean fans and international fans that has emerged through online discourse. This has led to the emergence of the term *haeoe p'aen* (해외팬) and one of the most common derogatory terms used Korean fans to refer to a fan outside of Korea: *oek'wi* (외꾸), a portmanteau of *oe* (외) from *oegugin* (외국인, foreigner) and *k'wi* (꾸) from *pak'wi pöllae* (바퀴벌레, cockroach) (cf. “Ethnographic Vignette” above). More recently, international fans have become aware of this phenomenon, as evidenced by a Twitter user reacting to ZEROBASEONE’s satisfactory chart results on the Korean streaming service MelOn by “Korean Fans of ZEROBASEONE <3 <3 big love from your *saranghanŭn oek'wi* (사랑하는 외꾸) <3 <3.” The tweet amusingly translates to “big love from your beloved foreign cockroach,” with the international fan re-using the derogatory term to show gratitude for the hard labor of Korean fans.

Furthermore, French fans also started to use a similar logic of exclusion through language—by using the term “inter” (short for international) to refer to non-French K-pop fans, particularly those from neighboring countries. This term is derogatory, often targeting fans from the UK, Spain, Italy, or Germany who travel to France for concerts. Historically, the first K-pop concert ever held in Europe was in France (SMTOWN in Paris, 2011) and ever since the country has hosted numerous K-pop concerts, reflecting the preferences of entertainment companies. On October 17, 2023, MTV announced that Jungkook from BTS would attend the ceremony of the 2023 MTV Europe Music Awards in Paris.

Our first round of #MTVEMA performers has arrived, and I'm OBSESSED
@AnneMarie @Coi_Leray @DavidGuetta #JungKook @bts_bighit
@ManuelTurizoMTZ @Ozuna @heisrema @reneerapp @SabrinaAnnLynn
@30SECONDDSTOMARS @TheKidLaroi Which artists are you excited to see
take the stage on 5 November? (@mtvema, October 17, 2023).

Numerous tweets surfaced where French fans attempted to dissuade “inter” fans from coming to Paris, warning them about bedbugs or the difficulty of finding an Uber to the venue.

Original Tweet (French)	English Translation
Les inters ça sert a rien de venir ya aucun uber qui va vous déposer a villepinte si il vous taxe pas 300 euros la course, et ya personne qui va vous montrer comment y aller RESTEZ CHEZ VOUS !	Inters , it’s useless do not come no uber will drop you off at Villepinte (TN: ceremony venue) unless they rip you off 300 euros and no one is going to show you how to get there, STAY HOME !
Les inters venez pas y’a les bed bugs (ha ha)	Inters , don’t come we have bed bugs (ha ha).

Table 4. Tweets from French fans, uploaded in October 2023.

Although these reactions may seem humorous, it is crucial to recognize the discriminatory and derogatory nature of such practices. This tendency is particularly concerning and hypocritical. It is audacious for French fans to assume that merely because a concert is held in France, they have the authority to police who should or should not attend. This dynamic escalates further when French fans begin to express grievances about language issues.

Original Tweet (French)	English Translation
Dans la queue pour le music bank y’a intérêt d’entendre parler que français avant que je gifle des gens pour une fois c’est notre tour c’est bon là	In the line for the Music Bank in Paris, if I hear another language than French, I think I would be able to slap people. For once, we have a concert in France; it’s our turn
Vous vous plier en quatre pour les inter j’ai carrément l’impression que c’est leur concert ça me mets hors de moi vrm bye	You are really going above and beyond for the inter , it feels like it’s almost their concert I can’t believe it bye

Table 5. Tweets from French fans, uploaded in April / June 2023.

The first tweet explains that even if France was chosen as the sole Europe stop for the Music Bank concert in April 2023, the fan will not tolerate to hear another language than French and hence, the presence of non-French fans in the line to get into the concert. The second tweet reacts to an English translation of fan projects for BLACKPINK’s concert at the Stade de France in June 2023, with someone criticizing the fanbase for being excessively inclusive towards international fans (“inter”).

For Anderson, an imagined community is a “stage for the modern nation,” and a collateral consequence of the “convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language.”³⁶ His observation highlights language as a factor of inclusion and exclusion when it comes to community. Similarly, Sakai, in the “Nation and the Mother Tongue,” discussed this sentiment mentioning “the network of imagined relations through which one relates ... to language unities.”³⁷ While Anderson and Sakai work in a context entangled in the power dynamics of colonization and thus, needs to be manipulated with caution if transposed in another context, this ambivalent characteristic attributed to language is useful in a contemporary context of transnational online spaces. One way Korean fans define “foreign fans” is by their use of English or their non-usage of Korean. This has led to concerns about English becoming the main language of K-pop, resulting in mixed feelings regarding the use of English by K-pop idols in their interactions with fans, or in their songs. Korean fans have coined the term *yǒngŏ konari* (영어 고나리, English beggar) to refer to international fans’ tendency to “force” K-pop idols to use English. Similarly, French fans of K-pop use language to create a separation within the larger category of international fans, using the word “inter”—in the same way Korean fans separate themselves from fans outside of Korea—to refer to fans that are not French, yet not Korean.

This intricate interplay between language and national identity within K-pop fandom(s) reveals a broader narrative of inclusion and exclusion. The use of derogatory terms like *oek’wi* by Korean fans and *inter* by French fans underscores the divisions that language can create within a supposedly unified fandom. Such dynamics are not just about language but are deeply rooted in power structures and cultural hierarchies. While these linguistic boundaries serve to reinforce a sense of community and belonging among local fans, they

³⁶ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 46.

³⁷ Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 36.

simultaneously marginalize and alienate international fans. The complexity of these interactions highlights the need to consider how nationality and language influence fan dynamics, shaping perceptions of authenticity and legitimacy within the global K-pop community.

Power Dynamics in the K-pop Fandom(s): when Korean Fans use their Nationality as a Tool of Legitimacy

The following case study shows even more clearly how Korean fans use their (national) economic contribution to the K-pop economy as a factor of legitimacy. On January 13, 2020, Chen (real name: Kim Jong-dae), a member of the boy band EXO—a boy band formed by the Korean entertainment company SM Entertainment in 2011—announced through a handwritten letter sent to his company that he was planning to marry his pregnant non-celebrity girlfriend.³⁸ This announcement shocked a portion of EXO’s fandom, who began trending on Twitter several hashtags such as *#Chen_t’alt’oehae* (#첸_탈퇴해, “#Chen_out”), *#Chen_kakja_kalgilgöitcha* (#첸_각자_갈길건자, “#Chen_letsgo_ourownways”) asking for Chen to leave the group to avoid further dragging the reputation of the other members of the band.³⁹ Although tweets supporting and reprimanding Chen could be found in both the Korean and international fandoms, the majority of the tweets asking Chen to leave were in Korean, indicating they came from the EXO’s

³⁸ Hyun-su Yim, “EXO’s Chen to Get Married,” *The Korean Herald*, January 13, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200113000741#:~:text=EXO's%20Chen%20to%20get%20married&text=EXO's%20Chen%20announced%20Monday%20afternoon,rest%20of%20his%20life%20with.%E2%80%9D>.

³⁹ On Twitter, “trending a hashtag” can be understood as an online way of protesting. It consists in uploading a large number of tweets including the same hashtag so that it appears in the “trending” section of the website that displays the trending topics worldwide and in each area.

Korean fandom.⁴⁰ For these fans, SM Entertainment’s support of Chen’s decision to marry his girlfriend was seen as prioritizing the opinion of international fans.

Original Tweet (Korean)	English Translation
해외팬들은 엑소에 돈한푼 안쓰는 잡덕들 주제에 말이 쳐 많아 #첸_각자_갈길가자	International fans are very vocal for people who do not use even a penny on EXO and support other groups at the same time” #Chen_letsgo_ourownway
sm 이 눈치보는거 뭐다? =한한령땀에 큰 피해 입었을만큼 주력인 중국팬 =가장 먼저 유료 팬덤 만들어줄만큼 힘쓰는 일본팬 =돈쓰는 국내팬 그중에 돈안쓰는 어린 급식팬, 돈안쓰는 잡덕 해외팬은 안중에도 없는게 사실 〇〇 #첸_각자_갈길가자	Why is SM (TN: entertainment) walking on eggshells like this? = The Chinese fans who are so powerful that the damages were big when was a ban on Korean culture in China = The Japanese fans who are so active that they were practically the one who created fandom economy = The Korean fans who use much money. We shouldn’t even consider the domestic young fans who do not use money, not to mention the <i>chaptōk</i> international fans. #Chen_letsgo_ourownways.

Table 6. Tweets from Korean EXO-L, uploaded on January 18-19, 2020.

These tweets highlight the importance of the economic hierarchy of “fans outside of Korea” determined by Korean fans, in which Chinese and Japanese fans are at the top, and the “international fans” are at the bottom. They use this argument of contributing to the K-pop economy to justify their demand that SM Entertainment should heed their call to remove Chen from the group.

Seyeon recalls: “I think that one of the reasons why Korean fans do not really like foreign fans is because they think that they don’t spend money on K-pop. They think that, as Korean fans, they spend a lot of money every day on K-pop: downloading the music legally, buying hundreds of albums, and going to concerts... but international fans, they just listen and watch reels on Instagram. Before, I was one of those who thought like this. I just thought that

⁴⁰ Hyun-su Yim, “Why Chen’s engagement is dividing EXO fans,” *The Korean Herald*, January 21, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200121000901>.

all international fans only enjoyed K-pop on social media.” Korean fans were not convinced by the economic repercussions of Hallyu, and that was one of the elements that made them competitive and reticent to recognize them as legitimate K-pop fans.

Korean fandom expects the same high level of commitment to the idols from international fans. In the tweets, Korean fans criticize international fans’ tendency to support multiple fandoms, a concept called “multi stanning” in English or *kyöpdö̌k/kyömdö̌k* (겹 덕/겸 덕) in Korean. This word is a combination of the verb *kyöpch’ida* (겹 치 다, “to overlap”) and the noun *tö̌k’u* (덕 후, “maniac, addict”), condemning the tendency of international fans to support more than one idol.⁴¹

Korean fandom, “according to their regulated practices tend to compare fans who are legitimate and those who are not,” constructing a differentiated recognition of international fans.⁴² In my previous study of the Korean fandom of K-pop, I noticed that even though Korean fans use the term “international fans” to refer to all fans outside of Korea, they often do not consider Chinese and Japanese fans as “international.” This is because Chinese and Japanese fans are well-known in the Korean fandom for heavily contributing to the economic activities of the idols (advertisement campaign, gift economy, awards ceremony voting, etc.).

“One thing I like about the Korean fans is their power of unity. Through their culture of donation, they cultivate a positive influence in what they want to achieve using the name of the artist they like. ... However, sometimes, it can also be a disadvantage. When you look at Twitter, you can’t help but notice them. Whenever something is said, they rush to comment.”⁴³

Among Korean fans advocating for Chen’s eviction from the group, many mentioned the fact that international fans who still supported him were ignorant of Korean culture. The main point of contention was that Chen also announced that his soon-to-be wife was also pregnant.

⁴¹ Sometimes, fans also use the word 잡 덕 (*chaptö̌k*), as we can see in the original tweet.

⁴² Minu Jö̌ng and Nayö̌ng Yi, “Süt’a-röl Kwallihanün P’aendö̌m, P’aendö̌m-ül Kwallihanün Sanö̌p [Fandom Managing Stars, Entertainment Industry Managing Fandom],” *Media, Gender & Culture* 12 (2009): 224.

⁴³ Mano, Interview in-person with author, November 3, 2022.

In a conservative Korean society where premarital pregnancy is still taboo, Korean fans confront international fans and blame them for their lack of cultural sensibility.

On January 29, 2020, a Korean fan of EXO published a letter to “educate” international fans with the following legend “To. EXO International Fans—The Reason why I Think Chen Should Withdraw from EXO.” The letter—written in English—argues: “The polarization between international fans and Korean fans over the issue may be differences in awareness of Premarital Pregnancy, or it could be the difference in time, money, effort, and mind spend [sic] of EXO’s support for nine years.”⁴⁴ Here, the writer mentions the issue of the economic hierarchy while also touching on the cultural differences that could be the origin of this polarity.

In one of the rare academic articles in English dealing with Korean fans of K-pop, Elfving-Hwang emphasizes how affective fan relationships in Korea are shaped around a “parasocial kin” between the fan and the idol who is often considered as an older sibling.⁴⁵ She furthermore argues those parasocial interactions might be the reason behind the importance of loyalty and desire of protection towards the idol within the Korean fandom. I would like to take this argument a step further and ask whether it is possible to attribute this tendency to the outdated, yet still very strong vision of a monoethnic Korean nation or *tan’il minjok* (단일 민족).

⁴⁴ The original tweet is unavailable, but for discussions of Korean fans acts of raising awareness regarding the wrongdoings of Chen, see Se-yeon Yoon, “Exo Fans Fight Back as Splinter Group Continues Campaign Against Chen,” *Korean JoongAng Daily*, July 27, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/07/27/entertainment/kpop/Exo-Chen-SM-Entertainment/20200727163100410.html>.

⁴⁵ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “K-Pop Idols, Artificial Beauty and Affective Fan Relationships in South Korea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliott (London: Routledge, 2018), 190.

Racial Dynamics in K-pop Regarding “Non-Korean” K-pop Groups

Jihyun Ahn starts her account on “K-pop without Koreans” by citing a disturbing comment below a video of a performance by EXP Edition posted on YouTube. It states “Keep Korean things Korean. Period.”⁴⁶ According to her, EXP Edition extended the history of associating musical genre with specific races.⁴⁷ The American group—with four non-Asian members—was an idea of Bora Kim, a graduate student at Columbia University at the time. She made the question “Do you need to be Korean to be a K-pop artist?” the core of her graduation project.⁴⁸ They debuted in 2015 and moved to Korea in 2017, where they trained like any K-pop idol. They learned Korean between dance and singing lessons, and performed at music shows and other events in front of an amused Korean audience. They disbanded in 2020 due to a lack of activity from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Yi Kyu-t’ak, while the issue was quite overlooked by Korean fans, the international fandom was the most vocal in terms of criticism, accusing the EXP Edition of “cultural appropriation.”⁴⁹

As part of my interview process, and especially with Korean interviewees, I included a section where I would show them various K-pop groups and ask them if they would consider them as belonging to the category of K-pop. When I showed her a picture of EXP Edition, Seyeon paused for a second. “Well... I think we can say it is K-pop. I don’t really think we can say, ‘K-pop is for Koreans!’ anymore. I feel that race is not important anymore. After all, there are groups where half of the members are not Korean, so...” For the music critic Kim Do Heon, EXP is also acceptable as a K-pop group, because it follows the basic recipe of a K-pop group. For him, “there is nothing Korean to K-pop. It’s just made in Korea.” For Mano,

⁴⁶ Jihyun Ahn, “K-Pop Without Koreans: Racial Imagination and Boundary Making in K-Pop,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 92.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁸ Yvette Tan, “K-pop’s EXP Edition: The world’s Most Controversial ‘Korean’ Band,” *BBC News*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46381997>.

⁴⁹ Kyu-t’ak Yi, *Kaltŭng Hanŭn K’ei, P’ap [K-pop; K in Conflict and Pop]* (Seoul: Threechairs, 2020), 95-98.

race does not make that much of a difference either, as long as someone Korean is involved in the process. According to her, K-pop is about being “overwhelmed with joy.” “If they are able to generate this type of emotion, then the K of K-pop is safe. For me, if they are able to make move ‘the *ŭmjukamu minjok*’ then it will be K-pop.” *Ŭmjukamu* (음주가무) is a four character expression where each of them combined highlights the importance of eating, drinking, singing, and dancing in Korean culture. Mano’s stance is interesting. Even though her understanding of K-pop is quite broad and very welcoming of foreign influences—in comparison to some fans—she still mentions an aspect of Korean culture that, for her, makes it the core of K-pop. Mano, Seyeon and Do Heon’s open-minded understanding of K-pop contrasts significantly with the following accounts of international fans regarding the “de-Koreanization” of the K-pop landscape.

Seeing non-Korean idols such as EXP Edition performing in Korean might have triggered the national pride of its Korean audience. For them, witnessing individuals with no ties to Korea embarking on a K-pop artist career while meticulously adhering to all the established codes is flattering. However—and this is why, in this context, the juxtaposition Korean vs. international fandom is challenging—for the core Korean fandom, EXP Edition is not competing in the same category. I argue that when Korean fans are praising EXP Edition, they are playing with *kukppong* and just contributing to the proliferation of more internet memes. Moreover, EXP Edition is not an isolated case study anymore. Even after their disbanding in 2020, more and more K-pop groups without Korean members are debuting as I write these words. As a result, I decided for this section instead to look at an instance where an already well-established K-pop band uses the popularity of K-pop to diversify its scope—and how K-pop fandom(s) reacted to this phenomenon.

In a YouTube video uploaded on June 29th, 2021, Lee Soo-man, founder of SM Entertainment—along with Doyoung, Mark and Kun, three NCT members—introduced an

upcoming partnership with MGM television.⁵⁰ This partnership had already been announced a few weeks earlier through a press release.⁵¹ This collaboration with the producers of popular American TV shows such as “Survivor” or “The Voice” aims at broadcasting SM Entertainment’s quest to add more members to NCT. They will form a group-unit called “NCT Hollywood.” This process matches the original concept of the group, which debuted in 2016 with the vision its number of members would be unlimited.⁵²

In her analysis of NCT, Suk-Young Kim argues that Neo Culture Technology “reinforces the problematic tenets of techno-orientalism, a view that often projects Asian bodies as machines devoid of humanity, and valorizes the state-led neoliberal initiatives carried out under the banner of promoting creativity.”⁵³ She characterizes the plans of a virtual community for Lee Soo-man as “a route to a nationhood with institutionalized trappings and power structures.”⁵⁴ I build on this idea when I argue that such a community—conceptualized as borderless and limitless and intended to transcend national boundaries—is in fact thoroughly embedded in a multilateral system of nationalist discourse produced, in part, though the interpretive and participatory activities of both local and international fandoms.

The announcement of a new team within NCT immediately generated backlash from the fans, who orchestrated a response, using the *ch’onggong* strategy (총공, “total attack”). This fandom practice, originating from Korean fandom, consists of sending an overwhelming

⁵⁰ SMTOWN, “[SM Entertainment Group] SM Congress 2021,” YouTube Video, June 28, 2021, 1:07:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsM4QeEdGEM>. For a discussion on how NCT as a project contributes in the discussion on K-pop and storytelling, refer back to Chapter 1.

⁵¹ Natalie Morin, “Fans Don’t Know How To Feel About This New K-Pop Competition Show,” *Refinery29*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/05/10464270/sm-entertainment-kpop-nct-hollywood-competition-show-reactions>.

⁵² Additional members were already added every year since their debut: 2017 (Johnny), 2018 (Jungwoo, Lucas and Kun), 2019 (Xiaojun, Hendery, Yangyang), and 2020 (Shotaro and Sungchan).

⁵³ Suk-Young Kim, “Disastrously Creative: K-Pop, Virtual Nation, and the Rebirth of Culture Technology,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 64, no. 1 (2020): 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

number of direct communications (fax, emails, phone calls, letters, social media messages) to the entertainment companies to voice the fans' discontentment regarding a particular issue. In this case, fans took over Twitter and trended several hashtags. Their main goal was to make the hashtag appear in the “trending topics” so that people would see it right on the main page when they log on to Twitter. A poster also started to circulate among fans. In red letters on a black background, we could read the following message

Original Poster in Korean	English Translation
NCT 의 팬들은 SM 새 보이그룹의 '엔시티 유닛화'를 반대합니다. SM 은 MGM 이 협업하는 할리우드 유닛에 'NCT 를 이용하지 말 것'과 NCT 와는 별개의 '독자적인 그룹'으로 운영할 것을 촉구합니다. #NCT_할리우드_반대 #NCT 는_미국진출의_수단이_아니다 #CANCEL_NCT_HOLLYWOOD	NCT fans oppose SM's new boy group's 'NCT unitization'. SM should not use 'NCT' in collaboration with MGM for the Hollywood unit and operate it as a 'separate group' from NCT. #Oppose_NCT_Hollywood #NCT_is_not_a_means_for_American_expansion #CANCEL_NCT_HOLLYWOOD

Table 7. Poster circulated on Twitter, uploaded on May 7, 2020.

This “total attack” was organized by both Korean and international fans, who made both Korean and English versions of the hashtags trend on Twitter for a few hours. However, there seem to be two different directions regarding the core of criticism rendered by the Korean and the international NCTzens.⁵⁵ The first and largest complaint regarding the launch of NCT Hollywood, as explained in the original announcement posted below, is the fans' concern regarding the addition of new members to NCT. Even if the concept of NCT implies an “infinite expansion” of the number of members, fans argue that it is too early to add more and that SM entertainment should first take care of the members they added recently.

⁵⁵ NCTZen refers to the official name of the NCT fanbase.

Original Tweet in Korean	English Translation
지금 있는 멤버도 제대로 관리 못하면서 #NCT는_미국진출의_수단이_아니다 이수만 니가 지금 있는 멤버들 다 공평하게 대우하냐? #NCT_할리우드_반대 무한확장하겠네 ㅅㅂ #엔시티_23명_절대지켜_영원한 막내는박지성이다#CANCEL_NET_HOLL YWOOD	“They can’t even manage the actual members correctly / #NCT_is_not_a_means_for_American_ex pansion / Lee Soo-Man are you actually treating the actual members equally? / #Oppose_NCT_Hollywood / Your craziness is really unlimited / #Protectatallcosts_NCT23members / The only maknae of the group is Park Jisung / #Cancel_NCT_Hollywood”

Table 8. Tweet from Korean fan against NCT Hollywood, uploaded on May 7, 2021.

In the tweet above, directly targeted at Lee Soo-Man, the fan hints at an obsessive behavior from the founder of SM entertainment, who keeps adding and adding members “without even managing the actual members correctly.” It seems that international fans share Korean fans’ concern regarding the new members, as the tweets below show.

Original Tweets in Korean	English Translations
Take good care of all 23 artists first. 먼저 23 명의 아티스트 모두를 잘 돌봐주세요. @SMTOWNGLOBAL #에스엠_무한확장_절대반대 #엔시티_23명_절대지켜 #에스엠_무한확장_절대반대 #NCTHOLLYWOOD_OUT	Take good care of all 23 artists first. @SMTOWNGLOBAL #Oppose_SM_Unlimited_Expansion #Protectatallcosts_NCT23members #Oppose_SM_Unlimited_Expansion #NCTHOLLYWOOD_OUT
#에스엠_무한확장_절대반대 NCT 23 개 모두 주목 해주세요 #엔시티_23명_절대지켜 더 이상 회원을 추가할 수 없습니다 !!! #에스엠_무한확장_절대반대 이수만, NCT 의 감정을 로봇으로 보지 말아주세요 !!!	#Oppose_SM_Unlimited_Expansion Focus on the 23 members of NCT! #Protectatallcosts_NCT23members We cannot add any more members !!! #Oppose_SM_Unlimited_Expansion Lee Soo-man, do not see NCT’s emotions as robots.

Table 9. Tweets from international fans against NCT Hollywood, uploaded on May 7, 2021.

Interestingly, the tweets seem to have been written using a translator. For example, the use of *tolbwajuseyo* (돌봐주세요) in the first tweet is awkward in this context because it is typically used in more personal or informal situations, such as asking someone to look after a child or pet. In the second tweet, the use of the wrong counter *gae* (개) instead of *myōng* (명)

and the use of the word *hoewŏn* (회원) as a literal translation of “member” instead of using the English word *membŏ* (멤버) validates the hypothesis. We see here another concrete example of the phenomenon highlighted in this chapter: the usage of Korean—even if with mistakes—to replicate Korean fandom culture.

A separate complaint is focused not on the question of additional members but on the assumed ethnicity of the members of this “NCT Hollywood” unit. Hearing from Lee Soo-Man that the new unit of NCT would be constituted from members based in America, fans assumed that it would look like a reboot of EXP Edition. The following tweets shows how fans express, in a satirical way, that they would have not expected such a turnover in NCT’s trajectory.

“U Knew the nct concept before u stanned!” !? I OBVIOUSLY DIDN’T THINK TYLER FROM NORTH DAKOTA WOULD BE JOINING NCITY	“u knew the nct concept before u stanned!” !? I OBVIOUSLY DIDN’T THINK JOSH FROM MIAMI WOULD JOINING NCITY
I DON’T WANNA WATCH A WHITE MEN DOING AEGYO ☹ WTF IS THIS NCT HOLLYWOOD !!?? WE DON’T WANT THAT	

Table 10. Tweet from international fans against NCT Hollywood, uploaded on May 7, 2021.

These reactions from the international fandom highlight an interesting phenomenon. Contrary to the Korean fandom, instead of focusing on the issue of adding more members to NCT—they are more concerned about the idea of a K-pop group based in the United States, directly assuming that the members would be of white ethnicity. As a Twitter user rightfully remarks, “constantly lost on how nctzens think nct hollywood means white men only instead of... Asian Americans.”

To circle back on the idea of a special recipe for K-pop introduced in the beginning of this section, the fans’ authentic image of the K-pop idol as Asian is disturbed by SM’s announcement. Using John Jacksons’s framework in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, stressing how authenticity could shape a community, Valentín concluded that “authenticity itself functions as a racialized and gendered form of capital that give straight

white cis males more access to success.”⁵⁶ In the same vein, joan miller’s take on cross-racial cosplay demonstrated how authenticity is shaped around “already ... highly visible and easily speaking subjects” and helps us shedding light on the racial dynamics attributed to K-pop fans’ sense of authenticity.⁵⁷ Kim Do Heon mentions that at the beginning of K-pop’s popularity, it was so important to show its significance that the fact that a K-pop group need to have Korean members became of the recipe and the narrative. It goes hand-in-hand with the fact that fans always have to prove themselves, as a member of the fandom but also to prove their idols’ relevance in the industry. Interestingly, after the family feud happening in SM Entertainment and the departure of Lee Soo-man from the company he founded, the new appointed CAO Chris Lee backtracked on the “unlimited expansion” vision—a way to erase the legacy of Lee Soo-man—and reassured the fans by promising that NCT will stay “forever,” 26 members.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to highlight the relationship between language, national identity, and power dynamics in K-pop fandom(s). Korean fans, as the original consumers of K-pop, navigate a complex landscape where their cultural and economic contributions are both a source of pride and a means of asserting dominance over international fans. This dynamic is evident in the use of derogatory terms and the insistence on specific linguistic and cultural practices that reinforce their perceived legitimacy. The ethnographic vignette from the beginning of this chapter encapsulates these tensions, illustrating the ambivalence felt by Korean fans as they grapple with the global reach of K-pop.

⁵⁶ Al Valentín, “Real Love? Authenticity as Capital in Let’s Play Culture,” in *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, ed. Rukmini Pande, Fandom & Culture (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 198.

⁵⁷ joan miller, “Raceplay: Whiteness and Erasure in Cross-Racial Cosplay,” in *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, ed. Rukmini Pande (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 71.

The influence of American hegemony in validating K-pop's success adds another layer of complexity. The prioritization of achievements in the U.S. market by both agencies and fans reflects a broader cultural hierarchy that impacts how K-pop is consumed and perceived globally. As K-pop continues to evolve and expand, it is crucial to address these underlying tensions and work towards a more inclusive and equitable global fandom. By acknowledging the power dynamics and cultural hierarchies at play, we can better understand the diverse experiences and contributions of heterogeneous K-pop fandom communities

The evidence and analysis presented above highlights the need for ongoing critical engagement with the global phenomenon of K-pop. By challenging unilateral visions of the Korean Wave and recognizing the contributions and challenges faced by international fans, we can move towards a more nuanced understanding of transnational fandoms. This chapter ultimately calls for a reevaluation of how we define and engage with K-pop, while being providing with the tool to reach a more complex understanding of fandom.

When asked if he is proud as a Korean that K-pop is popular, Do Heon laughs.

“To be honest, I’m a little embarrassed. K-pop is essentially a genre born out of contradictions. For example, training kids from the age of 10, taking away their phones, banning dating—these things that would never be understood overseas. It’s absurd. Also, the notion of being independent and self-drive is entirely manufactured ... If th[is] culture doesn’t change and we export it as is, training overseas children in the same way, it would be terrible. However, K-pop has potential as it evolves. In Korea, it’s tough to become a trainee unless you’re from a well-off family, but overseas, there are more opportunities for minorities and communities to find potential in K-pop. I think there’s potential overseas because in places like in the U.S., minority communities find comfort in K-pop, which can be a new possibility.”⁵⁸

One of the reasons that could explain why the international fandom of K-pop is so defensive about the thought of having non-Asians—and especially, white individuals—in the K-pop sphere could be because of the fact minorities, in the U.S.—and other parts of the world—“find comfort in K-pop.”

⁵⁸ Kim Do Heon, Interview in-person with author, November 1, 2022.

Through the lens of Nakamura's framework of reading and writing race on the internet and Pande's postcolonial approach to fandom, the backlash from the international K-pop fandom against the perceived “colonization of K-pop” reveals two interrelated aspects: it underscores the assumption that a K-pop group based in the United States would inherently comprise members of white ethnicity, while simultaneously highlighting how the international fandom's sense of authenticity is inextricably tied to racial and ethnic dimensions, perpetuating a racialized understanding of what constitutes authentic K-pop. This situation raises the debate about culturalism, which according to Sakai, “postulates cultural difference only between the interior and exterior of a certain national or ethnic community.”⁵⁹ By voicing concerns about “foreign” influences, international fans’ discourse dangerously matches up with cultural essentialism but also alludes to the vision of Korea as an ethnically unique nation (*tan’il minjok*).

⁵⁹ Sakai, “Nationality and the ‘Mother Tongue.’,” 6.

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Outro

Towards a Timeless and Limitless Study of K-pop Fandom(s)?

This exploration of K-pop fandom(s) has been an attempt to provide an alternative framework, beyond the Korean Wave, by examining the power dynamics between K-pop fans inside and outside of Korea through lenses of nationalism, gender and race. Those power dynamics between the Korean fandom and the international fandom of K-pop—encompassed under the term K-pop fandom(s)—alluded to a sense of community built on a common approval or disapproval of the “narrated authenticity” created by entertainment companies.

In Chapter 1, I delved into the concept of “narrated authenticity” by exploring the evolution of storytelling in K-pop. I examined how the approach of storytelling evolved from a fantasy approach to an approach based on the “true” personality of the K-pop idols that emphasized its own authenticity and genuineness. I explored how Korean entertainment especially instrumentalized authenticity to capitalize on its attractiveness, a strategy that worked especially well with Euro-American audiences particularly fond of this value. This chapter was also inscribed in a current that sees K-pop idols as influencers, and a context in which the “original media” are constantly challenged by the rise of influencer marketing. By looking at how Korean entertainment companies use mental health to expose the vulnerability of K-pop idols and to make them more relatable to their audience, we could see a direct materialization of this switch from the inapproachable celebrity to the “authentic” idol.

Once the bases of the “narrated authenticity” were established, I shifted the focus to reception. In Chapter 2, I examined how fans understood these narratives differently, and how this shaped their “fan identity.” Through this process, I highlighted the fact that K-pop fans almost never dissociate their cultural identity from their fan identity. Throughout this survey, I explained that even if K-pop had a very different position both inside and outside of

Korea—and that this position is still changing as I am typing these words—the process of becoming a fan, being a fan, and then leaving the fandom was always associated with identification or disidentification with a set of values. It is the encounter between one's own set of values and the one that the idols convey that is at the core of the affective relationship created between the fans and the artists, as well as the different communities that encompass the K-pop fandom(s). In this chapter, I hinted at the fact that fan identity was heavily connected with nationalism, a point that returned later in the dissertation.

In Chapter 3, I spotlighted the labor of people who were behind the K-pop songs. I used a digital humanistic approach to map the producing process of K-pop. Through in-depth interviews with producers working in the K-pop industry and a network analysis of K-pop song credits, I was able to show the reality of the process and highlight the increasing diversity of producers involved. One of the main takeaways was the increasing sense of competition with international producers who are increasingly attracted to the K-pop market. By juxtaposing the image of the “idol producer,” making music alone in a dark room, with the reality of the process, which was mostly similar to any other type of company—a collaboration between various people—I could highlight the responsibility of entertainment companies in making fans believe that idols were the only contributors. Victims of “narrated authenticity,” fans who absorb the content created by companies (Chapter 1) tend to want to assert the authenticity of idols by showing how much they contribute to the making of their music. These fans are manipulated into thinking that the participation of other producers was minimal, when it was in fact part of a multilayered creative and production process.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated how “narrated authenticity” facilitated the transmission of Korean fandom culture beyond the domestic audience. By repositioning the concept of “fan narcissism” within Korean Studies and coupling it with theories of Korean nationalism, I highlighted the nationalist discourse of Korean fans, who often use their positionality as

Korean fans of K-pop to assert their superiority to international fans. In their mind, they are beyond “narrated authenticity,” because they have enough cultural background to understand K-pop correctly. However, this is not as linear as it appears. With the circulation of terms and rules used among Korean fans, and the new economic power of international fans who can contribute as much as the Korean fans to the K-pop economy, this order has been troubled, and Korean fans cannot help but testify to the switch of focus toward a “global” audience. On a broader scale, discussions about the racial purity of K-pop idols among international fans—and especially among individuals that have no ties with Korea—are a disturbing yet fascinating phenomenon. Divergent understandings of “narrated authenticity” are informed by differences in cultural background regarding race. Furthermore, the Korean understanding of race as synonymous with nation is slowly absorbed in the way international fans engage with K-pop related content. Seemingly without realizing it, international fans comply with the *tan’il minjok* (“Single Nation”) discourse and become vectors of Korean nationalism.

There were a lot of challenges while writing this dissertation. One of them was the COVID-19 pandemic and how it completely revolutionized the relationship between K-pop fandom(s) and their idols. Interestingly, the necessity to interact through means such as social media completely complied with the logic of “idols as influencers,” mentioned in Chapter 1. Very quickly, we saw the democratization of online concerts. This practice, even once the pandemic was contained, was continued by most entertainment companies, for the enjoyment of international fans who could get a glimpse of what it looked like to go to a K-pop concert in Korea from the comfort of their living room. Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic also reinforced the necessity of interactions between artists and fans. Now, each comeback is followed by a succession of online and in-person fan sign events, where fans from inside and outside Korea compete fiercely to be the lucky ones to talk for a maximum of a minute and a half with their favorite idol. The increasing set of services offered with a K-pop concert

ticket, and the unlimited set of services added to the VIP packages has led to more and more duties for the K-pop idols, who not only have to perform during the show but also have to show interest in the few fans who paid higher prices for the pre-concert soundcheck or the post-concert send-off event. All of this is orchestrated with an over-saturation of K-pop artists touring—from Southeast Asia, Oceania to Europe, North and Latin America, with an emerging market in North Africa (Morocco) and Central Africa/Eurasia (Turkey, United Arab Emirates).

What used to be a slight inconvenience for Korean fans started to become a real danger, that is, that K-pop was no longer about catering to a Korean audience. Accordingly, as power dynamics shift the international fandom is no longer as intimidated by Korean fans. In a follow-up project, I would like to investigate this new status more closely by looking at mechanics of surveillance within online and offline fan activities. This project would grow out of the conclusion of this dissertation—that the expansive nature of the K-pop fandom(s) gives rise to an intensified environment of scrutiny where fans find themselves navigating their behaviors and wrestling with the implications of other community members' actions.

Another challenge while completing this dissertation was witnessing the passage of time. When I started writing (Fall 2021), BTS was at the peak of its popularity in a process of return to the normal after the COVID-19 pandemic, and Korean politicians, the general public and fans were arguing about whether BTS deserved, needed or even wanted an exemption from serving their country through compulsory military conscription. Now that I am writing this conclusion (Spring 2024), after a period of solo projects and a meticulously drafted calendar of military duty, the first member of BTS is about to be discharged. It is quite ironic to say that the passage of time was an issue in the writing of this dissertation, now that I have spent most of it trying to dismantle a chronological approach of the Korean Wave and its academic obsession with whether it would continue or not. By making the bold

assumption that the Korean Wave was “over,” I have repeatedly tried to find issues that were not sensitive to the passage of time. My objective was that—no matter how many years later it might be read—this dissertation would still be relevant. However, in this process, I came to the conclusion that the perpetually changing nature of K-pop was just a characteristic that I needed to accept if I were to keep it as an object of study for later. Even if the artists, the incidents, and many case studies I have mentioned in this dissertation might not be as relevant in five, ten or even twenty years, I am hopeful that the concept of “K-pop fandom(s)” or “narrated authenticity” would still find resonance, based on what the future of K-pop has to offer us.

The last hope that I had with this dissertation was to show that it was possible to go beyond a love-hate assessment of K-pop and to relate this phenomenon to broader academic conversations. This dissertation is the result of a continual reflection on how to build an interdisciplinary bridge between Korean Studies and other fields. I wanted to express a wish to see more diversified studies on K-pop—either through a reception or production lens—that would engage more closely with Korean Studies. I hope this dissertation “paves the way” for Korean Studies to gradually welcome a wider array of objects of study and to embrace more interdisciplinary discussions, contributing to a richer and more inclusive academic dialogue.