BLURRING DISTANCE AND DIGITAL LINES: THE ROLES OF REAL PERSON FANFICTION IN PARTICIPATIVE K-POP FANDOMS

Aimee Beatriz Lee

Yonsei University

The growth of the online community as a space for various types of content creators has ultimately led to an influx of fanfiction — written works published by fans for fans — which is, in part, composed of real person fanfiction (RPF). While RPF has always maintained some sort of following throughout the years, especially with regards to musical acts such as One Direction, arguably one of the largest contributors to its growth in the last decade is the K-Pop community. Based on the statistics on the currently leading repository for multi-fandom and multi-genre fanfiction, Archive of Our Own (commonly known as AO3), 'K-Pop' as a whole is the leading category under Music and Bands, with a total of almost 360,000 works to date, rivaling the entire 'Real Person Fiction' section with less than 350,000 works. However, while scholarly research on fanfiction has also accumulated and diversified over time, the topic of RPF still presents gaps when surveying current literature — K-Pop RPF, for how much it has contributed to the growth of digitally published fanfiction as a whole, still has facets and aspects yet to be explored. Thus, the goal of this paper is to examine and analyze the role of RPF in participative K-Pop fandom culture. It draws information and insight from a survey that collected opinions and answers from over 500 respondents that identify themselves as an active part of the K-Pop community that has had experience in consuming, if not creating, K-Pop RPF. In doing so, this work presents the argument that fanfiction in K-Pop does not only fulfill fantasy and bridge gaps in one's experience in the fandom but is also an avenue towards identity building as well as further participation with and influence on an idol, their company, or even the collective fandom in itself.

Introduction

Fanfiction in and of itself is no new phenomenon; as a general literary practice, it has been in existence as early as the 20th Century, when a distinction between a character's original author and another author who had used the same character in

a different work or context needed to be made.[1] Over time, the concept of fanfiction needed constant revision and delineation to set itself apart from original fiction, and much has needed to be established, adjusted, and reconsidered to give way to the constant transformation that it has gone through. Now, with the digital space (which acts as the main medium for modern day fanwork) larger than ever, the practice of creating and consuming fanfiction in general becomes more evident and widespread. Fanfiction, at its core, is derivative; it is created as a kind of juxtaposition that both (a) strikes a delicate balance between its source work and the ideas that make it "unique" or transform it and, at the same time, (b) blurs the line that is meant to visibly separate what is "original" by the first author and what is "original" by the fanfiction writer in order to make sure that the elements the latter adds or changes can still exist in harmony with the basis of the initial text. The complexity of the issue and the arbitrariness of what is acceptable and what is not in fanfiction has led to multiple issues that are no closer to creating a unanimous perspective on the craft.

The lines become blurrier and the boundaries and ethics of the craft become much more difficult to dissect when considering works that take inspiration from or build foundation off of reality. Real person fanfiction (RPF) brings up unique points of what is acceptable and what should be condemned not in terms of a work's premise but a person's identity. It consistently and ceaselessly begs questions about the extent to which a real person without a fictional identity can be manipulated within a work of fiction and the manner in which one can derive from their personal, real-life context, if at all. For the most part, RPF has been limited to certain niche fandoms with a particularly strong following — this much will be seen later in the discussion — but RPF has since become a larger phenomenon following the rise of K-Pop and the strength of K-Pop fans as a community of proactive and participative consumers that not only seek to mitigate gaps or counter truths but also aim, in some ways, to influence reality to a certain degree. The agency of K-Pop fans within their fandom and with regards to communication with the idols and their companies is unprecedented, and this much is true in how they participate — fanfiction creation and consumption included.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the diversity of RPF in the K-Pop fandom. In doing so, it argues that fanfiction in K-Pop does not only fulfill fantasy and bridge gaps in one's experience in the fandom but is also an avenue towards identity building as well as further participation with and influence on an idol, their company, or even the collective fandom in itself.

Literature Review

By its transformative nature, fanfiction is considered a hypertext. Any work that falls under this category is the later "text B" that calls back to the earlier hypotext

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1   Bailey Gribben, "Fanfiction: A Legal Battle of Creativity," *Reporter*, Feb 5, 2016, accessed June 22, 2020, https://reporter.rit.edu/views/fanfiction-legal-battle-creativity.

"text A" in a manner that is not just commentary but, in many ways, transformative.[2] Fanfiction is also highly archontic, which means that it is literature that refers to and builds on already existing literature as reference.[3] In other words, fanfiction cannot just be derivative of a work or a body of work; it must also be *expansive* and offer new information, integrate new elements, and propose itself as something of a supplement (or, to some extreme degree, an alternative) to the original work.[4] When understanding fanfiction as separate, simply as a type of literature, it is fairly straightforward in its approach and role. It appears to act simply as a means for fans to further explore a fictional work through a specific lens that suits them and to push the limits of their own creativity and understanding of the hypotext/text A. However, fanfiction as both malleable text and a tool for reshaping existing information makes its nature, purpose, and consequent role much more complicated and open to interpretation.

Experts in fan studies have since debated the place and role of fanfiction as a part of the dynamics of society and through a more anthropological lens; this lens is meant to treat fanfiction — as a part of the larger umbrella of fan work — as discourse, education, and negotiation. While it is not the main goal of this paper to elaborate on fanfiction as a resource for learning, much research has delved into the value of online-specific literature to engage English as a Second Language (ESL) students and sharpen their linguistic skills.[5] Some studies would actually see it as a form of resistance; the first wave of fanfiction studies theory was almost always linked to a heavily Marxist perspective,[6] where the art of writing was seen as a means to overcome oppression. In this case, the fans are the literary proletariat that struggles to find a space of empowerment against corporations that claim ownership to characters and their contexts.[7] In this kind of perspective, we see fans as those that fight for agency, employing fanfiction as a tool or a weapon of revolution specifically created for carving out a more even playing field rather than transformation for artistic transformation's sake. To a less aggressive degree, fanfiction was one of the main tools that fans of musical TV series *Glee* used to express their dissatisfaction:

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2   Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

3   Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theoriers of Fan Fiction," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet,* eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2006), 61.

4   Sara K. Day, "Pure Passion: The Twilight Saga, "Abstinence Porn," and Adolescent Women's Fan Fiction," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 39, no. 1, (2019): 29.

5   Amy C. Hutchinson, Lindsay Woodward, and Jamie Colwell, "What Are Preadolescent Readers Doing Online? An Examination of Upper Elementary Students' Reading, Writing, and Communication in Digital Spaces," *Reading Research Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2016).

6   Bronwen Thomas, "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 3.

7   Ibid.

"In the case of Glee, some works of fan fiction take care to explicitly call out Glee's inadequacies, especially as a moral or progressive text, and/or to punish characters for their homophobic bullying, or to educate and rehabilitate characters whose ignorance remains intact in *Glee*."[8] However, this perception of fanfiction as a tool for battle or, at the very least, for rectification, suggests that all transformative works are inherently oppressed by the original text. While this may be true in some cases, it is not for all. With the exponential growth fanfiction has undergone, it has not only been able to thrive in harmony with the original text but has expanded to become a diverse genre (and not just a subgenre) of its own.

More recent and developed studies on fan culture and fanfiction paint such derivative works as no longer just a secondary creation but an essential part of pop culture engagement. Fans are no longer slaves to the grind that have to kowtow to franchise and corporation will nor are they using their works as retaliatory or resistant. Rather, they write fanfiction to broaden their own interaction not just with the text but also with the fandom itself. Thomas points out that the act of writing becomes more personal, intimate, and reflective in this case:

> *… [It] is distinguished by a greater self-reflexivity about the theorist's own motives and positions and by a shift in emphasis toward exploring the contributions of fans to contemporary culture. Theorists reflect in a much more person- al way about their own engagement with fandoms and with fan texts, and instead of fans being seen as isolated or marginal, their activities are treated as a fundamental aspect of everyday life.*[9]

The takeaway from this perspective is that fanfiction is (a) in-depth textual engagement, (b) fandom participation and contribution, and (c) self-reflection all in one. In looking at it as something with multiple purposes it can also be seen as something with multiple effects and different kinds of significance. Fanfiction becomes empowerment in a different way; rather than fighting against those who have the upper hand in a more traditional sense (that is, one of power), it is a way to introduce and explore things like queer discourse and feminism which may not be tackled adequately — or in some cases, at all — in the context of the original text.[10] Stark, somewhat extreme examples of this would be the characterization of the Babadook (the demonic antagonist in the horror movie of the same name) as an "LGBTQ+ icon by Tumblr and other fanfiction websites" as well as the romanticization

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8   Louisa Stein, "Dissatisfaction and Glee: On Emotional Range in Fandom and Feels Culture," in *Anti Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age,* ed. Melissa A. Click, (NY: NYU Press, 2019), 90.

9   Thomas, "What is Fanfiction," 4.

10   Diana Koehm, "Revision as Resistance: Fanfiction as an Empowering Community for Female and Queer Fans," *Honors Scholar Theses,* 604, (2018).

of the antagonist of Stephen King's *It*, Pennywise.[11] Though odd as an approach and as parodic as it may seem, the widespread acceptance of such traits attributed to these antagonists in either an attempt to humanize them or, to some degree, even create space for personal relatability or representation in texts that do not offer such space to its fans is indicative of the diversity of fanfiction's role in the fandom.

In the context of a different fandom, we can look at the television series *Supernatural,* which has an immensely large following. Despite having a highly complex and diverse plotline, *Supernatural* is still subject to fan remixes that are often built on canon divergence — that is, an intentional departure from the key points of the source text's original and, thus, 'canonically accepted' plot — and audience-perceived subtext. In fact, it is interesting to note that despite the much longer story *Supernatural* offers, with fifteen seasons under its belt, fans still generate more fan work, most especially fanfiction. In other words, an original text need not be necessarily lacking for it to have supplementary works. Hypertexts multiply in proportion to the growth of the hypotext; there is more to be explored and more desire to explore if there is more original content. Thus, it can be said that fanfiction is not just inevitable but infinite; fans create it not specifically with the *need* to transform the text in mind but the desire to do so, and desire, in this case, grows more rapidly and exists more visibly than necessity. Thomas states that:

> *Fanfiction thus poses an important challenge to conceptualizations of storyworlds that focus on their universality and familiarity, demonstrating that, in fact, readers' and audiences' relations with those worlds are diverse and sometimes conflicting. These fan-produced narratives also underscore that work focusing on how storyworlds are triggered by textual cues must be supplemented with research addressing the whole question of what readers and audiences do with those worlds—how they inhabit them, transform them, make them their own.* [12]

Finally, if one looks at the case of *Supernatural*, it is clear that fanfiction is also an essential avenue for indirect contact and interaction with those who control the franchise at its core. Granted, the producers and writers of the show are seemingly more aware of the discourse about the show that fanfiction creates, but their knowledge is also interestingly translated into the original text itself. Time and time again, the show's writers insert subliminal (or even explicit, at times) references to fan culture known as "easter eggs" into the actual dialogue or plot, introducing fandom-specific knowledge, jokes, and theories as canon. This is what Reijnders et al. call ascended fanon — "a case where a media producer uses fannish ideas,

11   Sherin John Francis and Kavya Purushothaman, "Fanfiction: A Study as An Uprising Genre in Literature," *UGC Care Journal* 31, no. 30 (May 2020): 30.
12   Thomas, "What is Fanfiction," 7.

jokes, or other contributions in canonic texts."[13] Supernatural injects fanon into the plotline, as a crucial element in an episode, or even just as comedic dialogue. For instance, in one episode, there is a "super-fan" named Becky who had an unhealthy obsession with the story, and it is through her that the main characters find that their entire lives up until that point (that is, the show's entire history so far) is published as a series of books. While the encounter in itself appears to be only a lighthearted representation of the show's strong and highly visible fandom, like in how Becky makes them aware of the "Wincest ship,"[14] possibly the most popular romantic pairing in the fandom's vast body of fanfiction works, it also becomes a springboard for the show's many turning points, as seen in the fact that the writer of these meta-books is later revealed to be "God," hiding on earth. The inclusion of the show's history into the plot itself also allows writers to tackle or expose certain critiques and theories the fans have made.[15] In doing so, Supernatural proves that being a part of a fandom also usually means being highly participative in shaping and negotiating the content and impact of a work, making it polymediated media (in essence, media formed with ideas from different sources); "Supernatural fans have gained a measure of power that will help them feel more included in the general fanbase, communicate better with the creators, and, possibly, force the creators to address critical and difficult problems in the show — all through transformative fan works."[16] Through this, it becomes clear that fandom and fanfiction now have a level of agency on what they consume and how they can consume it that is given to them through the expansion of the digital space and the fan made content they create through it. The relationship between the fan and the franchise or the "big machine," then, is no longer simply passive on the former's end.

Much of the framework of this discussion is taken from theories and analysis of fanfiction of fictional works because the derivative relationship between them is much more clean-cut. However, this link becomes muddled when considering the specific subgenre of RPF, which is considerably less explored in academia and, thus, has more gaps and raised questions. Real person fiction (RPF) is most associated with music acts, and the phenomenon in itself is strange in that music acts do not really have stories that are comprehensively published and can thus be interacted with or analyzed in the traditional sense.[17] However, the roles of RPF in music act-based fanfiction, in some ways, intersect with the aforementioned roles of fanfiction

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13   Stijn Reijnders Abby Waysdorf, Koos Zwaan, and Linda Duits, "Fandom and Fanfiction," *ResearchGate,* March 2017, 6.

14   Art Herbig and Andrew F. Hermann, "Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the *Supernatural* Episode 'Fan Fiction,'" *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 758.

15   Ibid., 757.

16   Deepa Sivarajan, "Tlön, fandom, and source text: The effect of fan works on the narrative of Supernatural," in *Saving People, Hunting Things*, ed. Catherine Tosenberger, *Transformative Works and Cultures Special Issue,* no. 4, (2010).

17   Ross Hagen, "'Bandom Ate My Face': The Collapse of the Fourth Wall in Online Fanfiction," *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 1 (2015).

in fiction fandoms, with some nuances. It is still a means to express dissatisfaction or, at the very least, bridge gaps in what one knows or understands and what one wants. One difference, however, is that there is a much heavier reliance on other fanfiction or, at least, other works created through different mediums (such as fan art and social media content) or ideas by other fans to build such bridges from fiction over to reality. This is what is called "intertextuality to the second degree," wherein interaction is not just limited between the hypertext and the hypotext as isolated cases but extends between hypertexts themselves.[18] These collectively agreed-upon "headcanons" are trickier and more subject to discourse and, thus, contention. Since there is no actual hypotext that serves as the origin for such ideas, fanfiction writers have to come to some kind of agreement on what is "true" and what "original elements" must be maintained to perpetuate the work as one of fanfiction and not just original fiction.

The concerns regarding RPF magnify and expand the deeper one delves into this subgenre. When looking at fanfiction as hypertext, the question of the original text is underscored. Fans consistently underscore their unanimous understanding and protection of the humanity and subsequent privacy of these celebrities but still see no issue with fictionalizing them. Crude as it may sound, the act of integrating these people into fiction suggests that the "reality" of the person and their "fictionality" as a celebrity are not always mutually exclusive. This much is seen in how fans of popular punk rock/emo bands My Chemical Romance, Panic! At The Disco, and Fall Out Boy would create ship/slash fanfiction of the members despite claiming their loyalty to the bands' desires for privacy. Hagen points out that "The boundaries between fiction and reality are relevant because RPF is built around the assumption that a celebrity's public identity is in some sense fabricated,"[19] which means that, in many ways, despite arguing the need to maintain the humanity of these celebrities, fans also simultaneously view their images, personalities, and experiences (to the extent that these things are publicized) as aspects of the overall hypotext that is the human, which challenges and expands the concept's traditional definition.

However, there are more issues and points for consideration when it comes to viewing a human as text that one can "derive" from. Stardom often seems to justify the liquefication of lines and boundaries that delineate the celebrity as a fan object, the celebrity as a character, and the celebrity as a real person.[20] The ethics of RPF are also often put into inquiry. As fanfiction is meant to be a further exploration of a text, RPF begs the question: if one is exploring the private life of a celebrity, then is it, in some way, a violation of it? The argument continues, and there is no clear answer, but it is evident that RPF is a more sensitive genre to cross over into. This much is seen in the case of One Direction, arguably the most popular boy band of the century to date. Much of the fanfiction that is published about them is slashfic —

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18   Milena Popova, "When the RP gets in the way of the F": Star Image and Intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 25, (2017).

19   Hagen, "Bandom Ate My Face," 48.

20   Popova, "When the RP gets in the way of the F."

the romantic pairing of two members, Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, categorized under the shipping portmanteau "Larry Stylinson." This pairing continues on as one of the most popular RPF ships to date, even after the group's disbandment and both Styles's and Tomlinson's explicit denial of the truth behind this pairing and their consequent discomfort and distancing from one another.[21] Fandom not only created but perpetuated this act of shipping, and despite there not being any more interaction between these members, the steadiness of fan content for it only showcases the transgressive nature of fandom power and agency: that it not only has the ability to ignore what is true but to transcend it, even affect reality to some degree.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to argue the ethics of RPF nor to condemn the perspectives or possibilities in its creation. Rather, this literature review is meant to provide a framework for this work's analysis of the multi-faceted role of fanfiction in the context of K-Pop. Not much seems to have been delved into with regards to this, in large part because K-Pop, in itself, is a relatively newer phenomenon than Western music/Western fan studies and also operates in a different manner. Thus, this literature review is meant to be a springboard for a better understanding of how K-Pop-based RPF is adherent to the same purposes and pitfalls mentioned above as well as how the intricate workings of K-Pop fandoms make its role unique.

Methodology

The researcher conducted a qualitative survey that collected answers on the experiences, thoughts, and knowledge of K-Pop RPF from 578 respondents across the internet, through two major channels: Twitter, where the researcher's followers are mostly K-Pop fans from various countries that subscribe to the fandom workings of multiple groups, and Tumblr, through the researcher's writing blog. To generate results as close to true randomness as possible, the survey link was disseminated to an open audience and through word of mouth (reblogging/retweeting).

The ages of the respondents varied between 18-32 on average, and the nationalities were highly diverse. 487 respondents (84%) classified themselves as "beginners" in Korean or not having any literacy or fluency in it at all, which limits this analysis to a collectively international experience (that is, it only takes into account fanfiction writers, readers, and works available in English or any other language that is not Korean, if any). Most fans were those dedicated to boy groups like EXO (48%), BTS (31%), and NCT (50%), although Red Velvet as a girl group was the most mentioned (34%). The experiences of fans in relation to becoming interested in K-Pop is fairly homogenous (67.6% from YouTube surfing, 51.9% from recommendation from other fans, and 28% from accidental exposure), and they have varying lengths of stay in K-Pop fandoms as a whole (30.4% of respondents have been fans of any kind of K-Pop for 4-6 years; 30% for more than 10 years, and 22.7% for 2-3 years). It is clear that, in this amount of time, most if not all respondents

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21   Francis and Purushothaman, "Fanfiction," 28.

would have been exposed to some kind of fan work, especially fanfiction.

Out of these participants, 67.6% (391 respondents) identify themselves as both fan work creators and consumers while 31.5% are passive fan consumers. The 0.7% of respondents that stated they did not consume nor create fan content were automatically led to a page that thanked them for their response to avoid gathering inaccurate information from them. More than 300 fan creator respondents (61.7%) answered that they had created fanfiction at one point, and 99.1% (569 respondents) of fan consumers say that they have consumed fanfiction at one point in time. The latter part of the survey used a five-point Likert scale ([1] strongly disagree, [2] disagree, [3] neutral, [4] agree, and [5] strongly agree) that posed K-Pop fandom and fanfiction specific statements to gauge each respondent's agreement or disagreement with them. After this, the respondents were encouraged (but not required) to elaborate on some of their answers from the Likert scale, and these results were carefully perused and compiled to create generalizations based on repeated themes that highlight the key perspectives on and roles of RPF in the fanfiction community. The researcher acknowledges that there is always a margin for error in drawing conclusions from highly diverse answers, and while they attempted to maintain a professional objectivity in distilling answers, they acknowledge the possibility of researcher bias (although curtailed to be as minimal as possible) as a limitation to the way in which such generalizations were developed.

Data Analysis

Fanfiction as Space for Negotiation

Possibly the most diverse answers within this survey had to do with idol image — its creation and negotiation within the fandom and, to a larger scale, between the fans and the idols themselves. Fanfiction, to a certain extent, requires the creation and perpetuation of an image that essentially and inevitably flattens their dimensions to re-envision them as a *character* that can fit certain plots or tropes. For instance, according to Haasch, the character of "Min Yoongi" within fanfiction is very often aligned with the typical 'bad boy' persona that is a staple in teen fiction.[22] Despite this, most fans know him to be "staunch in his opinions but respectful and well-spoken in interviews."[23] The discrepancy between who he is portrayed as in fanfiction and who he appears to be "in real life" (at least, to the extent of fans' knowledge) indicates that fans use fanfiction — whether by choice or subconsciously — to re-envision their idols and, thus, re-negotiate their image collectively. In this, fanfiction writers take advantage of the celebrity image as *text* to diversify analysis of them and present an alternative that better suits their needs or expectations.

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22   Palmer Haasch, "Community, Soul-Searching and Pleasure: The Significance of Real Person Fanfiction in BTS Fandom," *Undergraduate Thesis,* University Honors Program, University of Minnesota, 28.

23   Ibid, 29.

This malleability of image and celebrity persona, though, is subject to much juxtaposition. When presented with the statement "fanfiction is meant to be an extension of the idols' lives and must be as accurate to their personas as possible," 46% of respondents strongly disagreed (almost 30% somewhat disagreed). This indicates that many fanfiction readers and writers see the celebrity image as almost entirely flexible — that is, the ownership of the hypotext (in this case, the idol), is almost completely transferred to the fan creator[24] and can be reshaped. This calls back to what Hagen says about the celebrity image as fabricated and the fans' knowledge of this as fiction that is *offered* and sold to them, thus becoming, to some degree, fandom possession. However, a contradiction arises when it comes to responses to the statement "Alternate universe fanfiction strips idols of their identity as real persons"; 41% responded with "strongly disagree" and 27% with "somewhat disagree." Thus, in the context of completely different settings or timelines, the "core essence," to most writers and readers, must remain; in other words, despite using them as fictional characters by displacing them from their current reality, fans have a strong awareness of the *truth* of them as real people. Some people who elaborated on their answers mentioned that authors should and do take care to have their characters stay as *accurate* to their real-life counterparts as possible, and this is what distinguishes AU RPF from original fiction.

What this juxtaposition proves is that fandoms are in a constant state of negotiation about idol images and that these negotiations have yet to find the ultimate balance between respecting what is real and expanding what is fictional. While many answered that it is not a priority to maintain real-life accuracy in fanfiction (as the celebrity acts as text), many of the same respondents stated that there is a need to keep these characters informed by the real idol's personality. Constantly having to navigate the tricky line between what is "real" and what is "mine to transform" becomes more complicated when considering the discussion of privacy. Because of the existence of *sasaeng* fans (a term coined from the Korean word '*sasaenghwal'* meaning 'private life' that refers to fans who infringe a celebrity's private life to the point of physically stalking them), K-Pop fandoms have a stronger sense of protectiveness over their idols' private lives, which is likely the reason why *seeing* fanfiction as speculative of their "real persona" seemed wrong to most respondents. However, it is also clear, even just through the massive archiving of K-Pop fanfiction across the internet, that these written fan works are a means for fans to perpetuate internal analysis and deeper negotiation about what these idols might be like in the private sphere and how these assumed personality traits and skills would play out *if* they were open to the public. Thus, it is clear that fanfiction is essential to the act of participating in fandom negotiation, where one can not only accept or negate prominent perceptions of an idol within the community but also elaborate upon these perspectives in detail to arrive at a more fine-tuned view of the idol image that serves as the fandom hypotext.

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24   Gino Canella, "Fan Fiction and the Transformation of Ownership," presented at the *International Communication Association annual conference,* 2015.

Fanfiction as Idol and Concept Blueprinting

Not only is an idol's image constantly in negotiation between fans through fanfiction, but fan writing also has its effects on idol images even within the companies and for the idols themselves. When asked to respond to the statement "It is evident that fanfiction influences the way idols act," 40% responded with "strongly disagree." This appears to be truer for newer idol groups like NCT as well as girl groups, but many fans of older boy groups (TVXQ, Super Junior, EXO, to a degree) recount instances in which certain actions appear to *at least* be aligned with very popular fanfiction representations of the idols. Many respondents mention Super Junior's queerbaiting, most especially instances that involved member Choi Siwon. Choi is known for his highly Christian approach to homosexuality and is vocal and explicit about his disregard for it; however, his image in fanfiction is often at least secretly homosexual or even overtly so. For many idols, fan service is a surefire way to generate interest or maintain fandom loyalty, and many ideas that these acts of service are borne of come from fanfiction, especially in the realm of shipping (whether platonic or romantic) and even sometimes individual personality.

Catering to what fans want despite it being misaligned with one's personal perception or actual personality not only generates interest in one's work/persona but also indirectly communicates to fans that what they *desire* from the "canon" that they diverge from through fanfiction can also come true (at least, to a certain degree); "'As celebrities become more and more involved in sort of curating their lives on Instagram and understand that people telling stories about them is one of the things they're selling...it will become a part of a media strategy,' Jamison says."[25] In actively attending to fans' whims and using common fanfiction elements or stereotypes as foundations for their actions, idols can enhance the strong feelings of love and want that is usually the basis for fan loyalty. It is an expansion of the emotional economy that creates something of a two-way relationship between idols and fans.[26] While it cannot be ascertained that Choi or any other Super Junior member has read fanfiction for themselves, it is clear that popular ships, portrayals, and especially the tropes of "stage gay"[27] in fanfiction are disseminated within the industry and to the people involved in creating and maintaining idols' images — inclusive of the idols themselves. Despite there being discrepancy between private persona and public image, the fact remains that the celebrity image, being performative in nature, is in a constant state of metamorphosis that is highly influenced by fan creations and the discourse that it is based on as well as creates.

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25   Tonya Riley, "The Dubious Ethics of Real-Person Fiction," *Dark(Ish) Web,* Jan 13, 2018, accessed June 24, 2020, https://medium.com/s/darkish-web/the-dubious-ethics-of-re-al-person-fiction-5cd6bd498c16

26   Q. Zhang and A.Y.H. Fung, "Fan economy and consumption: Fandom of Korean music bands in China," in *The Korean wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality,* eds. Yoon Tae-Jin and Dal Yong-Jin (NY: Lexington Books, 2017).

27   Hagen, "Bandom Ate My Face."

Furthermore, it is not just in terms of the individual idol that fan works, especially fanfiction, become blueprints; for agencies, fan-driven information and the shared narrative they create for the idols and the groups are springboards for the expansion of popularity or profit. Many respondents to the survey mention the likelihood of companies using fanfiction as key points of market research to gain a better understanding of what fandoms are collectively invested in. The prime example of this the BTS Universe (what fans call BU), which was specifically shaped by fan theories and consequent fanfiction that exploded in 2015. The *I Need U* and *Run* music videos featured elements of those fan-created theories that not only sparked interest in the fan works but also helped the group itself gain traction not just as performers but as "artistic storytellers." To a lesser degree, fanfiction — especially in terms of shipping — also sets the tone for merchandise pitches and concepts; a clear example of this is the recent inclusion of "couple photocards" in albums in tandem with single ones. One notable group to have done this is NU'EST, who have admitted to reading fanfiction of themselves; fans noticed an increase in "shipping subtleties" in merchandise as well as member-to-member interaction. These examples illustrate not just the more potent relationship between the machine and the fans but also the heightened level of agency that K-Pop fans have with regards to how what they do can both directly and indirectly influence marketing and performance decisions.[28] While the takeaway is not that specific works of fanfiction directly influence idol or company action, it is clear that the popularity of fanfiction and the tropes or concepts it presents is often integrated into K-Pop — perhaps even more so than in any other music industry around the world.

Fanfiction as Fandom Identity, Participation, and Networking

The act of writing is greatly individualistic in its process. However, literature, especially in fanfiction, is formative in many ways, not just in terms of the idol or their image but also in terms of the fandom and the individual fans themselves. In the context of K-Pop, identity and camaraderie seeking are essential to international fans, in large part because they are already geographically disconnected not just from the idols themselves but from the frontline fanbase: the Korean fans. Furthermore, K-Pop, especially outside of Asia, is still a highly niched interest; it does not have the same public acknowledgment as interest in Western music does. As such, fans need not only to connect with their fandom but also find their places in it. SNS set the stage for such interaction to begin,[29] but in communities as large as K-Pop ones are and on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr where it is much too difficult to filter

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28   Jungbong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, "Introduction: Why fandom matters to the international rise of K-pop," in *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, eds. Jungbong Choi and Roald Maliangkay, (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

29   L. Leung, "'#Unrequited love in cottage industry? Managing K-pop (transnational) fandom in the social media age," in *The Korean wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality,* eds. Yoon Tae-Jin and Dal Yong-Jin (NY: Lexington Books, 2017).

users based solely on their proclaimed interest in a group, there has to be a way to create a network that is more specific to one's own preferences and allows them a safe stage on which they can participate. Swan mentions the phenomenon of reaction videos and YouTube, as the receptacle, as one of the means by which fans participate. Through this "user-generated text," fans feel like they are more visible and have created an intimate place on a highly-visited platform where they can be heard and reached out to by other fans.[30]

Fanfiction, in the same vein, acts as one other hub for fans with more particular interests to gather, and this much is clear from the results of the survey. Almost 50% answered that the "inner circle" of their social media networks was built on similar interests in fanfiction, either partially or completely. Some respondents even admitted that fanfiction has become their primary avenue of interaction with other fans and their most important source of entertainment and contribution in the fandom when idols are not promoting. Leung states that fans are cultural intermediaries, consumers, and creators,[31] and fanfiction is one of the primary means by which their involvement and participation are elevated. The act of simultaneously adding to the content that the fandom creates and consuming others' works with a similar level of enthusiasm as one would with an idol's releases ostensibly creates a new, more specific sense of unity and belonging with other fans, wherein all participate in perpetuating a core activity within the fandom.

Interestingly, 54% of respondents also said that they have since created some level of distinction between the "fellow fan" and the "fellow writer/reader," which also brings up a different side of community existence— the creation of personally adhered-to hierarchies and the act of distinguishing the "other" from the "self." This is also seen in how fans perceive other consumers of fanfiction; when asked if they believe that fanfiction has affected their image of an idol, 40.5% of respondents strongly disagreed; only 3% agreed. However, when asked if they believe that *others* have been somehow affected by the fiction they read, 65% of respondents agreed to some extent. Many of the answers that elaborated on these responses carried similar if not identical messages that boiled down to "*I* personally am unaffected by fanfiction given that I know they are real people, but I am also certain that *others* are affected." Who the "others" are is not clear, but fanfiction also appears to be a trigger that delineates "music-focused fans" that only read for entertainment from the supposed, much larger fans that take it too far — who the former would brand as "delulu," a colloquial collective term for those who are unable to separate fanfiction from reality. Lamerichs talks about how even in the context of a shared and agreed-upon narrative, hierarchies can be created: "Media fans have a shared lingua franca and social protocols. However, they also have hierarchies that result in part from

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30   A.L. Swan, "Transnational identities and feeling in fandom: Place and embodiment in K-pop fan reaction videos', *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 4(2018): 548-565.

31   Leung, "Unrequited Love."

their interpretive and creative competences."[32] In creating this distinction through othering, specific fans reinforce their identities to themselves and to their peers in their journey of participation within the fandom.

Conclusion

By no means is this discussion meant to be a comprehensive run-down of all the many roles that fanfiction plays within the K-Pop fandom; if anything, it only serves to highlight the complexity of its role in making fans more participative as they engage in content about and *with* the idols. While fanfiction of fiction serves some similar purposes as that of RPF in K-Pop like in fantasy fulfillment and in bridging gaps in knowledge or addressing criticism or dissent, K-Pop RPF offers specific opportunities that make the experience of engaging in it fairly unique. It serves as a wide space for negotiation in terms of how idols are perceived (as celebrity texts or as real people), and it offers certain image blueprints for the idol and the company that further underscore the involvement of the fandom in creating the idol inasmuch as the idol and the company create the fandom. Finally, it is an avenue for networking and identity formation; through participating in and contributing to the culture of creation in K-Pop, fans find a place within the community that speaks to their more specific interests and tastes. All of this is proof that fanfiction is *key* to the fandom experience, most especially if one is a K-Pop fan; it is not just essential but inevitable, and it acts as a bridge that connects proactive, participating fans to the idols, the industry, and to each other.

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32   Nicolle Lamerichs, "Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom," in *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures,* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).