

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Identity and Belonging: South Asian Americans Navigating K-pop Industry and Fandom

Thejas Varma

A senior thesis submitted to the Department of Communication and Media at the University of
Michigan in partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts degree (Honors)

Advisor: Dr. Jimmy Draper

April 2024

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Table of Contents

i. Abstract

ii. Introduction

iii. Literature Review

iv. Methods

v. Analysis

vi. Discussion

vii. References

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Abstract

Through four semi-structured interviews of South Asian (“Desi”) American K-pop fans, this article delves into the complexity in how South Asian American K-pop fans experience and interact with K-pop music, paratextual materials, and fandoms. Characterized as a interchanging diasporic negotiation between the fans and the various texts, this article shines light on how subsets of marginalized fans navigate community and discrimination within fandoms, and that increased inclusivity towards subsets of marginalized fans can and should be fostered both from the industry and within fandoms.

The central findings here point to South Asian fans having shifting feelings of alienation and identification within K-pop fandom and the music industry as a whole, pointing to shared fandom bonds and musical messaging, while also pointing out cultural alienation and feeling personally impacted by colorism in relation with their hybridized South Asian identities and the parasociality within fandom that continually enables such harmful incidents. Thus, this study discusses the necessity of taking the experiences of racialized diasporic fans, in this case South Asian American fans, more seriously, calling on both improved cultural sensitivities within the fandom, a dismantling of enabling parasocial practices, and representation and training with both the K-pop industry, alongside paratextual industries broadly, to offer a better experience towards the experiences of diasporic fan communities.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Introduction

Since the '90s, popular culture from South Korea has exploded in popularity, which is something known as the Hallyu Wave. Apart from Korean TV shows and films, South Korea's most renowned cultural export is K-pop (Korean pop). Although the Hallyu Wave was originally popular in neighboring East and Southeast Asian countries, the emergence and growth of the internet allowed for fans all across the globe, including the United States, to engage with and enjoy K-pop alongside other South Korean cultural exports. Accordingly, international fan communities have expanded, which encouraged fans who are able to translate Korean media to other languages, making it more accessible for other international fans. In recent years, K-pop entertainment companies have increasingly marketed towards the US, allowing for groups like BTS and BLACKPINK to become largely popular; for example, BTS sales and streams make up one third of all K-pop sales in the US (Peoples, 2022).

K-pop fandoms have gained notoriety for being extremely organized and defensive about their favorite groups. K-pop fans use social media platforms to promote their favorite artists/groups, engage in mass-buying tactics for albums and songs, and also "protect" their favorite artists/groups from hate. People rally around specific popular fan accounts, who are notable for constantly reposting content from artists/groups, or translating material from Korean to English, which creates a semi-organized community despite its prevalence on decentralized platforms such as Twitter.

However, fans have also organized to call out popular groups from problematic behavior. K-pop groups have faced consequences for incidents of racism and cultural appropriation, prompting responses from fans and anti-fans, especially outside of South Korea. Much of this

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

has to do with the (mis)use of Black American culture; K-pop idols and groups have worn durags, gotten box braids, and misused AAVE (African American Vernacular English) within songs. The musical stylings of K-pop have also long been influenced by Black American music like R&B and hip-hop. But there is also a history of other cultural appropriation and racial insensitivity, towards groups such as indigenous Americans (e.g. T-ARA's 'YaYaYa' music video) and South Asians (Norazo's 'Curry' being a prominent example). This kind of behavior from K-pop groups has garnered critical responses from fans, especially internationally, as fans have used social media as an outlet to share their opinions and persuade idols, groups, and entertainment companies to apologize.

This study specifically focuses on the relationship between South Asian American K-pop fans online and the K-pop industry. How do South Asian Americans critically engage with and make meaning from K-pop culture online, in both assimilatory and oppositional ways? How do they engage with fandoms, as well as other South Asian American K-Pop fans online? A major reason for this study is the lack of research done pertaining to South Asian Americans and online fandom. There have been previous studies focused on Asian American K-pop fans (Kuo et al., 2022) but these have had limited to no focus on South Asian Americans. There have also been studies focused on Black K-pop fans (Oh, 2017) that focus on their specific experiences engaging with K-pop. K-pop has typically maintained rigid beauty standards that have been seen as colorist often due to emphasis on lighter skin and also the prevalence of plastic surgery to alter facial features, among other issues, which has the potential to translate to how South Asian American K-pop fans critically engage with the material as well as their respective fandoms. The fandom aspect of this becomes important as the organizational and tight-knit nature of K-pop

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

fandoms emphasizes fan activity and interaction, which would allow for a wealth of material regarding the racial context in which South Asian Americans experience K-pop fandoms. It is important to understand the experiences of South Asian Americans — as opposed to South Asians living within South Asia — because the diasporic experiences as a racial minority in a White-majority country potentially factors into how they experience K-pop “texts.” In the findings, there are common, shifting experiences of diasporic alienation and resonance towards the “texts” and fandom alike, which calls for a bigger emphasis on change within industry and fandom through representation and improved cultural sensitivities.

Literature Review

Fandom as community

Although a relatively recent academic field, fan studies has a trove of literature dedicated to analyzing the intricacies of fans and fandoms. There are a number of reasons for this; fandoms are collective subculture that often resist the dominant narratives of popular culture. Gray et al. (2007) write about how part of the purpose of fan studies was to provide support in the role of fandoms in resisting popular ideologies, and “to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by non-fans” (p. 2). There is also discussion of the changing perspectives of fandoms, and how popular media and companies came from viewing fans through a lens of ridicule to an important group and consumer base (operating within the limits of capitalism), said to be caused by the fragmentation of media industries and the onset of neoliberal capitalism (p. 4). Fandom has also allowed ways for celebrities and politicians to connect with their voter base and expand their reach; Gray et al. (2007) refer to a situation where

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

former President Bush listed himself being a fan of country music, in which his identity as a fan was leveraged to present himself as a particular kind of person that resonated with his base (p. 5). It becomes important to understand how fandom exists in both submissive and subversive ways to the dominant capitalist world system, and how K-Pop in particular is able to hail fans in specific ways that may not always be in agreement.

It is difficult to discuss the literature on (internet) fandom without understanding digital communities as a whole. Social networking sites are defined as “web-based services” which allows users to create a profile, make connections and communicate with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Although SNS’s are typically designed to be global and diverse, many do attract homogenous populations in the form of groups; fandoms are a particular type of homogenous community on SNSs (p. 214). Among the importance of studying fandom, one of the major aspects to understand is the unique dynamics of internet fan communities. In an increasingly digital society, fandoms are predominantly internet-based, using different social media platforms to congregate and communicate with each other. Studies have pointed to the formation of online fandoms as unique communities. Hillman et al. (2014) analyzes the popularity of Tumblr as an outlet for fandoms of TV series, noting that these fandoms even have their own jargon related to fan-related topics such as shipping. Furthermore, the paper notes that the online community is as important to fans as the fan object itself, stating that they were “just as interested in the value of joining the fandom as the value of the actual watching of the television series” (Hillman et al., 2014, pp. 287-288). This research is relevant to the study of K-pop fandoms, which largely exist online, and the community is as important to the consumption of K-pop “texts” as K-pop culture (variety shows, events, products, etc.) itself, with

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

different in-jokes and jargon. Han (2017) presents the idea of K-pop fandom in Latin America as “transcultural,” with transcultural fandom being “concerned with cross-cultural communication and identification, which further expands into cultural values and virtues” (p. 2251). In particular, Latin American K-pop fans are observed as identifying with K-pop traditions and virtues within the Latin American context, which “(re)imagin[es] a new sense of social identity as an everyday and modern cosmopolitan subject that frees them from the constraints of society” (p. 2262). Aside from being a distinct subculture, this study displays that non-Korean fandoms often engage with K-pop culture in distinct ways, which this paper aims to expand upon and broaden.

Aside from being posited as tight-knit community spaces with their own rules and in-group behaviors, the organized nature of online fandom spaces has allowed for them to serve particular functions in support of fan objects, among other issues as well. One particular aspect that has been documented has to do with how fans react to and engage with the “texts” or “fan objects” of their liking. Oftentimes, fans have negative reactions to the text, which leads them to make complaints and pursue alternative routes, similar to original fan studies pioneers viewing fans and fandoms as a countercultural resistance to hegemonic ideology. Goodman (2015) tackles this notion of “disappointed” fans, referring to how “fanon” (fan-created universes) fill in the gaps that “canon” (original text) did not cover, or in other instances, completely diverge from it, essentially rejecting the author’s intentions. Goodman writes, “Fans are hard on creators and source texts because the fannish impulse is to maintain the integrity of the fictional universe at the expense of the integrity of the creator(s) and the text itself” (p. 669).

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

On the other hand, there are many cases of fans “accepting” the texts through their status as incredibly loyal fans, which produces something known as the “fan economy.” As Liu (2022) states, the fan economy “refers to the cultural consumption caused by the psychology of individuals or groups worshiping and pursuing virtual objects in their minds or objects that exist in reality” (p. 769). This admiration with the fan object has often been taken to the limits, as some are colloquially known as “stans,” which is said to come from a portmanteau of the words ‘stalker’ and ‘fan.’ The fan economy is literally economic as well as cultural, as part of the fan activities for their fandom will relate to supporting their fan object through a number of means, whether that be CDs, movie tickets, and official (and unofficial) merchandise. Incidences of mass buying or collecting have been observed in the case of music fandoms, in order to make their favorite artists successful. Liu (2022) concurs, noting that the fan economy transforms fans from simple appreciators into “‘consumers’ and ‘capital investors’ who will pay for their idols and purchase the latest products of the brand for the first time” (p. 770). Thus, a significant part of fan studies is understanding how and why fans respond and engage with the texts they do, which will be a central part in this paper’s research as it relates to the ways that specific demographics of K-Pop fans are able to engage with the original fan objects.

Booth (2009) also points to the accepting engagement of fan objects/texts through the concept of the narrative database, drawing on the existence of “wikis.” The narrative database and “narrativity” function as the communal re-writing of a narrative story through another’s discourse,” thereby allowing “a community [to] re-read a narrative together” (p. 377). The original texts, rather than being denounced or completely changed, are interactively pieced and

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

put into different contexts by fans, allowing for a specific critical engagement. Part of my study is related to the critical responses that South Asian Americans may have in relation to K-pop.

Jenkins (2015) also points to the concept of fan activism, referring to it as the process where fans enter “civic discourse...[and] they assert their collective rights as the most active and engaged segments of the media audience” (p. 209). Fan activism involves a large group within a particular fandom coming together to support a particular cause. Jenkins (2015) goes on further to discuss the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a nonprofit organization that used the branding of Harry Potter to mobilize fans to support progressive social and political causes (It is now called Fandom Forward); in one example, HPA collaborated with The Leaky Cauldron, a Harry Potter fanbase, to organize parties that raised awareness of the Sudanese genocide (p. 215). In this particular context, fan activism uses the existing investment in a popular fan object to drive large groups of fans towards supporting important causes; Jenkins (2015) notes that “Harry Potter constitutes a form of cultural currency that can carry the group’s messages to many who would not otherwise hear them and that channels our emotional investments” (p. 217).

The idea of fan activism carries a specific relevance that gives context to the dynamics of K-pop fandoms; Kanozia & Ganghariya (2021) note how ARMY (Boy group BTS’ fandom name) come together to raise funds for social causes, often spurred by viewing BTS and their music as inspirational and littered with positive messages. Thus, the text and author can be an influence on how fans operate as a community. This kind of organizing, along with other forms of fan activity, especially through the promoting of their fan objects and creative works, is something that Kosnik (2012) has noted as “free labor,” while also noting that “...fandom is widely categorized as pure leisure...fans’ perception that what they do...[as] explicitly

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

anti-commercial prevents them from considering what they do as warranting pay” (p. 108). Free labor in the form of fan activities is an important part of the social dynamics of fandom, as it does not carry many material benefits, yet still produces in-group dynamics. One prominent example of this was noted in Pitchfork, as music artists often used fans on Discord, an instant messaging and social media platform, to do unpaid work for them; the article also pointed at the prominence of fan accounts on Twitter in their role of updating people on specific musicians (Zhang, 2022). Fan activism allows fans to come together on a global level, but smaller-scale operations within specific demographics have also been studied; Kusuma et al. (2020) notes that, in addition to organizing BTS-related events for the ARMY in the city of Surabaya, Indonesia, the local fan accounts have created organized networks for fans to partake in, as well as efforts to raise awareness for Indonesian issues, donate to charity, and meet up to break the fast during Ramadan (p. 248-249). These studies affirm the role of K-pop fandom as a collective identity with purpose, spanning both local and global contexts; this paper aims to analyze this relationship with regards to how South Asian American K-pop fans online specifically experience K-pop fandom.

The rewards for fan activity often arrive in the form of social capital. Contrary to the view that these online communities are utopian social spaces, fandoms often maintain in-group social hierarchies through their specific access to forms of social capital. Chin (2018) writes that “fans who provide free labor (e.g., in the form of website or fan page maintenance) can gain access to the celebrity or producer. This also elevates the status of the fan in the community” (p. 247). Therefore, there are hierarchies that are maintained and reinforced through this dynamic between the fans that provide increased free labor and organize fan activities versus others that

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

simply want to be part of a community, without being increasingly involved or dedicated to spend their time on the free labor of fan activity. This carries a particular importance to the understanding of K-pop fandoms, as there are often fans that provide greater services (translations, meeting up with the groups, constant streaming) that present them as more “important” to the fandom than the ones who are more casual fans. However, this kind of hierarchical dynamic is not the only one within online fandom; it can be influenced by personal identities.

Intersections of fandom and identity

One specific field of fan studies, as documented in Gray et al. (2007), focuses on the “micro” of fandom, which relates to *why* fans are attracted to specific fan objects (p. 8). Fans often use fan objects to make sense of their own social identities, whether it be gender, age or race; Harrington & Bielby (2005) discuss the role of aging in fandoms, tracking the experiences of adult fans in relation to their fan objects (many of which became fans during childhood). They note that “as normative adult life destabilizes, cultural objects are increasingly providing a reference point for navigating the trajectory through adulthood and later life” (p. 445). Part of studying fans is to figure out these intentions behind the interest in particular fan objects, especially as it relates to our self-identities. In other fandoms, the medium of the fan object itself can allow for greater forms of self-identification, most prominently in role-playing games (RPGs); in Hoch (2020), she describes the racial issues surrounding the game “Dragon Age: Inquisition,” and its fandom; she specifically focuses on fanfiction. The main character Sabina is often read as racially ambiguous, but on fanfiction websites such as Archive Of Our Own the author along with other non-white fans have chosen to write her as a brown woman, citing the

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

malleable nature of her identity that gives the potential for representation and identification for brown women.

These ideas become ever relevant to my research, which focuses on the relationship between South Asian American identities and K-pop “texts.” Kuo et al. (2020) uses grounded theory to study how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans engage and identify with K-pop in order to shape and support their identities. They found that K-pop can be a form of representation for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans through “alternative narratives of sexuality, gender, and Asian identity” (p. 163). Furthermore, it discusses how it gives Asian Americans a space for community with each other; the text also mentions the difficulties in LGBTQ+ representation within K-pop, but notes how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans are able to use fan activity to overcome poor representations (p. 163). Kuo et al. (2020) has been a big influence on this paper, predominantly because it is a foundational study within studying how a marginalized demographic is able to identify with these texts, and how that allows them to engage with each other.

However, the study faces limitations that are going to be expanded upon in my own study; namely, there was only a single person of South Asian American origin amidst a largely East Asian American dataset. As Kibria (1996) has discussed, South Asian Americans are often considered “outsiders” within the Asian American community, partly explained both by their recent immigration patterns relative to other Asian Americans, as well as perceived racial differences (p. 82). Thus, the collective experiences of South Asian Americans are very much unique, albeit some similarities to other Asian American groups, necessitating the study of them distinctly. Furthermore, despite the inclusion of idols from South and Southeast Asia, K-pop is

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

overwhelmingly dominated by East Asian idols, and it is necessary to study the differences in how South Asian Americans may identify themselves within it and in relation to the fandoms. Furthermore, while Kuo et al. (2020) discusses the often problematic nature of LGBTQ+ representations in K-pop as it relates to LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, this study aims to discuss the problematic racial representations (or lack thereof) within K-pop. Rather than simply looking individually, these foundational ideas within fan studies contribute to a larger understanding of the social and personal dynamics that shape fandom, especially in the digital era.

But even as fans use fan objects to enhance and stabilize their self-identities, fandoms are often not equal spaces, as fans from marginalized communities often face discrimination and ostracization from so-called “normative” fan spaces. Previous studies have pointed to the negative impact of online discrimination on mental health (Perkins et al., 2021). This is especially evident with fans of minority racial and ethnic groups, who are often excluded from or made invisible within majority-white spaces; in Young (2014), the Game of Thrones fan website Westeros is analyzed through a lens that describes the domination of whiteness, as they note that “whiteness on *Westeros.org* is literally invisible because it is part of the virtual rather than physical world, and conceptually because normative identity in the community is constructed as white” (p. 744). Race essentially becomes invisible, seeing as how the general identity of the website is already constructed to be entirely white. This corresponds with other studies, such as Pande (2018), which reaffirmed that fans of marginalized racial groups felt excluded by being grouped into the “Fans of Color” title, as it potentially implied that fandom is inherently a white activity (p. 328).

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

The K-pop industry has its own issues with racism that have reflected on fans; cultural appropriation is particularly relevant, especially as K-pop groups and idols have often been found to take from and disrespect Black American culture, alongside other cultures. Kim (2023) discusses the experiences of K-pop fans of color in negotiating with and responding to incidents of cultural appropriation and racism within the K-pop industry; it finds that fans often developed coping strategies, such as laughter and jokes in the face of the racism displayed (p. 3). In other situations, fans sought out to cut ties with the artists they liked (p. 4). A key part of the study was how K-pop fans of color often reflected on their own upbringing in understanding their beliefs on cultural appropriation (Kim, 2023, p. 3). In discussing the experiences of fans of color in response to cultural appropriation within K-pop, Kim (2023) helps provide context for this paper; however, there was no mention of South Asian Americans, which is something to expand upon. While there are bound to be similar collective responses to cultural appropriation, it is important to understand the unique ways in which it may affect South Asian Americans.

Aside from the invisibilization of racial minorities through white hegemony in fandoms, non-white fans are often attacked for rejecting the norms; Hoch (2020)'s discussion on fanfiction related to Sabina, the protagonist of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, as a brown woman prompted "aggressive comments left on Archive of Our Own, anonymous asks on Tumblr, or repeated harassment, both direct and indirect" by white fans. Within white-dominated fandoms, it essentially becomes an assumption that everything has to revolve around whiteness, and anything that does not cater to hegemonic whiteness is shunned and ostracized through the bullying of non-white fans. In the context of K-pop, Kim (2023) discusses the racism displayed towards fans of color by white fans when they try to speak out against cultural appropriation, as

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

fans noted how they “found it extremely difficult to continue supporting the group” (p. 5). This study will explore the relationship between South Asian American fans and fans of other demographics, in order to understand the predominantly racial dynamics at play.

Other studies have explored these social hierarchies through the lens of gender and sexuality. As documented by Nesbitt (2018), women in male-dominated fandom spaces are often subject to misogynistic harassment and exclusion, as male fans accuse them of not being real fans; Nesbitt (2018) also notes that women are objectified and sexualized through forms of cosplay, in a way that did “not necessarily [parallel] men” (p. 180). This theme of “not real fans” is constantly brought up across studies related to identity within fandom spaces — whether it be race or gender, the collective identities of fandoms has often been studied as a homogenous, normative space that privileges white, heterosexual men. These social hierarchies, often mirroring real-world discriminations, also target members of a fandom based on their sexuality, once again because it is not “normative” to the experiences of the fandom. Aalto (2016) discusses how femslash (a subgenre of fan-fiction with relationships between female characters) has allowed for members of specific fandoms to explore and come to terms with their own identities as queer women (p. 22). However, many other fandom members have bullied and harassed said members for their sexuality and shipping choices, which produces negative self-perceptions (p. 22). Although this study does not chiefly focus on gender and sexuality as avenues for marginalization within K-pop, Kuo et al. (2020) presents an image of predominantly female K-pop fans, alongside a significant LGBTQ+ demographic; therefore, it would be important to explore how marginalized genders and sexualities factor into potential “Othering” of South Asian American K-pop fans in opposition to other fans, alongside society.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Methods

This study is interview based, conducted both virtually as well as in-person at the campus of a public Midwestern university. Participants were found through snowball sampling, where they are found through referrals by other participants. Twitter has become one of the largest platforms in which fandoms connect and organize, which has resulted in the development of “Stan” Twitter, with “stan” referring to a form of obsessive fan, adopted from the Eminem song of the same name. However, the decentralized nature of the platform made it more difficult to find people that fit the study. Instead, I used Discord — a more centralized social media platform, due to its distinct “servers” — to find K-pop fans with Twitter accounts in order to allow for a more streamlined approach to finding participants. The demographic of ‘South Asian American K-pop fans’ was specified in my recruiting messages on Discord — this refers to American-born people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Maldivian or Sri Lankan descent who are also active in online K-pop spaces. This is due to South Asian Americans being the main focus of my study. I joined servers, both K-pop related and the university’s official server, to collect participants. On campus, I reached out to student groups in order to collect participants. My five participants were all women between the ages of 18-30, which was important to assess a younger female audience, who are typically the biggest age and gender group for K-pop fans online.

Interviews are the most ideal method of collecting data as the qualitative nature of this study requires more personal, detailed information that can be collected. I interviewed participants for around 30 minutes both in-person and online, asking them some questions

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

regarding their personal relationship to K-pop, as well as disappointments they have felt considering the actions of particular groups and fandoms, alongside reflections on the beauty standards of K-pop. There were ethical considerations taken into account, in particular as the information that I collected is of a personal nature. While there was some baseline information collected, such as the participants' names and ages, this will not appear in the study; the only information in the study will be related to the questions asked, none of which will be identifiable. Furthermore, participants were financially compensated for their time through \$20 gift cards.

Analysis

Three major themes came up in these four interviews, pertaining to shifting cultural connections, personal impact of viewing/experiencing racial discrimination, and the community bonds experienced through the fandom. Such themes point to a collective understanding of how one's diasporic experiences interact with their fandom experiences.

Entertainment and cultural (dis)connections

One of the major themes that popped up across the four interviews was participants discussing the cultural (dis)connections they had to K-pop music and industry. As the industry is majority East Asian, it is understandable that coming from a different cultural background, South Asian American fans would not be as drawn to it in a uniquely cultural way as East or even Southeast Asian Americans, the latter due to the popularity of the Hallyu Wave in Southeast Asia. Thus, participants heavily discussed the ethnocultural distance that they felt from K-pop. Participant 1, a 20-year-old Indian-American woman, described that “in terms of my heritage and whatnot, I really don't connect with any K-pop...especially physically, I don't see myself in any

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

idols.” There have been increased South Asian and non-East Asian idols in K-pop, such as Sriya from BLACKSWAN, who is Indian, or upcoming girl group Katseye, who is composed of international members. But still, due to the minimal proportion of South Asians in K-pop, this kind of disconnect manifests itself both through racial disconnect (as Participant 1 notes not seeing people that look like herself) and other cultural aspects.

For instance, Participant 2, a 20-year-old Bangladeshi-American Muslim woman, also discussed a specifically religious disconnect she felt to K-pop, noting that “even if they are religious, they don’t openly show that.” South Korea is predominantly an irreligious or Protestant country, which may produce an increased cultural distance to South Asian Americans, as South Asians are mostly Hindu or Muslim. Furthermore, being openly religious, Participant 2 is also drawn to more technical aspects of the music as K-pop idols do not present overtly religious displays, save for a few exceptions (Hyolyn of SISTAR, for example, has discussed her religiosity on reality shows). While other participants did not discuss anything pertaining to religious identity, participants generally indicated feeling disconnected in a cultural sense due to differing backgrounds.

However, this led to them discussing the other ways in which they identified with K-pop, which was predominantly in a technical and artistic sense. When asked to describe what initially drew her into K-pop, Participant 3, a 19-year-old Indian-American woman, noted:

Whenever I listen to [K-pop] music, I'm always more focused on beats and the visual aspect...the choreo involved with it and just being able to cater to so many different groups. It's not a lyrical thing because, obviously, I don't know Korean. So it really

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

appeals to me with the whole dance routine and how much effort they put into outfits and the music video sets. I think there's a lot of effort placed in so many categories that's fun. This sentiment of being drawn to more technical elements over any specific cultural identification was echoed by all four participants. Sometimes, this was inspired by prior subcultural affiliations: Participant 1 discussed being drawn to the unique and "intense" production of K-pop music, which appealed to her as an artist and art student: "The continuation of creative themes from album designs to photoshoots to music videos felt really cohesive and cool." K-pop, like any other popular music, is a corporate entertainment industry, and meticulously crafts music, dances, and public appearances for idols. Fans of K-pop listen to the music, watch the dance performances and other paratextual material, such as groups'/idols' appearances on "variety" game shows. For artists and other creatives, the creative processes would be appealing in getting into K-pop, despite little prior identification with the industry or fan subculture.

Participant 3 mentioned that she enjoyed how the K-pop industry displays the personalities of the idols really well, which allowed her to "get to know them on a deeper level," as opposed to Anglophone artists, who they claimed to not know much about. A major way that K-pop companies and groups facilitate connection across backgrounds is through their social media presence. The K-pop industry is highly coordinated and centralized, and in a way, it functions as somewhat insular: The music, performances, and other appearances are all connected to each other, with every album/single release cycle presenting idols and groups through a number of defined spaces, within YouTube channels, TV shows (Music Bank, Inkigayo), general social media and their own platforms (e.g. Bubble, WeVerse), in which their

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

songs are broadcasted and watched. There are similarities to Anglophone music industries, yet as dedicated international fans of K-pop, fans often stay in tune to a number of different sources to engage with their favorite groups; Participant 2 mentioned that apart from using Twitter, she also used VLive, a defunct South Korean video streaming service which many groups used to interact with fans, which has been replaced with Weverse, owned by one of the industry's biggest companies HYBE, responsible for BTS.

Thus, people who get into K-pop have a variety of sources to access information and content related to their favorite groups, often offered top-down from big K-pop companies themselves. Although there is no specific ethnocultural connection between many South Asian Americans towards K-pop, participants use these paratextual ways to increasingly identify with artists and the music they listen to. Participant 1 discusses how messages within BTS' music inspired a personal connection beyond simply listening to the music in a surface level manner:

I was like a really diehard fan [of BTS] from 2016 to 2020. And during that time, they were doing the Love Yourself campaign. And I thought that was really cool. I never really heard that kind of messaging through music before...just love yourself, you know, take your own path. Don't listen to what the status quo is. So when it comes to more philosophical things, I definitely connected more.

This participant was referring to BTS' series of albums prefixed by "Love Yourself," which conveyed messages of self-love. In this way, even as groups and idols within K-pop may not directly present a connection to South Asian Americans through the relative lack of cultural representation, through other aspects such as reality shows and social messaging, fans can feel a greater connection to the music and surrounding culture they engage with.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Although brief, there were also direct cultural links that participants made between their respective backgrounds and the K-pop music they listened to. Participants 3 and 4 both compared K-pop to Bollywood in a point of connection between their background and the industry. Bollywood and other Indian film industries typically feature bright, flashy songs and choreographies, which display obvious similarities to K-pop. However, Participant 3 still pointed out distinctions, indicating that K-pop seemed more “mechanical” compared to Bollywood or Anglophone pop. Even in forging connections between different cultural products, participants seem keen in distinguishing how they experience both kinds of art.

On the other hand, Participant 2 identified a lot more with K-pop culture compared to the rest of the participants. She discussed her Bengali upbringing, noting how when she was younger, she was heavily inspired by and related to the work schedules within K-pop:

What made me really, not only get into the Kpop pole, but also stay there for a while was [that] I admired their hustle...I feel like with my Bengali mindset, it's also very much a hustle culture there... I was looking at these idols. And I was hearing all their stories of how trainees work so hard, they barely sleep...and I was like, oh my God is so inspiring...my roommate and I talked about how like, they're not like idols are not allowed to like they or drink or get tattoos and I was like, I'm basically an idol because I can't do any of those things either.

Unlike the others, Participant 2 looks past any specific racial and ethnic identification to discuss how she identified with K-pop through common social mentalities. The trainee system is typically known for grueling hours of vocal and dance practice, and the participant described it as being appealing through her younger lens due to similarities with her Bengali upbringing,

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

which she later connected to an immigrant hustle mindset. There is also an emphasis on connecting with the socially conservative aspect of it — K-pop idols often have stringent rules regarding what they are allowed to do, in the name of protecting their public image, which Participant 2 connected to her own upbringing, specifically bringing in a comparison of social norms. In these ways, South Asian American participants generally felt disconnected in a cultural sense from K-pop, but they also found ways to forge connections through other elements of their upbringing or interests that shaped their attraction to the music/culture.

Industry and fandom bigotry

Both prompted and otherwise, participants discussed racism within the K-pop industry and fandom in diverse ways. Participant 3 noted how certain beauty standards within K-pop made her feel uncomfortable as to her own identity as a South Asian American:

I know there are definitely like a lot of Kpop artists who have tanner skin, but then makeup artists will not match their foundation [to their skin tone] which is a crazy thing because [they have] a lot of fans who are tanner so it makes me think like oh, was being tanner a bad thing? Why are they covering it up?

The K-pop industry has a history of skin lightening practices for idols and groups; these standards are predicated on colorist and racist ideas, in viewing lighter skin as more “pure” or better (Park and Hong, 2020). As Participant 3’s reaction shows, South Asian Americans K-pop fans generally feel alienated through viewing such attitudes and practices; many South Asian Americans do not have pale skin, so the commonality of these incidents further presents racial disconnect, which could potentially drive fans away or produce negative attitudes towards oneself. Participant 3’s question (“...was being tanner a bad thing?”) further highlights the

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

potential for self-esteem issues within South Asian American K-pop fans, as industry representations of solely or overwhelmingly pale-skinned idols can make fans view these standards as the “ideal,” comparing themselves to such. Similarly, Participant 4, a 22-year-old Indian-American woman, compared beauty standards for idols to South Asian beauty standards she experienced through the emphasis of lighter skin and being thin.

While discussing the personal impact that colorism and discriminatory actions from groups and idols have had on them — one that came up was the common referencing of “Curry” by Norazo by idols, including a member of boy group SEVENTEEN — fans also discussed the negative effects it had on their engagement with K-pop. Participant 1 noted her experience seeing members of the girl group BLACKPINK mock traditionally South Asian dance movements in the past, describing her response to it:

It really came off as tone deaf, but it also opened my eyes a little bit to be, like, “Oh, these people aren't really untouchable. They're just real people.” If you live in such a homogenous society, you're not going to know all of the nuances of cultural appropriation or what's considered offensive to somebody else. So I was just, like, okay, maybe I should take a step back and reevaluate how I perceive these people. Because obviously, there's a level of parasociality being a K-pop fan, especially with how often they interact with us and like, how direct these interactions are.

Here, it becomes clear how perceived racist and culturally insensitive incidents can transform South Asian American K-pop fans' relationship to particular artists and groups, which may potentially limit future engagement. Stereotypical representations of K-pop fandom typically present them as fans with a theological devotion to their favorite groups and idols

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

(Sounders, 2022). As noted in the prior section, K-pop companies often employ centralized tactics to establish supposedly deeper connections between fans and artists, which participants previously noted as being helpful despite lacking other cultural representation. But such controversial incidents also have tangible impacts in reducing future fan engagements with the artists, through their personal relationship to racism and colorism.

In discussing their reactions to racist and colorist incidents within K-pop that they were aware of, some participants emphasized how their diasporic experiences emphasized their negative reactions to these incidents. Participant 3 expressed her perplexity at seeing one Asian minority being racist towards another Asian minority, noting that it “heightened” her disappointment regarding particular incidents. Although inaccurate in presumption (the K-pop industry is overwhelmingly non-diasporic), it specifically contextualizes her experiences as a diasporic South Asian. She notes her increased confusion at particular acts of colorism within the K-pop industry, considering the shared experiences of racism between ethnic minorities within the US. Participant 4 took a similar yet distinct angle, discussing her own struggles with her identities that made her feel isolated:

I think growing up [in India], I would have felt more solid with my identity and my sense of self, because that was like a huge thing I was really struggling with growing up, being like “everyone hates me for being Indian.” ... I don't think I would be as affected [by racist/colorist incidents within K-pop].

This is where the distinction between the experiences of South Asians and diaspora becomes more pronounced. The distinction between homeland and diasporic country is emphasized, noting that the presence of a greater community back in one’s homeland would have

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

made her more secure about her identity, which Participant 4 hypothesizes would make her less affected by viewing colorist incidents in media. Prior research has already discussed how South Asian American communities are often considered outsiders to normative Asian American communities (Kibria, 1996), and combined with common diasporic experiences of loneliness and isolation as an ethnic minority, it can impact how South Asian American K-pop fans react to racism within the “texts” they engage with and the fandom spaces they occupy. However, this did not hold true across participants. Participant 2 noted not being particularly personally affected by racist and colorist incidents she was aware of in K-pop, citing a particular distance to industry incidents and a common occurrence of similar bigotry within her communities:

I never was offended by anything...I feel like I've grown with the mindset of like, we have our own beauty standard...they're in a different country...also, [in] the high school I went to pretty much every guy was racist...it definitely pales in comparison to the stuff I've heard.

Participants also discussed the racism they had seen and experienced within fandom spaces, noting how that contributed to how they operated online. Participant 1 mentioned not being open about Indian online due to seeing fans be racist online, stating that they “didn’t really want to be caught in the crossfire.” There is a sense of isolation that seems to come up in that fans cannot fully express themselves in these online spaces due to fear of bigotry. Furthermore, participants also noted how the prevalence of parasociality within fandom spaces often left them uncomfortable due to how it leads fans to defend racist incidents. For example, Participant 3 said:

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Whenever a K-pop artist does something wrong, like being racist towards the Black community or Desi community and Black people or Indian people are speaking up in the comments, fans of other racial groups will be like, “what are you talking about?” Because [the fans] only care about protecting the idol’s image. They don't care about what other fans have to say if they're actually deeply affected by an issue.

As discussed in the literature review, K-pop fandoms are widely regarded as tight-knit, organized spaces. Often, these have been used for good — Participant 1 discussed how she emailed K-pop companies in the past to call out racism, but didn’t think it did anything — but fans can also weaponize their relationship with the artist to defend them even in instances of bigotry, which works against fostering a better space for South Asian American and other marginalized fans in K-pop fandom spaces, since it does not get groups or idols to realize the harm of cultural insensitivity, as marginalized voices get drowned out by fandoms willing to excuse racism.

When asked about how they thought the K-pop industry could broadly improve cultural sensitivities towards South Asians and as a whole, every participant stressed the need for change to come from the top more than anything, with Participant 2 stressing the importance of media training. Participant 4 also thought increased education would be beneficial, noting how the parasociality of fandoms means that “there are people who will be more impacted by these incidents than others.” The question of increased representation itself was relatively limited across participants, aside from Participant 1 emphasizing having more representation on songwriting teams, while both 1 and 4 noted the increase in “global” girl groups such as Katseye and VCHA as a sign of improvement within the industry. Thus, while there were connections

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

between fandom racism and industry discrimination, South Asian American participants within this study were drawn more towards making the industry a more open and inclusive space, which would presumably also have an impact on fandoms, noting as how some participants felt a direct connection between discriminatory industry incidents and parasocial fans defending them.

Community bonds

Despite issues with prejudice within fandom spaces, South Asian American K-pop fans still generally had a lot of positive things to say when describing their experiences within online fandom spaces. Participant 1 discussed the importance that sharing that common interest in K-pop had in fostering relationships with others, online and offline:

The fandom part is so important. A big part of being into Kpop is making connections with random people...I know BTS, you know BTS, you can start a conversation like that...making connections through these groups and their communities is a really big aspect.

Prior studies have discussed how fandoms are as important in the fan's experience as the fan object itself (Hillman et al., 2014). In this case, to make friends through liking the same K-pop groups is considered to be transformative in the positive social relations that it has produced for the participant. Participant 3 discussed her shift in how she viewed the online fandom as she got older and more mature, noting that her relationships with other fans got more positive as she focused on their mutual interests with K-pop rather than resorting to heated arguments: "I'm just here for the music and the artists and that's pretty much it."

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Rather than focusing on inter-fan relations, Participant 4 discussed being inspired by K-pop groups themselves, in the sense that it operated as a “found family” of sorts, in that members from different backgrounds come together and are supportive of one another:

Growing up in a predominantly white area, and also being in the US as an Indian American, finding community and finding your group of people is really important. So I think seeing that on screen was really good. I think that's really great that idols can have people around them to kind of support them.

Participant 4’s relation to enjoying the groups and the community surrounding them partly stems from her diasporic experiences of being a racialized minority in a white-majority country, through which South Asian American K-pop fans may see themselves in groups coming together to support one another, similar to how she stressed the importance of community as an Indian American. In the previous section, Participant 4 stated that struggling with her identity impacted how she reacted to discriminatory incidents she was aware of within K-pop. Here, we see how K-pop has also produced the inverse for her, in providing a safe space to relate to group relations on screen, not just the fanbase as a whole.

K-pop fan content was also just as impactful to having a positive online experience. Participant 3 discussed looking at how fans provided in-depth analysis of music videos or lyrics, which was “helpful to making people feel happy and have fun.” As noted in the previous passage, fandoms are as important to the fan as the fan object, but K-pop fan content (art, theories, edits, etc.) also provided a secondary source of entertainment to the fan to complement K-pop music and the centralized paratexts, and both of these form a symbiotic relationship in how fans engage with the work.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Participant 1 herself was involved in producing fan art, and mentioned that in lieu of other forms of interaction which felt more negative, she felt that fan art “felt like a very neutral way to contribute to the growing fan base online...it felt nice getting likes and stuff.” There was discussion over what makes a good or a bad fan in K-pop, as she pointed out the “mob mentality” commonly present by K-pop fans towards people who weren’t contributing as much, such as collectively harassing fans for not streaming songs obsessively. She did not feel like doing fan art necessarily made her a “better” fan, but it shielded her from more negative responses compared to people who would express the wrong opinions. This discussion exposed the shakiness of fan hierarchies within K-pop; while you can positively contribute to the fandom through creative works, all it could take is a certain perceived negative aspect of someone, such as their identity or fan activity, to make someone a “worse fan.” This relates to Participant 1’s mention earlier of how she did not discuss being Indian-American online, as she felt as though this would expose her to racial abuse by other fans.

Regardless, other participants noted the continual formation of bonds people’s love of K-pop can produce, specifically in the form of fan humor. Participant 3 discussed continuing to engage with online spaces for the “shits and giggles,” while Participant 2 noted the integrality of humor in how she experienced K-pop:

The memes they make...they're just so funny. I'll see something super funny and I'm like “oh my god, I'm so glad I'm in this.” We’ve found people, we like their work, and now we're joking about it. We have inside jokes that no one else can get. I think that's a really nice community.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

In this sense, fan humor through memes functions similarly to other types of creative fan content (art, for example) in how they allow for continued interest and engagement with K-pop. Furthermore, the reference to having their own inside jokes again shows how essential fan content is to identity formation. That is, K-pop fans being a distinct kind of group is defined by such aspects of their online engagement. It functions as a feedback loop of sorts — K-pop's initial (para)texts produce interest, which leads to various kinds of fan content surrounding it, producing an increased interest in the original (para)texts.

However, this did not mean participants found themselves in agreement with all common aspects of K-pop fan culture. As discussed in the previous section, South Asian American K-pop fans/participants believed that K-pop fan parasociality often lead to fans defending their favorite group or idol's worst actions, especially in relation to colorism or other bigotry, which they reported as making them uncomfortable. But such parasocial culture was criticized in other aspects as well. Participant 1 noted how she felt as though K-pop fans online often went too far in trying to defend or tear down stars:

I think they need to touch grass. I think online culture meshing with fandom culture makes people's perceptions of what makes a positive social online relationship very convoluted. People are so quick to judge when it comes to, like, "Ooh, you like this group? Well, they did something bad in like 2012 so I think you should kill yourself." That's a little much. People can have interests.

For Participant 1, not just as a South Asian American K-pop fan, but just as a fan, enjoying K-pop becomes difficult when people try to tear down your interests. This toxic fan culture can be connected to the general emphasis that companies place on deeper artist-fan

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

relationships, which may enable entitlement of idols by fans through the construction of parasociality, which is combined with online anonymity. This entitlement was further discussed by Participant 2 as something that felt very uncomfortable as a fan, observing how BTS's RM used to say things about how he was going to marry his fans, to the present day where he's setting more boundaries between himself and the fans. While fandoms have been very positive places to foster relationships for the South Asian K-pop fans/participants, the persistent culture of parasociality has damaged their perception of K-pop fandom, cutting between the positive aspects to becoming a culture of entitlement. As noted in the previous section, this parasociality was observed as leading to the defending of unnamed bigoted incidents participants personally observed.

Discussion

From these interviews, South Asian American participants tended to engage with K-pop in complementary and resisting ways, navigating their diasporic identities through the music, paratexts, and fandom. As discussed previously, fan objects provide a great way for fans to navigate their own identity. The goal of this study was to explore the complex ways in which South Asian American K-pop fans understood K-pop, especially as it connected to fandom online and their own identities as hybridized individuals. It was also intended as an expansion of prior studies like Kuo et al.'s (2020) work, which found out that Asian American LGBTQ+ participants found representations within K-pop, and to see the differences in how South Asian Americans connected with it, especially due to the increasingly global reach and prior incidents of racial tension and discrimination within the industry and fandom.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Throughout this study, participants discussed important themes regarding how they related to K-pop. Principally, most did not see themselves represented within K-pop, citing lack of cultural relation and choosing to focus on the musical and other creative aspects of K-pop, such as choreography, conceptual photoshoots, or music videos. Participant 2 was an outlier here and throughout the study, because while she noted a religious disconnect, she discussed the cultural connections she recalled feeling through a similar hard working mentality to her Bengali upbringing. But such cultural disconnections were not a barrier for all, as Participant 3 brought up how idols get opportunities to show off their personalities through other mediums, and Participant 2 mentioned using VLive, a former K-pop live streaming app. Thus, South Asian American K-pop fans interact with the music that distinguishes them from other Asian American fans as previous studies have discussed (Kuo et al., 2020), since there is virtually no representation to be found. But it also displays the industry's power to reach across backgrounds through their online social reach, as fans can form unique cultural connections with K-pop (Han, 2017).

Of course, participants also discussed feeling uncomfortable through colorist and racist incidents both within the industry and fandom. While few explicit incidents were named, such incidents felt more harmful to some participants as it came from their context of already being racially marginalized within the US. However, participants thought that change from the industry, through increased representation and media training for idols in order to respect cultural sensitivities, was necessary. Within the fandom, some participants also noticed how dedicated fans would be likely to defend colorism or racism from their favorite groups or idols, which was disconcerting. Again, in contrast, Participant 2 felt less impacted personally, due to her

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

distancing herself from incidents in “another country,” while still remaining aware of them and acknowledging their harm. There is a similarity here to prior studies on racialized K-pop fans, in how fans looked inwards in navigating their reactions to the racism they saw from K-pop media and fandom (Kim, 2023). While the fans in this study reported minimal fan activity, their statements point towards an affinity of fan activism, in acknowledging and discussing the harm within K-pop beauty standards that fans have historically tackled (Jenkins, 2015).

Regardless of these experiences, participants still engaged with the community, described as important in forming bonds as well as giving one a greater sense of their own self-identity. Fan activity and objects were crucial to their experience as fans, describing them as something that helped them feel part of the community. This is similar to Chin’s (2018) discussion of fan hierarchies that emerge through the free labor done through fan activity. While there was no explicit hierarchy of fans mentioned throughout the interviews, participants discussed the benefit of fans who produced different content, indicating somewhat of a privileged status within the online community.

There were also some limitations considered while doing this study. A majority of the participants were Indian-American, which could have limited a diversity in experiences shared given potentially differing social and racial experiences of South Asian communities. Furthermore, there was little discussion related to gender, religion, and sexuality. All of the participants were women, and as such, there could have been exploration over representations of masculinity and femininity in K-pop and how that connected to gendered beauty standards within South Asian communities. Religion could have also been a factor in how participants experienced race, and while Participant 2 discussed her experiences as a female Muslim K-pop

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

fan, others were not as open about their religion. Along with an increased number of participants, such factors remain important to be explored in future research, especially through other formats such as being directly in fan spaces, where a broader anonymity might lead to more open discussions regarding fandom and identity.

This study sought to approach the ways diasporic South Asian K-pop fans related to and remained critical of K-pop industry and fandom. While much of the activity operated in a manner similar to other fans, South Asian American fans channeled it through their unique experiences as racial minorities within the United States. In doing so, it offers a better view in how racialized fans — specifically South Asian/Desi, in this case — operate within fandom. Their experiences in relation to industry and fandom necessitates a larger emphasis for better fandom etiquette in order to protect various marginalized fan groups, both within K-pop and across different fandoms, as well as an understanding of diasporic alienation and the need for increased representation within the K-pop industry, more education and training to reduce colorism, especially as K-pop expands its global reach to both the US and worldwide.

References

- Aalto, E. (2016). “*She’s straight, you delusional cunt!*” : a study on bullying and homophobia in online fandoms. *Jyx.jyu.fi*. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/49588>
- Booth, P. (2009). Narrativity and the narrative database: Media-based wikis as interactive fan fiction. *Narrative Inquiry*, 19(2), 372–392. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.19.2.09boo>
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>
- Chin, B. (2018). It’s About Who You Know. *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119237211.ch15>
- Cho, M. (2022). BTS for BLM: K-pop, race, and transcultural fandom. *Celebrity Studies*, 13(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2063974>
- Goodman, L. (2015). Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 48(4), 662–676. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12223>
- Gray, J. A., Sandvoss, C., & Harrington, C. L. (2007). *Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world*. New York New York University Press.
- Han, B. (2017). K-Pop in Latin America: Transcultural Fandom and Digital Mediation. *International Journal of Communication*, 11(0), 20. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6304/2048>
- Hillman, S., Procyk, J., & Neustaedter, C. (2014). Tumblr fandoms, community & culture. *Proceedings of the Companion Publication of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer*

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing - CSCW Companion '14.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/2556420.2557634>

Hoch, I. (2017). Fill in the Blank: Customizable Player Characters and Video Game Fandom Practice. In *Fandom, Now In Color* (pp. 109–121). University of Iowa Press.

Jenkins, H. (2015). “Cultural Acupuncture”: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance.

Popular Media Cultures, 206–229. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137350374_11

Kanozia, R., & Ganghariya, G. (2021). More than K-pop fans: BTS fandom and activism amid COVID-19 outbreak. *Media Asia*, 48(4), 338–345.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.1944542>

Kibria, N. (1996). Not Asian, Black or White? Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity. *Amerasia Journal*, 22(2), 77–86.

<https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.22.2.m363851655m22432>

Kim, K. (2023). Stifled, invisible, and threatened: cultural appropriation in K-pop through the lens of identity-negotiating fans of color. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 1(7).

<https://doi.org/10.1093/cc/cad023>

Kosnik, A. de. (2012). Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory. In *Google Books*. Routledge.

https://books.google.com/books?id=-6ec1yPK_KAC&newbks=0&printsec=frontcover&pg=PA98&dq=fandom+digital&hl=en&source=newbks_fb#v=onepage&q=fandom%20digital&f=false

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

- Kuo, L., Perez-Garcia, S., Burke, L., Yamasaki, V., & Le, T. (2020). Performance, Fantasy, or Narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American Identity through Kpop Media and Fandom. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1815428>
- Kusuma, A., Purbantina, A. P., Nahdiyah, V., & Khasanah, U. U. (2020). A Virtual Ethnography Study: Fandom and Social Impact in Digital Era. *ETNOSIA : Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia*, 5(2). <http://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/etnosia/article/view/10898/5986>
- Lee Harrington, C., & Bielby, D. D. (2010). A life course perspective on fandom. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(5), 429–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877910372702>
- Liu, F. (2022). The Fan Culture and Fan Economy. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 664. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220504.140>
- Nisbett, G. S. (2018). Don't Mess with My Happy Place: Understanding Misogyny in Fandom Communities. *Mediating Misogyny*, 171–188. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72917-6_9
- Pande, R. (2018). Who Do You Mean by “Fan?” Decolonizing Media Fandom Identity. *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, 319–332. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119237211.ch20>
- Park, S., & Hong, S.-K. (2021). Performing whiteness: skin beauty as somatechnics in South Korean stardom and celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*, 12(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2021.1912258>
- Peoples, G. (2022, June 16). *BTS Accounts for Nearly 1/3 of All U.S. K-Pop Sales & Streams: Their Domination, By the Numbers*. Billboard. <https://www.billboard.com/pro/bts-sales-streams-k-pop-domination-numbers/>

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

- Perkins, T., Durkee, M., Banks, J., & Ribero-Brown, B. (2021). Gender and Racial Identity Moderate the Effects of Online and Offline Discrimination on Mental Health. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 32(1), 244–253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12717>
- Young, H. (2014). Race in online fantasy fandom: whiteness on Westeros.org. *Continuum*, 28(5), 737–747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.941331>
- Zhang, C. (2022, May 25). *On Discord, Music Fans Become Artists' Besties, Collaborators, and Even Unpaid Interns*. Pitchfork. <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/discord-music-fandoms/>