

Transcultural K-pop fanfiction: Authors, Readers, and Imagined Koreas

Imene Meddoudi

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School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how transcultural K-pop fans imagine, negotiate, and contest “Korea” through English-language K-pop fanfiction. It asks four main questions: how non-Korean authors construct fictional Koreas; what shapes their decisions about representing “Koreanness”; how K-pop RPF readers comment on these stories; and what these practices reveal about the nature of transcultural K-pop fandom.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is a site where affective affinity and friction coexist. At the level of writing, transcultural fandom is normatively contested and marked by asymmetries of power and entitlement. These negotiations do not produce a single stable of image of “Korea” but a range of imagined Koreas whose contours shift across genres. Koreanness is taken up and reworked differently across AUs, yet these heterogeneous imagined Koreas converge around a shared project of constructing queer-safe spaces, which I call queer Korea. At the level of reception, however, much of this friction recedes from view. Instead, K-pop fanfiction readers’ practices align closely with broader anglophone fanfiction gift-culture norms and affect. In this sense, friction in transcultural fandom is displaced than absent, as it surfaces most sharply in authorial self-reflection and on social media platforms. Moreover, these findings contribute to transcultural fandom studies by theorising how affect, friction and racialised authority are distributed across different fan practices, and to fanfiction studies by foregrounding K-pop RPF as a hybrid space where global fanfic conventions, mediated Koreanness and queer world-building are collaboratively negotiated.

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Introduction: Transculturality and K-pop fandom

Back to the summer of 2007 when I first discovered the rabbit hole that is K-pop on YouTube, after spending around a month fanning over J-pop idols, Arashi. The algorithm has done its job linking me to the two phenomena, and before I knew it, I was watching TVXQ's "Hug" music video, being in awe at how angelic the five guys looked in white. Not too long after, while looking for the Romanised lyrics of the song, I found myself lurking in forums which talked about fellow K-pop groups. That was how I finally 'stanned', the word combining stalk and fan (in a good way), Super Junior. I found a forum thread talking about Super Junior's "Happiness" music video, and immediately clicked on it. Give it a few months until the beginning of 2008, and I found myself stanning, what SM entertainment labelled the female version of Super Junior as well, Girls' Generation. I was, however, not alone in this. My sister, being just a few years younger, shared the same interest and we would spend hours in front of our shared computer watching Super Junior and Girls' Generation videos, singing along to their songs, and even learning choreographies. The fannish experience did not, however, stop at consuming.

A few months after, my sister and I began to share oral stories (little did I know the term fanfiction existed that time) about Super Junior and Girls' Generation members, often pairing the two of them together. It was first oral, then forwards to 2010, I started archiving the stories I told on my virtual notepad, afraid of forgetting them because they meant a lot to me. I spent all that time not knowing that fanfiction existed, thinking that what my sister and I did was something unique and exclusive to us. Not until 2011 came, and I stumbled upon Asianfanfics when looking for Super Junior and Girls' Generation interactions on Google. It turned out that Google had instead guided me to fictional interactions, rather than real ones, and I certainly did not mind. I was in awe of the amount of fanfics I found, and became a

regular visitor on the platform, lurking there to find stories about my OTP ('one true pairing') YoonChul, a pairing name for Yoona and Heechul from Girls' Generation and Super Junior respectively. Then, I realised that I was writing K-pop fanfiction way before I knew of its existence in a beginner's English, and at the same time, sometimes mixed with Korean and Arabic words. I realised that I would write about K-idols (Super Junior and SNSD) in an intended South Korean (hereafter Korean) setting where the only cities were Seoul, Incheon, and Busan. I imagined these three particular cities, none of which I had personally experienced, because they were the most commonly mentioned cities in K-pop media content at the time.

In 2012, I published my first fanfic story on Asianfanfics titled *My Painful Tears*, and a very interesting thing happened to me, which is the reason this thesis exists. I simply did not realise I was mixing up my own culture with Korean culture. *My Painful Tears* was a story about Heechul, a rich Korean guy immigrating from America, Yoona, a Korean girl from the middle class, and Kibum, Yoona's old brother and Heechul's best friend. Writing *My Painful Tears* as an Algerian teenager meant that Kibum would stand in between Yoona and Heechul because in my culture, women are considered as men's honour, and that includes a man's sister, wife, mother, and daughter. So, growing up in that culture, I thought that a good obstacle in between Yoona and Heechul would be her brother who was also Heechul's best friend and colleague at work. I did want them to date as young adults, and due to that particular reason, Heechul did not approach Yoona in my story with the intent of marriage, and instead dated her in secret. The fact that they had a secret relationship behind Kibum's back made him become vile to his sister, same as her father. The 'Aha!' moment happened when I had one of my readers comment and ask me why the relationship I was depicting was seen as a problem? That wouldn't it be nice to be happy for them considering Heechul is his best friend? It was then that I realised that I was writing *My Painful Tears*

from an Algerian context, but about Korean characters and what I thought was a Korean setting.

That did not mean I stopped purposefully including anything non-Korean in my K-pop fanfiction writing, however, I definitely found myself making more efforts to do research about Korean cultural elements because of wanting my stories to be accurate. I started including actual Korean universities in my College AU fics and using actual Korean food. There were definitely areas that I worked on less than food and setting, and that included honorifics (I felt they would never have an accurate translation), taking shoes off while coming inside the house, and eating with chopsticks sometimes.

Later on, when I got this PhD opportunity, I wanted to make meaning of my experience with K-pop fanfiction and Korean culture, and especially after realising that my experience was not a unique one, but unified with multiple transcultural K-pop fans who wrote in English platforms. There were multiple degrees and forms of transcultural elements present in the stories I read of transcultural K-pop fanfiction authors. Some of them used more elements of Korean culture while some others neglected it completely, and replaced it with Western elements. I, then, concluded that this personal journey of integrating my cultural context into K-pop fanfiction is not unique to me. It is part of a broader phenomenon where fans from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with K-pop in ways that reflect and blend either their own or other cultural aspects. This process of cultural integration and adaptation is central to the concept of transcultural fandom.

In order to investigate this, I decided to conduct a formal study of all aspects of transcultural K-pop fanfiction, including the authors, the readers, and the texts. My position as a K-pop fan, a K-pop fanfiction author, and K-pop fanfiction reader allows me to closely analyse K-pop fanfiction from both an academic and a fan view. This nuance, I feel, brings

me an insight to easier study transculturality in K-pop fanfiction due to my exposure to both Korean and K-pop culture for 17 years. In this thesis, I explore not only K-pop fanfiction as text, but also authors, and readers. The K-pop fan community is a transcultural fandom where fans from various cultures and countries share a common interest in K-pop, engaging in the creation and consumption of fanfiction. This transcultural interaction is fluid and dynamic, blending Korean culture, K-pop culture, and the global fan community in the making, reading, and writing of fanfiction. I argue that K-pop fanfiction constructs an "imagined Korea," where authors share a set of characteristics in their writing due to their transcultural backgrounds. This construction may invite criticism due to cultural sensitivity issues. Additionally, I contend that K-pop fanfiction readers in the comments sections primarily focus on plot and narrative, often overlooking deeper cultural elements, except for occasional mentions of hybrid Korean-English words. This focus on plot aligns with behaviours observed in Bandom communities, suggesting a common trait among RPF readers.

Furthermore, K-pop fanfiction adapts to specific genres, such as College AU and Coffee Shop AU, with the narrative, setting, and character tropes of each genre influencing the presentation of transculturality. This adaptation contributes to the creation of a genre-specific "imagined Korea." Ultimately, my research enriches the fields of transcultural fandom and fanfiction studies by examining how transculturality functions within the growing phenomenon of K-pop fanfiction and its role in constructing an "imagined Korea."

Dissemination of K-pop

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, refers to the global diffusion of Korean popular culture, encompassing not only K-pop, television dramas, and cinema, but also extending to beauty, fashion, and cuisine. In contemporary discourse, virtually any cultural product associated with Korea has become subsumed under the term Hallyu. Originating in the late 1990s, the term was first employed by a Chinese journalist before gaining traction in academic and media contexts (Won, 2017; B. Kim, 2015). One of the earliest driving forces behind the rise of Hallyu was the South Korean government itself. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the state sought innovative ways to revitalise the national economy and enhance Korea's cultural image abroad, leading to the strategic development of Hallyu as a means of expanding Korean cultural influence on a global scale (Kim, 2012; Lie, 2015; Won, 2017). Thus, rather than an incidental occurrence, the Korean Wave was the result of deliberate cultural policy, through which the government channelled investment into infrastructure, professional training, and media networks to establish K-pop and other cultural products as competitive assets in the global marketplace (Kim, 2012; Won, 2017; Jin, 2017; Park, 2017).

Although the Korean government has provided substantial financial support for Hallyu, this does not imply that it exercises full control over its development, particularly as its primary focus remains economic rather than artistic (Samosir & Wee, 2024). The actual driving force behind the growth of Hallyu lies within the creative industries (such as entertainment companies, film industry, gaming, etc), while the state offers the necessary funding (Samosir & Wee, 2024; Won, 2017) and later appropriates this success by utilising Hallyu stars and cultural projects to enhance Korea's international image (Samosir & Wee, 2024; Won, 2017). Ultimately, it is the "loose relationship between the state and creative industries that makes Hallyu a particularly interesting case of soft power at work" (Samosir &

Wee, 2024, p. 5). In other words, the South Korean government allows creative autonomy to the cultural industries, limiting its involvement largely to financial and promotional support rather than direct creative intervention.

In the specific context of K-pop, this partnership between the state and the entertainment sector positions the genre as an exportable cultural commodity, thereby transforming it into a vehicle of soft power that connects fandom to broader narratives of Korean modernity and global presence (Lie, 2015; Won, 2017). The promotion of Hallyu operated as a form of soft power rather than through traditional modes of export (Kim, 2012). Rather than relying on coercive or militaristic means, Korea advanced its cultural influence through strategies of attraction and affective appeal (Samosir & Wee, 2024; H. Lee, 2017), cultivating global engagement grounded in emotional resonance and a sense of inclusivity (Jung, 2017). Hyesu Park (2021) contends that the significance of Hallyu lies in its disruption of the historically one-directional flow of cultural influence from the West to the rest of the world. By demonstrating that cultural trends can also originate from non-Western contexts and circulate globally, the Korean Wave challenges Western cultural hegemony and highlights the growing plurality of global cultural exchange.

Domestic responses to Hallyu in Korea were characterised by a strong sense of national pride, reflecting both the cultural phenomenon's global success and its economic prosperity (Won, 2017). The Korean media played a central role in amplifying this sentiment by actively promoting and celebrating Hallyu as a marker of national achievement. Scholars, journalists, and political figures alike contributed to this discourse, framing Hallyu as tangible evidence of Korea's cultural advancement and international recognition (Yoon & Kang, 2017; Won, 2017).

The evolution of the Korean Wave can be conceptualised as a multi-phase trajectory (Cho, 2023; B. Kim, 2015; D. Lee, 2021), beginning in the late 1990s, consolidating its influence within Asian popular culture throughout the 2000s, expanding its global presence during the 2010s, and ultimately emerging as a dominant form of global popular culture after 2019 (Cho, 2023). Some scholars categorise these stages numerically: Hallyu 1.0, centred on Korean television dramas; Hallyu 2.0, driven by K-pop; Hallyu 3.0, characterised by the broader diffusion of Korean cultural content; and Hallyu 4.0, associated with the global rise of “K-style” (B. Kim, 2015).

Following its initial success in the 1990s with dramas such as *Star in My Heart* and early K-pop acts including H.O.T and BoA, Hallyu expanded across Asia in the 2000s through the immense popularity of series like *Winter Sonata* and *Jewel in the Palace*, alongside the emergence of idol groups such as TVXQ and Girls’ Generation, which cultivated a devoted regional fan base. In the 2010s, this regional momentum transitioned into a global phenomenon, facilitated by digital platforms such as YouTube and social media (Hong, 2017). K-pop became the primary engine of this expansion, exemplified by the worldwide success of Psy’s “Gangnam Style” in 2012, the genre’s first global hit, followed by the unprecedented international achievements of BTS, EXO, and BLACKPINK, who propelled Hallyu to new levels of global prominence (Cho, 2023).

The initial success of Hallyu was most prominent in China and Japan, a development that Shin (2013) attributes to the broadcasting of Korean cultural content on local television networks and the involvement of international intermediaries. Another key factor often cited in explaining this success is the notion of cultural proximity, which highlights the shared cultural values, social norms, and collective experiences among East Asian audiences. Cultural proximity has been regarded as one of the earliest and most influential frameworks for understanding the regional appeal of Hallyu (Hong, 2017; Yoon & Kang, 2017; Ryoo,

2009). Furthermore, the concept has been extended beyond East Asia to account for Hallyu's reception in other regions, with studies documenting similar dynamics in contexts such as Northeast India (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021), Palestine (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013), and Latin America (Meza & Park, 2015; Min, 2017).

While Meza and Park (2015) suggest that cultural proximity may account for the appeal of K-pop among Latin American audiences, particularly given the region's strong affinity for dance, a key feature also central to K-pop. Seok-Kyeong Hong (2017) contends that this framework has notable limitations. Thus, cultural proximity alone cannot adequately explain the rapid global diffusion of Hallyu beyond East Asia (Hong, 2017; D. Lee, 2021), especially in regions with minimal cultural or linguistic affinities to Korea (Hong, 2017). This raises a crucial question regarding the factors that underpin Hallyu's worldwide resonance and, more specifically, the global appeal of K-pop as the focal point of this thesis.

K-pop, the Frontrunner of Hallyu

Among the various dimensions of Hallyu, K-pop has emerged as the most prominent and emblematic expression of Korea's cultural industries, especially in terms of "global presence and influence [which] cannot be easily challenged" (Jin, 2017, p. 51). K-pop integrates diverse musical styles, performance aesthetics, and production practices, and is characterised by "its catchy rhythms, slick choreography, and expansive dedicated fanbase" (Kuo et al., 2022, p. 2). The K-pop idol system was notably influenced by Japan's J-pop industry, particularly the idol culture that emerged during the 1990s (Shin, 2023; J. Lee, 2023). Early Korean entertainment agencies adopted this Japanese model of idol training and management (Jin, 2020), placing strong emphasis on intensive preparation, image cultivation, and sustained fan engagement. This approach prioritised not only musical performance but also the development of versatile entertainers capable of appealing across multiple media forms. However, while initially inspired by J-pop, K-pop eventually distinguished itself through its heightened focus on globalisation, high production values, and the strategic utilisation of digital media to connect with international audiences.

The worldwide proliferation of K-pop, as previously noted, has been significantly facilitated by digital media (Hong, 2017). The rapid expansion of Asian mass media and digital networks during the 1990s and 2000s played a crucial role in the genre's dissemination (Won, 2017). More recently, digital technologies, particularly smartphones and online platforms such as social media have become central to the global circulation of K-pop (D. Lee, 2021; Samosir & Wee, 2024; Yoon and Kang, 2017; Jin & Yoon, 2014, Jin, 2016). The utilisation of these platforms by Korean popular culture industries has evolved over time in response to shifting patterns of fan consumption. As audiences increasingly engage through social media and YouTube rather than purchasing physical albums, entertainment

companies have experienced declining profits (Jin, 2017). Consequently, K-pop agencies have adapted by implementing new monetisation strategies, including live-streamed concerts and digital advertising (Jin, 2017). Despite these transformations, social media continues to serve as a vital mechanism underpinning K-pop's global visibility, commercial success, and sustained international popularity.

In the Western context, Gibson (2018) identifies four distinct phases in the development of K-pop between 2009 and 2019. During the initial stage (2009–2011), K-pop was marginal within Western media, receiving limited and often superficial coverage that generated only minimal awareness. The subsequent period (2012–2013) was marked by the viral phenomenon of Gangnam Style, which brought unprecedented global attention and stimulated broader curiosity about Korean culture. Between 2014 and 2017, media portrayals of K-pop became increasingly sophisticated, addressing both the glamour and the complexities of the industry. From 2018 onwards, K-pop has become fully integrated into mainstream Western popular culture, with artists such as BTS achieving sustained visibility and contributing to the normalisation of Korean culture within global media discourse (Gibson, 2018).

K-pop's Global Appeal

Diasporic Asian communities have played a significant role in the early transnational circulation and popularisation of Korean popular culture. Korean embassies actively disseminated media such as television programmes and music to migrant populations as a means of maintaining linguistic and cultural ties, particularly for second-generation youth (Meza & Park, 2015; Jung, 2009). While these broadcasts were primarily intended for Asian migrants, they unexpectedly attracted non-Asian viewers as well, illustrating how diasporic networks became an initial conduit through which Hallyu reached broader Western audiences (Jung, 2009; Hübinette, 2012).

K-pop's global success is largely rooted in its deliberate hybridity, which merges Korean cultural elements with Western musical styles such as hip hop, RnB and pop, the Japanese idol system, synchronised choreography, and global visual influences (Kim, 2012). By blending local identity with global aesthetics, K-pop achieves a balance that appeals to diverse audiences without losing its Korean cultural specificity (Kim, 2012). Similarly, Jung (2017) asserts that K-pop's global appeal stems from its cultural hybridity, as it blends global musical styles with distinctly Korean values, creating a sense of emotional closeness that enables international audiences to connect with Korean culture beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries. This hybridity consequently broadens its transnational reach. Eun-Young Jung argues that the Korean Wave is not purely or "authentically" Korean as it carries along "transnational and hybrid" characteristics (2009, p. 69). Moreover, Jung suggests that the Korean Wave is "multi-layered and multi-directional," and it is precisely this quality that enables it to reach audiences across the world, as consumers find familiarity in its hybrid and transnational characteristics (2009, p. 78).

Similarly, Gooyong Kim (2017) argues that K-pop's global appeal stems partly from its accessibility to both Korean and international audiences, with its hybrid blend of Western and Asian influences producing a commodified form of pseudo-Koreanness tailored for global consumption and detached from authentic Korean experiences. Additionally, Jung (2009) insists in defending the hybridity concept; that the diffusion of Korean popular music has nothing to do with "traditional Asian values or uniquely Korean musical elements" (p. 69), suggesting that if K-pop was purely Asian and/or Korean, it would probably be disregarded in the global market. Hyunjoon Shin also asserts that "Asianness or Koreanness, or any other national or regional root and scent, is never indispensable in the mass market of the pop music industry, which always prioritises artists who have an 'international' repertoire" (2009, p. 516).

In relation to E. Jung's (2009) point about how Korean popular music's dissemination has no absolute relations with authentic and original Korean elements, John Lie has a helpful discussion of Korean music and culture from the age of Confucianism (2012, p. 340); a philosophy that reached Korea through China; founded by Confucius (541-479 BC) and later developed by Mencius (371-289 AD) that consists of teachings which aimed "for a search of harmony" (Levi, 2013, p. 7-8). Lie (2012) argues that by the beginning of the 20th century, precisely in the Cho-son dynasty (1392-1897) (p. 340), before Korea was exposed to the Western world, the country was known to hold on to its Confucian style of living. The elite especially put great emphasis on "respecting elders and ancestors, hierarchy and patriarchy, and tradition and order" (Lie, 2012, p. 341). As a result, the music during that period used to be what Westerns would mark out as conservative.

For instance, the themes sung about used to revolve mainly around "parental and familial love" and during the performance, the singer represents, as Lie (2012) states, a Confucian body by "not only preserving the parental gift but also avoiding any display of

flesh” (p. 341). Moreover, questions arise as to what would have occurred if Korea had maintained its ‘authentic’ elements in music: would K-pop be embraced as it is today? Considering that the hybridity of the genre is part of its appeal, there is a substantial possibility that it would not be as popular. To support this argument, Leung (2012) states that transcultural and transnational consumers “latch more into the ‘familiar’, more global aspects of K-pop” which explains how crucial hybridity is to the dissemination of this genre (p. 46).

Therefore, the exposure of the Western world to Korea, and vice versa, is deemed a major factor in K-pop’s massive popularity. To be more specific, the United States of America was the one who brought such opportunity to Korea. Lie (2012) reports that after Korea freed itself from Japanese dominance, America became the new leading power in the country with its huge "cultural dominance in the 1950s and 1960s” in which the U.S. military brought along its musical genres like rock, pop, jazz, blues, etc. and these were performed for the American soldiers. Furthermore, Hollywood movies were also displayed in Korean theatres which led Korean citizens to be exposed to this new culture. It eventually gained massive popularity with the Korean public and rapidly spread around the country (p. 343).

Globalisation markedly affected Korea both in terms of production and consumption. Jung (2009) affirms that Western values were replacing Korean ones to an extent that even beauty standards started to change; Western beauty standards impacted the society which led to Koreans attempting to modify their appearances to resemble Western standards (p. 77). This also applies to K-pop stars and how their companies craft them to become more “transcultural”, therefore, more suitable to be globally consumed. For instance, BoA, known as one of the most successful soloists in Korea, had to learn, sing, and look Japanese in order to be consumed by the Japanese population (Jung, 2009, p. 76) and her Japanese success was so remarkable that SM entertainment, her management agency, attempted to promote her to the U.S. market.

Nonetheless, despite making the singer more “Americanised” by transforming her appearance into a stronger and bolder one (Jung, 2009, p. 77) she did not make history in America as she did in Asia. As Jung argues, this could be due to the American population who are used to “overtly sexy” celebrities and whose opinions are “shaped by stereotypical media representations” of Asian females (Jung, 2009, p. 77). Further, other attempts into the U.S. market have been made and K-pop songs began to include more English lyrics. Today, some of the singers even learn the language professionally in order to penetrate the global market (Jin & Ryoo, 2014, p. 120)

Supporting the transcultural K-pop argument, Lie claims that “there is almost nothing Korean about ‘K-pop’” (2012, p. 360) Sun Jung also states that the Korean popular culture is “hybridised and influenced by various foreign cultures” and this commits to what they label as “non-nationality” in the genre which is why it has been growing globally. (2011, p. 3) However, the domination of K-pop in the global market, according to Gooyong Kim, is deemed as a “counterargument against dominating globalisation” In other words, its hybrid and transcultural nature is successfully used to dominate the global market as “contraflows” (2017, p. 2368), which, as aforementioned, works to decentralise the dominance of Western culture (Han, 2017; H. Park, 2021).

The literature demonstrates that while hybridity can be advantageous for Korean popular culture, it can also present challenges. Otmazgin and Lyan (2013), for example, examined Jewish and Muslim K-pop fans in Israel and Palestine and found that “to some degree, Korean TV dramas are more popular among Palestinians, while K-pop culture is considered more sexually provocative, is more accepted among secular Israelis” (p. 75). In other words, because sexual explicitness is not permitted in Islam, Muslim fans may find it difficult to engage with all forms of Korean popular culture. Another example concerns Indonesian K-pop fans, particularly given that Islam is the predominant religion in Indonesia.

Jae-Seon Jeong reveals that, in response to Indonesian female fans' strong interest in Korean boy groups, some Indonesian men began to "shame Hallyu" because of the flower-boy aesthetic commonly associated with these groups. Consequently, they viewed the feminised presentation of Korean boy groups as a "potential threat to the traditional gender relations in the country" and as something that could complicate "the desires of the female consumers living under an Islamic system" (p. 2299). This illustrates the limitations that hybridity may impose on the dissemination of K-pop due to cultural and religious differences.

Moreover, although K-pop may include more sexual or provocative content than K-dramas, American pop is even more explicit, which makes it difficult for audiences in both Confucian Asia and other conservative cultures and religions to engage with it. Lie (2012) reinforces this point by arguing that Korean popular culture "filled the gap left vacant by the urbanized and sexualized American performers—celebrating sex and violence, replete with tattoos" (p. 355). This underscores the perceived innocence of K-pop in comparison with American popular culture. Lie later adds that "K-pop singers' politeness, their clean-cut features as their gentle demeanours, is something of a nearly universal appeal, whether to Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians" (p. 355), which emphasises K-pop's role as a form of soft power. Even Korean music, despite its obvious hybridity, is said to "express more soulfulness than Western music" (Ryoo, 2009, p. 140).

Beyond its hybridity, several other factors contribute to K-pop's global appeal. These include its strong emotional resonance, the participatory culture it fosters, its accessibility, its striking visual aesthetics, and the distinctive structure of its idol system, all of which collectively enhance its transnational reach and sustained popularity (Gibson, 2018). The emotional resonance embedded within K-pop, both in its musical narratives and in the portrayal of idols' personal struggles, growth, and group dynamics, plays a crucial role in shaping international fans' connections to the genre (Cho, 2023). Bok-Rae Kim (2012) argues

that K-pop, alongside K-dramas, incorporates cultural concepts such as *gi* (vital force), *heung* (joyful energy), and *jeong* (deep emotional attachment) to cultivate profound audience engagement and provide fertile ground for fan reinterpretation.

These emotional frameworks, Bok-Rae Kim (2012) suggests, translate effectively to international audiences, eliciting universal affective responses that underpin global fans' emotional attachments to K-pop idols and narratives. Similarly, Hyesu Park (2021) contends that empathy operates as a universal affect, enabling audiences to experience the collective emotions of sadness, excitement, and joy conveyed through K-pop songs. Such emotional dynamics allow fans to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, fostering deep affective connections with the genre (H. Park, 2021). Emotion, therefore, emerges as a key site of affective interaction between K-pop and its global audience.

The visual aesthetics of K-pop and the idol system constitute key factors underpinning the genre's global appeal. Stephanie Choi (2023) notes that K-pop's widespread popularity, both within South Korea and internationally, is largely driven by the centrality of idol performers, whose visual allure and star power shape the genre's distinctive cultural presence. In other words, K-pop's success can be understood as rooted in the idol figure itself, whose charisma and meticulously constructed image encapsulate its appeal across diverse audiences. John Lie (2015) further argues that the structured idol trainee system, where idols receive intensive training in performance, foreign languages, and global fan engagement, demonstrates Korea's deliberate intention to export K-pop to an international market, a goal it has effectively realised. They maintain that K-pop idols function not only as musicians but as multi-skilled cultural products designed for global consumption, and that this form of cultural engineering fosters a transcultural fandom uniting audiences from different parts of the world through their shared admiration for K-pop, which will be discussed in details later on.

Additionally, beyond the idol system, non-verbal elements such as music videos, vibrant visuals, intricate choreography, and the distinctive aesthetic presentation of idols, including fashion, hairstyles, and makeup, combine with the emotional or energetic tone of K-pop songs to create what Hyesu Park (2021) describes as a sensory experience. This multisensory engagement helps explain the emotional and physical responses of global audiences, allowing fans from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect deeply with K-pop despite linguistic barriers. Although the genre has been criticised for its perceived artificiality, excessive commercialism, and manufactured production style (Lie, 2015) in terms of how heavily idols are trained and dictated to (Choi, 2023), John Lie (2015) asserts that these very features distinguish it from Western pop models and, paradoxically, contribute to its global attraction. Therefore, K-pop's success lies not in imitation of Western popular music but in the development of a unique system that cultivates emotional and cultural attachment among its audiences (Y. Cho, 2023).

Another global appeal factor of K-pop idols, albeit somehow unique to male K-pop idols, is the soft masculinity that these male idols represent. The soft masculinity that K-pop idols have today is different from how Korean masculinities were decades ago (Jung, 2011). Moon (2002) defines hegemonic masculinity through three primary elements: the capacity to support the family financially, maintaining a separation from domestic and caregiving duties, and fulfilling mandatory military obligations. Drawing on that, Sun Jung (2011) deduced three major stereotypical images of Korean masculinities which are “patriarchal authoritarian, *Seonbi* (*wen*), and violent” (p. 23). Before Hallyu went viral, these were how Korean masculinities were known. *Seonbi*, which means scholar-official and focuses on wisdom (*wen* in Chinese) puts emphasis on intellectual and cultural achievements of men rather than physical power and authority. The *Seonbi* masculinity is what inspired the construction of soft masculinity which became prevalent in Korean popular culture such as Bae Yong-joon's

character in the 2002 *Winter Sonata* which garnered a lot of middle-aged Japanese female fans, further popularising Korean masculinities and transforming it from the violent and patriarchal male image (Jung, 2011, p. 25).

Sun Jung argues that Korean masculinity has been “transformed” in how Korean men are now “doing different masculine acts in terms of the different socio-cultural contexts of recent South Korea”, and labels that transformation as transculturation (2011, p. 26). The transculturation, according to Sun Jung (2011), is what mainly caused the shift in Korean masculinities from traditional to soft, or rather hybrid. The concepts of *Mugukjeok* (무국적) and *Chogukjeok* (초국적) play a significant role in that. *Mugukjeok* which translates to “non-national” or “stateless” aligning with Koichi Iwabuchi’s concept of odourless culture, refers to when cultural products minimise or erase specific national characteristics to appeal to broader international audience. The aim is to create something that can be easily consumed by international audiences without emphasizing the product’s Korean origin. Meanwhile, *Chogukjeok* which translates to “trans-national” or “cross-national” involves retaining and highlighting national specificity while simultaneously integrating transcultural elements. In that case, the cultural product keeps its Korean identity, but is designed to be appealing across different cultural contexts.

A primary example of *Mugukjeok*, according to Jung (2011) is how both Korea and Japan create and enjoy the *Kkonminam* (pretty boy or flower boy) aesthetics, likely derived from the *bishōnen* characters in Japanese *shōjo* manga. That kind of image has been frequently replicated and commercialised by numerous regional pop stars, evoking into a “shared imagination of pan-East Asian soft masculinity” (Jung, 2011, p. 27). For *Chogukjeok* masculinities, Jung (2011) cites K-pop boy band 2PM as an example due to the “manufactured hybrid form of masculinity” which is both recognisable as Korean and appealing to international audience. Although not all male idols present themselves as

jimseungdol (짐승돌), plenty of them show versatile masculinities too. It is now regarded as a K-pop masculinity trait. The majority of current active male idols represent a hybrid form of masculinity in which they dance powerfully on stage and generally have well-built (sometimes yet lean) bodies, but are styled in an androgynous way by wearing makeup, accessories, and different hair colours and hairstyles. This is why K-pop masculinities are often discussed as “liminal” (Oh, 2015), “overlapping” (2014), and “hybrid” (Jung, 2018).

Those versatile masculinities happen not only in stage vs. offstage comparisons, but also according to the concept of the male idol group releases (Song & Velding, 2020, p. 5), and fun and gentle interactions with fans through social media networks (Dewi & Kurniati, 2022). Versatile and hybrid masculinities, more specifically, soft masculinities of K-pop male idols, are regarded as a prominent reason behind the genre’s popularity, especially among young women (Jung, 2011; Hübinette, 2012, p. 521). That might be different if the fans studied were men. For example, Thomas Baudinette (2023c) introduces a contrasting perspective by examining the preferences of Japanese gay men. Contrary to previous findings, his study reveals a preference for “hard” K-pop masculinities. Furthermore, the study explores how these preferences are embedded within Japan’s socio-semiotic systems, suggesting that cultural and social contexts significantly shape how masculinities are perceived and valorised.

Even though soft masculinity or versatile masculinity of K-pop idols are embraced by fans, there are studies suggesting that such masculinities are often a source of stigma from broader society. For instance, when studying American K-pop fans, it was found that K-pop male idols’ versatile masculinities and their gender fluid nature, which generally mixes both masculine and feminine features, challenge American norms and gender binaries, often leading to stigmatisation due to deep-rooted cultural norms and stereotypes (Lee & Lee, 2020; Song & Velding, 2020; Putri & Mintarsih, 2020). However, it is crucial to mention that soft

masculinity does not stop at the appearance of Korean male singers, it also includes their ethics and politeness (Jung, 2011, p. 25-26) Therefore, as Shin mentions, “Although anecdotal, overseas fans of Korean pop were attracted by the ‘Korean work ethic and discipline’ which was incarnated in Korean celebrities” (2009, p. 517).

The effectiveness of the idol system lies partly in its ability to promote close fan–idol interaction through digital communication, emotional marketing, and real-time engagement (Kim, 2012; Choi, 2023), which in turn nurtures intimate yet parasocial relationships between performers and their audiences. The bonds formed between idols and fans are central to the development of K-pop’s global fandom, as both virtual connections, mediated through online platforms, and physical encounters, such as concerts, fansigns, and fan meetings, play a pivotal role in sustaining emotional attachment. Entertainment companies actively promote these interactions, recognising their significance in maintaining fan loyalty and enthusiasm. The accessibility of K-pop content, coupled with fans’ active engagement with idols, further strengthens the genre’s global appeal, ultimately fostering deep affective ties (Samosir & Wee, 2024) that underpin a transcultural fandom.

As previously discussed, the relationship between idols and fans is facilitated through both virtual and physical forms of accessibility. However, virtual accessibility remains the most fundamental mode of connection for a global phenomenon such as K-pop, given its extensive international fanbase. As Sorim Lee (2024) asserts, it was the discourse surrounding technology that ultimately propelled K-pop’s global expansion, underscoring its pivotal role in the formation of a worldwide fandom. Nevertheless, Epps-Robertson (2024) acknowledges that while social media is instrumental in fostering connections between idols and fans, it is not the sole factor behind these relationships. They emphasise that the music itself, alongside live performances and other forms of content, also plays a vital role in sustaining the strong idol–fan bond and contributing to K-pop’s global popularity. Jin and

Yoon (2014) similarly denounce social media consumption as the sole factor behind the “speradability” of K-Pop and asserts that being “social-media driven” consumers is not adequate, and there is a need for fans’ “engagement and participation” for the enhancement of extension of Hallyu in the social network platforms (p. 1288).

By engaging on social media and other digital platforms with the aim of connecting with their idols, the fans then both intentionally and unintentionally create buzz for their K-pop idols, resulting in K-pop’s global popularity. Bok-rae (2015) and Otmazgin & Lyan (2013) argue that the global popularity of Korean culture owes much to transnational fandoms, whose members actively serve as cultural ambassadors, promoting and disseminating Hallyu within their social networks. It is that devotion which Kuo and their colleagues refer to as “fan labour” that is ultimately the “driving force of the fandom” (2022, p. 6). Similarly, Stephanie Choi (2023) emphasises that K-pop fandom is characterised by forms of “intimate labour,” through which fans actively support their idols and, in turn, gain a sense of purpose and emotional fulfilment in their everyday lives. That fan labour embodies a dual nature; emotionally driven yet exploitative, as participants invest significant effort and emotional commitment in exchange for limited symbolic satisfaction (Leung, 2017). As a result, K-pop fandom reflects both a form of cross-cultural creativity and an arena of structural imbalance, revealing the intricate relationship between passion, labour, and power in the digital era (Leung, 2017).

Transcultural Fandom and Its Relevance to K-Pop

Comprising individuals from diverse national, cultural, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds, K-pop fandom can be characterised as transcultural, as fans collectively form a community united by their shared admiration and affective investment in K-pop. As S. Keith (2023) notes, fans build communities and shared identities through their collective admiration for K-pop, forming bonds that operate beyond geographic and cultural divides. On a similar note, McLaren and Jin (2020) describe this process through the concept of affective identities, wherein fans define themselves through emotional attachment rather than cultural or national affiliation. Drawing on Grossberg's (1992) understanding of affect as the intensity that gives meaning to experience, they argue that such identification is grounded in shared feelings of empathy, inspiration, and authenticity that foster belonging within a global, emotionally driven fan community. If explained within a Korean context, Jung (2017) introduces the notion of *woori-ness* (우리), or “we-ness,” a Korean collectivist value that underscores solidarity and shared purpose, qualities that deeply resonate within Global K-pop fandoms. This collective ethos extends beyond national borders, enabling fans worldwide to participate in a sense of communal identity and cooperative engagement rooted in Korean cultural values.

When comparing transnational with transcultural fandom, Benjamin Han (2017) defines transcultural fandom as being “less concerned with mobility and more concerned with cross-cultural communication and identification,” suggesting that it extends into the exchange of cultural values and meanings despite its marginalised global status as a subculture (p. 2251). This understanding highlights that transculturality within fandom primarily manifests through fans' practices and interactions, which shape their identities not only as international audiences but as members of a distinct subcultural community united by shared sensibilities and participatory activities. Similarly, Matt Hills (2000), in his discussion of Otaku

subcultures in the United States and the United Kingdom, argues that such fan identities create a sense of belonging to an alternative cultural space that distinguishes itself from “mass culture.” He further contends that transcultural fans may “disarticulate” their national identity to some extent while engaging with foreign media texts (p. 12–13). Thus, transcultural fandom is not merely defined by its international character, but by the ways in which it enables fans to construct a sense of unity and belonging that transcends national and cultural divides.

Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that while national identity and historical or socio-political contexts may influence fan activities, they are not the sole determinants of transcultural engagement (p. 93). They contend that the term transcultural is more appropriate than transnational because it accounts for additional dimensions such as gender, sexuality, and fan cultural contexts that shape how fans consume and produce media (p. 93). In their view, transcultural fandom is best characterised by affective affinity which refers to, as aforementioned, the emotional and cultural connections that link fans across different backgrounds through shared enthusiasm and identification. Building on Hills’ concept of “transcultural homology,” Chin and Morimoto (2013) describe fandom as a site where marginalised identities intersect, giving rise to “a common – albeit somewhat differently realized – subjectivity,” which may transcend national, regional, or cultural boundaries (p. 99).

This notion supports the idea that fan identity can at times overshadow national identity, enabling participants to find comfort and community within fandom spaces regardless of cultural or geographical differences. In the specific context of K-pop, Han (2017) draws parallels between K-pop fans and Otaku culture, suggesting that being a K-pop fan “is not a matter of cultural or national differences, but a means to cement [fans’] subcultural identity in the form of K-pop fan to encounter their mass culture” (p. 2252). In

this sense, K-pop fandom exemplifies transculturality by fostering a global community united through shared media practices rather than common cultural origins.

Scholars have also explored various motivations behind transcultural fan practices. Chin and Morimoto (2013) reference Iwabuchi's study of Japanese female fans of Hong Kong stars, arguing that their attraction to foreign media reflects a desire to resist traditional social expectations and assert individuality (p. 95). However, the motivations behind transcultural consumption vary depending on the type of media and the fans' cultural, gendered, and national contexts. Jung (2011) further characterises transcultural fans as "culturally hybrid; they pursue a global consumerist lifestyle orientated towards the procurement of leisure and entertainment; and they are technologically savvy" (p. 4). In other words, transcultural fans tend to be open to cultural diversity, digitally adept, and oriented toward global leisure and consumption practices.

Nevertheless, as Annett (2011) reminds us, "a transcultural fan community is not necessarily a blissfully multicultural group where people of all origins are (supposedly) united in equality" (p. 173). Rather, they define a "transcultural animation fan community" as one in which individuals from diverse cultural, ethnic, gendered, and social backgrounds "find a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest while negotiating the frictions that result from their differing social and historical contexts" (p. 174). This framing recognises that transcultural fandom, while fostering connection and mutual understanding, also involves ongoing negotiation of difference and inequality within global fan networks. To sum up, The perspectives above position transcultural fandom as a complex and dynamic cultural formation, one rooted in affective exchange, creative participation, and identity negotiation. It is through these practices that fans construct a shared sense of belonging that transcends national and cultural boundaries,

while simultaneously navigating the tensions and asymmetries inherent in global media consumption.

It is important to note that although transcultural fandom is grounded in shared affect and emotional connection that transcends national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, it is not entirely free from the influence of the state or political contexts that may shape fans' experiences. Baudinette (2021) complicates Chin and Morimoto's theory of transcultural fandom by demonstrating that such fandoms do not exist in isolation from national politics or historical tensions. His ethnographic research on Japanese K-pop fans shows that, while their emotional attachment to Korean idols aligns with Chin and Morimoto's notion of shared transcultural affect, their practices are nonetheless shaped by Japan's colonial history with Korea and persistent nationalist attitudes.

Baudinette (2021) therefore argues that transcultural fandom must be understood within broader sociohistorical and political frameworks, as xenophobia and postcolonial power dynamics continue to influence how fans experience and express their attachments. This argument can also extend to the experiences of Chinese transcultural K-pop fans, particularly following China's unofficial ban on Korean cultural content in 2016 after the deployment of the US-made THAAD missile defence system, which Beijing perceived as a security threat. This political tension effectively prevented K-pop idols from performing in China, thereby restricting fans' opportunities for live engagement and shaping their overall experience as transcultural fans.

Moreover, media and cultural studies scholars Oh and Han (2024) also emphasise that race is a crucial dimension shaping how transcultural K-pop fandom receives and interprets Korean popular culture. Oh and Han (2024) explicitly challenge Hyeri Jung's (2017) notion of *woori*-ness, which suggests that K-pop fans are united by a shared affect that transcends racial and cultural differences, and instead argue that "while fans come together in a

cosmopolitan project, their specific racial identities matter in reception practices and in intra-fandom hierarchies. Even as these largely digital fandom communities are deterritorialized, their local sites of reception and their everyday meaning-making still very much inform their cultural interpretations and experiences within fandom” (p. 12). They propose the term “racial translocalism” to stress that race, understood intersectionally, is central to how people in different locations receive Korean media. In this view, every act of transnational reception is anchored in local conditions, so cross-racial engagements with Korean popular culture are always shaped by the specific racial dynamics of the societies in which audiences live (Oh & Han, 2024).

Work on Asian diasporic audiences already demonstrates this logic of racial translocalism. Studies consistently highlight that for many migrants, consuming Korean popular culture provides a way to negotiate identity in multicultural but racialised Western settings. Ju and Lee (2015) show that border-crossing media use enables East Asian American viewers to navigate tensions between their Asian heritage and their U.S. environments, while Sang-Yeon Loise Sung (2010) observes that shared engagement with Korean cultural products strengthens feelings of pan-Asian collectivity and everyday social belonging. This affective and racial identification is further evident in Yoon’s (2017) analysis of Asian Canadian K-pop fans, who use K-pop as a cultural resource to affirm a positive sense of Asianness, counter underrepresentation, and articulate meanings that resonate within their local racial contexts.

Similarly, Baudinette (2020b) shows that Asian Australian fans turn to K-pop and anime to reconnect with heritage and overcome experiences of “Asian shame” in a predominantly white media landscape. Yet scholars also caution that such identifications can reproduce neoliberal ideals of self-discipline and success (Yoon, 2017), and Oh (2015) notes that “homeland” Korean media can simultaneously empower second-generation Korean

Americans and be used to police intra-ethnic boundaries. Overall, diasporic fans have not only facilitated the early global spread of Korean popular culture but have also used it as a significant cultural and emotional framework through which to negotiate identity, belonging and racial visibility in Western societies, precisely the kinds of localised racial negotiations that racial translocalism seeks to name.

This emphasis on race in transcultural fandom aligns with a broader shift in fan studies, where scholars have increasingly criticised the field's longstanding tendency to treat fans as implicitly white and to underplay race (Pande, 2018; Young, 2014). As Moitra and Pande (2017) argue, race is as central as gender and sexuality for understanding how fan communities are structured. Although fan studies often imagines itself as a project that “challenges and posits alternatives to oppressive social structures and conventions” (Carrington & Kosnik, 2019, p. 2), this ambition remains unevenly realised, with many studies still lacking racial diversity in both topics and participants.

In the context of K-pop, debates about racism, appropriation and cultural ignorance foreground precisely the kinds of racial translocal dynamics that Oh and Han (2024) describe. Discussions about anti-Blackness in K-pop have intensified in recent years, particularly around the use of blackface or brownface in performances and variety shows, and the casual use of racial slurs when idols rap or sing along to lyrics by Black artists. Black fans and other fans of colour have been especially vocal in calling out these practices, highlighting how K-pop has long drawn heavily on Black, and specifically African American, musical and stylistic traditions (Cho, 2022; Suh, 2022). Their critiques point to the tension between aesthetic borrowing and ongoing ridicule or stereotyping. Some idols and agencies have apologised, and anti-racist debates within K-pop fandom continue to grow; spaces such as the subreddit *r/kpopnoir* provide platforms where fans of colour document and contest racist or ignorant acts by idols, functioning as important sites of fan activism.

Research on Black American K-pop YouTubers also illustrates racial translocalism in practice. Oh (2017) argues that reaction videos enable these fans to perform “polycultural” identities that stitch together Black American and Korean lineages, expanding what Black fandom can look like. Rather than simply “consuming” Korean culture, these creators position themselves as both Black and transnationally connected, using K-pop as a resource for articulating global, cosmopolitan Black identities. Research on Black American K-pop YouTubers also illustrates racial translocalism in practice. Oh (2017) argues that reaction videos enable these fans to perform “polycultural” identities that stitch together Black American and Korean lineages, expanding what Black fandom can look like. Building on this, Anderson (2024) notes that Black K-pop fans are often hypervisible in media coverage only when racial controversies arise, yet their reaction videos are also spaces of Black joy. By centring this joy, Anderson shows how Black fans act as cultural translators and curators for non-fans, talking about K-pop beyond its racial implications and challenging assumptions that Black audiences are generally hostile to transnational Korean media. This work further complicates racial translocalism by highlighting cross-racial engagements that cannot be reduced to either racism or simple economic consumption.

Within K-pop fandom more broadly, anxieties about cultural appropriation are often articulated through the figure of the “Koreaboo.” According to Urban Dictionary, the term refers to “someone who is obsessed with Korean culture so much they denounce their own culture and call themselves Korean”; by contrast, fans who are simply fond of Korean language, culture or music are explicitly distinguished from this group. As Yoon (2019, pp. 8–9) notes, many K-pop fans work hard to distance themselves from Koreaboos, whom they associate with fetishisation and reductive stereotyping of “Korean culture.” Koreaboo practices are frequently framed as a form of cultural appropriation, in which (usually Western) fans appropriate selected elements of Korean culture while disavowing or devaluing their

own. Cultural appropriation has thus become a major point of tension as Western fans engage with Asian popular cultures more broadly (see Kleisath, 2014; Lee, 2015; Ubonrat & Shin, 2007; Yoon, 2019). These debates again exemplify racial translocalism: K-pop is received within local racial and cultural hierarchies, and fans' efforts to police Koreanness, call out racism or distance themselves from Koreaboo behaviour are shaped by their own racialised positions and histories of inequality.

After establishing how race and locality complicate transcultural fandom, it is also important to consider how K-pop's own formal and industrial characteristics foster the formation of a global, transcultural fan community. As discussed earlier in this chapter, elements such as hybridity, emotional resonance, accessibility, participation, and K-pop's exportable design are central to its worldwide success. According to Bok-Rae Kim (2012), K-pop's hybridity, state-backed cultural strategy, emotional narratives, and digital accessibility collectively shape the development of transcultural fandom. Bok-Rae Kim (2012) further emphasises that K-pop represents a model of popular culture that remains deeply embedded in Korean identity while simultaneously embracing global reinterpretation, encouraging audiences across the world not only to consume but also to connect, participate, and emotionally invest in a culture that is both distinctly local and universally accessible.

K-pop's deliberately export-oriented design is closely tied to its hybrid form. As previously noted, the Korean state and cultural industries intentionally positioned K-pop for global markets, and this strategy contributed to the production of a highly hybrid genre. This hybridity renders K-pop adaptive, inclusive and mobile (Kim, 2012), enabling it to attract fans from diverse cultural contexts while simultaneously fostering the development of transcultural fandom (Lie, 2015; Cho, 2023). Lie (2015) observes that the K-pop industry does not simply produce songs; it curates a broader global fan experience that actively encourages transcultural connection.

The emotional appeal of K-pop is equally important. Kim (2012) highlights that K-pop's emotional narratives create a sense of universality that is fundamental to the formation of communities built on shared feeling rather than shared geography. In this sense, idols' performances of vulnerability, perseverance and intimacy enable fans to find personal meanings that resonate across cultural boundaries. Gibson (2018) notes that K-pop's global growth has been closely tied to fan-led online engagement, in which international audiences do not merely consume Korean culture but also help shape its global perception through commentary, circulation and creative responses. Collectively, these dynamics contribute to the emergence of emotional communities that cross linguistic, national and cultural divides, uniting fans through their shared engagement with Korean popular culture (Gibson, 2018).

Emotional attachment feeds directly into K-pop's participatory fandom. K-pop encourages participation both between idols and fans, and among fans themselves. The idol system depends extensively on social media interaction, emotional branding, and real-time engagements (Kim, 2012), such as idols hosting live broadcasts on platforms like Weverse or, previously, V Live (which was discontinued in December 2022). This participatory structure enables K-pop's transcultural fandom to engage in shared fan practices, including fanfiction, fan art, video edits, and collective discussions of their favourite idol groups on social media. Such participation fosters a transcultural fandom in which audiences from across the world interact with Korean culture not as passive observers but as active contributors who continuously reshape its global image (Kim, 2012). Moreover, K-pop fans' engagement across various digital platforms creates what Roy and Das (2022) describe as translocal networks, where fans cultivate shared identities and a sense of global belonging rooted in collaboration and emotional connection.

Digital media is therefore not simply a distribution tool but the primary space of transcultural fandom. Online platforms make K-pop accessible to geographically dispersed

audiences and provide the infrastructure through which transcultural identities are formed (S. Keith, 2023; Kim, 2012). The online presence of transcultural K-pop fandoms plays a vital role in enhancing their visibility among other global fan communities, which in turn increases the visibility of K-pop itself. As Samosir and Wee (2024) note, transcultural fandoms formed through “nontraditional forms of media” such as social platforms cultivate a strong sense of community that contributes to the continued promotion of Hallyu. Consequently, transcultural fandoms actively aid in the dissemination of K-pop through the affective connections and collective practices they develop online. In this way, transcultural fandoms participate in a reciprocal dynamic: K-pop’s design invites transcultural engagement, and these fan communities, through their affective connections and collective practices, further disseminate K-pop by supporting artists, seeking connection with them and engaging with fellow fans.

Transcultural K-Pop Fan Identities

Through participation in the transcultural K-pop fandom, fans develop a range of identities rooted in both their enjoyment of and engagement with one another and with K-pop as a form of popular culture. These transcultural fan identities are characterised as active, cosmopolitan, emotionally driven, and collaborative. The active and participatory dimension is central to transcultural K-pop fandom due to its highly engaged global fan community. As Sarah Keith (2023) and Lisa Yuk-ming Leung (2017) demonstrate, international K-pop fans are not merely audiences but co-creators who translate, curate, subtitle, and circulate materials across multiple platforms. This reflects how transcultural fans view themselves as active cultural participants within a global community rather than as passive consumers of K-pop (S. Keith, 2023; Leung, 2017).

Through their active participation, transcultural K-pop fans also construct identities that are cosmopolitan and culturally curious (S. Keith, 2023). They frequently engage in linguistic practices such as learning the Korean language or incorporating Korean vocabulary into their everyday conversations and online communication (Khedun-Burgoine, 2022). By acquiring knowledge of the Korean language and other cultural elements, these fans develop what Baudinette (2020b) terms “Asia literacy.” In his study of young Australians who consume Japanese and Korean popular culture, Baudinette (2020b) found that non-Asian/white fans often use their cultural engagement to present themselves as more “Asia literate” and cosmopolitan, that is, as open-minded, globally aware, and culturally tolerant compared to the average Australian. This cosmopolitanism and cross-cultural openness indicate that transcultural K-pop fans’ identities extend beyond national boundaries, positioning them within a shared, global cultural sphere.

Emotional and affective connections are fundamental to these identities. Fans derive significance not only from their attachment to idols but also from the sense of belonging and connection fostered within the fan community itself (Keith, 2023; Epps-Robertson, 2024). At times, transcultural K-pop fandoms demonstrate ongoing commitments to supporting their communities in ways that are not directly linked to the artists or to K-pop itself (Epps-Robberston, 2024, p. 210). Fandom thus functions as both an emotional and social identity, where members experience belonging through shared affect, mutual support, and collective creativity. These affective investments transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries, reflecting Bok-Rae Kim's (2012) notion of affective communities grounded in shared emotion.

While transcultural K-pop fandoms are inherently collaborative and community-oriented, this does not mean that hierarchy is absent within such spaces. Fan accounts with larger followings often hold more influence, while long-standing fans may possess greater authority due to their perceived experience and familiarity with the idols, earning them respect from newer members. This demonstrates that although transcultural fan identities are built on collaboration and emotional engagement, they also contain what Annett (2011) describes as "friction," arising when certain groups within the fandom hold more power or visibility than others. Even though hierarchy within fans is part of transcultural K-pop fandom (Malik & Haidar, 2020), it is still less hierarchical in comparison to Korean fandom experiences (Epps-Robberston, 2024).

The collaborative nature of transcultural fan communities often leads to the development of ethically and politically aware fandoms. This occurs because transcultural fandoms can operate as spaces of intercultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy, challenging Western cultural dominance while promoting non-Western forms of modernity (E. Lee, 2017). A notable example of such fan activism can be seen during the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM)

protests, when globally dispersed K-pop fans, particularly BTS's fandom, ARMY, used digital platforms to support demonstrators by overwhelming police surveillance applications with fancams and countering racist hashtags, thereby extending the movement's visibility across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Cho, 2022).

Similarly, the environmental campaign KPOP4Planet demonstrates how K-pop's transnational fanbase mobilises collective action through multilingual networks to demand eco-friendly reforms, such as reducing single-use plastics in merchandise, promoting sustainable touring, and boycotting high-emission events.¹ Through these forms of activism, transcultural K-pop fans embrace their global identities and use them to advocate for values of inclusivity, modernity, and global solidarity (E. Lee, 2017). However, as Epps-Robertson (2024) notes, while activism has long been part of K-pop communities, for some fans these actions arise not solely from their identities as K-pop fans, but from the ethical and political commitments they bring into these spaces. This highlights that transcultural fan activism is both shaped by the collaborative ethos of K-pop fandom and enriched by the diverse moral and ideological frameworks of its global participants.

Theoretical Framework and the Thesis Argument

¹ Kpop4Planet is a fan-led climate activism organisation founded in 2021 by South Korean activist Dayeon Lee and Indonesian activist Nurul Sarifah. It mobilises the global K-pop fandom to call for more sustainable practices within the K-pop industry and related sectors such as fashion, electronics, and streaming. Through online campaigns, petitions, and social-media advocacy, the group pressures entertainment companies and brands to reduce environmental harm. Notable initiatives include the *Plastic Album Sins* campaign, which challenges the excessive plastic waste generated by bulk album purchases. Overall, Kpop4Planet illustrates how fandom communities can harness their collective power for transnational environmental activism. Their website is <https://www.kpop4planet.com/> Accessed on April, 15th 2025

This thesis builds on and extends transcultural fandom theory by bringing it into dialogue with Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities. Chin and Morimoto (2013) conceptualise transcultural fandom as an "affective affinity" that links fans across borders through shared emotional investments and fan practices rather than shared nationality. I take their model as a starting point for thinking about K-pop fanfiction as a space where authors, texts and readers co-produce a sense of belonging that is not grounded in Korean citizenship but in attachment to K-pop idols, shared platforms such as AO3, and common fanfiction conventions. In this framework, I use "transculturality" to refer to the conditions and practices that arise from this cross-border engagement, for instance, anglophone K-pop fans on AO3 imagining "Korea", debating representation on X, or building queer safe spaces around Korean idols. Across the three empirical chapters, I treat this affective affinity as the baseline that makes it possible for non-Korean fans to imagine Koreas together and to recognise one another as part of a dispersed, yet mutually intelligible, RPF community.

Annett's (2011) notion of "friction" and Oh and Han's (2024) concept of "racial translocalism" together provide a way of thinking about how difference and inequality are negotiated inside what still appears to be a cohesive transcultural community. Annett reminds us that transcultural fandom is held together by shared interests and by ongoing negotiations of unequal histories and positions. Oh and Han's racial translocalism adds that these negotiations are always embedded in specific local contexts of race and ethnicity: receptions of Korean media are shaped by how "Korea" and "Asian-ness" are positioned within different national and racial orders. I extend on these theories to explore how and whether these frictions appear at the level of not only global K-pop reception, but production of fan practices, particularly fanfiction wherein transcultural global fans write and read fanfiction about Korean idols, a foreign media object.

I draw on Annett's and Oh and Han's ideas to frame the tensions that run through my material, for example, authors' worries about "getting Korea wrong" or being seen as Koreaboos, their decisions to relocate stories to the United States, and the X debates in which Asian fans explicitly invoke their Asianness when calling for more accurate representations of Korea. Rather than treating these as minor inconsistencies, I read them as signs that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is a space where fans are constantly, and sometimes explicitly in racial terms, working through locally situated anxieties about cultural authority, authenticity and belonging.

Throughout this thesis I use the term "Koreanness" in a specific and limited way, which I call "mediated Koreanness." I am not claiming that there is a single, authentic essence of Korean culture that can be captured in a checklist of foods, places or behaviours. As Minjoo Lee (2024, p. 56) notes, definitions of "Korean" and "Korean culture" lie at the heart of disputes about whether foreign Hallyu fans can claim any connection to Korean identity; although these terms appear self-evident, deciding who or what falls inside or outside their boundaries is highly complex and contested. Hallyu itself is widely understood as culturally hybrid rather than "purely" Korean, yet scholars disagree over what "Korean culture" means in the first place: whether it is grounded in Confucian ideology, traditional folk culture, or something else, and thus over why Hallyu should be seen as hybrid (Lie, 2012, 2015; Jung, 2009, 2011; Shin, 2009; Kim, 2012; Kim, 2017; Ryoo, 2009).

These debates underline that the boundaries of Korean culture are difficult to define even for experts, let alone for fans. At the same time, Korea as a society is itself marked by contradiction: Chang's (1999) notion of compressed modernity captures how Korea industrialised and urbanised at extraordinary speed; Cicchelli and Octobre (2021) argue that Hallyu operates as an "aestheticised" form of global pop culture and "sweet power," allowing Korea to brand itself as a safe, creative and desirable nation and to accumulate symbolic

capital through carefully managed images of modernity and cosmopolitanism. They also suggest that Hallyu functions as a kind of “mediated ethnography,” offering international youth only fragmentary “minuscule knowledge” and a selective cultural toolkit through which they imagine Korea and a “good society.” In a related vein; Kim (2014) stresses that both North and South Korea continue to struggle with an incomplete postcolonial identity after Japanese colonisation, the Korean War, and national division, which sustains strong nationalisms even as South Korea’s economic growth and democratisation have enabled it to export popular cultural products such as music, dance, dramas, films that now circulate globally, including in countries that once provided it with massive aid.

Within this landscape, K-pop occupies a particularly visible position. It condenses many of these tensions: it is celebrated domestically as a symbol of national achievement and soft power, yet it is produced through highly precarious labour regimes and neoliberal competition; it draws on Western musical forms while being promoted as distinctively Korean; and it stands at the centre of state and corporate branding projects that sell an image of South Korea as modern, safe and cosmopolitan. In this sense, K-pop is both a product of compressed modernity and a primary vehicle through which South Korea presents itself to the world.

In this context, I use “mediated Koreanness” to refer to the bundle of signs, images and narratives about Korea that circulate through K-pop, Korean dramas, tourism campaigns and global media coverage: Seoul cityscapes, idol training narratives, hanok houses, hansik dishes, the Korean education system, Korean language and honorifics, and so on. For most non-Korean fans, this mediated Koreanness is what “Korean culture” looks like, because it is what they encounter through popular culture. These are already selective and branded representations, shaped by the Korean state, cultural industries and global media, and they often sit uneasily alongside the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Korean

society outlined above. As Minjoo Lee (2024) cautions, the issue is not simply that Hallyu fans lack clear definitions of Korean culture, but that some construct their own versions of Koreanness in ways that risk sliding from appreciation into appropriation and reproducing historical power hierarchies. By treating mediated Koreanness as an object of analysis rather than as an authentic standard, I aim to trace how fans navigate and sometimes reinforce these tensions in their imagined Koreas. Mediated Koreanness is therefore an imperfect and partial picture rather than a mirror of Korean culture, but it is a useful analytical lens for studying the imagined Koreas that K-pop fanfiction authors construct. It allows me to scrutinise how fans translate what they consume as K-pop fans into particular fictional Koreas, and where they repeat, exaggerate, soften or erase aspects of this mediated Koreanness. When I analyse “Korean” elements in fanfiction and fan comments, I am examining how fans take up, rework or sidestep this mediated Koreanness, rather than measuring their work against some imagined pure “real Korea”.

In this thesis, I draw on Benedict Anderson’s (2006) notion of imagined communities primarily to theorise the imagined Koreas produced in K-pop College AU fanfiction, rather than to argue that K-pop fans themselves form a nation. For Anderson, nations are “imagined” because their members “will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” and because communities are “distinguished... by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6). I adapt this framework to show that CAU K-pop fanfiction functions as a dispersed but collaborative project of imagining Korea: authors who mostly have limited direct experience of Korean universities nonetheless share and reproduce particular versions of “Korea” through recurring settings, foodways, linguistic choices, and campus routines. Rather than treating K-pop CAUs as isolated stories that succeed or fail at realism, I use Anderson to read them as part of a larger,

ongoing process in which transcultural fans collectively stabilise certain styles of imagining Korea.

Building on this, I argue that it is more accurate to speak of imagined Koreas in the plural. The College AU corpus repeatedly configures Korea as, for instance, an Americanised campus with Korean idol characters a hybrid everyday Korea in which US-style college templates are peppered with selected Korean cues (food, address terms, hierarchies), and an imagined queer Korea where multiple same-gender idol–idol relationships are woven into the ordinary fabric of student life. These are not random distortions of a single “real” Korea, but patterned styles of imagining that emerge from shared fan repertoires and mediated Koreanness. Anderson’s emphasis on style allows me to foreground the formal and affective conventions through which these Koreas are produced: the red-cup party, the ramen-filled dorm kitchen, the hybrid text-speak that mixes Romanised Korean with Anglophone internet slang, and the saturation of campuses with queer pairings. Digital platforms such as AO3 and X (formerly Twitter) take the place of Anderson’s print media, providing the infrastructure through which scattered fans internalise the same CAU jokes, character functions and world-building habits, and thus come to participate in a loosely unified project of imagining Korea together.

Throughout this thesis, I use “queer” following Halperin’s (1995) formulation, not as a fixed identity label such as gay or lesbian, but as a positionality “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62). I adopt this broader, relational sense of queer because my material involves authors and idols who are not always named with specific LGBTQ+ identity terms, yet whose stories and practices unsettle heteronormative expectations. Using queer in this way allows me to talk about fan practices and story-worlds that position themselves against dominant norms in Korea and in global fandom, without assuming that all participants would claim particular identity categories for themselves. In using queer in this

sense, I am not making claims about the personal sexual identities of idols, authors or readers. Rather, I use it to describe storyworlds and practices that contest heteronormative norms. In contrast, when I use the term LGBTQ+, I am referring to sexual and gender identity categories (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, etc) as they are named in my sources or by participants. I use LGBTQ+ to avoid assuming that everyone I discuss would personally embrace “queer as a self-description, even when their practices or storyworlds can be analysed as queer in Halperin’s positional sense.

Additionally, I draw on Halperin’s formulation to theorise both the “queer Koreas” imagined in my College AU corpus and the queer safe spaces described by authors. I am not treating these stories as straightforward reflections of how queer life actually is in contemporary Korea; instead, I read queerness here as a way of imagining and organising social worlds. The College AUs do not simply insert same-sex couples into otherwise realistic campuses: they reconfigure the social order so that queer relationships are structurally ordinary and largely unremarkable, while homophobia is minimised, displaced into the past, or excluded altogether. Likewise, in the authors’ accounts, writing is framed as a way to construct spaces where readers can inhabit queer intimacy without fear of punishment or stigma. Using Halperin’s (1995)’s definition of queer as a positionality allows me to argue that these fan practices constitute a queer reorganisation of “normal” Korean student life and community. Queer, in this framework, names the way these fictions and fan spaces contest heteronormative assumptions and experiment with alternative, more liveable social arrangements.

Drawing on these frameworks, this thesis addresses the following questions:

1. What factors shape K-pop fanfiction authors’ decisions about how to represent Korea and Korean culture in their stories, and how do they talk about their own positions as

non-Korean writers when negotiating mediated Koreanness, cultural authority, authenticity and Koreaboo stigma?

2. How do transcultural K-pop fanfiction authors construct the imagined Koreas? And how do they draw on, rework and reimagine mediated Koreanness while doing so?
3. How do comment practices on K-pop RPF compare with those on bandom RPF, and what do these similarities and silences reveal about transcultural affect, genre conventions and the relative visibility of “Korea” in reader reception?
4. Lastly, what do these authorial practices, fanfiction texts and reader responses reveal about the nature of transcultural K-pop fandom, and how might they refine or complicate existing theories of transcultural fandom, including affective affinity, friction and racial translocalism?

These questions are significant because they allow me to bring transcultural fandom theory into dialogue with the concrete practices of K-pop fanfiction authors, readers and texts. By focusing on imagined Koreas, mediated Koreanness and queer safe spaces, the thesis extends existing work on transcultural K-pop fandom and contributes to scholarship on fanfiction and RPF beyond predominantly Western media contexts.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is a site where affective affinity and friction coexist. At the level of writing, transcultural fandom is normatively contested and marked by asymmetries of power and entitlement. These negotiations do not produce a single stable of image of “Korea” but a range of imagined Koreas whose contours shift across genres. Koreanness is taken up and reworked differently per AUs, yet these heterogeneous imagined Koreas converge around a shared project of constructing queer-safe spaces, which I call queer Korea. At the level of reception, however, much of this friction recedes from view. Instead, K-pop fanfiction readers’ practices align closely with broader

anglophone fanfiction gift-culture norms and affect. In this sense, friction in transcultural fandom is displaced than absent, as it surfaces most sharply in authorial self-reflection and on social media platforms.

This thesis's corpus has a timeframe of 2019-2022. I selected the period from 2019 to 2022 for data collection to gather comprehensive and up-to-date information reflecting current trends and dynamics within the K-pop fanfiction community. During this time, the global popularity of K-pop surged, with groups like BTS and BLACKPINK achieving unprecedented international success, which likely influenced fanfiction content and interactions, making it an ideal period for study. Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a notable increase in online fan activities, including fanfiction creation and consumption, providing a unique opportunity to examine how transcultural fans engaged with K-pop fanfiction during heightened digital interaction and cultural exchange. I also monitored for significant updates in the data after 2022 and found no noticeable changes in the most popular stories or reader comments, reinforcing the relevance of the selected timeframe.

Research design, methods and positionality

This thesis adopts a qualitative, multi-method research design to examine how transcultural K-pop fans write, read and imagine K-pop fanfiction. Rather than treating “the fan” as a single, stable figure, I follow Henry Jenkins’ account of media fandom as a multi-dimensional culture of reception, interpretation, activism, cultural production and community, and I approach fandom as a set of overlapping practices (Jenkins, 1992) (reading, writing, commenting, making and sharing texts) that now take place across specific digital platforms and genres. Across the thesis, I consider how these practices are shaped by affective investments, platform norms and mediated understandings of “Koreanness”. Each empirical chapter focuses on one of these sites: Chapter 2 examines authors’ reflections on their writing practices through semi-structured online interviews; Chapter 3 analyses readers’ comments on Archive of Our Own (AO3); and Chapter 4 turns to the fanfiction texts themselves through a combination of close and distant reading. Ultimately, these three chapters trace how mediated Koreanness and transcultural fandom are negotiated at the level of authorial decision-making, reader response and textual representation

Overall research design and digital fieldwork

The design of this project is deliberately multi-sited. Chapter Two focuses on fifteen K-pop fanfiction authors who write in English and publish on platforms such as AO3, Asianfanfics and Wattpad. I conducted semi-structured interviews with these authors using text-based instant messaging (text-IM) on platforms such as X, with two interviews conducted on Skype and Google Docs respectively, according to participants' preferences. The interviews were organised around six sets of questions, covering the authors' fannish histories, writing habits, views on "realism" and "accuracy", their use of specifically Korean cultural elements, experiences of cross-cultural writing and their reflections on readership. This method allows me to explore how authors themselves make sense of the cultural work they are doing when they write K-pop fanfiction.

Chapter Three shifts attention from authors to readers, analysing 3,235 comments left on twenty highly commented AU fanfictions on AO3: 10 located in Bandom and 10 in K-pop fanfics. I use qualitative content analysis to explore how readers respond to stories, what forms of affect they express, how they position themselves in relation to the narratives and the idols, and how they navigate issues such as realism, cultural specificity and queerness. Following Berelson's classic quantitative definition of content analysis as "the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (1952, p. 18), early applications focused largely on counting words or themes. By contrast, more recent work on qualitative content analysis emphasises the interpretation of both latent and manifest meaning, the importance of context, and the hybrid qualitative/quantitative nature of coding and frequency counts (Krippendorff, 2004; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012; Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). My analysis follows this latter tradition. I developed a coding frame that combined inductive, data-driven categories with deductive ones informed by prior

research, and treated this codebook as open to modification as coding progressed (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). In line with Mayring's (2014) discussion of reliability in qualitative content analysis, I also discussed the codebook with my supervisors before full data collection, using their feedback to refine the categories and ensure that they remained closely tied to my research questions.

Chapter Four turns to 39 College AU K-pop fanfictions, combining close readings with more distant, pattern-oriented observation. The corpus consists of the nine most commented College AUs on AO3, supplemented by thirty additional stories to broaden the range of groups, writers and narrative strategies. Here I am interested in how College AUs, as a travelling fanfiction template, are adapted to K-pop contexts: what kinds of campuses are imagined, which everyday practices and spaces are foregrounded, how Korean cultural elements appear or are reworked, and how queer relationships are embedded in these fictional worlds. Methodologically, I combine detailed close readings of the top 9 fics with more distant attention to recurring motifs, settings and narrative moves across the wider corpus of thirty additional works, in order to identify broader tendencies in how "imagined Koreas" are constructed in College AU K-pop fanfiction.

Across these chapters, then, I combine online interviews, qualitative content analysis and textual analysis to build a multi-layered picture of transcultural K-pop fan practices. Rather than aspiring to statistical representativeness, my aim is to produce a rich, situated account of how a particular group of fans, writing and reading in English on specific platforms, negotiate mediated Koreanness in their creative and interpretive work. Moreover, Because K-pop fandom and fanfiction are primarily organised through digital media, it was important that my methods followed fans into the spaces where they already operate. Fan communities write, read and comment on platforms such as AO3, Asianfanfics, Wattpad and X; they share recommendations, joke about tropes and negotiate norms in timelines and

comment sections. My interviews therefore took place in the same chat environments where many of these interactions normally occur. Conducting interviews through text-IM allowed participants to respond from their own devices and time zones, to think through their answers at their own pace and to draw on their open tabs, drafts and timelines while chatting, echoing the advantages of online interviewing highlighted by Pearce et al. (2019) and others. It also helped to mitigate some of the embarrassment or stigma that participants associated with being “formally” interviewed about their fanfiction writing, by allowing the conversation to resemble an everyday fannish chat more than a face-to-face academic encounter.

Similarly, treating AO3 comments and fanfiction texts as data recognises that these are not marginal by-products of fandom but central communicative practices in their own right. My sampling choices, focusing on the most commented AU and College AU fictions, reflect the prominence of these stories within their respective communities and allow me to observe intense reader engagement around specific narratives, while acknowledging that other, less visible practices remain outside the scope of this project.

Positionality and insider “aca-fan” knowledge

I write this thesis from a dual position as both K-pop fan and academic researcher; what Jenkins (1992) terms an “aca-fan.” I have been reading and writing K-pop fanfiction in English since my mid-teens, participating in K-pop fandom on platforms such as Asianfanfics, AO3 and X for several years. This means that I enter the field not as an external observer discovering an unfamiliar community, but as someone already enmeshed in the practices I analyse. Following Jenkins, I understand this dual role as involving a “constant movement” between academic frameworks and fannish knowledge (1992, p. 6). I draw on work in fan studies and on scholarship on transcultural fandom, but I also draw on my familiarity with ships, tropes, tags and platform norms. This position has been crucial in granting me access to K-pop fan communities across platforms and in allowing me to approach my participants and materials in ways that feel recognisable and legitimate to them.

My insider status provides particular forms of knowledge and access that would be more difficult for a non-fan researcher to obtain. Approaching popular culture “as a fan” allows Jenkins to read texts differently from “narrowly circumscribed” academic criticism (1992, p. 5), and a similar dynamic operates here. Because I have long experience of writing and reading K-pop fanfiction, I can recognise the significance of commenting practices on AO3, understand, for example, keysmashes, emojis and in-jokes as meaningful affective labour rather than noise, and read College AU and other templates in relation to their histories in K-pop fandom. This insider knowledge shapes all three empirical sites in the thesis. In Chapter Two, it underpins my choice to recruit authors through a K-pop fan account on X and to conduct text-based interviews in a chat-like style that mirrors everyday fannish conversation.

In Chapter Three, it informs the construction and refinement of my qualitative content analysis codebook for AO3 comments, where categories such as “supportive praise” or “exuberant affective reaction” were grounded in my understanding of how fans usually respond. In the College AU chapter, it allows me to notice subtle departures from dominant American campus imaginaries, or the ways in which, for example, Korean food and/or address terms are woven into otherwise Western-coded storyworlds. In line with Hansal and Gunderson’s (2020) call for a “fannish methodology,” I therefore treat my affective investments and long-term participation not only as potential sources of bias but also as resources for asking better questions, noticing patterns, and taking fans’ own interpretations seriously.

At the same time, I do not treat this insider position as a neutral or total vantage point. Drawing on Haraway’s (1988) notion of “situated knowledges,” I understand my perspective as that of an Algerian K-pop fan, writing in English about Korean popular culture and Anglophone platforms. This position gives me a particular view of transcultural fandom (for example, in the case of my first fanfic *My Painful Tears* mentioned in the introduction, of what it feels like to import Algerian cultural elements into stories about Korean idols) but it is only one among many possible positions within global K-pop fandom. Evans and Stasi (2014) emphasise that fan studies is always engaged in representing “the fan,” often from a position where the researcher and the fan overlap, and that this makes methodological reflexivity necessary. In this thesis, I therefore treat my insider status not as a guarantee of correctness, but as a form of situated knowledge that both enables and constrains my interpretations.

Following Dwyer and Buckle’s (2009) argument, I also recognise that I do not occupy a purely insider position. They describe qualitative researchers as inhabiting a “space between” insider and outsider rather than fully embodying either pole (2009). Although I share an “identity, language, and experiential base” with many of the non-Korean K-pop

fanfiction authors and readers I study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58), I differ from them in terms of nationality, race, class, age, and personal histories, and I do not assume that membership in a broad K-pop fan category allows me to “know” their experiences in any complete sense. My position is thus best understood as an in-between one: close to my participants on many dimensions, but not identical to them. This space between affords both opportunities and risks. It facilitates access and trust, for example, participants were often willing to discuss topics such as explicit content or embarrassment about writing RPF because I approached them through a visible fan account and spoke the shared language of ships, biases and tropes, but it also makes it tempting to assume similarity and overlook moments where their experiences diverge from my own.

The aca-fan position has long been recognised as uneasy. Jenkins (1992) explicitly notes that his dual role “colours” his account and discusses concerns about “going native” versus maintaining a supposedly objective distance. Hills (2002) similarly argues that the scholar-fan is caught between the norms of the “good” rational, detached academic and the intense affect and enthusiasm that characterise fandom, and that this position brings particular obligations. For Hills, scholar-fans should avoid using theory to tidy or overwrite fandom into a more respectable form, but they should also resist bending theory simply to protect their own fannish investments. My own position as an aca-fan inevitably colours what feels obvious to me, what I notice and what I might take for granted, for instance, the idea that comments “should” be supportive, or that relocating idols to Americanised campuses is a normal narrative move. Rather than attempting to bracket these attachments out, I take Jenkins’s and Hills’s warnings seriously and treat my standpoint as a useful but partial perspective that must constantly be checked against what authors say, what readers do, and what the texts themselves put on the page.

In practical terms, this commitment to reflexivity informs how I design and analyse my research across the three empirical chapters. In the interview study, I used a semi-structured guide to ensure that all authors were asked comparable questions about their writing practices, use of Korean elements, and views on “realism” and “accuracy”, even as the conversational tone allowed them to lead the discussion in directions they found meaningful. I recruited participants through a K-pop fan account whose icon and biography clearly marked me as a fan, which likely facilitated rapport, but I treated their responses as situated accounts that could both align with and challenge my own expectations. In the qualitative content analysis of AO3 comments, I developed my coding scheme iteratively, starting from a small sample of comments and refining categories through discussion with supervisors.

This process, along with my use of both inductive and deductive approaches, was designed to ensure that categories were grounded in the data rather than simply mirroring my prior sense of “how comments usually work.” In the College AU chapter, finally, I combined close reading with more distant, pattern-oriented analysis to make visible broader tendencies in how imagined Koreas are constructed, and I paid particular attention to comments, motifs or narrative moves that complicated my existing impressions of College AU as simply Americanised or simply hybrid. Across all three sites, I quote readers’ comments and fanfiction passages verbatim, retaining spelling, grammar and punctuation, so that my movement from specific instances to broader claims remains open to scrutiny.

Overall, then, I embrace my insider, aca-fan position as a condition of possibility for this project: it gives me linguistic, cultural and affective access to K-pop fanfiction communities that would be difficult to reproduce from the outside. At the same time, following Haraway (1988), Evans and Stasi (2014), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Jenkins (1992), Hills (2002) and Hansal and Gunderson (2020), I treat this position as situated, partial

and ethically charged. Rather than claiming a neutral view from nowhere, I offer a reflexive, located account of how transcultural K-pop fans write, read and imagine fanfiction, in which my own fandom is acknowledged as part of the very phenomenon under study.

Thesis Chapters Outline

In Chapter One, I map the conceptual and industrial background that the rest of the thesis builds on. I begin by outlining what fanfiction is and why people write it, drawing on work in fan studies that understands fanfiction as a transformative, dialogic practice rather than derivative “copying”. I show how scholars such as Jenkins emphasise fans’ dual impulses of fascination and frustration with canon, and how later work on fanfiction communities stresses gift culture, collective world-building, and the dense networks of feedback that shape writing and reading practices over time. I then narrow in on RPF, tracing how stories about real public figures sit uneasily within wider fan cultures and media discourse, yet persist because they offer a powerful space to explore identity, performance and intimacy in ways that official narratives foreclose.

The chapter then situates K-pop within this wider RPF landscape by examining how idols are produced, marketed and shipped. Drawing on scholarship on K-pop and neighbouring BL/shōjo cultures, I unpack how idol fanservice, same-sex intimacy on stage, and established pairing practices in East Asian fandom generate a dense homoerotic archive that both Korean and international fans draw on when they ship groups such as Super Junior’s EunHae or BTS’s JiKook. By analysing concrete examples of online shipping posts, I show how global, Anglophone K-pop fans inherit these East Asian logics of pairing while also re-framing them through their own vocabularies and platforms. This chapter therefore positions K-pop RPF fanfiction at the intersection of East Asian idol/shipping traditions and Anglophone fanfiction infrastructures, setting up the later empirical chapters’ focus on how transcultural fans write, read and imagine “Korea” through K-pop fanfiction.

In Chapter Two, I argue that non-Korean K-pop fanfiction authors work within a field structured by friction rather than by a smooth, borderless “we-ness” (Jung, 2017). Drawing

on Annett's (2011) adaptation of Tsing (2004), I show how authors experience internal friction in everyday craft decisions about mediated Koreanness—how much to research, which Korean markers to include or avoid, when to keep settings vague—and how these questions become collaborative and asymmetrical friction in public debate. Bringing Oh and Han's (2024) notion of racial translocalism into conversation with Annett and Kraidy's (2005) critical transculturalism, I argue that transcultural K-pop fandom is organised not only by shared affect but by racialised and geo-cultural hierarchies of expertise and entitlement, which shape who can claim authority over “accurate” or “respectful” representation and sometimes lead authors to export idols into local settings or retreat into an “unmarked state” (Shaw & Ward, 2005).

The chapter also shows that this friction is calibrated differently across genres. Comparing realist and supernatural AUs, I demonstrate that mediated Koreanness is not simply present or absent but redistributed, producing shifting “imagined Koreas” that extend Anderson's (2006) notion of imagined communities into fan-produced worlds. Yet when it comes to homophobia, this contestation gives way to a striking consensus: regardless of their disagreements over realism or Westernisation, authors converge on building queer-safe Koreas in which idols' same-sex relationships are structurally ordinary and largely protected from harm. Read through Halperin's (1997) definition of queer as that which is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” I argue that K-pop fanfiction authors actively reorganise Korean storyworlds so that queer life is no longer defined by injury. In this sense, Chapter Two reframes transcultural K-pop fandom as a normatively contested and unequally structured space, except when it comes to queering Korea, where friction around representation is temporarily suspended in favour of collective queer world-building.

In Chapter Three, I shift from authors to readers and ask what actually shows up in the everyday “noise” of K-pop fanfiction commenting on AO3. Through a comparative

qualitative content analysis of comments on twenty multi-chapter AU fics (ten K-pop, ten Bandom), I show that visible references to Korean language, culture or geography are relatively rare, and that K-pop readers' comments are overwhelmingly organised around affective response and gift-culture gratitude. Romanised Korean and Korean–English hybrid terms appear occasionally as what Lee (2018) calls “social languages”, marking in-group identity rather than asserting deep cultural expertise, but they form only a small fraction of the data. Far more common across both K-pop and Bandom samples are brief messages that thank the author, gush about the ship, react to characters and beg for updates. Drawing on Jenkins' account of affective motivation in fan writing (1992), Busse and Hellekson's concept of fanfiction as a gift economy (2006), and Karpovich's work on feedback as communal fantext (2006), I argue that K-pop and Bandom readers participate in a shared Anglophone RPF commenting culture that renders K-pop RPF legible as part of general fanfiction practice rather than a radically separate niche.

The chapter nuances existing work on transcultural fandom, particularly Chin and Morimoto's account of affect-based convergent fan cultures (2013) and Annett's (2011) use of “friction” to describe tensions within transcultural fandom. My data show that for Anglophone K-pop fans, the transcultural dimension of their fandom is not usually articulated through comment-box policing of Koreanness, but is backgrounded behind shared fanfiction norms: English readability, affective fit with ship and trope, and adherence to gift-culture etiquette. At the same time, interviews with authors speaking as readers reveal how strongly this Anglophone infrastructure shapes expectations, with legible English functioning as a soft gatekeeping criterion even for non-native speakers. Bringing these strands together, I argue that Anglophone K-pop RPF exemplifies a hybrid fan space in which East Asian idol/shipping traditions intersect with long-standing Western RPF and fanfiction infrastructures. Within this space, critique and cross-border concerns about Koreanness and

queer politics do not disappear. However, as Chapters Two and Three together show, they surface episodically and platform-specifically as friction on X and in writerly self-reflection, while AO3 comment sections remain primarily affect-driven sites of reciprocity.

In Chapter Four, I argue that transcultural K-pop fanfiction constructs multiple imagined Koreas through the flexible template of the College AU (CAU), a popular genre in which idols are reimagined as university students. Drawing on my concept of mediated Koreanness, I treat CAU K-pop fanfiction not as an attempt to reproduce “real” Korean universities, but as a set of reassemblies of the selective images of Korea that circulate through K-pop, K-dramas and other media. Using Benedict Anderson’s (2006) notion of imagined communities, I suggest that CAUs function as a community project of imagining “Korea” in particular styles, as dispersed Anglophone fans who will never meet nonetheless share recognisable campus Koreas through recurring tropes, tags and storylines. The chapter identifies three recurring configurations of these imagined Koreas: an Americanised campus Korea, in which Korean idols are inserted into US-style “fictional higher education”; a hybrid everyday Korea, where the same CAU frame is overlaid with Korean food, address terms, university names and hierarchies drawn from mediated Koreanness; and an explicitly queer Korea, in which multiple idol-idol queer relationships are normalised and homophobia is largely bracketed out so that queer intimacy becomes structurally ordinary.

Building on work on transcultural fandom and friction, I draw on Annett’s (2011) adaptation of Tsing’s concept of “friction” to show how these Americanised, hybrid and queer Koreas emerge from uneven encounters between US college media, Hallyu’s pseudo-Koreanness and fans’ own local experiences, and how they generate debates about Americanisation and misrepresentation on platforms such as X. At the same time, following Halperin’s (1995) understanding of queer as a positionality “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62), I read the imagined queer Korea of CAU as a campus

world that reorganises student life so that cis same-gender relationships become central rather than marginal, and structural homophobia is softened or displaced. In doing so, I build directly on my earlier discussion of shipping as a transcultural, queer-affirming fan practice: whereas Chapter Two theorises how K-pop fans “deploy homoerotic imaginaries” through shipping, Chapter Four examines College AUs as a specific textual site where these imaginaries are extended into everyday campus storyworlds. I foreground setting, everyday practice (especially food, language and social relations) and world-building as key sites where transcultural K-pop fans work with mediated Koreanness to make Americanised, hybrid and queer Koreas narratively liveable and emotionally meaningful within a global fan commons.

Chapter One: K-pop Fan Practices and Communities

Introduction

Fanfiction studies as an academic discipline is relatively new, with its foundation in the early 1990s. Jenkins, widely considered the father of fanfiction studies, has greatly contributed to this field. In his book, *Textual Poachers*, first published in 1992, he discusses the nature of fanfiction writing and reading and provides a significant amount of case studies concerning the matter. With the road that Jenkins paved, many fandom scholars have developed academic study of aspects of fan culture; especially fanfiction. For instance, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's compiled essays in their book *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities In The Age Of Internet* in 2006, and Anne Jamison's *Fic: Why Is Fanfiction Taking Over The World* in 2013.

Fanfiction is a form of creative writing produced by fans who use characters, settings, or worlds from existing media to tell new stories. Fans write fanfiction for a range of intertwined reasons that go far beyond simple admiration for a favourite text. Fans turn to fanfiction because it lets them stay with a text they care about while simultaneously fixing what feels missing or unsatisfying. Jenkins (1992) terms fanfiction writers as poachers and notes that fans write from a blend of fascination and frustration with existing media, using familiar characters and worlds as a starting point for new narrative possibilities rather than accepting official versions as final. Moreover, He insists to stop considering fans passive consumers, and encourages seeing them as active cultural producers who rewrite, reinterpret, and expand the original text. Derecho (2006) frames fanfiction production as part of a broader tradition of archontic literature, in which writers build upon pre-existing texts in ways that expand, question, or contradict them. In this sense, fanfiction offers a relatively

low-barrier way to experiment with plot, genre and setting, to ask “what if?” questions the source cannot or will not pursue, and to keep a narrative alive beyond its formal ending (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). The practice is therefore attractive to fans who want to explore alternate trajectories, emotional depths, or cultural contexts without abandoning the media that first drew them in.

For many participants, fanfiction is also a way of inserting themselves into cultural production when mainstream structures marginalise or ignore them. Jamison (2013) emphasises on fanfiction’s subversive and transgressive qualities. They argue that a significant proportion of fan writers are women, queer people, or writers of colour, who use fanfiction to reconfigure stories that underrepresent or stereotype them in commercial media. Similarly, Derecho (2006, pp. 71) suggests that this mode of writing has long appealed to those from “cultures of the subordinate”, because it enables them to respond to powerful media institutions by amplifying sidelined perspectives and crafting their own continuations or alternatives. Emotional and relational themes are central here: Woledge (2006) shows how many fan texts revolve around care, mutual recognition and everyday intimacy rather than conventional romance or explicit sexual content, allowing fans to imagine different models of attachment and support. Through such reworkings, fanfiction becomes a vehicle for exploring identity, desire and vulnerability in ways that feel safer and more resonant than what commercial publishing or screen industries usually provide (Jamison, 2013).

At the same time, people write fanfiction because it is embedded in a highly interactive and socially dense environment. Jenkins (1992) emphasises that fan writing develops within networks of zines, workshops and commentary, where authors depend on feedback, shared vocabularies and collective interpretive habits. Busse and Hellekson (2006) focus on the immigration of fanfiction from fanzines to the internet, and use the term *fantext* to describe the ever-expanding web of stories, tropes and discussions through which a

fandom gradually constructs its own understandings of characters and settings; individual works contribute to this larger tapestry and are, in turn, interpreted through it. Practices such as beta reading and commenting further reinforce this mutual shaping of texts and community: as Karpovich (2006) observes, editorial help and reader responses are embedded in ongoing relationships and shared norms rather than in formal publishing hierarchies. Writers are therefore motivated not only by solitary creativity, but by the expectation of conversation, affirmation and debate with others who recognise the same canon. In this collaborative framework, fanfiction acts as a continuous, collective project in which meaning is negotiated, revised and redistributed (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Karpovich, 2006) across a global, often transcultural, network of participants.

Real People Fiction (hereafter RPF) is my main focus for this research. Most of the relevant fandom studies, however, have focused predominantly on the most popular genre of fanfiction, which occupies itself with fictional characters. This led to the marginalisation of RPF which is a genre that concerns itself with real life people, mostly public figures. Fanfiction.net, a renowned fanfiction website, has even banned RPF from its platform. Scholars mostly dedicated their work to explaining RPF, mainly in terms of its stigma and moral issues, and predominantly concerning American and English public figures (Arrow, 2013, Busse, 2006). In this thesis, the focus will be on K-pop RPF or K-pop fanfiction. K-pop has undoubtedly been growing over the past decade and media scholars have dedicated themselves to studying why it has become globally significant. As noted above, K-pop crosses all types of boundaries and has reached most parts of the world, resulting in its having a substantial base of international, or indeed transcultural fans.

K-pop fanfiction is a significant aspect of fan practices, playing a crucial role in how fans interact with and expand upon the content produced by idols. Platforms such as Wattpad, *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, and *Asianfanfics* are teeming with a wide array of fan-written

stories that allow fans to explore and express their creativity. These narratives often delve into the imagined romantic relationships between idols, a phenomenon largely driven by the extensive shipping culture that permeates the K-pop fandom. Shipping, which involves fans supporting and promoting fictional romantic pairings between idols, has become a prominent fan practice. This culture is heavily fuelled by fanservice activities, wherein idols engage in behaviours specifically designed to cater to fans' fantasies and desires, thereby blurring the lines between reality and fiction and enhancing the emotional investment of fans.

Building on this scholarship, my thesis extends these debates in two ways. First, by focusing on K-pop RPF rather than fiction-based fanfiction, it brings questions of cultural authority, transcultural writing and queer-safe world-building into dialogue with fanfiction's transformative and subversive potentials. Second, by analysing transcultural K-pop fanfiction written in anglophone spaces, it shows how the familiar functions of fanfiction such as world-building and community negotiation are inflected by mediated Koreanness, imagined Koreas and the dynamics of a global, non-Western media object.

In this chapter, I will briefly delve into various fan practices within the K-pop fandom, providing a thorough exploration of the motivations behind these activities, their broader implications, and the cultural dynamics they engender. I include a brief exploration of K-pop fan practices to introduce my audience to the unique dynamics of the K-pop fan community before delving into the specific practice of K-pop fanfiction. This overview serves to highlight how fan practices within the K-pop community are distinctive configurations to K-pop culture. By establishing this context, I aim to convey the possibility that K-pop fanfiction may also exhibit unique characteristics, shaped by the broader K-pop fan practices, which might be essential for appreciating the transcultural nuances and the exclusive nature of K-pop fanfiction within the K-pop fan community.

Key practices such as fansites, where dedicated fans take professional-quality photos and videos of idols; dance covers, which showcase fans' admiration and talent; and fan-subbed content, where fans voluntarily translate and subtitle videos to make K-pop more accessible globally, will be briefly examined. Additionally, the chapter will cover streaming projects, where fans coordinate efforts to boost view counts and chart positions of their favourite idols' content, reflecting their strategic support. The competitive nature of fan voting, which involves fans participating in online polls to help their idols win awards and secure performance slots, will also be briefly discussed, highlighting the impact of these activities on the success and recognition of K-pop idols.

Furthermore, the chapter will examine the role of shipping and fanservice in shaping fan interactions and the broader K-pop cultural landscape. Shipping, while rooted in fans' imaginative interpretations, often leads to the creation of intricate fanfiction that expands the narrative universe of K-pop idols. Fanservice, on the other hand, involves idols engaging in interactions that hint at romantic or close relationships, thus feeding into the shipping culture and deepening fans' emotional connections. By exploring these elements, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how K-pop fans engage with and contribute to the global phenomenon of Hallyu.

The shipping culture and fanservice are the primary catalysts for the creation of fanfiction within the K-pop fan community. Understanding the dynamics of shipping, which involves pairing idols in romantic relationships, and fanservice, where companies and idols play into these pairings, is crucial. These practices not only inspire fans to create fanfiction but also reveal the underlying motives behind its creation. To assess transcultural K-pop fanfiction, it is essential to comprehend these foundational practices and their influence on the content produced by fans. Additionally, exploring shipping culture and fanservice helps us understand how these elements affect transculturality in K-pop fanfiction, especially since

fanservice is a prevalent phenomenon in K-pop and other East Asian fandoms, such as J-pop and BL dramas.

Fan Practices in K-pop

Since K-pop has noticeable differences in comparison to American or English pop, both in terms of production and consumption, a question arises as to how these nuances would affect the practices of K-pop fans. Anderson and Shim note that “the complex engine of fan activity” is a great factor that helped the proliferation of Hallyu in which it “created a vibrant [and] global community” (2015, p. 3). They elaborate that fan activity in Hallyu relies tremendously on the interactions between the artist and fans that a great number of scholars have examined (2015, p. 5). However, most studies of fan activities are related to K-drama rather than K-pop, which demonstrates the marginalisation of the musical genre and its fandom in academia. (Anderson and Shim, 2015, p. 4)

The term “fan” carries, at times, a negative connotation in K-pop fandom; especially in relation to ‘sasaeng fans’² (사생팬) who are marked out as ‘crazy and possessive’ and are known to follow Korean celebrities everywhere, also in relation to how some K-pop fans reject their idols getting romantically involved with other celebrities. Yet Ju Oak Kim (2015), focuses on the bright side of K-pop fandom, specifically in terms of donations fans make under the names of their idols. For instance, in Super Junior (a very well-known K-pop boyband run by SM entertainment) fandom, their fans (named elfs; short for everlasting friends), run an X account under the name SJCharities that is dedicated to the multiple donations the fans give to those in need.³ This type of fan activity has been acknowledged by Super Junior themselves. In recognition of their fans’ fundraisings efforts, for instance, the group participated multiple times in home shopping shows, such as one in 2017 where they sold jawline masks (Avajar) that they’ve been endorsing: they donated the profit under the name of their fans.

² The term sasaeng literally translates to « Private Life »

³ <https://twitter.com/SJCharities>

Similar to donating in the name of idols', more recently, opening birthday events in cafés or sending coffee trucks to idols' filming locations have been trending in K-pop fan communities. The photo below is an example of the coffee truck culture (see figure 1) wherein Girls' Generation received a coffee truck celebrating their 15th anniversary on the 28th of July, 2022 at the filming set of the Korean variety show "Knowing Bros". Those coffee trucks can be sent by both Korean or international fans. However, if one is part of an international fan club located outside of Korea, they would need to collaborate with fan clubs within Korea to arrange for food trucks or coffee trucks to be delivered to the set (Faicol, 2021). Figure 2, meanwhile, is an example of s birthday café event prepared by fan support.

Figure 1. *Girls' Generation posing in front of a coffee truck sent by fans for their 15th anniversary⁴*



Figure 2. *A cafe decorated for BTS' Jimin's birthday by the fans⁵*



⁴ Photo retrieved from Girls' Generation Sunny's Instagram account on July 28th, 2024.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cg8KpbCvo7Q/>

⁵ Photo retrieved from PJM_data on X on July 28th, 2024.

https://x.com/PJM_data/status/1579371281845084160?s=20

Both coffee truck culture and birthday café events exemplify how K-pop fandom practices operate as hybrid forms shaped through transcultural exchange between Japan and Korea. Coffee truck culture originated in South Korea, however, the broader idea behind this practice stems from Japanese idol fan traditions, which started decades before K-pop and also inspired it, in which supporters sent gifts, flowers, or congratulatory items to express loyalty and admiration. Similarly, birthday café events where fans decorate cafés, distribute themed merchandise, and organise exhibitions to celebrate idols' birthdays, reflect the fusion of Korea's distinctive café culture with Japan's established fan club event practices. Both customs have since been adopted by international fans, who replicate them globally, thereby transforming localised Korean fan practices into global expressions of transcultural fandom.

Another common fan activity in K-pop fandom is 'fansite' culture. This fan practice particularly refers to fans with professional photography skills who, most of the time, reside in Korea, even if they are foreigners, to take clear and high quality photos and videos of their idols at almost every public event. Some pictures and videos taken by fansites then get posted on their social media accounts or websites in order to share them with other fans, especially those who cannot attend these events. This may be considered as a fan job because of how fansites make profits from their idols's photos and videos by selling them to fans. Most interestingly, some of these fansites even share a close relationship with their idols and often get caught communicating with them in public⁶. Thus, this emphasizes the prominence of artist/fan interactions in K-pop.

Fansite culture is another fan practice borrowed from Japan and later transformed within K-pop fandom. While the term fancam originated in the K-pop context, the act of

⁶ One famous interaction is of EXID's Hani and her fansite Pharkil. Pharkil was the main reason for EXID's Hani's blow-up with his HD fancam of Hani of their song Up and Down. That Hani fancam was uploaded on the 8th of October, 2014, and has 38 million views as of 30th of June, 2024, and Hani was filmed thanking the fansite in another fancam the fansite posted on the 25th of December, 2024.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24BkSvoqKg8>

filming performers on stage has existed since the early days of the internet. Japanese rock bands such as X Japan, for example, were known to have fansites as early as the 1990s. K-pop fandom adopted this tradition and, with advancements in technology such as high-quality cameras and smartphones, popularised fancams as a defining feature of idol fandom. Over time, this practice evolved into a transcultural K-pop phenomenon, spreading globally and reshaping how fans document and share their idol experiences. Another of the most consistent K-pop fan practices is dance covers; where fans often learn Korean singers' choreographies then upload themselves replicating the dance moves on YouTube (Jung, 2009). Similar to other fan communities, fanarts, fan videos, and graphic designing are also very common in K-pop fandoms, however, that does not mean that they are uniquely or inherently K-pop fan practices, as they have originated from earlier fandoms as well.

With K-pop being a Korean language media product, fansubs, the act of providing subtitles (most commonly English) by fans and for fans, are an important bridge that helps the fans understand K-pop idols' abundant content. Fansubbing, which originated in Japanese and later Western fan communities, was adapted by K-pop fans into translation collectives that make Korean content internationally accessible and further strengthen transcultural fandom networks. This community-based activity allows non-Korean speaking fans to access and enjoy K-pop music videos, variety shows, and interviews, either in the form of videos or texts uploaded on social media sites like X and Instagram.

There are also dedicated subbing communities on platforms that provide almost instant subs like Viki and YouTube. Fan communities on these platforms usually work to provide subtitles within hours of a new release, ensuring that fellow global fans can stay up-to-date with their favourite idols' content. These fan subbing teams often consist of dedicated volunteers who work collaboratively, dividing tasks such as translating, timing, and editing to produce high-quality subtitles quickly. There are also professional teams who sub K-pop and

K-drama content, but most fans, specifically K-drama fans, prefer fansubbed material due to preserving Korean cultural aspects such as honorifics (Van Rossum, 2015), as translation from Korean to English is not only limited to language, but also to Korean sociocultural elements which needs to be preserved while the translation happens (Cruz et al., 2019).

Streaming has also become an essential part of K-pop idol fan cultures. Streaming projects are coordinated efforts by fans to increase the view counts of music videos and boost songs on music charts. Fans organise these projects through social media platforms like X and Instagram, setting specific times for mass streaming to maximise the impact. For instance, ARMYs, the fanbase of BTS, frequently organise streaming events to break viewership records on YouTube and propel BTS songs to the top of Billboard charts. These projects illustrate the collective power of fans and their strategic approach to supporting their idols, often leading to tangible successes such as record-breaking views and chart positions. This phenomenon underscores the deep commitment fans have to their idols' success and the significant influence they wield in the digital age.

Additionally, streaming culture has sparked significant conflicts among fans of different K-pop groups. When two groups release new songs around the same time, it often leads to intense competition to dominate the charts. This rivalry sometimes escalates to the point where fans might even resort to artificially inflating view counts by purchasing views. As a result of that and the time consumption that streaming requires, streaming culture has recently garnered criticism within the fan community for its excessive focus on chart performance, which detracts from a genuine appreciation of the music itself. This shift in priorities has led to a growing concern that the true essence of enjoying and celebrating music is being overshadowed by an obsession with numerical achievements.

Consequently, there exists a disagreement among K-pop fans over streaming practices. In 2023, a part of K-pop fans was attempting to trend the hashtag #SayNoToStreaming in order to urge moderation, viewing continuous streaming as unpaid labour, while other K-pop fans objected, believing streaming culture is vital for supporting artists. This debate reflects broader Korean work culture, which values hard work and long hours. The issue highlights the complexities of K-pop fandom and the pressures K-pop fans face (Yang, 2023).

Similar to the streaming culture, fan voting has also grown into a vital practice where fans participate in various online polls and voting events to help their favourite idols win awards and secure performance slots on music shows. For example, fans of BTS, named ARMYs, are known to actively participate in voting.⁷ This activity showcases the competitive and supportive nature of K-pop fandom, as fans dedicate substantial time and effort to voting campaigns. The impact of fan voting is evident in the numerous awards and accolades idols receive, often attributed to the relentless efforts of their fanbase.

This practice highlights the significant role that fans play in their idols' achievements and public recognition. Consequently, many entertainment companies prioritise the international fandom over the local Korean fanbase. These companies recognise that international fans are more numerous and often more engaged. As a result, they may focus more on international releases and activities to cater to these fans. The loyalty and dedication of international fans, particularly in terms of streaming and voting, drive this strategic emphasis, as their active participation can greatly influence an idol's success on global platforms.

⁷ Having teams dedicated to voting is a common practice among K-pop fans. A famous example is @VoteWithARMY, an X account managed by a team of ARMYs dedicated to voting for BTS on various platforms, including Billboard and Korean platforms such as M!Countdown and Music Bank.

To sum up, K-pop fandom today is shaped by a complex web of transcultural practices that move fluidly across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Many of the participatory fan activities now synonymous with K-pop did not originate solely in Korea but emerged through transnational exchanges with Japanese and Western fan cultures. As Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue, fan practices circulate “in ever-tightening circles of influence within an increasingly convergent transcultural context” (p. 104). These practices are sustained not simply through cultural proximity or national identification but through what they describe as affective affinities, meaning shared emotional investments that allow fans across diverse contexts to connect through similar modes of attachment, creativity, and care. Another example of a transcultural fan practice is shipping, which will be discussed in depth later.

K-pop Fanfiction platforms and Fan communities

K-pop fanfiction, in Korean more known as Korean idol fanfiction, arose primarily in the middle of the 1990s, but studies surrounding it only emerged in the early 2000s. Still, the main parts that scholars focused on were the practice of women reading and writing homoerotic fanfiction. The K-pop fanfiction community, meanwhile, keeps on growing largely on the internet. There exist multiple websites and platforms where K-pop fanfiction is shared today; Wattpad, Archive of Our Own (AO3), X, Livejournal, Tumblr, and Asianfanfics. These platforms contain different types of fanfiction stories. There are some websites that might hinder the writing of fanfiction, such as X, wherein a limited number of characters per post is only, and which thus might make it more difficult to write a detailed fanfiction story. However, K-pop fanfiction writers seem to adapt to any kind of platform and such limitations do not prevent them from engaging in this type of fan activity. An example would be the famous boy group BTS's X horror fanfiction story entitled *Outcast* which was in the form of screenshots of interactions between the group members on X. Readers of this story contributed by voting on a poll in order to decide future events. This new type of fanfiction gained huge attention from both ARMYs and other fandom communities to the point it had a Billboard article published about it.⁸

Among all of the aforementioned websites, Asianfanfics is the only platform dedicated to K-pop fanfiction only (with some rare and occasional J-pop). Although it is possible that not every K-pop fan participates in the writing and reading of fanfiction on Asianfanfics, most, if not all, are aware of its existence. The site was founded by Jason Ado in 2009. It is well known that the founder launched the site for his friend who kept having her stories deleted on another website. Unfortunately, his friend lost her life a year after

⁸ <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8094300/bts-outcast-horror-fanfic-twitter>. Accessed on 3rd of March, 2018.

Asianfanfics was founded. Therefore, Ado decided to keep the website in memory of his deceased friend. Like most fanfiction websites, Asianfanfics has a tagging system that allows users to easily search and track genres, pairings, and other categories. Instead of kudos (popular on AO3, as will be explained below), Asianfanfics uses an upvote system, where stories with many upvotes can be featured on the main page.

Additionally, readers can subscribe to stories to receive notifications when updates are available. A unique feature of Asianfanfics is its karma system, which rewards users for their activity and contributions on the site. The karma system on Asianfanfics rewards users for their activity and contributions. Users earn karma points by posting stories, commenting, receiving upvotes, and participating in events. These points can be used for premium features like advertising stories, changing usernames, or gifting karma to others. Accumulating points can also increase a user's rank or level within the community, offering additional recognition and privileges.

As⁹ AO3, launched in 2009, is a non-profit, open-source repository not only for fanfiction but also other fan works, operated by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW). The non-limitations that AO3 grants its participants is one of the reasons behind its massive popularity. Unlike fanfiction.net which banned RPF stories, AO3 does not allow anyone to delete someone's story. The fanfiction stories on AO3 are often properly tagged for readers to avoid reading anything that might trigger them. Additionally, navigating through AO3 is relatively easy. Works and tags can be easily accessible through the Search option. Also, there is no need for someone to register and make an account to be able to read the stories, just a click that one is "over 18" would do in case the story contains mature content. The user experience, thus, is a contributing factor as to why the platform has been growing in

⁹ This information was retrieved on the 10th of June, 2024.

popularity among the K-pop fan community. Even authors who mainly published on Asianfanfics are also sharing their stories across AO3 in order to gain a bigger audience.

The transcultural nature of K-pop fandom communities, however, raises complications in relation to the language used when participating in fanfiction activities. With English as the international language and also the language transcultural fan communities use to interact with each other and their media object, most of the stories are published in English. This highlights the affective affinities within K-pop communities in which fans share their creations in the most understandable way possible. As a result, one might witness different levels of English skills in the platforms since K-pop fan communities consist of multiple languages and cultures, different English-language abilities and skills are evident. This, thus, demonstrates the challenges that non-English speaking fans confront as transcultural fanfiction writers. There are multiple instances where non-native English speakers include disclaimers that English is not their first language when publishing their stories, in order to avoid criticism, and probably for their stories to be taken more seriously.

Similar to other fan communities, K-pop fanfiction's main genre appears to be "romance". That is possibly due to the wide shipping culture that established itself within the K-pop community. Shipping is the act of loving and supporting the idea of two or more idols in a relationship (usually romantic) with each other. This occurs especially due to the fact that most idols engage in multiple public events where they can display their bond, or engage in what K-pop fan communities call fanservice, which also explains the consistency of fanfiction stories. The nature of shipping, fanservice, and some particular characteristics of this culture within K-pop fanfiction will be explained later in this chapter.

Another popular genre is "angst" which describes fanfiction stories that carry within them anxious happenings and frustration the protagonist(s) experience in a romantic context.

This genre, moreover, exists in most fanfiction communities. Original Character stories also seem to spread rapidly in K-pop fan communities; fanfiction writers seemingly enjoy inventing characters who will be coupled with Korean idols in the story, most of the time based on the author's self. Meanwhile, other writers like to produce self-insert or "idolxyou" stories where the readers can read stories about themselves and their idols, or the author and the idols. Additionally, roleplays remain tremendously popular in K-pop fanfiction platforms, especially on X where K-pop fans create accounts with K-pop idol's names, have their photos on their profile photos, and pretend to be them as they interact with other K-pop idol roleplayers.¹⁰

Similar to how fanfiction writers in fandoms based on a delimited set of texts or 'canon' in other media may attempt to sponsor further creation of canonical text, K-pop fans seemingly love to discover other sides of their idols that cannot be displayed in public. Lastly, K-pop fanfiction writers, specifically shippers, love to write about their OTPs in alternative universes where they can imagine them engaging in a romantic relationship. Considering the fact that idols themselves provide the fans with a large amount of fanservice; it is almost impossible for K-pop fanfiction writers not to get involved in shipping culture. This, also, will be elaborated later in this chapter.

¹⁰ For instance, @BTS_KTHV_95 is a BTS V roleplay account on X and has 17k followers. They post V photos and speak as if they are him. They also have fans interact with them as if they are the BTS member. https://x.com/BTS_KTHV_95 Accessed on the 30th of June, 2024.

RPF: Its Practices and Controversies

Real Person Fiction (hereafter RPF) is a subset of fanfiction that distinguishes itself from traditional fiction-based fanfiction by focusing on real individuals rather than fictional characters. Though it often intersects with other fanfic genres, RPF is distinct because it specifically focuses on real individuals and their performances, instead of elaborating on an existing fictional universe (Pope, 2020). An illustrative example of this distinction can be seen in the shift from shipping the fictional characters Sam Winchester and Dean Winchester from the television series *Supernatural* to the real-life actors who portray these characters, Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, commonly referred to as J2 within the fandom. Fans seemingly liked picturing the two brothers in, surprisingly, an incestuous romantic relationship in the series. Therefore, thousands of fanfiction stories exist today as a result of shipping the two male characters.

However, it becomes noteworthy in relation to my discussion of RPF when shippers' attention does not cover simply the Sam/Dean ship anymore, but goes far beyond to pair the actors playing the fictional characters, J2, and to explore "the mechanics of filming the show" (Brennan, 2009, p. 47). V. Arrow (2013) asserts that fanfiction distinguishes itself clearly from its subgenre, RPF. Arrow describes fanfiction as an "entity entirely its own", indicating that it is separate and distinct from RPF (pp. 338-339). In other words, shippers of fictional Sam/Dean and shippers of J2 may be regarded as belonging to two different entities.

RPF, in most cases, revolves around both famous and 'normal'¹¹ people (Chiang, 2016, p. 228) and similar to other types of fanfiction, it "concerns itself primarily with the official narrative, or "canon," and often fills gaps or re-tells stories from a different perspective" (Hagen, 2015, p. 45). Although it has been considered as controversial in the

¹¹ Mostly stars' non-celebrity friends, lovers, and relatives.

fannish world by some contemporary fans, this form of fanfiction was a familiar activity done by one of the greatest literature icons. Shakespeare, for instance, wrote about King Henry V (Kirby-Diaz, 2005) and the Brontë family used soldiers from the Napoleonic Wars as characters in a role-playing game for children which was assumed to be a practice for them to “polish their writing skills” (Segall, 2008, p. 25). Therefore, questions arise as to why this form of fanfiction has controversial meanings attached to it when highly respected writers adopted it both before and during their careers. The theories concerning the misconceptions and controversies of RPF will be discussed later in this chapter.

Fanfiction, in general, has been most common among media fans, especially those of television shows and films, ever since the 1970s (Hagen, 2015). However, RPF concerns itself primarily with the music industry as it has been argued that “virtually every mainstream band of the last fifty years that includes at least two men has had a slash RPF fandom” from Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Panic! At the Disco, Jonas Brothers, to today’s popular One Direction (Arrow, 2013, p. 339). As a base for their stories, RPF writers make use of stars’ public events such as “interviews, tour documentaries, audience footage from concerts, and other public appearances” and also take into consideration the “music, lyrics, and liner notes of the artists’ records” (Hagen, 2015, p. 46).

Despite the growth of this fan activity, it is still understudied in the world of academia in comparison to fanfiction involving fictional characters (Piper, 2018; Fathallah, 2017). Even within the fandom, RPF has been a site of hostility and embarrassment (Bennett & Booth, 2016) due to some fans disagreeing with such practices occurring in their fandom. Since the world of music fanfiction remains vast in terms of categorisation, RPF stories written about rock bands, that are perceived as more natural and realistic, seem to be more tolerated (Hagen, 2015). Bandom, for instance, is a form of fanfiction that developed in the 2000s and involves solely “popular rock, pop, and punk bands” such as My Chemical

Romance, Panic! At the disco, and Fall Out Boy (Hagen, 2015, p. 45-46). This form of fanfiction is highly accepted, in that even band members themselves are aware of such practice and often enjoy speaking about it in public interviews and “playing up to common pairings for the entertainment of writers” (Fathallah, 2017, p. 572). This indicates, as she argues, that bandom is “far from being a secretive or shameful sub-facet of fandom, but an ongoing part of a vast, postmodern, multi-authored and polymorphously queer text deconstructing performance, identity, sexuality, and the alternative music scene...” (Fathallah, 2017, p. 572). This implies that Bandom is perceived as a fundamental activity that fans engage in to decode and analyse the source material provided to them. This arguably prevents the fans from being merely passive consumers.

Meanwhile, RPF surrounding pop bands, such as One Direction, is undervalued when compared to Bandom, which as aforementioned, mostly concerns itself with rock bands, and other aforementioned music fanfiction types. Arrow (2013) labels this as a “hierarchy of respectability” and argues that it exists even within RPF which is already controversial in itself. He states that “the way an RPF fandom is viewed is frequently connected to the way its source material is seen by the rest of the world” That signifies that the way wider society perceives pop boy bands and their supporters plays a major role in judging the quality of their fanfiction. Furthermore, Arrow (2013) adds that pop boy bands’ “poppy style” of music and “the perception of their audience as teenage girls” are the source of undervaluation by society. That can be seen in the case of the popular boy band One Direction in relation to how their fans are perceived as “immature” and their fanfiction is considered but an “underdeveloped fantasy” (p. 339).

This demonstrates the misconceptions of people Arrow (2013) claims as “RPF detractors.” Those misperceptions of “nonparticipating fans/fandom” happen due to the stereotype that fans devote themselves to celebrities merely because of their appearances.

Therefore, their RPF is perceived as existing whether “to feel their devotion to those celebrities is validated, and is about more than just their appearance; to ‘prove’ in some way that they ‘know’ a star better than other fans (and therefore deserve his love); or [...] to seek to legitimize the ‘lesser’ form of media which the star is a part” (p. 339). Those perceptions are but stereotypes for there is no evidence that those are fans’ intentions behind participating in RPF activities. There are some RPF authors who may simply enjoy the genre because of shipping; while some others might do it due to their interest in writing. However, Arrow’s arguments in relation to the reason behind the stigma of RPF may be shallow and over generalising, since even some fans do not take RPF positively.

Those misconceptions, however, do not seem to affect fans and their RPF activities. They view RPF as a way of showing affection, however, they still would not want necessarily their stories to be exposed to their subjects (Dare-Edwards, 2014; Hagen, 2015). Some of them, although this is uncommon, even put a disclaimer in their “author’s note” asking their idols not to read the story (Fathallah, 2017). The reasons why RPF participants do not want to be exposed relate more to the content of the RPF stories that are known to be mostly sexually explicit. However, this is different when it comes to why RPF is considered as an unethical activity.

To elaborate, RPF “remains largely stigmatized” by both some fans, non-fans, and scholars “not simply because of the sexual content, but for its seeming intrusion into privacy of subjects.” (Thomas, 2014, p. 175). The outcome of RPF’s controversies is shown in the fact that fanfiction.net, one of the most used fanfiction sites, banned RPF in 2003 because the archive’s growing popularity increased the possibility of RPF being exposed to celebrities (Pellegrini, 2022). This demonstrated that RPF was perceived as containing harmful, embarrassing and illegal elements as a genre. As a result, there is more literature about the downside of RPF and its hazardous nature than about the process and practice itself.

Garon (2017) elaborates on how RPF, although produced with good intentions, might cause harm to both the celebrity's career and their emotional states. He highlights the main disadvantages of RPF as "defamatory", a cause of "emotional distress", and an intrusion of privacy (p. 4-6). Therefore, although there appear to be more legal actions taken against fanfiction involving pre-existing fictional characters, RPF remains an issue that a celebrity might sue for (Hagen, 2015; Garon, 2017). To elaborate, concerning "defamation", Garon (2017) argues that RPF might tremendously impact the public's impression on celebrities due to the ways in which it creates "false statements embedded in the work." He also compares it to novels and movies "based on true [stories]" and how these would lead the public to shape an image about the celebrity which is possible to harm the celebrity's career if the "living persons" are identified as people characters who "committed crimes or immoral acts" (p. 5-6).

Thomas (2014) also supports that argument stating that "RPF may [...] [hold] a mirror up to prevailing and often highly contradictory attitudes and assumptions about celebrity (p. 175). That it is why if the RPF writer states that their fanfiction is "based on a true story," the celebrity, when taking legal actions, "will need to prove the falsity was published intentionally or with reckless disregard of the truth" (Garon, 2017, p. 6). For that reason, when RPF writers provide a disclaimer that their work is not based on true events, it might lessen the "likelihood of defamation", however, it will not be deemed completely safe. For instance, if the work, although with clear disclaimers, has the potential to cause harm to the celebrity's emotional state due to its misrepresentation, legal actions might be taken if the content is perceived as "highly objectionable, intrusive and emotionally harmful" (Garon, 2017, p. 6).

On the other hand, to defend RPF participants, Arrow (2013) uses the notion of "manufactured reality" in which they affirm that such activity does not have the potential to harm the celebrity in any way on the grounds that the fans write their stories based on "a

random jumble of marketing ploys and happenstance, crafted constructs and slips of actual personality, about which fandom at large comes to consensus” (p. 343). In other words, taking into account that celebrities’ public personas are mostly, if not all, fabricated for the sake of marketing, RPF should not be perceived as injurious. RPF writers, nonetheless, fabricate their “reality”, which is referred to as “fanon” in fandom, based on their own perceptions with so little exposure to the actual reality of the celebrity life. Likewise, Fathallah (2017) mentions that RPF writers clearly state that their work does involve “real people” (admitting to the celebrities’ public personas) but deals with “their mediated representations only.” That makes RPF “conceived as a form of postmodern fiction that is both explicitly concerned with facets of identity and playfully manipulative of them” (p. 570).

Furthermore, Jennifer McGee (2015) states that RPF participants shield themselves by explaining that the “people” they write about “are not really people at all” in which they insist that those real people are “carefully constructed personas, created for the consumption of the public in the same way fictional characters are.” As a result, she concludes that because the “personas [...] are created to be a commodity, it is not unethical to use them as such” (p. 174). That demonstrates that RPF is not different from other types of fanfiction wherein a reader re-uses their book’s favourite characters in their writing. Consequently, although RPF remains a separate entity, it should be regarded as any other form of fanfiction.

Similar to the literature siding or coming against RPF, some celebrities show discomfort around RPF(for instance, One Direction’s Liam Payne, Daniel Radcliffe, Tom Felton, Tyler Posey, 5 Seconds of Summer’s Michael Clifford have all commented that RPF stories about them were weird and bizarre)¹² others display acceptance and even attempt to behave according to the fans’ fanon (Hagen, 2015; Arrow, 2013). Piret Virres, support their argument by comparing RPF to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum and hyperreality

¹² <http://www.clevver.com/male-celebrities-who-hate-fanfiction/8/> Accessed on 15 February 2018.

wherein she defines simulacrum as “a copy for which there is no original” and discuss how RPF subjects are “copies of the character images of pop stars created for the general public, and may not exist in real life.” They provide an example of a Russian female group t.A.T.u discussing how they managed to “deceive” their fans into thinking they were lesbians as a part of their public personae which resulted in fans writing RPF about them in romantic and sexual relationships (2005, p. 167-168).

RPF’s controversies are not unique to Western fandoms. One of the most prominent examples of the controversial of RPF is manifested in the ban of AO3 in China on February 29, 2020. The ban was said to be a result of the Chinese slash fanfic titled “Falling” by the author under the username 迪迪出逃记, published on AO3 in January 2020. The fanfic starred fictionalised versions of real-life TV celebrities Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo, inspired by their on-screen chemistry in the highly popular xianxia-dangai drama “The Untamed” which aired on Tencent Video in 2019. Despite the danmei tropes being common in BL (Boys’ Love) fan communities, fans of Xiao Zhan, who felt that the actor’s fanfic character was too provocative, reported the fanfic and AO3 to authorities, leading to the ban.¹³ A group of fans blamed the author of the fanfic, and others blamed the actor himself for not taking action against such fans who wrote RPF about him. Basu (2022) argues that this controversy highlights the perception of Chinese young male actors as “little fresh meat” (p. 47), and that the incident was indicative of a broader trend of government interference in online content, impacting freedom of expression and access to fan-created works, with the prohibition of AO3 and the elimination of explicit content perceived as assaults on internet freedom and the LGBTQ+ communities in China. The fans’ opposing reactions to *Falling* fanfic and ultimate

¹³ Danmei (Boys Love or BL) is a genre that depicts romantic and/or erotic relationships between men, mainly created by and for female readers, often referred to as “rotten girls” (funü). Despite facing state censorship because of its connections to homosexuality and obscenity, it has developed into a significant subculture in China since the mid-1990s. (Wang, 2023)

reporting to the authorities, it has been argued, should be seen as misplaced fan activism (Basu, 2022; Wang, 2023)

Within the context of K-pop, there were different reactions to the existence of RPF, that is, K-pop fanfiction. Some idols, like Super Junior's Kim Heechul, publicly supported the writing of fanfiction, and even wrote some himself. On an Instagram post from his old Instagram account kimheenim (now deleted, and has a new account with the same name) in 2014, Kim Heechul shared a short fanfic story starring himself and his band member, Leeteuk:

Figure 3. *A translated screenshot of Heechul's Instagram post's caption in 2014 from his now deleted Instagram account kimheenim*

trans from heechul IG :

"Teukie and I have completely opposite personalities. Teukie always endures and contains [himself,] while I always yell and in order to solve things right away. Teukie a bit timid? I'm a bit crazy? Teukie decorated his room all in white, while mine is all red. Teukie says to look back on yesterday, while I say 'let's think about what to do tomorrow'.. And it kept going like that until few years ago, some events that made me think 'Ah, I should always be on Teukie's side' happened and since then, if Teukie were to ask me to do something, even if I ignored the company and manager's words before and even if it seemed unreasonable, without asking him why, I would follow Teukie opinions. And gradually, our relationship slowly became deeper, and we were drawn to each other's eyes. And finally, Heechul breathed heavily and started stroking Teukie's face...?! kkkkkkkk (Korean laughter emoticon) #fanfic #83 #oldguys"

The post was even tagged as 'fanfic' and also the two members' famous pairing name '83' created by the fans because both were born in 1983. The mini fanfic has started with Kim Heechul pointing out the differences between him and Leeteuk, to him adhering to Leeteuk's orders, and was starting to get physical before Kim Heechul abruptly halted the writing and wrote 'kkkkkkk', a Korean expression that stands for giggling. The way the fanfic was stopped before it went to the romantic part signifies how Kim Heechul probably thought it

was getting too absurd, which is what lots of idols think about when it comes to RPF.

However, Kim Heechul still shared fanfiction pieces here and there in his social network accounts both about him with members, and other members together.

In contrast, some idols address the peculiar nature of fanfiction in a light-hearted manner, while others express significant discomfort. A notable example is Haruto from the K-pop group TREASURE, who has compared fanfiction to deepfakes and stated that he finds it deeply unsettling. Haruto's case is particularly sensitive, as he is underage in Korean terms. In response to the idol's complaint, plenty of Korean netizens have sympathised with him and labelled RPF, particularly RPS (Real Person Slash) as a sexual assault and encouraged the companies to take legal action (H.R. Park, 2021). Writing fanfiction with mature content about minors remains a contentious issue and is widely frowned upon by many K-pop fans. This highlights the ethical considerations and boundaries surrounding the RPF nature of K-pop fanfiction.

The reactions and interactions with fanfics from the companies' point of views significantly differed than those of idols. Relatively, companies showed a far more relaxed and even, in some cases, supportive stances in relation to fanfics. One of the earliest examples would be in 2006 when SM Entertainment organised a fanfiction contest for fans of the 2nd generation popular K-pop group TVXQ. According to an article published in Sports Khan, Kang (2006) reported that SM Entertainment designed the contest to interact with fans and promote healthy creative activities. The winner of the contest was said to receive 1 million Korean won and a special date with one of the TVXQ members. This initiative by SM Entertainment illustrates the early recognition of the importance of fanfic to the K-pop fan culture.

Similar to that, but much later in 2021, HYBE has taken significant steps to support and engage with fanfiction communities by collaborating with WEBTOON and Wattpad. Those platforms released a series of original webcomics and web novels featuring stories inspired by HYBE artists BTS, TXT, and ENHYPEN. This initiative is part of WEBTOON's Super Casting project, which partners with global entertainment companies to create innovative content. These stories will be available as webcomics on WEBTOON and as web novels on Wattpad, providing fans with new and immersive ways to connect with their favourite artists.¹³ HYBE's collaboration with WEBTOON and Wattpad demonstrates a supportive action towards fanfiction, echoing the intent behind SM Entertainment's 2006 contest. Such supportive acts from both companies are reflected in how they encourage fanservice among their K-pop idols. Additionally, such acts do not only foster fan engagement, but also eventually generate profit for the company because it helps the fans become more connected with their idols through the acknowledgement of their fannish practices, in that case, fanfiction.

The reaction of fans to HYBE's collaboration with Wattpad has been mixed. While some fans were indifferent or supportive, a significant portion, particularly among BTS's fanbase known as ARMY, expressed strong opposition. This opposition was manifested in the trending hashtag #NOTWATTPAD on X, reflecting their discomfort with the possibility of BTS members discovering their fanfiction. This reaction underscores a common sentiment among fanfic writers, as aforementioned, who value the separation between their creative works and the subjects of those works. Some other fans also were against the idea because they perceived it as an encouragement for delusional fans. That is because the writing of RPF offers a more personal glimpse into the lives of celebrities, albeit in a fictional way, which thus might lead fans to feel a sense of entitlement and control over the celebrities (Roach,

2018). That is one of the main reasons why some fans refuse to accept RPF culture and consider it rather dehumanising.

In the context of K-pop and other fandoms, celebrities behaving accordingly to fanon is labeled as “fanservice”. The term “fanservice” refers to actions and behaviours by idols that are specifically intended to entertain and engage their fans. This can include a range of activities, such as playful interactions between group members, winking, blowing kisses, making heart gestures, or other affectionate displays that cater to fans' desires and fantasies. It is often performed during concerts, fan meetings, variety shows, and on social media, and is a deliberate strategy used to strengthen the emotional connection between idols and their fans, fostering loyalty and enhancing the overall fan experience. Another factor behind fanservice is to promote shipping among the fans. Shipping is the term for the practice of fans imagining and supporting romantic relationships between K-pop idols, either within the same group or from different groups.

K-pop Idols and Shipping Culture

Shipping is the term for the practice of fans imagining and supporting romantic relationships between K-pop idols, either within the same group or from different groups. The term itself is believed by fans to have originated around 1995 among Internet fans of the TV show *The X-Files* who rooted for the potentially romantic relationship of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. They initially referred to themselves as "relationshippers" before shortening it to shippers.¹⁴ Jungmin Kwon (2019) traces the introduction of shipping into Korean idol fandom to the 1990s, arguing that South Korean women encountered the practice through increased access to Japanese popular culture at the very moment K-pop idol groups were beginning to emerge. While following first-generation groups such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, and Shinhwa on online forums, these fans were also reading fan-translated Japanese Boys Love (hereafter BL) manga available on the same platforms. This overlap led the two fan cultures to merge, as young women began interpreting idols' interactions and imagining romantic or sexual pairings that echoed the narrative patterns of the manga, enabling them to articulate both their affective responses and personal desires (Kwon, 2019; Kang-Nguyen, 2022). Consequently, shipping became a central element in the development of K-pop fandom culture (Baudinette, 2023b).

Before its adoption in Korea, BL manga had already shaped the interpretive habits of young Japanese women, who drew on these narratives to read homoerotic possibilities into the relationships between Japanese idols and to ship them accordingly (Glasspool, 2012). As discussed earlier, young Korean women who similarly engaged with Japanese BL manga extended these interpretive practices to K-pop idols, producing comparable forms of

¹⁴ Connecting the word "shipper" with the watercraft "ship" in fan spaces is common. A popular phrase of when the pairing does not interact for so long or allegedly break is "the ship has sunk".

imagined intimacy. Notably, this transcultural fan practice did not remain confined to Korea (Kwon, 2015; Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023) it has travelled across wider Asia, influencing fandoms in China (Baudinette, 2023a) and Thailand, where Thai fans draw simultaneously on Japanese BL and K-pop idol culture to ship Thai BL actors, both in fictional contexts and as public figures (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023).

The movement of shipping from Japanese BL manga into K-pop idol culture demonstrates that the practice is simultaneously transnational and transcultural. It is transnational in its ability to circulate across borders, and transcultural in that it provides fans with a shared mode of expressing affection for idols that cuts across national, cultural, and linguistic divides. As Baudinette (2023b, p. 250) explains, shipping is “a social practice whereby fans deploy homoerotic imaginaries...not only to explore their sexual desires for the attractive idols but also to express the intensely affective experience of fandom itself.” Put differently, shipping K-pop idols with one another constitutes a transcultural fan practice through which fans articulate their emotional attachment to idols while also vicariously expressing their own desires through the imagined couples they ship.

Japanese fans also engaged in shipping K-pop idols, with BL narratives influencing these interpretations, particularly as entertainment companies encouraged idols to interact in ways reminiscent of BL dynamics (Baudinette, 2023b). This practice aligns with the broader K-pop tradition of fanservice, a term used to describe behaviours performed by idols specifically to entertain and please fans. Such actions may include playful interactions between members, flirtatious gestures, or affectionate displays such as winks, heart signs, or staged intimacy during concerts, fan meetings, variety shows, or on social media. Fanservice is strategically designed to deepen fans’ emotional attachment and enhance their overall experience. Importantly, it is rarely initiated by idols themselves; rather, entertainment companies actively promote and manage these performances because they understand the

commercial benefits of encouraging fans to become deeply invested in particular members (known as their “bias”) or in specific pairings within a group (Iwicka, 2014). As Baudinette (2023a) notes, K-pop companies, whose core audience consists largely of young women, also maintain idols’ perceived romantic availability through mechanisms such as dating bans and media control, thereby reinforcing the conditions under which fanservice and shipping can flourish.

According to Kwon, the industry later incorporated shipping into its broader idol production strategies, presenting it as a safe mode of consumption that allows female fans to enjoy imagined relationships without undermining this sense of availability (Kwon, 2019). In 2021, Hye-rim Park from the tabloid *Heraldbiz* reported that a YouTuber who claims to be an idol trainee dancer trainer, revealed that when fans start pairing idols from different groups into couples, agencies encourage these idols to engage in more physical affection, or “skinship,” to capitalise on the trend.¹⁵ This is done to produce more content that fans can consume, such as photos and videos pairing the members that fans are highly invested in. The trainer also shared a conversation with an active idol (whose identity was not unveiled) who confirmed that many idols participate in these “business gay performances” to please fans and generate profits for the agency. However, some male idols are uncomfortable with being sexually objectified and forced into these roles by their agencies. The YouTuber criticised the exploitation of idols’ emotions for financial gain, arguing that while genuine relationships should be respected, the commercial manipulation of fan sentiments is problematic (H.-R. Park, 2021).

The commercialisation of homoerotic imagery by idol production companies ultimately proved advantageous for K-pop, as it attracted shippers who expressed their

¹⁵ Skinship is a Korean-English coined word used mainly in Korean language and which refers to the act of engaging in physical contact.

affective identities by pairing idols together and engaging in related fan practices such as writing fanfiction, producing fan art, and creating video edits. Ono Toshirō even argues that part of TVXQ's success stemmed from female fans who shipped the members and produced what he describes as "K-pop idol yaoi" (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 254). It is crucial to recognise, however, that shipping within both K-pop and J-pop fandoms predated corporate efforts to encourage such interpretations, emerging instead from fans' "obsessive search for interactions between celebrities awash with queer potential" (Baudinette, 2023a, pp. 88–89). In other words, entertainment companies drew inspiration from existing fan interests and subsequently instructed idols to perform particular interactions in order to further stimulate and monetise shippers' fantasies.

A range of studies offers explanations for why fans ship idols, suggesting motivations that span from acts of resistance against patriarchal norms to fantasies of vicarious romance. In the Korean context, the rise of K-pop idol shipping can be read as a challenge to a patriarchal society that restricts women's sexual agency and positions them primarily as objects of male desire (Baudinette, 2023b; Kwon, 2019). On this basis, Kwon Jungmin (2019) argues that shipping constitutes a feminist act. At the same time, pairing idols, particularly in the Japanese idol system, has been linked to the strengthening of parasocial relationships, as it enables fans to express affection in a harmless way without undermining the carefully maintained illusion of idol availability (Glasspool, 2012).

The shattering of that romantic availability comes often disappoints the fans, sometimes even making some fans leave the fandom, or become haters. Super Junior's member Kim Heechul, in 2014, discussed such matter in a television show *War Of Words* where mostly fans and celebrities related topics are discussed, "Idols always tell their fans 'I love you guys, only you' etc... So when the scandal [comes] out the fans feel they were betrayed." When referring to the relationship announcement of Girls' Generation Taeyeon

and EXO's Baekhyun back in 2014.¹⁶ Kim Heechul emphasises on how betrayed the fans feel after their idols continuously tell them they belong to them only which is regarded as fanservice.¹⁷ As Elfving-Hwang (2018) suggests, shipping enables fans to imagine homoerotic scenarios between idol members while simultaneously preserving the fantasy that these idols remain romantically attainable which is precisely the dynamic that Kim Heechul described. Ultimately, shipping can be viewed as an affective practice through which fans articulate their emotions for idols in ways that meet a range of personal and fannish desires (Baudinette, 2023b).

Fanservice is sometimes interpreted as queerbaiting because both involve the performance or suggestion of queer moments, yet the two concepts operate quite differently. Nordin (2015, p. 14) argues that “queerbaiting is all about what fans believe the producers intend with their work,” meaning it typically refers to creators of fictional narratives who hint at a character's queerness to generate audience interest without ultimately confirming it. This distinction has fuelled ongoing debates within K-pop fandom, where some fans view certain forms of fanservice as queerbaiting, while others counter that the term applies specifically to fictional media and therefore cannot be directly mapped onto idol performances.

Roach (2018) specifically argues against using the term “queerbaiting” for real-life celebrities. They assert that unlike fictional narratives, where queerbaiting involves deliberate hints at queer relationships to attract LGBTQ+ viewers, applying this term to real people overlooks the complexity of their lived identities and public images. This broad application risks diluting the term's meaning and may misinterpret marketing strategies aimed at

¹⁶ In Korean popular culture context, a dating reveal is labelled as a “dating scandal”.

¹⁷ Because of Kim Heechul's transparent stance on the culture of fanservice, his public relationship with Twice's Momo that was revealed in 2020 and ended in 2021 was not received it badly by his fans. Opposite to that, he received plenty of backlash from Momo's fans, as they believed she was dating one of her members, and kept insisting that the relationship was a public stunt. That points to how fanservice can lead the fans to completely alter realities and make their own.

LGBTQ+ audiences, better understood as "rainbow capitalism." Additionally, it can lead to harmful fan behaviours, including invasive scrutiny of celebrities' personal lives and demands for validation of their sexualities. Such actions can cause distress to the celebrities involved and shift the focus away from meaningful discussions about LGBTQ+ representation and support. (2018)

It is also noteworthy to mention that not all fans read fanservice as such. Some others genuinely believe that some members are dating each other and hiding it from the company and the public. That often results in close reading of the members' interactions, and supposedly, interpretation of secret codes. Roach (2018) marks this kind of "reading signs of coded queerness" as harmless as long as it does not "cause emotional stress or harm to the individual concerned and fuel toxicity within the fandom at large." But still advises for all of that reading to remain as RPF (fictional) rather than RPT (short for Real Person Truth) (p. 179). That kind of reading has indeed caused trouble within K-pop fan communities. There are plenty of incidents when fans would call out what they label as "toxic shippers" of widely popular ships such as TaeKook (BTS' V and Jungkook) and Jenlisa (Blackpink's Jennie and Lisa). Such incidents are not unique to more recent fandoms, the same thing happened with SNSD's Taeny, who has been historically remarked by even newer K-pop fans as a ship that attracted the attention of toxic shippers.¹⁸

Despite ongoing debates around queerbaiting, several media scholars contend that K-pop fandom can in fact serve as a queer-affirming environment. Baudinette and Scholes (2024) demonstrate that K-pop fandom enables LGBTQ+ fans in Australia and the Philippines to explore and articulate their gender and sexual identities, arguing that these fan

¹⁸ Back in 2014 when Girls' Generation Tiffany was revealed to be dating 2PM's Nichkhun, TaeNy shippers continuously attacked him on his X account. Often, he would reply to their hate comments and it would fuel them even more. Another incident is when some TaeNy shippers would cut Seohyun's face from TTS's (a Girls' Generation subunit made of Taeyeon, Tiffany, and Seohyun) photos and videos to place the focus on TaeNy only, later receiving lots of backlash for it.

communities function as queer spaces in which individuals both negotiate their own subjectivities and use K-pop to “queer heteropatriarchal and heteronormative ideologies” (p. 1581). These “queer discourses” arise from the affective connections LGBTQ+ fans experience toward idols, feelings of “security, attraction, and relief” that shape how they interpret and inhabit K-pop fandom (Baudinette & Scholes, 2024, p. 1581).

Kwon (2023) introduces the concept of K-(Q)ueerness to emphasise the ways queerness can be celebrated within K-pop as a genre, highlighting how it unsettles rigid binaries such as masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual to accommodate a broad spectrum of gendered and sexual expression (p. 55). This perspective resonates with earlier discussions of soft masculinity in K-pop. However, Baudinette and Santos (2024) value Kwon’s intervention while contending that queerness arises less from the genre itself, which remains embedded in a national context marked by discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, than from the practices of fans who actively produce queer meanings. They argue that the queer dimensions of K-pop are generated through fans’ creative and affective engagements, framing queering as a dynamic process initiated by audiences rather than an intrinsic feature of K-pop. Notably, many LGBTQ+ Koreans express surprise that international fans perceive the Korean Wave as a queer-affirming space, given Korea’s socially conservative climate and the limited legal and social protections available to sexual minorities (Kwon, 2019, p. 144).

Kuo et al. (2022) show that LGBTQ+ Asian American K-pop fans use imaginative and participatory engagement with the genre to access affirming representations of gender, sexuality, and Asian identity that are often unavailable within their families or through Western media. Furthermore, transcultural Anglophone K-pop fans, regardless of their own sexual identities, actively participate in queering K-pop and the Korean Wave by reworking it into a “queer social force through their aspirations for queerness” (Baudinette & Santos, 2024,

p. 163). This queering primarily takes place through transnational and transcultural fan practices such as shipping and fanfiction, which, as Baudinette (2023b) notes, are “consciously and strategically tied to LGBTQ+ identity politics.”

Kuo et al. (2022) demonstrate that fan labour and fanfiction function as important resources for LGBTQ+ Asian American K-pop fans, enabling them to negotiate their gender and sexual identities through engagement with queer narratives that validate and normalise their experiences. Writing, reading, and circulating fanfiction becomes, for these fans, an act of “resistance to problematic media representations and a society that erases their identities” (Kuo et al., 2022, p. 18). In line with Baudinette and Santos’s argument that K-pop fandom actively queers both K-pop and the broader Korean Wave, Kuo et al. (2022) further note that fans frequently interpret practices such as cross-dressing, skinship, and shipping as forms of queer representation. They emphasise that “shipping fan labour is a form of creating queer representation, queer art, and a source of fantasy and escapism” (p. 16), underscoring how these creative practices allow fans to explore queerness and construct alternative imaginative spaces within fandom. Transcultural practices of shipping and producing, consuming, and sharing fanfiction can therefore be understood as forms of queer practice within K-pop fandom.

According to several participants in Kuo et al.’s (2022) study, shipping can at times have negative implications for LGBTQ+ communities, as it does not necessarily indicate genuine allyship and may contribute to the fetishisation or spectacularisation of queer relationships (p. 117). They also note that the taboo surrounding shipping can cast LGBTQ+ identities as illicit or excessive (Kuo et al., 2022). Nonetheless, while some participants expressed concerns about how queer identities are represented or negotiated within fandom, they also acknowledged that shipping can be constructive when approached with clear and considerate boundaries (Kuo et al., 2022).

Some participants in Kuo et al.'s (2022) study also highlighted the development of community norms such as restricting shipping discussions to appropriate spaces, using clear tags, distinguishing fantasy from reality, refraining from mentioning ships to idols, and valuing queer representation without demanding it, as evidence of ongoing efforts within fandom to negotiate marginalisation and foster more inclusive environments. Within this context, K-pop becomes what Baudinette (2022) terms a “resource of hope.” Baudinette (2020) originally uses this concept to describe how BL enabled Chinese gay men in Japan to feel empowered in the face of Chinese patriarchal norms, offering forms of liberation and confidence. Similarly, LGBTQ+ K-pop fans understand K-pop as a “resource of hope,” using it to actively reject heteronormativity (Baudinette & Santos, 2024) and to imagine what Baudinette (2022, p. 51) describes as “futures which are both emancipatory and empowering.”

In order to provide an overview of shipping culture within a K-pop fandom context, I selected EunHae and TaeKook. EunHae is the ship name of Super Junior's Eunhyuk and Donghae, and TaeKook is the ship name, as aforementioned, of BTS' members, V and Jungkook. In the ship name, V's real name, Taehyung, is used instead of his stage name. Both of these couples were selected at the same time because they are perfect examples of a classic ship, considering Super Junior have been around for longer and way before K-pop has gone as viral as it is today, with a more contemporary ship. I have selected Tumblr to study EunHae's shippers dynamics around middle of 2010s and X for a more contemporary look, precisely from 2020 onwards, on TaeKook's shippers dynamics.

EunHae, also known as HaeHyuk are the same age (both born in 1986) and known for their similarities in their group positions with both of them in charge of dancing and rapping. The two were shipped together since the group's debut in 2005 and spent most of their time in front of camera together. The shippers since then continuously supported the idea of the

two in a romantic relationship, and with the growth of Super Junior's popularity because of their hit song *Sorry Sorry* in 2009, EunHae became even more aware of themselves as a ship which led to them engaging in fanservice to trigger the fans' fantasies, with the support of their company. EunHae is the most popular pairing in Super Junior. They have 11,775 published fanfics under the tag "eunhae" on Asianfanfics which ranks 1st when compared to the remaining Super Junior pairings and 4th in general K-pop pairings, and 2,403 fanfics under the tag "Lee Donghae/Lee Hyukjae | Eunhyuk" on AO3.¹⁹

The massive popularity that these two Super Junior members have as a pair is not unknown to Eunhyuk and Donghae themselves. Furthermore, it is undeniable that it has seemingly brought discomfort in both the public and private life of these idols. Almost certainly due to the ubiquity of fanfiction featuring them in a romantic and/or sexual relationship, Eunhyuk and Donghae have publicly denied multiple times that they are homosexual and insisted on their interests in the opposite sex. In 2015, an article entitled 'Super Junior's Donghae & Eunhyuk ask fans to stop shipping the 'Eunhae couple''²⁰ came out when the two members made an appearance in a Taiwanese show *Idols of Asia* as a part of their promotion as a duo. During the show, they were asked to do some tasks in order to show their closeness. However, "after randomly selecting the task of jumping rope together 10 times" Donghae disapproved instantly claiming that it was only for couples to do followed by Eunhyuk's disagreement as well. Later in the show, upon the host mentioning how popular they are as a ship in Taiwan, both of the members insisted that the fans should stop speculating about their relationship. Eventually, Donghae finished the argument, "I don't know if I can say this, but in another country, people think we are gay...but it's really not like that. Please don't do this." This led the couple to carry on the rest of the show awkwardly.

¹⁹ Before the rise of AO3, most of K-pop fanfics were published on Asianfanfics, hence the higher number of EunHae fanfics on the latter. Information retrieved on the 11th of June, 2024.

²⁰ <https://www.koreaboo.com/video/super-juniors-donghae-eunhyuk-ask-fans-to-stop-shipping-the-eunhae-couple/> Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

Despite these two Super Junior members constantly denying their romantic involvement, this had little effect on the shippers' continuous speculations. To examine these speculations, I selected Tumblr as a source to study the nature of shipping for "[it] has become a key site for fan-related content and its community of users" (Bennett and Booth, 2016, p. 63) and is also considered as space where shippers usually argue and negotiate about their OTPs. Therefore, it was convenient for finding EunHae-related texts by searching through the "Eunhae" tag.²¹

I have chosen 4 of the most popular EunHae-related posts from 3 different blogs²² all of which post about different K-pop bands including Super Junior. The posts' notes ranged from 41 up to 107 notes combining both likes and reblogs. Those notes, however, do not reflect the fandom or ship size because posts that mainly contained gifs and photos outnumbered text posts in the "Eunhae" tag. Therefore, it was challenging to find Eunhae-related text posts on the popular tag page. Another reason might be the fact that some bloggers do not tag their posts, meaning that there may be considerably more content on EunHae than can be found by a simple search tag. Additionally, given the longstanding nature of the ship, some posts from quite a long time ago might have either left the site or deleted their posts.

The content included multiple topics about EunHae's relationship including the shippers' analysis and reactions to their interactions. The first notable element that is regarded as a reason behind the shippers' fantasies is the reactions of other Super Junior members to EunHae. These convinced the shippers that what EunHae shared was not merely platonic. The fanblog worktheroom, for instance, analysed a set of videos to prove other

²¹ Before the rise of fan communities on X, Tumblr was more of a home for shipper discussions.

²² Tumblr users Worktheroom <http://worktheroom.tumblr.com>, Eunhae-code <http://eunhae-code.tumblr.com> and, ishipthatfishycouple <http://ishipthatfishycouple.tumblr.com>

group members have knowledge about EunHae's relationship. One of the videos²³ she analysed was taken at a Super Junior fanmeeting²⁴ in 2011 in Beijing. The video was originally a fancam²⁵ but was edited by an EunHae shipper to point out EunHae's moment during the fanmeeting: the title was *ENG Eunhyuk said that Donghae lacks of love? - MC EunHae shipper?* The 1 minute 5 seconds video showed the fans chanting Donghae's name when a manipulated photo of Eunhyuk and a fangirl was displayed on the large screen behind the stage. Upon the loud screaming of the fans, the MC asked Eunhyuk about the reactions of the audience and Eunhyuk responded that "Donghae lacks love" The MC then pointed out, "But Donghae finds comfort with you" which resulted in the fans screaming louder. Before Eunhyuk could answer, Siwon, a fellow Super Junior member, walked abruptly to him and acted like he was going to punch him which made Eunhyuk gasp in surprise and laugh.

Worktheroom, consequently, implied that one of the group members, Siwon attempted to prevent EunHae from exposing their relationship to the public during the fanmeeting in the following post:

²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LBvzZK1_fs&feature=youtu.be Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

²⁴ Fanmeeting is a gathering of idols with a limited number of fans. Filming or taking photos is usually prohibited in such events.

²⁵ In K-pop fandoms, fancam is a video filmed personally by fans during events or concerts.

Figure 3. *worktheroom's post on Tumblr about EunHae (part one)*²⁶

eunhae fanmeet essay thing and it's actually not like a novel? ~~kind of though. kind of.~~

so basically we need to talk about this video in particular (x)

Hyukjae is asked who he loves most, or something about who he loves, and the fans start to shout Donghae's name. of course. and at 0:04, you can see Donghae go behind Siwon's back and over to Hyukjae and when he gets back, Siwon pulls Donghae back to his spot. then Hyukjae teases and says that Donghae lacks when it comes to love (0:30) and so the translator helps him out and then the Host says, "But Donghae can find comfort in you, right?" ~~lol she ships it~~ and Hyukjae has to wait for the translation and, as he is, Siwon comes out of nowhere and starts hitting Hyukjae's chest repeatedly and ~~notice Kyuhyun's face there at 0:52, he is utterly thrown off and it's strange, because~~ Siwon scares the shit out of both Hyukjae AND the translator, but then he just *leaves..* with no explanation or anything and poor Hyukjae is so frazzled that all he does is nod and the host quickly moves on and LDSA;KDFJ SIWON, JUST WHAT WERE YOU DOING, HONEY?! I'd understand if he had hit Hyukjae and then said something about it.. like at the Anniversary party where he tried to make Donghae choose between him and Hyukjae and he caused a scene and it was cute, but here..... I have no idea what was going on.

so i ask WHAT WAS THE POINT OF THAT. if you're not gonna twist it and turn it into something fanservice-y like siwon is very capable of doing, then why react like that? i don't mean he had to start another eunsihae thing right there but you're gonna walk all the way over, hit him, and then just leave? what is your point? what are you doing and why? and hyukjae was trying to have something explained to him. *he didn't even know what was going on* and then that happened and he just nodded and the MC just moved on because SIWON WHY.

(also, this happened the day after (this) aired. not after it was filmed.. after it aired on television. out for everyone to see. and siwon is usually not like this in fanmeets. usually, he just lets them get on with it and he stays out of it because fanmeets are all about this.. he will even join in.. but not this time. ~~maybe he was on eunhae patrol because of the big gay hug idk~~)

but this brings me to the issue of the members stopping them without reason. ~~as if there would be a reason apart the world knowing eunhae are married.~~

a few examples ~~simone you've already seen these sorry-{: ::~~

(x) 5:15 to 5:25. yesung why. ~~i talk about why this one's weird later~~

(x) 1:50 to 2:00 siwon. again. why. also i think he just got lazy here to be honest because he was messing around with them and being his usually flirty self and trying to turn everything into eunsihae like he's generally happy to play right along but then a blow job innuendo happens and he's like "ugh can't be bothered. i'm just gonna throw hyukjae to the ground and walk away idk i'm tired" also note donghae and hyukjae's reaction please. they're like oh no did we do something wrong? should he not have gotten on his knees in front of me and touched me sensually or?

(x) 0:15 sungmin. wae. we know they're backhugging for no GOOD reason. but why are you saying "no" over and over and trying to stop them by like swatting at them? sora specifically says she wants to try a backhug with leeteuk so it's not like they were being completely random right like we didn't NEED a demo but there was basis idk ~~also i think sungmin was on eunhae patrol during wgm because he was trying to stop them a lot.. even in the first episode with leeteuk and sora~~

(x) 0:05 leeteuk. you seemed panicked. pourquoi.

(x) ~~what?~~

²⁶ <http://worktheroom.tumblr.com/post/25432712573> Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

Figure 4. *worktheroom's post on Tumblr about EunHae (part two)*

and the reason this sort of stuff is telling is because you have to wonder what the issue is. why not just let them carry on? and these were not playful interruptions like (here) ~~though yesung i have to wonder why again because just why~~ where it's just yesung trying to annoy them for the lolz or whatever. ~~also that moment is great because yes hyukjae defend/protect your man~~. like let's look at yesung's first example... just what was he preventing? and why look so panicked? donghae had turned hyukjae's face toward his and held it. perhaps he was gonna do something. perhaps not. but why stop him? and with siwon and sungmin and leeteuk just what did they think was going to happen? and why'd they feel the need to intervene? basically, if it's fanservice, you just let it happen. fanservice is always going on so why would the members stop them, and only them, in these manners from doing fanservice? it makes no sense, if that's all it is.

so, yeah.

and since i know they're just doing their jobs... here are a couple of examples of them shipping eunhae like the pros they are

(x) look at leeteuk's smile aww and his little giggle and comment at the end. ahh (sigh this one always gets set to private for some reason but it's from 2011 on sukira just after Mr Simple promotions started and leeteuk says "today at the photoshoot, donghae said to me, 'eunhyukie really knows how to dress well'" and hyukjae giggles and says "it's not just dressing well, i can do everything well" then leeteuk says "he also said something else.. it's the only thing eunhyuk pays attention to" and they laughed and then hyukjae says "he's already told my mom" and leeteuk laughs awkwardly and says "why are you like this" it'S A FUCKING GEM IDK WHY IT GETS PRIVATED :(but yeah)

(x) siwon i saw what you did there and i approve. ~~seriously siwon why were you so persistent though relax~~

(x) okay siwon

right. basically my point is that the members give things away maybe even more so than the people involved ~~especially leeteuk lol what~~ (x) in the beginning around 0:10 when eunhae are flirting. i know it's difficult but peel your eyes away from eunhae and LOOK AT LEETEUK'S FACE. ugh his smile and his FACE. ~~ummaaaaaa~~ that is the face of a shipper. and then he makes hyukjae thank donghae for saying such nice things aw leeteuk, why are you only like this when eunhae are involved. don't answer that i already know.

as you were.

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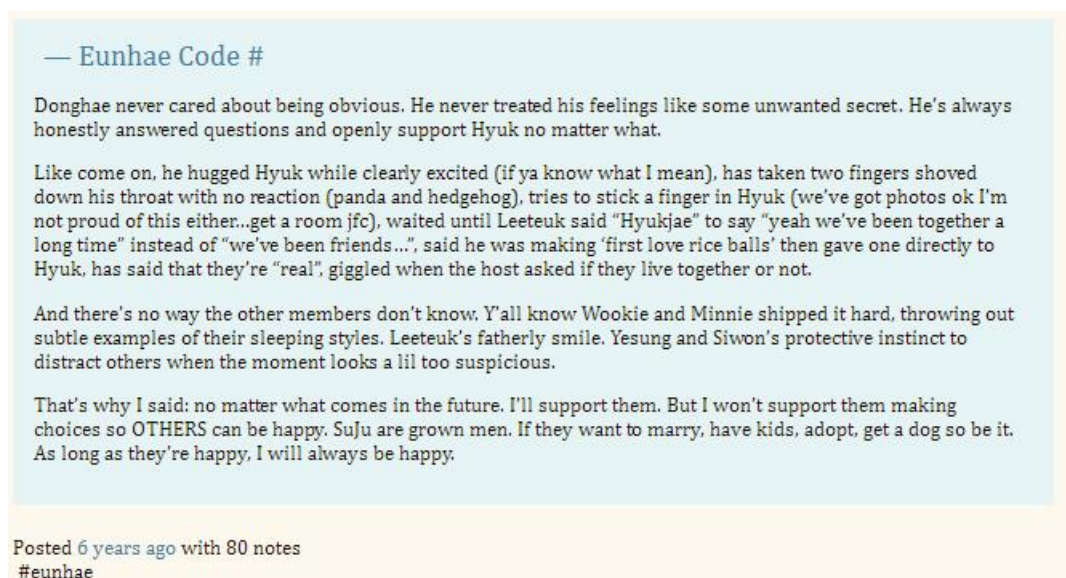
EUNHAЕ # ANALYSIS # HERE IT IS !

The blogger started with a short explanation of the content of the video and mentioned the minute and seconds of the moment they were discussing. The first comment they made was on the presenter's question when she asked Eunhyuk if Donghae found comfort in him implying that the presenter "ships" EunHae accompanying it with "lol" to convey humour and amusement. The blogger then described Siwon's sudden action towards Eunhyuk as scary and even marked out fellow member Kyuhyun's reaction to that. At the end of the first paragraph, the blogger started using upper case letters to show their enthusiasm and accentuation. The use of random letters in upper case also demonstrates the blogger's enthusiasm as it is a common behavior in fandom.

The shipper consistently displayed confusion around Siwon's sudden behaviour; they even reminisce about an anniversary party where Siwon apparently attempted to make Donghae choose between him and Eunhyuk calling it "cute" while assuming Siwon's behaviour as commonly "fanservice-y". The blogger then mentioned eunsihae which is a threesome name for Donghae, Eunhyuk, and Siwon and assumed Siwon wanted to get involved with EunHae as he usually did. Moreover, they compare what happened to the moment in the video and attempt to show the difference. The shipper insisted more in their second paragraph by repeatedly asking supposedly rhetoric questions to strengthen their argument- that Siwon's action had hidden meanings. They conclude at the end of their posts that the members would not have "the need to intervene" if EunHae was simply "fanservice." This depicts that the shippers are aware of the effort that the idols make in order to appeal to the shippers.

Another EunHae shipper under the username eunhae-code seems to be convinced that the members are aware of EunHae's romantic feelings for each other in their post:

Figure 5. *eunhae-code's post about EunHae*²⁷



The members of Super Junior, according to EunHae shippers, have the responsibility to protect EunHae from revealing their relationship to a certain extent. Consequently, any actions taken towards EunHae in public would often raise discussions between the shippers. However, there is no clear evidence that the members are behaving that certain way for a specific reason. Yet, shippers still attempt to frame it the way they want.

Moreover, in the K-pop fandom, it is not peculiar for members of the group to support the ship since, as aforementioned, even the companies and management often attempt to pair members together. In EunHae's case, SM Entertainment, their management company, even paired them up as a duo under the name D&E after and possibly as a result of their identification as a key pairing by Super Junior fans. Additionally, Kim Heechul, one of Super Junior's members, triggered the fans' fantasies by publishing a self-written fanfiction story on his Cyworld²⁸ starring the popular trio EunSiHae (Eunhyuk, Siwon, Donghae). This paved the way for shippers to write more fanfiction and thus speculate that EunHae might actually be in a relationship.

²⁷ <http://eunhae-code.tumblr.com/post/171355584157> Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

²⁸ Cyworld is a Korean social network.

A prominent example of reading queer-codes is the analysis of Donghae's and Eunhyuk's Instagram posts. Shippers consider the rain as a code between the two Super Junior members and claim that it is a symbol of them "missing each other." This apparently started when Donghae first uploaded a photo of raindrops on a glass which appeared to be a car's window on the 6th of April, 2013 with the caption "Rainy Days...Like it ^^". The shippers related that post to the fact that Eunhyuk during that time was filming a show in Vietnam. Furthermore, Eunhyuk retweeted his group mate's tweet²⁹ and commented "Bullshit" jokingly. However, not too long after, on the 8th of April, 2013, Eunhyuk posted a photo of raindrops on the glass of a car with exactly the same caption as Donghae's. It was inevitable, then, for the shippers to relate "rain" to EunHae. This also happened when Donghae tweeted a photo of himself in Super Junior's dormitory with the caption "*is it gonna rain?*" on the 17th of July, 2013. During that time, Eunhyuk was in Hawaii which made the shippers, again, persist that rain has something to do with Eunhyuk.

In one of their posts, the blogger shirade also posts a compilation of photos and screenshots of Eunhyuk and Donghae's social media posts on Cyworld as well as X to prove that the rain is a code that EunHae share together then finishes the post by saying:

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/AllRiseSilver/status/320435589423980544> Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

Figure 6. *shirade's post about EunHae's rain code*



Although these assumptions may fall under the term “fanon”, one should also take into consideration how the shipped singers participate in building the shippers’ perceptions. That takes us back to the idea of the manufactured reality that celebrities use to deceive their fans (Virres, 2005). Eunhyuk and Donghae, for instance, even wear couple items, such as similar shirts, shoes, bracelets, and other accessories both on and off stage which is an act that is greatly common between couples in Korea. The reason behind such an act is the willingness to show off their relationship. Shippers, hence, keep their eyes open on every single accessory or outfits they wear just to spot something shared or bought together.

As aforementioned, the two Super Junior members constantly denied any romantic feelings towards each other. Nevertheless, their consistent denial mostly encouraged the shippers to believe that the reasons behind their persistence were the conventions and views Korea holds about homosexuality. The blog eunhae-code posts about it:

Figure 7. *shirade's Tumblr post about EunHae #2*³⁰



The shipper here mentions their indifferent support to the two Super Junior members “no matter what comes in the future” implying, possibly, the news of their heterosexual relationships. Yet, they persist that EunHae should prioritize their happiness over others’. In other words, by capitalizing “others”, the shipper emphasizes on the Korean society who still has not opened up about homosexuality. Moreover, shippers’ awareness of how of a taboo homosexuality is in Korea led them to believe that although Eunhyuk and Donghae might not be in a romantic relationship, there certainly exist romantic feelings between the two of them. So, to reveal it or not is up to the Korean society and how they perceive it. Meanwhile, not every shipper holds their hopes high for longer once the members of their ships deny their relationship or presumed sexual orientation. Some consequently choose to accept the sad reality. But only those loyal and dedicated shippers choose to remain.

For TaeKook, the pairing has witnessed popularity unlike any ship before in K-pop’s history. Their fanmade videos on YouTube bring up to 42 million views. One of the channels

³⁰ <http://eunhae-code.tumblr.com/post/171355584157> Accessed on the 11th of June, 2024.

dedicated to making videos about them under the name taekook-lives has 511k subscribers and has 18 videos of them with views ranging from 1 to 4 million. The videos often include proofs, jealousy moments, analyses, and other subtle moments. Similarly, TaeKook's shippers are also loud about their ship on X, and their posts gain a large amount of attention even by Korean tabloids such as Dispatch. For instance, in the X post down below by X user @flirtaeguk, it does not even contain an actual interaction of V and Jungkook and only has them edited together yet it has 37k likes:

Figure 8. *flirtaeguk's X post about TaeKook*³¹



³¹ <https://x.com/flirtaeguk/status/1329407788615757824> Accessed on 2 June 2024.

Fan edits are common both in K-pop shipping communities and other fan shipping communities more generally. Those edits can gain as much attention as an actual interaction. Additionally, the video is designed to create an impression of interaction or shared context between the two members, which is a common practice among shippers to reinforce the idea of a relationship. The editing also raises questions about the boundaries between reality and fantasy in fan practices. While some fans might fully recognise the fictional aspect of their creations, others might blur the lines, leading to intense emotional investment in the shipped relationship. In another post, X user babiteas with 32k likes, again showcasing the amount of attention fan edits get in TaeKook's shipping community, share a fanart of TaeKook inspired by the Manga turned Anime series Spy Family:

Figure 9. *babiteas's X post about TaeKook*³²



This fanart post combines elements from the popular manga series *Spy Family* with the BTS ship TaeKook, featuring Jungkook and Taehyung in roles inspired by the characters from the manga. The user depicts Jungkook and Taehyung in an intimate, dramatic pose, with Jungkook holding a gun, which is characteristic of the spy theme in *Spy Family*. By combining TaeKook with *Spy Family*, the shipper taps into the interests of fans from both fandoms, potentially broadening the audience and engagement. At the top is Jungkook striking a feminine pose, further highlighting the roles that TaeKook shippers paint him as:

³² <https://x.com/babiteas/status/1554082301004226565> Accessed on 2 June 2024.

the subordinate in the relationship. Such role might have been assigned to him due to him being the youngest and also smaller in figure, similar to Donghae being the subordinate in EunHae's relationship because he is a few months younger and physically smaller.

Another example of TaeKook's shipper dynamics is the following post by X user @jiravalee posted on the 8th of June, 2024 with 1k likes:

Figure 10. *jiravalee's X post about TaeKook*³³



This post includes a real interaction between V and Jungkook. What makes this post more special is the fact that it talks about a “personal photo of TaeKook” meaning that the photo

³³ Accessed on 2 june 2024.

the two members seem to be taking in the video/screenshot is a photo that has never been shared to the public. It is this kind of moments that strengthen the shipper's belief in their OTPs. Adding that HYBE is a factor behind the unreleased of those personal photos and claiming that TaeKook is a pair that "companies are afraid of" also further highlights the fans' ultimate belief in the ship, as well as cancels the companies' role as fanservice-seller and paints them as an obstacle instead. This shows how shippers' fantasies might alter K-pop cultural elements and how they view them.

The nature of interactions and the type of content produced by shippers slightly differ. EunHae shippers often analyse interactions during live events, fan meetings, and older social media platforms, with text posts on Tumblr providing detailed breakdowns of videos, quotes, and specific interactions. In contrast to the popular EunHae discussion posts extracted from Tumblr, TaeKook shippers use fanmade videos and art on X to showcase interactions, focusing on creating and interpreting fan edits, often combining elements from other popular culture references, such as manga and anime. The platform dynamics further differentiate the two, with EunHae on Tumblr featuring analysis posts rich in textual content, including lengthy explanations and interpretations, while TaeKook on X consists of short, viral posts with fan edits and art that garner substantial likes and retweets, reflecting the fast-paced, visually-driven nature of the platform. The dynamic shipper posts of both TaeKook and EunHae shippers highlight the adaptive nature of shipping culture to the unique characteristics of different K-pop groups and the evolving nature of social media platforms. That, however, does not mean that TaeKook shippers do not provide lengthy speculative posts about the pair's relationship, or that EunHae shippers do not make fanarts. Both of the shippers' acts are highly common in K-pop shipping communities.

Shipping, generally, remains a common act in K-pop fandom. As discussed before, one of the results of devoted shipping is the practice of fanfiction; in this case RPF. RPF

writers are considered as ethnographers as to how they study, speculate, and examine every action their OTP makes (Cole & Gunnels, 2011) in order to write their fanfiction. To conclude, shipping seems to play a key role in K-pop fandom. Meanwhile, some Korean celebrities oppose such culture, but still engage in what Kang MyeongSeok mentioned in an interview, “brotherhood business” where celebrities, particularly male idols would use their bond to create the fanon in order to appeal to the public.³⁴ This also happens in girl groups where the two girls display affection among each other to appeal to the fans and emphasise on their friendship. This, however, appears to have limits, and when those limits are reached, Korean celebrities often remind their fans of the extensive gap between fantasy and reality. With the growing number of RPF stories, it is, however, sometimes difficult for fans to distinguish between the two.

³⁴ MBC Radio, 손석희의 시선집중 (Son SeokHee’s Friday’s focus on culture) Interview with culture critic Kang MyeongSeok.

Comparative Genealogies of RPF: East Asian BL and Western RPF

RPF and shipping emerge from distinct genealogical trajectories in Western and East Asian media cultures, yet perform remarkably similar affective functions in both contexts. The East Asian context, by contrast to Western RPF discussed above, is deeply shaped by the longstanding traditions of *shōjo* manga and BL (Kwon, 2019; Baudinette, 2023b), instead of developing through media fandom (such as one of the earliest forms of shipping, Star Trek's Kirk/Spock) within music fandoms such as bandom (Hagen, 2015; Fathallah, 2017). BL emerged in Japan in the early 1970s within the sphere of *shōjo* manga, where female authors began creating stories centred on romantic and erotic relationships between beautiful male characters (McLelland & Welker, 2015). Initially developed as part of a growing girls' culture, BL quickly became a creative space primarily produced and consumed by adolescent girls and women (Nagaike & Aoyama, 2015), allowing them to explore desire and gender outside conventional heterosexual frameworks (Welker, 2015).

The BL genre is characterised by a distinctive pairing system known as the *seme-uke* dynamic (McLelland & Welker, 2015), in which one partner is depicted as the dominant, often older or more assertive figure (*seme*), while the other is positioned as the receptive and more feminised partner (*uke*) (Welker, 2015). This asymmetrical structure became a defining narrative convention across BL manga, *dōjinshi*, and later BL-influenced fan practices (Suzuki, 2015), shaping how many fans, particularly in East Asia, imagine and interpret male-male intimacy. BL's *seme-uke* structure, defined by asymmetrical dynamics of age, height, emotional disposition, and sexual positioning, offers readers a gendered template for imagining romantic relationships between men (Nishimura, 2015). This BL framework was transplanted into idol fandoms, first within Japanese pop culture and, as discussed above,

later into K-pop fandoms in both Korea and Japan (Kwon, 2019; Baudinette, 2023a).

Japanese and Korean shippers thus adopt tropes from an established girls' culture tradition that uses homoerotic male relationships as a means to explore gender, sexuality, and desire, long before similar practices took hold in global Anglophone K-pop fandoms.

Another significant difference between East Asian and Anglophone forms of RPF lies in how queer desire is imagined and structured within each cultural context. Baudinette (2023b) asserts that Japanese K-pop shippers frequently categorise idol pairings according to the *seme-uke* formula, positioning one member as the dominant *seme* and the other as the more “feminine” *uke*, often based on attributes such as age, height, or personality (p. 255–256). These roles are rarely reversed, and Japanese fans may describe idols like BTS's Jungkook as a “young princess” protected by older members (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 256). Such interpretive practices draw directly from the conventions of BL, where asymmetrical gendered dynamics are central to articulating romantic and erotic relationships. Consequently, shipping within this context forms part of a much longer tradition in Japanese girls' culture through which young women explore their own gendered and sexual identities by imagining stylised, homoerotic male relationships.

In contrast, Anglophone K-pop fans tend to approach RPF and shipping through the lens of LGBTQ+ identity politics rather than BL narrative structures. As Baudinette (2023a) and Baudinette and Scholes (2024) note, many Anglophone fans consciously reimagine idols as LGBTQ+ within their fanfiction and fanart. While they generally understand these portrayals as fictional, they nonetheless use them as a means of expressing solidarity, exploring queer desire, and articulating their own subjectivities. In Anglophone contexts, then, shipping becomes an explicit queer identity project in which fans draw on LGBTQ+ politics and discourse to label idols as queer within the narrative and to use these imagined relationships as a space for self-exploration and community formation. Ultimately, these

examples demonstrate that while both East Asian and Anglophone fans engage in homoerotic fantasy play, they do so according to different cultural logics. East Asian RPF is structured by the asymmetrical *seme-uke* framework that has long shaped BL manga and its associated gendered aesthetics, whereas Anglophone RPF foregrounds explicit queer identities and political vocabulary.

RPF also carries distinct feminist functions across Western and East Asian settings. In Western fandoms, RPF, especially around pop boybands, has historically been dismissed due to misogynistic assumptions about teenage girls and feminised consumption (Arrow, 2013). Feminist analyses therefore emphasise how RPF enables young women to reclaim interpretive power, transforming celebrity personae into material through which they explore agency, sexuality, and desire (Fathallah, 2017; Hagen, 2015). In East Asia, However, shipping and RPF have been explicitly theorised as responses to patriarchal constraints on women's sexual expression. Kwon (2019) and Baudinette (2023b) argue that imagining male-male intimacy allows young Korean women to bypass restrictive gender norms and articulate desire in non-heteronormative ways. This mirrors longer traditions in Japanese girls' culture, where BL has long provided a medium for exploring sexuality outside the confines of heteropatriarchy. Thus, although the social structures differ, RPF functions as a feminist modality across both contexts.

Anglophone K-pop fanfiction represents a distinctive site of transcultural hybridisation because it emerges at the intersection of Western RPF traditions and East Asian BL-informed practices. As Chin and Morimoto (2013) note, transcultural fandom develops from "affinities of affect" (p. 93), allowing fans with different cultural backgrounds to participate in the same phenomenon even when their interpretive frameworks diverge. Shipping itself originated in Japan and travelled through *shōjo* and BL manga into Japanese and Korean idol fandom, where fans adopted *seme-uke* or *gong/su* roles to structure imagined

pairings (Baudinette, 2023b). When this practice moved into Anglophone spaces, however, fans reinterpreted the same idol relationships through LGBTQ+ identity politics rather than BL's hierarchical gender tropes (Baudinette, 2023b). The result is a globalised fan practice whose meaning shifts depending on cultural context: BL conventions shape the aesthetic origins of K-pop shipping, while Anglophone fans extend it through queer identity discourse. In this sense, K-pop RPF is hybrid not because individual fans combine these logics, but because the global practice itself contains multiple genealogies that coexist and interact across transcultural fan communities.

This hybridity is further amplified by the global digital platforms through which K-pop circulates. Anglophone fans, for instance, often engage with K-pop alongside exposure to Japanese anime, Western fanfiction, and Korean idol content, creating what Roy and Das (2022) describe as “translocal communities” bound together by shared media ecologies rather than geographical proximity. Thus, K-pop RPF cannot be understood through a single cultural lineage; rather, it is produced through what Baudinette (2023b, p. 260) describes as “radically different” logics that nonetheless converge in highly affective and creative forms of fantasy play. In practice, this means that a single ship between two idols can be read simultaneously through BL tropes, queer identity politics, and transnational fandom norms, depending on the cultural position of the fan. This also aligns with how Chin and Morimoto's (2013) discuss Hills's concept of “transcultural homology,” in which fans recognise similarities in affective orientation even when their cultural logics diverge (p. 99).

Baudinette (2023b) observes that Anglophone K-pop fans draw on wider North American-centred fandom traditions that have circulated globally through social media, including established practices such as shipping. Although his discussion focuses on how these fans employ shipping in ways that are “consciously and strategically tied to LGBTQ+ identity politics” (p. 163), his argument also implicitly highlights the extent to which

Anglophone K-pop fandom is shaped by, and adapts, broader Anglophone fan cultures. Building on this point, the shared use of English within Anglophone fandoms also facilitates the circulation of fan practices across different communities, as fans often occupy the same digital platforms, such as AO3, Tumblr, X, and Reddit, etc., regardless of their national backgrounds. This shared linguistic environment enables K-pop fans to encounter, adopt, and adapt shipping conventions and creative traditions originating in other Anglophone fandoms. Consequently, the borrowing and blending of interpretive habits becomes a natural feature of transcultural fandom, where practices flow easily between communities and gradually intersect, producing hybrid forms of engagement.

At last, it is also important to recognise that fandom cultures and fan practices continually intersect and influence one another, meaning that this transcultural exchange is an ongoing process within global fandoms. As a result, different fan communities increasingly share characteristics and draw inspiration from each other. For instance, some global fans have adopted seme-uke dynamics in their fanfiction, reflecting the global influence and popularity of manga and anime fanworks (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Thus, while the comparison above highlights the distinct genealogies of Asian and Western RPF and shipping cultures, it is equally clear that these traditions inevitably interact, borrowing from and reshaping one another to produce hybrid, transcultural fan practices, particularly in relation to the production of fanfiction and, more broadly, shipping.

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I traced the wider ecology that K-pop fanfiction emerges from, moving from general fanfiction theory into the specific infrastructures and routines of K-pop fandom, RPF, and idol shipping culture. Drawing on Jenkins' account of fanfiction as a creative, communal response to the gaps and frustrations of commercial media (1992), and Busse and Hellekson's notion of the "fantext" as a dense web of related stories and discussions (2006), the chapter showed literature around the production of fanfiction and the reasons behind it. Afterwards, I discuss how K-pop fans participate in this wider tradition through practices such as fansites, fansubbing, streaming projects, and coordinated voting. At the same time, I highlighted how these practices are not purely "Korean" inventions but the product of ongoing exchanges with Japanese and Western fan cultures, fans reworking and localising things like Japanese idol support customs, early anime/manga fansubbing, and older music fandom infrastructures, which thus frame them as transcultural. K-pop RPF, and especially K-pop fanfiction on platforms like Asianfanfics and AO3, appears in this context as one node in a much larger, already transnational fan-cultural network, rather than as an isolated or purely local phenomenon.

The chapter then focused more narrowly on RPF and shipping, outlining both their controversies and their genealogies. In the Western context, I drew on Arrow's (2013) discussion of the "hierarchy of respectability" within RPF, Hagen's (2015) work on music-based RPF and bandom, and Fathallah's (2017) analysis of bandom as a polymorphously queer text that plays with performance and identity, to show how writing about real people has long been both stigmatised and central to music fandom. I contrasted this with the East Asian trajectory, where RPF and shipping are deeply shaped by *shōjo* manga and BL traditions, with their seme-uke dynamics and stylised homoerotic male couples (McLelland

& Welker, 2015; Nagaike & Aoyama, 2015). As Kwon (2019) and Baudinette (2023b) contend, those BL logics migrate into Japanese and Korean idol fandom, where young women repurpose them to imagine male–male intimacy among idols and to negotiate desire under patriarchal constraints. The chapter used this comparative frame to argue that anglophone K-pop RPF sits at the intersection of these different lineages: it inherits BL-inflected shipping from East Asia, while also being shaped by Western RPF traditions and the affordances and norms of global fanfiction platforms.

Moreover, I showed how queer readings of K-pop and shipping practices sit at the intersection of several strands of scholarship. Kwon’s (2023) notion of K-(Q)ueerness highlights how K-pop aesthetics unsettle fixed binaries of masculinity and heterosexuality, while Baudinette and Santos (2024) caution that queerness in this context arises less from the genre itself than from fans’ practices of actively producing queer meanings through their engagements with idols and media. In their account, international fans “bring the queerness of K-pop aesthetics and performances into being,” reworking K-pop and the Korean Wave into a “queer social force” through aspirational, transformative fandom rather than simply consuming a ready-made queer product. Kuo et al. (2022) further demonstrate that LGBTQ+ Asian American K-pop fans use shipping and fan labour as resources for imagining affirming narratives of gender, sexuality and Asian identity that are often unavailable in family or mainstream Western media, while also acknowledging ongoing debates about fetishisation and allyship. Finally, drawing on Baudinette’s (2020, 2022) concept of K-pop and BL as a “resource of hope,” I argued that for many fans these practices offer tools for resisting heteronormativity and for imagining futures that are, in his words, “both emancipatory and empowering,” even as they remain entangled with more ambivalent industry logics.

I grounded these arguments in close readings of global shipping practices around EunHae and TaeKook, using posts from platforms such as X and Tumblr to show how fans

actually enact these queer readings in everyday discourse. In these examples, international fans pore over gestures, glances and backstage interactions, build elaborate narratives about intimacy between idols, and debate how far such readings should go. Some posters insist on treating ships as playful fantasies, others frame them as plausibly “real,” and still others worry about “outing” idols or disrespecting their privacy. These discussions highlight that queer K-pop shipping is not a simple matter of either innocent fun or unethical projection: it is a negotiated practice, where pleasure, identification, ethics and speculation are constantly being weighed against each other. In this way, the EunHae and TaeKook examples anchor the chapter’s argument that K-pop shipping sits at the intersection of industrial fanservice, BL-inflected ways of reading intimacy, and fans’ own ethical negotiations over privacy, authenticity and desire.

Thus, in this chapter, I show that K-pop RPF and shipping emerge at the intersection of multiple genealogies: East Asian girls’ cultures and BL, Korean idol production and fanservice, Western critiques of RPF and performance, and the aspirations of international queer fans who turn K-pop into a resource for thinking about their own lives. This provides the conceptual foundation for the empirical chapters that follow. Chapter Two takes up these themes from the perspective of transcultural K-pop fanfiction authors, showing how they draw on these industrial and fan traditions while grappling with “friction” around Koreanness, race and representation. Chapter Three then shifts to readers, demonstrating how the affective and gift-culture norms traced here shape everyday commenting practices on AO3, and how debates about Koreanness and queer ethics are displaced across different platforms and positions. In this way, Chapter One anchors the thesis’ broader claim that transcultural K-pop fandom is not a unified, harmonious space but a layered field in which shared pleasures, unequal power relations and competing imaginaries of “Korea” and “queer Korea” are constantly negotiated.

Chapter Two: Transcultural K-pop Fanfiction Authors

Introduction

This chapter examines how non-Korean K-pop fanfiction authors negotiate what I call mediated Koreanness when they write Korean idols into English-language RPF set in real and alternative Koreas. I focus on authors' own accounts of their responsibilities, limits and choices when representing Koreanness, and on how this is shaped by genre, language, race and sexuality. Rather than treating K-pop's global fan base as a harmonious, borderless community, I argue that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is a normatively contested field in which authors continually negotiate what counts as "enough" Koreanness, what feels respectful rather than "cringeworthy" or Koreaboo, and where they draw the line between creative freedom and ethical obligation. At the same time, I show that across these disagreements there is a striking convergence: whatever their differences over realism and representation, these writers overwhelmingly agree that K-pop fanfiction should function as a queer-safe space, and repeatedly imagine what I term "queer Koreas": fic-worlds where queer idols can live, love and form communities without punishment.

This focus addresses a gap at the intersection of K-pop studies, fan studies and transcultural fandom. Existing work shows how transnational K-pop fans form communities organised around shared affect (Chin and Morimoto, 2013) and a sense of "we-ness" or *woori-ness* that cuts across national borders (Jung, 2017). At the same time, scholarship on K-pop reception and fan activism has foregrounded debates about cultural appropriation and racism (see Introduction). Yet we still know relatively little about how non-Korean K-pop fanfiction authors themselves describe the everyday labour of representing Korea, how they experience and manage conflict within the fanfic community, and how their love for queer imaginaries sits alongside their knowledge of Korean homophobia. This chapter responds to

that gap by placing authors' reflexive accounts of their own practice at the centre of the analysis.

I situate this chapter in relation to work that understands transcultural fandom through affect rather than the nation. Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that transcultural fans are drawn to border-crossing media through affinities of affect and fan-cultural context, and that the nation should be treated as only one context among many rather than the primary frame for understanding cross-border fandom. Jung (2017) similarly describes how K-pop fandom can generate a sense of "we-ness" that is not grounded in shared nationality but in shared emotional investments. My material both takes up and troubles this work. I start from the assumption that K-pop fanfiction emerges from these affective affinities, but I use Annett's (2011) adaptation of Tsing's note of friction to show that the transcultural K-pop fanfic community is anything but smooth or unified and is rather normatively contested. At the level of individual craft, I trace what I call internal friction such as authors' hesitations, compromises and selective emphasis as they try to balance immersion, enjoyment and respect when writing across cultures. At the community level, I examine collective friction in debates over westernisation, Koreaboo behaviour and racialised authority over "proper" Koreanness, where affective attachments coexist with sharp disagreement and hierarchy, showing the unequal power present in transcultural K-pop fandom concerning the production of K-pop fanfiction.

In addition, I draw on Kraidy's (2005) notion of critical transculturalism, but argue that transcultural K-pop fanfiction shows that it is not only globally dominant Western cultures that shape cultural translation; authors' own local and regional contexts, such as Filipino or Indian settings, can also become powerful frames for "translating" Korean idols. I also use Shawl and Ward's (2005) concept of "the unmarked state" to describe those fanfics

where setting and culture are kept deliberately generic or unspecified, effectively reinstating an unmarked, often implicitly Western, default background against which Koreanness appears only lightly or not at all. Additionally, when the authors themselves read K-pop fanfiction, they do not use the same frictional lens concerning their decision over what a “good” K-pop fanfic is.

Third, I build on Oh and Han’s (2024) concept of racial translocalism, which argues that fans’ racialised and local positions continue to matter in ostensibly global K-pop online fandom. I show how racial translocalism shapes both authors’ sense of cultural proximity and authority, and the way their work is read and policed, for instance when East Asian, Asian and white Western writers are differently positioned in debates about cultural accuracy, resulting in a field of unequal power. Finally, following Anderson’s (2006) understanding of nations as “imagined communities” distinguished by the style in which they are imagined, I argue that K-pop fanfiction authors participate in producing multiple imagined Koreas and, more specifically, queer Koreas, as they calibrate mediated Koreanness across genres and story worlds. Halperin’s (1995) formulation of queer as that which is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62) underpins my reading of authors’ shared refusal to script homophobic conflict as a deliberate act of queer world-building rather than a simple failure of realism.

These frameworks allow me to extend existing models of transcultural fandom in two ways. I show, first, that affective “we-ness” (Jung, 2017) around K-pop coexists with deep stratification and friction shaped by race, language, location and genre; and second, that transcultural fandom is not only affective but also regulatory and reflexive, as fans collectively work out how far they can, or should, claim Koreanness within English-language fanfiction. Empirically, the chapter develops three linked arguments. Transcultural K-pop

fanfiction is organised by friction around mediated Koreanness: authors share broadly similar mediated images of Korea and a strong attachment to K-pop, yet differ sharply in their access to information, linguistic skill, cultural proximity, time and confidence. This produces internal friction as they decide whether to research and maintain dense Korean settings, rely on a small repertoire of familiar markers (food, honorifics, place names), or keep settings deliberately vague.

In those more vague stories, I suggest, Shawl and Ward's "unmarked state" is extended from characters to settings, as authors leave culture largely unremarked in order to avoid mistakes or criticism, while effectively recentring an unmarked, often Western-coded, backdrop. This friction is also collective and racialised. Public discussions and call-out threads about misrepresentation reveal clashes between Asian-descent, East Asian, diasporic and white Western fans over westernisation, Koreaboo practices and cultural responsibility. Here, Annett's collaborative friction, Kraidy's (2005) critical transculturalism and Oh and Han's racial translocalism together help explain how unequal access to Asia literacy, differing local racial formations and diverse non-Western contexts shape who feels authorised to speak for "Korea", and how debates over Koreanness become constitutive rather than incidental to how this transcultural community organises itself. Across both realist and supernatural AUs, authors calibrate, rather than abandon, Koreanness, and yet converge on queer safety.

By comparing authors' own stories across genres, I show that mediated Koreanness is redistributed rather than simply "dropped" when writers move into supernatural or fantasy frames: some thin out explicit Korean markers, others maintain dense Koreanised worlds across genres, and others oscillate between them. These shifting calibrations generate further friction over how much Koreanness different genres can or should carry, but they also feed

into a shared repertoire of imagined Koreas within the community. At the same time, when it comes to homophobia, a strong point of consensus emerges. Regardless of their disagreements over realism, westernisation or language use, my interviewees overwhelmingly choose to construct “queer Koreas” in which same-sex relationships between idols are ordinary and structurally safe. In other words, a community that is divided by friction over Koreanness is united by a shared commitment to queer-safe world-building.

On this basis, the chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. How do non-Korean K-pop fanfiction authors describe their responsibilities and limitations when representing Korea and Korean idols in English-language fic?
2. What practical strategies do they use to negotiate mediated Koreanness in their stories, and how are these strategies shaped by genre (for example, realist versus supernatural AUs)?
3. How do racialised and cultural distinctions among K-pop fanfiction authors, and K-pop fans more generally, shape debates about the representation of Koreanness in K-pop fanfiction, and how do these debates influence what authors feel entitled or obliged to do when they write about Koreanness?
4. Given these frictions, how do transcultural K-pop fanfiction authors handle the queer dimension of their writing, where their love for queer imaginaries meets their knowledge of Korean homophobia?

In the rest of the chapter, I draw on text-IM interviews with fifteen authors to explore these questions, beginning with their self-positioning as transcultural writers before turning to their negotiations of mediated Koreanness, the racialised and genre-based frictions that shape those negotiations, and their shared construction of queer-safe imagined Koreas.

Methodology

Semi-structured text instant messaging (hereafter text-IM) online interviews were conducted with 15 K-pop fanfiction authors recruited from X. Utilising online spaces for research has flourished “over the last decade” (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 1370) especially with age groups who consider online communication to be the most useful way of communicating (Ison, 2008, Benford & Standen, 2010). Text-IM interviewing is a type of online interviewing and is defined as “a method of interviewing participants online in an instant messaging service to type to each other at the same time in a conversational style” (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 1369). This synchronous type of messaging is an exclusive element of text-IM interviewing which helps to keep the conversation flowing (Brewer, 2000, p. 11-26), as opposed to other types of text-based methods such as e-mail interviewing which is usually slower in process. Additionally, the synchronous nature of the text-IM technique permits interviewees to view what they have written beforehand instantly which helps them reflect on the conversation (Pearce et al., 2019. P. 1373; James and Busher 2006) making the interviews more efficient.

The reason why online interviewing was chosen is due to, first, the geographic distance between me and the potential K-pop fanfiction authors. The authors reside in different parts of the globe and it is difficult to meet them face to face. Online interviewing is useful in this case as it is ideal for saving travel costs and time (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 1373). Second, for K-pop fans, technology has played a major part in the circulation of K-pop and fannish practices around it (see Introduction), especially fanfiction as it is mainly published online. Therefore, the internet is considered a familiar space for fans who write and engage with fanfiction, which makes it easier for researchers to reach out to them online.

The Text-IM method was used for various reasons. Fans have been stigmatised for as long as they have existed and many fans refuse to display their “fan” accounts to anybody

who is not a fellow fan. Despite K-pop fanfiction authors being familiar with technology, they might still feel uncomfortable being approached by a stranger on the internet, especially if asked for a video call interview. Using the text-IM method, thus, might make the interviewees feel more at ease as opposed to face-to-face interviews (Hu, 2004) and is ideal for conducting interviews that take into account the sensitivity of the participants (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 1369). Another reason the interviews were conducted using the text-IM technique is that K-pop fandoms contain fans from different parts of the world and plenty of them are non-native speakers, which might make it difficult for them to converse (verbally) in English and express themselves. The text-IM method allows the interviewees to increase their “conversational fluency and the ability to express oneself.” (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 1379).

X was chosen as the platform for the recruitment of interviewees who are K-pop fanfiction authors, and the interviews were conducted on the same website (with the exception of 2 interviews which were conducted on Skype and Google Docs respectively). X is highly popular among K-pop fans and fanfiction authors alike. The K-pop fan community, also known as #KpopTwitter has been greatly occupying the number of trending hashtags on X and has even been taking place in other activism related hashtags such as the #BlackLivesMatter movements.³⁵ In 2020, #KpopTwitter reaches 6.7 billion global tweets with BTS, NCT, and EXO as the top 3 mentioned K-pop artists³⁶. K-pop celebrities and companies use X significantly to share updates about their musical and entertaining endeavours, which may explain why K-pop fans are enormously active on X in comparison to other social media platforms³⁷. Lastly, X and Skype were selected as the place for text-IM

³⁵ Plenty of articles were published on K-pop fans and the BLM movement such as: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/06/twitter-k-pop-protest-black-lives-matter/612742/> <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21279262/k-pop-fans-black-lives-matter-fancams-youtubers-protest-support> <https://mashable.com/article/black-lives-matter-kpop-blackpink-bts-nct-127-stray-kids-twitter/?europa=true>

³⁶ https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/insights/2021/kpoptwitter-achieves-new-record-of-6-billion-tweets-globally-in-2020.html

³⁷ K-pop companies and groups have accounts on other social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook, but they are more active on X. Also, BTS, the most influential K-pop group currently, are only allowed to use X by

interviews due to the instant messaging systems they provide. Still, prioritising the authors' comfort, they were also given the freedom to choose the platform they are most comfortable being interviewed on if they were not satisfied with the two suggested options.

K-pop fanfiction authors have also been active on X albeit publishing most of their fanfiction on AO3, Asianfanfics, and Wattpad³⁸. They also occasionally publish K-pop fanfics on X (usually labelled as Twitter au). The authors often use X as their publicizing platform in which they share URL links of their fanfiction stories to a wider audience. X, therefore, helps to circulate K-pop fanfiction stories from different platforms. Additionally, the authors sometimes use their X accounts to contact their readers. That is especially the case for AO3 authors as the website does not have a private messaging option. However, not all K-pop fanfiction authors share their X accounts on the website as some of the authors prefer anonymity and privacy. The diversity of K-pop fanfiction authors, in terms of fanfiction publishing platforms, thus makes X a significant choice for their recruitment as it covers authors who both post and cross-post K-pop fanfics on multiple platforms. In other words, instead of roaming through thousands of fanfiction stories across numerous platforms and attempting to find the authors' social media accounts (since not all of the authors refer back to X and there might be some of them having inactive accounts), it is more practical and time-saving to find them on X and contact them directly.

Recruitment

In order to recruit interviewees, I used two approaches. First, I typed "K-pop fanfic" into the search bar on X and contacted the major authors who posted URL links to their fanfiction or

their company. Such preference could also indicate X as Korean industries' favourite platform.

³⁸ It is important to note that some K-pop fanfiction authors cross-post their fanfiction stories on various platforms.

were mentioned by other X accounts as influential in K-pop fandom because of their popularity in their respective fandoms. Since most of the authors under that tag belonged to newer fandoms (BTS, EXO, and Red Velvet), I contacted other popular authors in K-pop fandom who wrote for older groups (such as Super Junior and SNSD). By “popular”, I mean, their number of followers, and/or the attention their posts/tweets of or about their fics receive. The reason I approached the participants in both ways is because the arguments in this chapter and the thesis more broadly are concerned with K-pop fanfiction generally rather than specific timelines. Put differently, the arguments developed in the thesis are applied to K-pop fanfiction across different fandoms, both older and newer. It is also crucial to note that, during the interviews, most of the selected authors were found to be multi-fandom.³⁹

As mentioned above, the stigmatisation that fans “suffer” could result in a sense of alienation with those who do not look like “fans” from their X accounts. In order to avoid such obstacles, the interviewees were approached using my X fan account *taesunamo* in which I had a K-pop related icon and bio. As discussed in the Introduction of the thesis, approaching participants through a visible fan account drew on my insider status to build trust and rapport, while I remain conscious that this shared fannish position is situated rather than neutral. To contact the potential interviewees, I sent those with their direct message open a private message informing them that I’m a PhD student, about my topic of interest, and my desire to recruit them as interviewees. For those who had their direct messages’ option closed, I tweeted at them with a brief introduction of my position, research topic, and recruitment intentions. In total, 21 potential interviewees were approached. 15 authors accepted to be interviewed after being provided with the details of the interviewing process (13 authors chose X as their interviewing platform, 1 chose Skype, and 1 chose Google Docs). Interviewee N, however, although informed that the interviews would be text-based, claimed

³⁹ Fans belonging to more than one fandom.

they would agree to be interviewed as long as it is not oral. Additionally, some interviewees made it clear that they did not wish to answer enquiries about their personal information. For instance, Interviewee D insisted they were not comfortable disclosing their personal information before the interview, despite being informed the questions to be asked are not too personal beforehand. Meanwhile, among the 6 authors who did not get to be interviewed, 3 of them rejected the request due to feeling “embarrassed” and fear of the inability to provide “interesting” insights and 3 others did not reply despite being active.

Interview design

The interview was scheduled with the interviewees beforehand so that we could agree on a suitable time (bearing in mind time zone differences). The interviews took place from the 26

April, 2020 to the 21 August, 2020. The way I interviewed the participants was casual and conversational. As an aca-fan, I understand the pressure a fan can feel when being “formally” interviewed which is why I allowed my participants to feel like they were “chatting” with me about their fanfiction writing journey.

The first set of questions was in relation to how and when they came to know of K-pop and their favourite bands. In order to examine the authors’ transculturality, it is crucial to take into account their fandoms and the duration of being fans due to the enormous growth of K-pop globally for more than a decade now. Additionally, recent or newer K-pop groups are known to have different styles of music and characteristics in comparison to older groups (see Introduction). The long or short duration of engaging with K-pop can affect the familiarity of K-pop fans with K-pop fan cultures (K-pop fanfics especially). Therefore, such familiarity can have an impact on the ways these fans engage with Korean culture and K-pop fanfiction writing more generally.

The second set of questions was in relation to biases (favourite member in a certain group) and shipping. Shipping in the first place is the key factor for RPF writing, and fanfiction writing more broadly (see Chapter One). The ships usually contain at least one of the biases. Bias-picking and shipping culture are essential in K-pop fandom. The idea of “fanservice” especially plays a big role in why and how K-pop fans choose OTPs. Since these authors write about their ships, it is fundamental to see how they express their shipping fantasies in their K-pop fanfiction writing. For those who ship same-sex couples, it is especially interesting to see how they challenge Korean conservative views such as homophobia when they write about their OTPs in a Korean setting.

The third set of questions is concerned with the writing history of these authors. K-pop fanfiction authors’ prior experiences with fanfiction writing in other fandoms might

affect their K-pop RPF writing. Those who belong to East Asian fandoms, for instance, might be more likely to portray their transculturality in their fanfic writing in comparison to those who wrote for Western fandoms. Therefore, taking into account the authors' writing backgrounds can be essential to the arguments built in relation to transcultural fanfiction writing.

The fourth set of questions are about the setting that these authors choose for their K-pop fanfiction narratives to take place in. The interviewees were asked whether they write their stories in an AU or a real-life setting. First, it is important to know if these authors take into consideration the Korean setting while writing as it showcases the way they engage with Korea geographically. Additionally, placing their stories in an AU is likely to allow them to create their own versions of Korea when they feel unsure about the everyday details of Korean life. So, it is crucial to know if such a decision is taken by the authors and why and how it affects their transcultural writing.

The fifth set of questions is related to the inclusion and/or exclusion of what the interviewees themselves might regard as "Korean cultural" elements such as bowing, honorifics, language, fashion, food, and other components the interviewees might be aware of. Since these authors are non-Korean and are writing about Korean idols, in most cases, imagined Korean settings, it was important to examine how they made decisions about whether to include or exclude such elements, and which factors shaped those choices. These questions were designed to shed light on how authors negotiate mediated Koreanness in their text worlds, rather than to test them against any fixed standard of "authentic" Korean culture.

When designing the interview schedule, I initially framed these prompts in terms of "Korean culture" and "realistic" Korean settings. In doing so, I inevitably encouraged participants to think in terms of visible markers such as food, honorifics and place names as

signs of Koreanness. In the analysis that follows, however, I draw on the concept of mediated Koreanness outlined in the introduction and treat authors' talk about "accuracy" and "Korean elements" as evidence of how they navigate selective, already mediated images of Korea, rather than as transparent measures of "real" Korean society.

Lastly, the sixth set of questions is concerned with these K-pop fanfiction authors' relationships with their readers and their positions as fanfiction readers as well. This section is further discussed in the fifth chapter, which focuses on transcultural K-pop fanfiction readers.

After conducting the interviews, they were stored in two different ways. More than half were stored by downloading the archive of my X account's direct messages. After downloading the archive, I used a coding algorithm in order to track the interviewees' IDs as finding them in the archive manually was difficult and time-consuming. After extracting them using a coding algorithm, I copied them and pasted them onto Word files. The coding algorithm inexplicably failed to work when I attempted to extract the remaining interviews which led me to manually copy and paste the interviews from my direct messages. After storing all of the interviews, they were also uploaded on the university's storage platform, Strathcloud. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis in which interesting themes were extracted in relation to my argument about transcultural K-pop fanfiction and the imagined Korea. For this study, an ethics application was approved by the university.

Exploring Diversity: Demographics and Dynamics of the Authors

Table 1. *Demographics of the interviewees*

Interviewees	Location	Ethnic Background or Race
A	UK (X)	"White"
B	Indonesia/UK (X)	"Asian-descent"

C	Not Korea (Interview)	“Asian”
D	Ukraine (X)	White (X)
E	USA (X)	“Indian”
F	Not Korea (Interview)	“I’m not [of Asian descent]”
G	Not Korea (Interview)	“I’m half! Chinese and white from my mom's side, and white and Filipino on my dad's side”
H	UK/Philippines (Interview)	“English [with] Filipino blood”
I	Singapore (Interview)	“Asian”
J	Philippines (Interview)	“from the Philippines”
K	South Africa (Interview)	“Indian”
L	Portugal (Interview)	“I’m from Portugal”
M	USA (X)	“I’m not, no. [of Asian descent]”
N	Philippines (Interview)	“from the Philippines”
O	Algeria (X)	“I am not Korean”

All of the interviewees stated they are not Korean, and are not based in Korea, with only 4 who had the chance to visit Korea for a while. The demographics of the interviewees present a diverse range of locations, ethnic backgrounds, and races (see Table 1). This diversity includes individuals from the UK, Indonesia, Ukraine, the USA, Singapore, South Africa, Portugal, Algeria, and the Philippines, highlighting a global interest in the subject matter. The ethnic backgrounds are equally varied, encompassing White, Asian-descent,

Asian, Indian, a mix of Chinese, White, and Filipino, and those who do not identify as being of Asian descent. This varied demographic illustrates the wide appeal and reach of the topic across different cultures and geographies, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives for the research.

Table 2. *Demographics of the interviewees' fandoms, platforms, and fanfiction*

Interviewees	Fanfic Fandoms	Platform of Interviews	Pairing Type	Fanfiction Platform	Duration of K-pop Fics Writing	Duration of Fanfic Writing
A	Suju	X	m/m	AFF	7 years	undisclosed
B	Suju/SNSD/ BTS	Skype/X	f/m	FF/AFF/AO 3	9 years	undisclosed
C	Suju	X	m/m	AFF	1 year	1 year
D	Suju	X	m/m	AFF	2 years	undisclosed
E	BTS/MX	X	m/m	AO3/X	2 years	9 years
F	BTS	X	m/m	AO3	1 year	6 years
G	BTS	X	m/m	AO3	2 years	7 years
H	RV	X	f/f	AFF/AO3	undisclosed	7 years
I	BTS	X	m/m	AO3/X	4 years	5 years
J	GG/Izone/R V	X	f/f	AFF/X	8 years	8 years

K	BTS	X	m/m	AO3/X	2 years	2 years
L	BTS	X	m/m	AO3/X	1 year	1 year
M	BTS	X	m/m	AO3/X	2 years	5 years
N	Sehun/Sejun	X	f/m	AFF/Wattpad	6 years	6 years
O	SNSD/Suju	Google Docs/X	f/m	AO3	9 years	9 years

The data gathered from the interviewees offers a comprehensive glimpse into the vibrant landscape of K-pop fanfiction, characterised by its diversity in fan bases, thematic focuses, and digital platforms. Interviewees are drawn from an array of fandoms, notably including a significant number of BTS enthusiasts, as well as fans of Super Junior, Girls' Generation, Red Velvet, Monsta X, Izone, and the pairing of Sehun and Sejeong. This diversity highlights the wide appeal of K-pop across various groups and genres within the fanfiction community.

A notable trend among the interviewees is a strong inclination towards male/male (m/m) pairings, particularly within the BTS fanfiction realm. This preference is mirrored in the engagement with other groups' fanfics, indicating a broader interest in exploring same-sex relationships through fanfiction narratives. However, the presence of female/male (f/m) and female/female (f/f) pairings also suggests an openness to a variety of relationship dynamics, enriching the tapestry of K-pop fanfiction with diverse explorations of love and companionship.

The platforms of choice for publishing these fanfics include Asianfanfics (AFF), Archive of Our Own (AO3), X, Wattpad, and FanFiction (FF). This selection underscores a

communal preference for platforms that not only support fanfic publication but also foster community engagement and niche fanfic exploration. These platforms cater to the specific needs and preferences of the K-pop fanfiction community, facilitating interaction, feedback, and the sharing of creative works.

The duration of involvement in K-pop fanfiction writing among the interviewees varies widely, ranging from 1 to 9 years. This variance points to a mix of both veteran and newer writers within the fanfiction scene, reflecting the evolving nature of K-pop's global influence and individual writers' journeys within the fandom. Interestingly, some interviewees have a longer history of fanfiction writing beyond the K-pop genre, with experiences extending up to 9 years. This indicates that their creative engagement predates their interest in K-pop, suggesting a migration of fanfic writing practices across different fandoms and genres.

Interviews were conducted on a variety of platforms, including Skype, Google Docs, and X, indicating a flexible approach to data collection that accommodates the preferences and availability of participants. This flexibility in the method of engagement reflects the adaptive and varied nature of the fanfiction community's communication practices.

Overall, the collected data paints a picture of a dynamic and diverse K-pop fanfiction community that, although picked at random, shares many similar views about the writing of K-pop fanfiction. The number of interviewees might be small, but it is also a common number among fan studies (see Kwon, 2019, Yoon, 2018). However, that is not to say these interviews are representative of the whole K-pop fan community. It does, nonetheless, represent a subsection of K-pop fanfic writers.

Internal Friction and Writing about "Korea"

Negotiating Mediated Koreanness: Realism, Respect and Responsibility

As outlined in the thesis introduction, when I refer in this chapter to “Korean culture” I am not treating it as a stable, authentic essence. I am interested in how non-Korean authors work with mediated Koreanness as the selective bundle of signs they encounter through K-pop, Korean dramas, tourism media, and online discourse, such as Seoul cityscapes, idol lifestyles,

honorifics, and Hansik (Korean food). The interviewees themselves often speak about “accuracy” and “realism” as if these signs could stand in for “Korea” as a whole, but my analysis treats them as already commodified, partial representations. What follows examines how authors negotiate, reproduce or sidestep mediated Koreanness when they write fanfiction, rather than measuring their work against some imagined “real” Korea.

Authors in K-pop fanfiction engage with the representation of what they understand as Korean culture to varying extents and with differing levels of granularity. This variance underscores the complex process by which transcultural fanfic writers navigate the portrayal of a culture that is not inherently their own. Specifically, they adopt diverse strategies in their literary endeavours, ranging from relatively dense inclusion of Korean settings, foods and social practices to the selective portrayal of a few familiar markers, and, in some instances, limiting their focus to minimal and largely unmarked aspects of everyday life. This diversity in approach reflects the challenges inherent in writing about an external culture, which is also a culture encountered primarily through media, particularly when faced with incomplete knowledge and uneven confidence. As a consequence, these authors either endeavour to align their narratives with mediated Koreanness, or choose to omit aspects they find perplexing or beyond their current understanding.

This approach evidences the authors’ consciousness of engaging with a culture distinct from their own, and of writing about idols and settings they know mostly at a distance. Many recognise “Korea” as different, without necessarily casting it as exotic or inferior, and thereby position themselves as transcultural subjects who are aware that they are writing across cultures.

Such cultural awareness is crucial within the context of transcultural fandom, especially in light of the tendency among some K-pop fans, to overlook the discrepancies

between their own social contexts and those of Korean idols. This phenomenon is significant, considering instances where fans have brought attention to specific elements of Korean culture.⁴⁰ This awareness and engagement with cultural nuances underscore the importance of a transcultural perspective, highlighting the complex interplay between fandom and cultural understanding. Upon inquiry regarding their motivations for incorporating all or specific aspects of Korean culture in their fanfiction, the authors cited several reasons: firstly, a commitment to making their narratives feel "realistic"; secondly, a gesture of respect towards the culture in question; and thirdly, an aim to maintain a sense of familiarity for their readers, thus preventing confusion.

Some authors state that they try to portray Korean cultural elements such as food and setting for reasons of realism, and thus for their stories to sound "real", without explicitly framing this as respect. In other words, these authors just like to keep things real in their stories, regardless of anything else. For instance, Interviewee A showed their enthusiasm in accurately portraying Korean setting and Korean food respectively:

god, yes. [I aim to portray Korean setting] like, to a tee. i do far too much research on weather, like if my story is set in february, i'll look up weather/temp. and i'll make sure to reference the correct subway stations if they're in specific locations. things like that. that's all part of the fun for me

...i genuinely just like to keep it realistic, if it's a story set in modern times i would hope to reflect that in the world around too !

⁴⁰ An example of that is when K-pop fans do not seem to know the gravity of mistakes that idols sometimes commit in relation to Korean culture. For example, Tiffany from Girls' Generation, in 2016, posted a filter with the Rising Sun flag a day before Korea's Independence day, the 14th of August, which resulted in massive backlash from Korean netizens, which global K-pop fans thought was "witch-hunting" and an over-reaction. That's just one example of how global K-pop fans might react differently and with less sensitivity to Korean cultural issues.

...[Korean food]'s another element i like to keep in the story to make it feel a little more real⁴¹ (Interviewee A)

Searching for and including details about Korean setting seems to be a way for the author to make the story realistic. Both that and the addition of Korean food seems to give the author a sense of authenticity in their narrative. On the same note, Interviewee D, meanwhile, relates their attempt to portray Korean elements accurately in their fics to the possibility of themselves being “perfectionist”:

[I maintain Korean elements in my stories] because i always want my stories to be as accurate and realistic as i can make them. maybe i'm a perfectionist haha⁴²
(Interviewee D)

Interviewee D's inclination towards perfectionism compels them to infuse their stories with a realistic portrayal of Korean life, mirroring Interviewee A's emphasis on research and detail. This veneration of realism within their narratives is indicative of a broader trend prevalent across the fanfiction domain. Realistic writing is often celebrated in the fanfiction community, with deviations from this approach typically criticized for indicating insufficient research and a lack of seriousness in both writing and world-building. Therefore, instead of approaching the inclusion of Korean elements primarily from a “respect” point of view, the quoted interviewees here seem to apply more general fanfiction criteria for what a good story is: consistency, believability and rich world-building.

Sometimes, however, the attempt to portray Korean elements “accurately” is explicitly framed as a way to respect what authors understand as Korean culture. Unlike Interviewee D and A, who relate their detailed depictions mostly to realism only and/or

⁴¹ Interviewee A 16th of June, 2020.

⁴² Interviewee D 29^h of April, 2020.

perfectionism, some other authors are keenly aware that their efforts to maintain Korean markers in their fics are an act of respect to Korean culture. This shows in how Interviewee M explains their reason for keeping Korean cultural markers: “To respect the place in which I’m writing as well as it to be as accurate as possible.” Here, accuracy becomes a sign of deference to the setting and its people. A similar logic appears in Interviewee E’s statement when talking about carefully depicting Korean cultural markers as well as setting:

i try to [take into consideration Korean cultural elements] as much as i can
[because of] realism partially, also because as an indian i know the significance of honorifics myself including their effect on the ships dynamic so if im going to set the fic in korea then i dont want it to not match
it also just generally feels mor respectful to the characters origin
...i try to researc location as much as i can
research*
[because of] realisim again, i want things to feel at least some level of authentic.
partially because it also gives me ideas for where i want to travel.
and its fun to learna bout things you can do and places to go
like my recent fic [is] set at a resort in jeju i found photos for because it was so pretty⁴³ (Interviewee E)

Interviewee E believes that closely matching their stories to the mediated images of Korea they have encountered is a way of showing respect to the K-pop idols they write about, and they link this to being "authentic." This suggests that the author is conscious of not wanting

⁴³ Interviewee E 20-25^h of August, 2020.

to offend the K-pop idols by misrepresenting their cultural background. By equating realism with authenticity, it becomes clear that this author holds a standard for K-pop fanfiction that values a plausible portrayal of Korea, as they understand it, as a marker of quality. This highlights one of the goals that K-pop fanfiction authors might have for writing a "good" fanfic, which seems to include a faithful representation of Korean markers and setting. Additionally, Interviewee E views the research needed to depict these settings not as a chore but as an opportunity for personal learning and exploration, even considering it “fun” and a way to learn about places they would like to visit.

This attitude contrasts with some other interviewees who described themselves as too "lazy" to conduct research on unfamiliar aspects of Korean life or who said they didn't have the time for such research, like Interviewee K and Interviewee G. This difference showcases the varying levels of effort authors are willing to invest in making their stories feel "authentic." Lastly, Interviewee E mentions their Indian ethnicity as a factor that helps them understand Korean honorifics, suggesting that being culturally closer to a hierarchical language system aids them in grasping some of its subtleties. This comment points to how cultural proximity can enhance an author's ability to incorporate and appreciate cultural details in their writing, which will be discussed extensively in the section below.

Some interviewees, who aim to accurately represent Korean culture in their stories, cite reasons other than realism. Instead, they focus solely on the aspect of respect. For instance, Interviewee I highlighted that their careful inclusion of Korean customs in their writing is primarily an act of respect. When questioned about their consideration of Korean traditions, the response underscored that this careful representation stems from a desire to honour the idols' heritage:

Yeah ofc

jondaemal, banmal

customs are important

i don't wanna disrespect the boys' heritage by completely disregarding their culture

...it's the least a writer could do⁴⁴ (Interviewee I)

In their response, the author initially focuses on the concept of honorifics, demonstrating their understanding by distinguishing between the two main types: the formal “jondaemal” and the informal “banmal.” They proceed to emphasise the significance of customs, ultimately suggesting that to overlook Korean customs entirely would constitute an act of disrespect. This stance indicates the author's recognition of the complexities involved in writing fanfiction about K-pop idols without fully understanding their culture in which those idols live, which is a challenge compounded for those not intimately familiar with life in Korea. Thus, the assertion that incorporating Korean customs is “the least thing a writer could do” implies a sense of obligation. It suggests that using K-pop idols as characters for fanfiction necessitates some effort to represent aspects of their cultural background thoughtfully, rather than neglecting mediated Koreanness altogether.

Across these interviews, the kind of “collaborative friction” that Annett (2011) identifies in animation fan communities appears in the uncomfortable space between authors' desire to write immersive, emotionally satisfying stories about idols, their limited and mediated knowledge of Korean life, and their sense of ethical obligation to respect idols' heritage. Some embrace research as a pleasurable part of world-building, while others pull back or keep settings vague. All, however, are feeling their way through the question of how much Koreanness they can and should claim in their fics. In Annett's terms, this is not a smooth process of cultural learning but an ongoing negotiation in which transcultural fans

⁴⁴ Interviewee I 28th of June, 2020.

test and contest the boundaries of what feels plausible, respectful and enjoyable when writing across cultures. The friction I trace here operates primarily within individual authors' decision-making about their own stories. Such internal friction is visible in their self-descriptions of compromise, hesitation, and selective emphasis, rather than in open conflict between different groups of fans, as will be explored below.

These patterns also clarify how transcultural fandom operates more broadly. For these non-Korean K-pop fans, being a transcultural fan is not simply a matter of enjoying foreign media or acquiring knowledge about “Korean culture”, but of constantly deciding how much responsibility they are willing and able to take on for representing that culture. Some treat Korea mainly as a narrative resource that can be drawn on when it serves realism or affective immersion, while others understand it as an ethical commitment that demands research, care and restraint. Unequal access to time, information and perceived cultural proximity means that different authors settle on different answers to what counts as “enough” Koreanness in a fic. In this sense, transcultural fandom emerges here not as a unified, harmonious community, as Hyeri Jung (2017) argues with their concept of *we-ness*, but as a differentiated field in which fans adopt craft-driven, ethics-driven or convenience-driven orientations towards the same transcultural object, a field whose more overt conflicts around westernisation and Koreaboo behaviour I examine in the following section.

Balancing Authenticity and Appropriation: Korean Language Use and Koreaboo Concerns

In this sense, honorifics, key Korean expressions and the fandom lexicon that circulate through translations and idol content form another layer of mediated Koreanness, which takes form of a linguistic repertoire that authors recognise as “Korean” and must decide how to use, limit or avoid in their writing. Honorifics in Korean are typically preserved in their Romanised form across various fan-translated contexts, including audio/visual formats like music videos, variety shows, and livestreams, audio-only formats such as songs and podcasts, and textual formats like transcripts. This differs from many official translations in other industries, where honorifics are often omitted and replaced with the names of the speaker or listener. The complexity of the Korean honorific system presents challenges in translating

honorifics accurately (see Bija, 2021; Han et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2021). Consequently, fan translators often aim to provide translations of Korean popular culture materials that retain more of these linguistic and cultural nuances than commercial subtitles.

Cruz and their colleagues (2019) note that fan translations in K-pop fulfil two main functions. First, they provide linguistic translations, such as fan-generated English subtitles, to help international audiences understand the lyrics and information about K-pop idols, thereby overcoming language barriers. Second, these translations help viewers form interpretive frameworks by making culturally specific signs and symbols in K-pop music videos more accessible, especially to those unfamiliar with Korean contexts (2019, pp. 647).

As a result, fans engaging with these translations gain partial, mediated exposure to aspects of Korean language and culture, particularly honorifics and commonly repeated expressions. Fan translators not only retain honorifics in their Romanised form but often do the same for other recurring expressions in Korean popular culture, like "daebak!" or "jjang." These practices contribute to the creation of a "fandom lexicon," as termed by Khedun-Burgoine (2022), where such expressions are widely used within the community regardless of speakers' actual Korean proficiency. The growing global interest in Korean media has led, for instance, to the inclusion of 26 new Korean words in their Romanised form in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2021 (Salazar, 2021).

This fandom lexicon permeates various aspects of fan activity, influencing both online and offline interactions among fans, as well as their creative outputs, including fanfiction writing. I return in Chapter Four to the ways in which this lexicon can both support and distort the representation of Korea in the fics themselves. For now, it is enough to note that what K-pop fans consume through these translations plays a significant role in shaping the

mediated Koreanness on which they draw, even if this knowledge remains fragmentary and uneven due to language barriers and limited exposure.

Honorifics are one way in which K-pop fans encounter Korean language's sensitivity to social hierarchy and age differences. Broadly speaking, younger speakers use different address terms for older interlocutors, even when the age gap is only a year. Females, for example, address older females as Unnie (언니) and older males as Oppa (오빠), while males call older females Noona (누나) and older males Hyung (형). There are other honorifics such as ajussi (아저씨) or ajumma (아줌마) for a man or a woman usually older than 40 respectively. However, the younger labels are mostly used in K-pop fanfiction as the stories revolve around K-pop idols. “-ssi” (씨) at the end of someone's name meaning “Mr/Ms/Mrs” is also a commonly used honorific in K-pop fanfiction.

In my interviews, honorifics were the one Korean linguistic feature that every participant recognised, underlining their visibility within K-pop media. Being aware of the perceived importance of honorifics led ten of the interviewees to include them in their fics, and the remaining five avoided using them because they found them confusing and worried about using them wrong. Since English is “relatively free from hierarchal connotations in most daily encounters” (Han et al., 2015, p. 323), some authors choose to keep honorifics in Romanised Korean in their English-language fanfiction to preserve what they deem an important aspect of Korean culture. Additionally, the group-based structure of K-pop also means that fans regularly hear younger members addressing older ones with these terms, reinforcing their salience.

As aforementioned, including honorifics in fanfiction is often framed by authors as a way of showing respect to what they understand as Korean culture, as well as to the idols themselves. The small number of interviewees who avoid honorifics likewise do so out of concern for respect, in their case a fear of misusing them and thereby offending the culture. Moreover, beyond the interviews, similar uncertainties about honorifics also surface in wider K-pop fan spaces on X, where posts offering advice on “how to use” honorifics attract large numbers of questions and corrections. I return to one such thread in the next section, where I examine how these debates about accuracy and authority play out at the level of performed fan discourse.

The way honorifics are used in K-pop fanfics is through Romanisation. Interviewee C, for instance, gave an example of “Hyung, Noona, Oppa.” Meaning older-male (from a male perspective), older-female (from a male perspective), and older-male (from female perspective) as honorifics they use frequently, and as noted, Interviewee F also gave examples of how they use honorifics in their BTS fanfics such as Seokjin hyung. More details about honorifics and the ways in which they are used will be explored and examined in Chapter four.

Despite most of the interviewees preferring to use honorifics in their K-pop fanfics, only two of fifteen reported using Korean vocabulary beyond these terms. Interviewee H said, for instance, that they only use Korean language when it comes to “basic responses”, but Interviewee I showed more enthusiasm about implementing Korean language in their fics. They said that they Romanise Korean words when including them in their fanfics. To give an example of how they do so, they stated that they Romanise “애정” meaning “Affection” to “aejeong.” They also gave few other examples of Korean words they use such as “eommoni” (mother-in-law), “eomma” (mother), and “Min-seobang” (Min-husband). Interestingly,

Interviewee I pointed out that being a “linguistic major...taught [them] to recognise language nuances” and that this training encouraged them to experiment with Korean words in their writing. They also mentioned studying Korean, primarily “out of interest” and to understand Vlives, rather than specifically for fanfiction purposes, but this language learning nevertheless makes it easier to incorporate Korean vocabulary when they choose.

This practice underscores how individual backgrounds, such as formal training in linguistics or access to language study, affect authors’ sense of what is possible and appropriate in representing Korean language. Although Interviewee I confirms fanfiction is not the reason they started learning Korean, they still credited the ability to include Korean words in their fics because they are learning Korean. In contrast with that, some of the interviewees who refused using Korean words in their fanfics stated that their lack of knowledge about the language as the reason behind such choice:

thats a little harder, not wanting to make a mistake in meaning and/or not having the time to learn enough so that i dont do that prevent me from going too far into it but if its something that doesnt always have an equivalent word like food names or describing aegyo then im okay using it.⁴⁵ [sic] (Interviewee E)

Interviewee E is careful about using Korean words in their stories because they worry about making mistakes with the language and do not have much time to learn it properly. In other words, some authors try to strike a balance: they refrain from using Korean vocabulary where there is a clear English equivalent, out of concern for accuracy, but are willing to retain Korean terms when they feel English cannot capture specific foods or concepts such as aegyo.⁴⁶ Here, perceived gaps between English and Korean shape what gets borrowed and what does not. Another factor as to why some K-pop fanfic authors stray away from using

⁴⁵ Interviewee E 20-25^h of August, 2020.

⁴⁶ Aegyo is Korean word meaning “to act cute”.

Korean language is that it is simply written English, and therefore, they do not feel the “need” to add in Korean words at all.

However, some authors go further and describe Korean vocabulary as aesthetically or normative undesirable. They avoid using Korean words because they find it “cringy and weird [sic]” and even insisted they would “exit out immediately” of a story containing “random inserts of Korean words” with the exception of honorifics (Interviewee K), not a “mature way of writing” (Interviewee N) and “cringeworthy”:

...i tend to think that it's cringeworthy because it defeats a lot of purpose: there's no additional merit to using it (e.g. there's 'thankyou' for 'kamsahamnida') BUT the key point is actually always on how you write it. I've seen a lot of mature writing (not as in smut, but like mature writing) which actually use korean terms, but there is a purpose beyond inserting it just because 'it feels like what a korean fanfic must have'⁴⁷[sic] (Interviewee B)

For these authors, incorporating Korean words that have equivalent English translations into K-pop fanfiction is regarded by that author as improper. Korean language is framed as useful only in those cases where no satisfactory English term exists, which helps explain why most respondents confine their Korean usage to honorifics, food names or a small number of untranslatable concepts. Moreover, Interviewee B expresses caution about using Korean in fanfics, labelling misuse as “cringeworthy” due to its lack of added value and potential to undermine the story's purpose. They argue that while using Korean terms can enhance authenticity, it is crucial how these terms are integrated into the narrative. The emphasis is on purposeful inclusion rather than adding Korean words just to meet expectations of what a K-pop fanfic “should” include. This position advocates for a considered, story-driven use of

⁴⁷ Fanfiction stories with sexually explicit or mature content. More common in K-pop fanfic.

Korean vocabulary that prioritises clarity and meaningful representation over superficial signaling. On a similar note, Interviewee D also stated:

because it looks like i'm using their culture a bit too much? i mean if you're writing in korean it's all okay but if you're writing in english please use english... imagine if your friend said "you're pabo~~~~" to you during your convo haha it's strictly language matter i have nothing against korean language⁴⁸, i'm studying it, but if i write in english why would i use korean words? [sic]⁴⁹ (Interviewee D)

The incorporation of Korean terms, according to this author, is exclusive to those who write the stories fully in Korean. The author prefers to employ one language in their narratives rather than a mixture of both Korean and English in order to maintain consistency. The example the participant provided in the quote above seems to indicate the abnormality concerning including a Korean word in an English conversation. In this case, both authors who prefer to be consistent with the English language, and those who do not see the purpose Korean words would serve in an English text, prioritise English over Korean due to their inability to fully write in Korean. Interestingly, the author also links the inclusion of Korean language to appropriating Korean culture despite writing about Korean characters in a Korean setting. Other authors similarly implied that using Korean language in their writings is considered “Koreaboo” or “Koreaboo-ish”.

Within fan discourse, the label “Koreaboo” is commonly used for fans who are seen as excessively or inappropriately obsessed with Korean culture, those who, in the words of one Urban Dictionary definition, “denounce their own culture and call themselves Korean”, rather than simply enjoying Korean media. Several K-pop fans explicitly distance themselves

⁴⁸ Pabo (바보), also romanized as babo translates to “stupid” in Korean and is a commonly used word among the K-pop fandom, becoming a part of fandom lexicon.

⁴⁹ Interview D 29th of April, 2020.

from Koreaboos because of the latter's perceived fetishisation and stereotyping of Korean people and culture (Yoon, 2019). In this context, Koreaboo practices are framed as a form of cultural appropriation in which fans adopt Korean aesthetics and language while disregarding their own cultural backgrounds. Scholars have critiqued such appropriative tendencies as part of a wider pattern in which some Western fans consume "Asian culture" in essentialising and extractive ways (see Kleisath, 2014; Lee, 2015; Ubonrat & Shin, 2007; Yoon, 2019). For the authors in my study, awareness of these debates shapes their sense of what is "proper" to include or exclude in K-pop fanfiction. Paradoxically, fears of being labelled Koreaboo or of appropriating Korean culture can lead some writers to engage less with Korean language than they otherwise might, in order to avoid appearing disrespectful or inauthentic. The fact that such strong reactions to Korean language use arise even though the characters and settings are often Korean suggests that some K-pop fics authors and readers experience Korean as a particularly sensitive site of representation. More broadly, this reflects the challenges that transcultural fanfic authors face when writing across linguistic and cultural distance, especially in relation to a culture that is "one of the most exploited cultures in the media" as interviewee H put it, and a culture often appropriated by global K-pop fans.

Given the increasing prevalence of Korean language learning and the ease of access to educational resources such as Duolingo, YouTube channels, and websites like TalkToMeInKorean, where many lessons are available for free, it is understandable that some fans feel encouraged to either learn the language more systematically or to avoid using it superficially in ways associated with Koreaboos. According to Yeung (2023), Korean ranks as the second most learned Asian language on Duolingo and has recently emerged as the fastest-growing language globally. This accessibility arguably heightens the expectation for fans to either engage with the language more "authentically", contrasting sharply with Koreaboos' often criticised superficial use of a fandom-specific lexicon, which is accused of

distorting the language's meaning (Khedun-Burgoine, 2022), or refrain from using fragments they do not fully understand.

Consequently, the reluctance of authors to incorporate Korean language into their fanfics, except when crucial for plot development, and typically steering clear of jargon strongly associated with Koreaboo behaviour, reflects broader community stigmas around language use. These patterns underscore how prevailing attitudes within the K-pop fandom significantly shape fanfiction authors' approaches to representing Korean language, and how their choices are framed as part of collective effort (however uneven and contested) to handle linguistic aspects of mediated Koreanness with care.

These disagreements over when and how to use Korean, including whether honorifics should be retained, whether scattered Korean phrases are “authentic” or “cringeworthy,” and how to avoid Koreaboo stigma, also exemplify what Annett (2011) calls collaborative friction. As Annett (2011) argues, drawing on Tsing, transcultural fan communities are spaces where participants work on shared cultural objects across uneven terrains of knowledge, linguistic skill and cultural capital, producing contexts that are what Tsing (2004, p. 4) terms “awkward, unequal, unstable and creative” rather than smooth. In my material, authors share an affective investment in K-pop and a broadly similar repertoire of mediated Koreanness acquired through fan translations, idol content and fandom discourse, yet they are very differently positioned in terms of Korean proficiency, linguistic training and confidence. Some feel able to integrate Romanised Korean words because of their linguistics background or ongoing Korean study; others limit themselves to honorifics or to untranslatable terms because they worry about making mistakes, and others reject most Korean vocabulary outright as “cringy”, “immature” or Koreaboo, or insist that English-only dialogue is more appropriate in an English-language fic.

These uneven capacities and divergent judgements generate friction as authors negotiate what counts as respectful, excessive or performative engagement with Korean language. That friction does not simply fragment the community but encourages writers to articulate and refine their own informal guidelines about when Korean terms are justified and when they are not, turning language use into a collaborative, if contested, process through which transcultural K-pop fans continually redraw the boundaries between authenticity, accessibility and appropriation in their fanfiction. In this respect, language use becomes one of the key sites where transcultural K-pop fans work out, in practice, how far they are willing and able to go in claiming Koreanness within English-language fanfiction.

Concluding Remarks

These two sections above show that what is at stake for these authors is not simply whether they “include Korean culture” or not, but how they work with mediated Koreanness under conditions of uneven knowledge, affective investment and moral pressure. At the level of setting, food and everyday practices, some writers treat Korea as a flexible narrative resource that can be mobilised when it serves realism or emotional immersion, while others understand it as an ethical commitment that requires research, care and restraint. At the level of language, they confront a similarly fraught repertoire of honorifics, fandom lexicon and scattered Korean phrases which they experience as at once indispensable markers of Koreanness and potential signs of Koreaboo-style appropriation. In both domains, the interviews reveal what Annett (2011) calls collaborative friction: authors share a strong attachment to K-pop and broadly similar mediated images of Korea, yet differ sharply in their access to information, linguistic skill, cultural proximity and confidence.

This produces ongoing, sometimes uncomfortable negotiation over what counts as “enough” Koreanness, what feels “authentic” rather than “cringeworthy”, and where the line lies between respectful incorporation, superficial signalling and perceived appropriation. Rather than a unified transcultural fan community, in the field of K-pop fanfiction production, transcultural K-pop fandom appears here as a normatively contested field in which fans adopt craft-driven, ethics-driven or convenience-driven orientations toward the same Korean source, and continually test, refine and disagree over informal norms of representation. In this sense, my argument is that transcultural fandom is not only affective but also regulatory and reflexive: it is a space where love for K-pop is inseparable from the everyday labour of deciding how far one can, or should, claim Koreanness within English-language fanfiction.

Westernisation, Race and Cultural Friction in Transcultural K-pop Fanfiction

The downplaying or erasure of Koreanness in K-pop fanfics has been linked, especially recently, to the westernisation, or, as I prefer to label it “white-washing” of K-pop idols and fanfics. Interviewee I illustrates that well in their strong-sounding statement:

i think western writers need to be aware of the poc nature of their characters

it’s like, for analogy purposes, a writer creates an Indian character but make them behave like a white person

and i’m SO against that

it’s blatant erasure

...yeah [authors not taking Korean culture seriously in K-pop fics] pains me

Americans like to write BTS as very western

...i can tell if a fic was written by a poc, at the very least⁵⁰ (Interviewee I)

In answering a question about culture, this interviewee immediately relates it to race, describing K-pop idols as people of colour (POC). Although race was not mentioned in the questions, the author still emphasised it. Moreover, Interviewee I also links the neglect of Korean cultural markers in K-pop fanfics to what they see as “western writers’” lack of awareness of idols’ East Asian racial identities. Showing how they are against such misrepresentation and describing it as “blatant erasure” also further highlights where the author stands in terms of the whitewashing of K-pop idols in K-pop fanfics, implying the unethical nature of such act, and also clearly illustrates the sensitivity to racial and cultural awareness and representation. Interestingly, later in the answer Interviewee I single out American K-pop fanfic writers as particularly prone to recasting idols as “Western”, implying, from their perspective, a recognisable pattern among U.S.-based fans. By contrast, they suggest that fanfics written by people of colour are often legible to them as such, hinting at shared approaches or priorities among writers of colour that they associate with greater attention to Korean cultural markers in K-pop fics.

Interviewee I’s answer echoes debates that have been increasingly prominent in the K-pop fan community, and more specifically, the K-pop fanfic spaces. Although K-pop fanfics have been around even before the massive bloom of K-pop globally, such conversations in relation to cultural awareness and representation only began to intensify in the past six years or so. A suggestion is that with K-pop growing more globally, and as a result having multiple debates rise in relation to cultural appropriation, activism, and racism (see Introduction), K-pop fanfic communities also became more sensitive regarding the writing of K-pop fanfiction in relation, especially in relation to culture. In 2019, for instance,

⁵⁰ Interviewee I 28th of June, 2020.

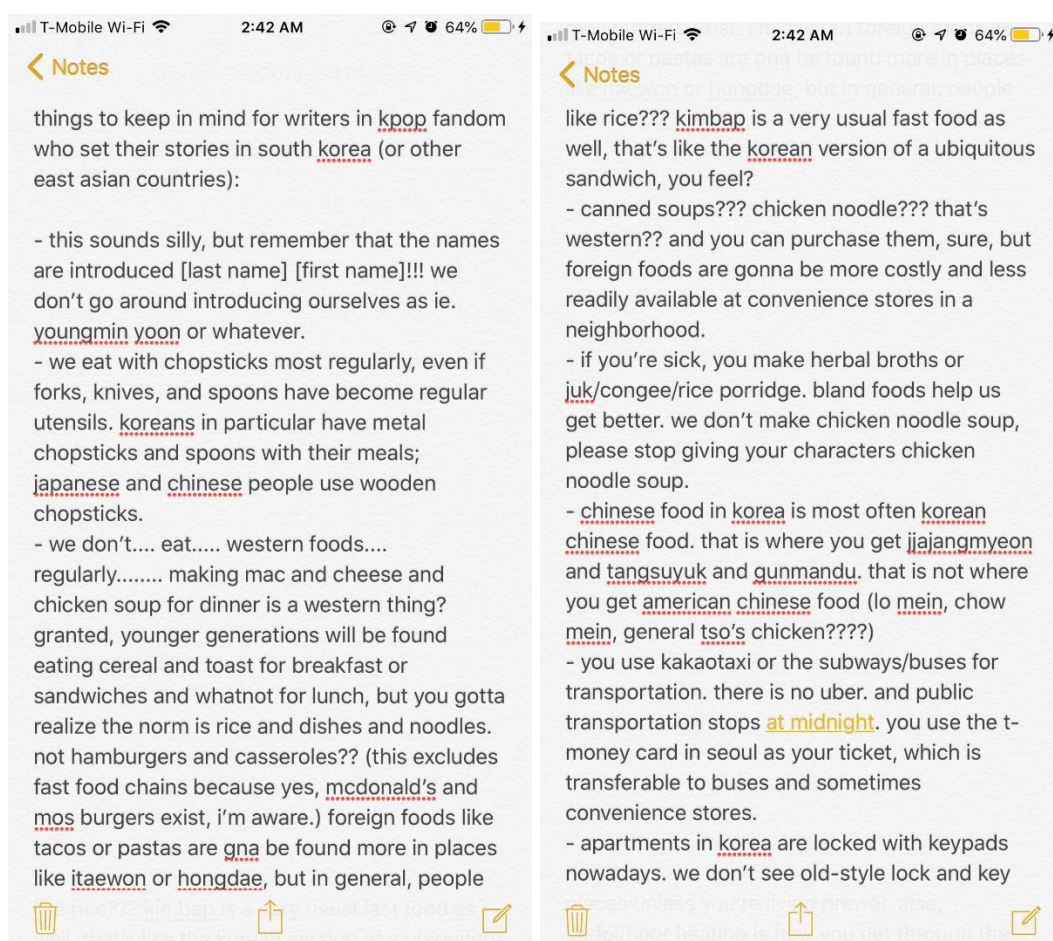
a thread post by X user @softwonwoolly that gained 7.8k likes and 4.4k reposts as of the 8th of March, 2024 was published:

Figure 11. X user softwonwoolly's post about K-pop fanfic writers misrepresenting Korea (part one)⁵¹



⁵¹ X post accessed on 30th of March, 2022. <https://twitter.com/softwonwoolly/status/1084358175887970305>

Figure 12. Screenshots posted by X user softwonwoolly



The X user posted this post as an initiation for other posts to follow and had with it attached 4 screenshots (two of them are displayed above) from their Notes memo consisting of a list of corrections regarding cultural elements in K-pop fanfics. Interviewee I accused White Western writers of whitewashing K-pop idols in their fics, but softwonwoolly rather used the term “nonasian” making the writers they’re targeting more specific. In other words, rather than focusing on people-of-color in general (like Interviewee I did), softwonwoolly’s statement is more concerned with the geography of the authors as people living outside of Asia (probably meaning East Asia more specifically). The Notes memo screenshots above contain several cultural markers that are often misrepresented or misused in K-pop fanfiction, consisting of food and general cutlery knowledge, setting, weather, honorifics, etiquettes, and many other more specific Korean elements. The X user also added more of such screenshots

in the posts attached to the thread post, and also recommended for other “Korean or east asian living in east asia, [to] please feel free to tell me more things [because] god knows I’m only one person who’s also a jooksing lmfaol” (softwonwoolly):

Figure 13. X user softwonwoolly's post about K-pop fanfic writers misrepresenting Korea (part two)



In response to that statement, the user gained lots of attention from fellow English speaking self-described Korean fans who also added other cultural elements that softwonwoolly failed to mention. Besides those fans, the post also gained so much traction from other global fans who expressed how the thread was extremely helpful for their future K-pop fanfiction writing, often showing remorse for writing inaccurately before. In this way, the thread functions both

as an angry call-out and as an informal guide to the mediated Koreanness for English-language fic communities. These debates resonate with Oh and Han's (2024) argument that transcultural K-pop fandom is not a colour-blind space of what Jung (2017) terms "woori-ness" but remains structured by racial difference and local conditions of reception. Oh and Han (2024) reject Jung's (2017) optimistic claim that K-pop dissolves racial and cultural boundaries, contending instead that "while fans come together in a cosmopolitan project, their specific racial identities matter in reception practices and in intra-fandom hierarchies" (p. 12). Even in deterritorialised online communities, they argue, fans' everyday racialised experiences in their own societies continue to shape how they interpret Korean popular culture. Interviewee I's focus on "western writers" and softwonwoolly's distinction between "non-Asian" and (East) Asian writers exemplify this racial translocalism. K-pop fanfics, thus, are read and policed differently depending on whether they are perceived to come from white Western, Asian diasporic or East Asian locations.

Some of the interviewees claim that their readers play a role in how they represent Korean culture in their fics, as well as how, as readers, they are influenced by what other authors write. The word "familiar" was mainly used when talking about that. Interviewee H, for instance, said:

I try [depicting Korean culture and setting accurately] from a reader's perspective.

The thing with fanfics is that the audience is a very specific set of people. They come in for the writer's version of the people they also have their own interpretations of. So what I do, because I want to make these characters make sense to people, is put them in a setting familiar to this very specific set of people.

I think they know, and in some way familiar with it. Again, these are very specific set of people, fellow kpop fans who also watch the same content as I do. What my interpretation or writing does is expand that knowledge for them. (Interviewee H)

Interviewee H visibly takes their readers into consideration, and most importantly, their nature as fellow transcultural K-pop fans who are supposedly people who are aware enough of mediated Koreanness, mainly from the K-pop materials both the author and the readers consume. On one hand, this shows the accountability they feel for portraying a story whose cultural elements do not clash too violently with what readers expect to see as “Korean”. On the other hand, their hope of “expand[ing] that knowledge” suggests a desire to prevent readers from absorbing inaccurate or stereotyped markers, and an awareness that misrepresentation could shape how others imagine Korea. In other words, the author is aware of their position as an influence within a networked fandom, where fics can reinforce or shift readers’ understandings of Korean culture, and this responsibility motivates them to aim for a version of Korea that feels accurate in relation to the images of Korea that circulate in fandom.

Such responsibility and accountability are reflected well in the intentions of softwonwoolly and many of the K-pop fans who interacted with their post. When attacked by some fans who felt that accurate representation of Korean culture in K-pop fics is not important (which will be discussed down below), aiwainaah, a fellow X user commented at the beginning of their post: “it's the never-ending argument about how "fiction isn't real!!!" without realising that what you read affects how you think.” (aiwainaah). This comment emphasises the potential of cultural inaccuracies to give readers a misleading picture of Korean life, and further underlines the ethical responsibility that some K-pop fanfic authors should have when writing K-pop fanfics. It also gives insight about how K-pop fanfics authors and readers see themselves as influencing each other.

Interviewee F, for instance, stated that the reason they include honorifics is: “because that's what [they] hear bts call one another by (ie: yoongi calling seokjin 'hyung') and [they] see it a lot in other fics.” That is one clear example of how K-pop fanfic authors (and readers) might influence one another. It is true that Interviewee F already had an idea about Korean honorifics from BTS members themselves, but reading it in other fanfics also played part in why they implement them in their stories. This highlights that K-pop fanfiction operates as a feedback loop in which writers and readers mutually circulate and consolidate particular versions of Koreanness, thereby either educating or misleading one another about Korean culture. Overall, this shows how K-pop fanfic is a crucial site for the representation and misrepresentation of mediated Koreanness. In other words, it is a place where cultural “knowledge” about Korea may be acquired, accurately or not, which helps explain why East Asian and Korean fans are so sensitive to misrepresentation in K-pop fics; they know how powerful fanfiction can be in shaping how international fans imagine their culture.

The critique of American K-pop fanfiction authors for westernising K-pop idols in their stories aligns closely with Kraidy’s (2005) notion of critical transculturalism. This perspective compels us to consider how authors’ own cultural contexts shape the fan texts they produce, and how power imbalances remain even within hybrid cultural reforms. In this context, some American authors, despite setting their stories in Korea, weave in elements from their own everyday lives so strongly that the fanfics read as Americanised narratives with Korean names. This phenomenon mirrors findings in Oh’s (2015) study, which observed how white K-pop fan video reactors interpret K-pop content through their own Western cultural lenses, highlighting the pervasive impact of one’s cultural framework on the interpretation and creation of cross-cultural narratives.

Oh & Oh (2022) critically examine the role of "white-expat-fans" in K-pop, highlighting their contribution to the continuation of Orientalist frameworks, the maintenance

of racial hierarchies, and the commodification of K-pop culture for personal gain. Their critique resonates with the tendency among some non-Asian, particularly White, K-pop fanfic authors to reduce or sidestep Korean cultural specificity in their works by substituting unfamiliar Korean elements with Western ones, thereby implying that Western norms are the default when cultural knowledge is lacking. Such Westernisation of K-pop idols in fanfics parallels the actions of white-expat fans, as both "extend the neocolonial hegemonic whiteness in race, gender, and language online" (Oh & Oh, 2022, pp. 212).

Furthermore, this practice invites criticism from Asian-descent fans, who call for more accurate cultural representation and highlight what Oh and Oh (2022) mark as the "hegemonic" and "Orientalist" nature of such works. Defending Korean culture from misrepresentations that keep occurring in K-pop fanfics can function, following Oh and Oh (2022), as a way "for the socioculturally marginalized, [disidentify] in/against the majority [as]...an inevitable process of re-constructing subjectivity." (Oh & Oh, 2022, pp. 211). That is because, despite its status as a global phenomenon, K-pop still encounters marginalisation and Orientalist stereotypes in the West (Cho, 2022; Suh, 2022), where it is often labelled as exotic, weird, and manufactured. This environment makes disidentification particularly important for Asian-descent K-pop fanfic authors and readers who strive for more grounded cultural representation, encourage research, and make efforts to share their knowledge of Korean culture with the wider K-pop fan community.

On another note, the hybrid nature of K-pop (Han, 2017; Jung, 2009; Shin, 2009), which incorporates increasing amounts of English in its lyrics, and is incredibly inspired by American hip-hop (Cho, 2022), raises questions about the expectations for fanfic authors to accurately depict Korean culture. Given the genre's own engagement with cultural hybridity,

as seen in groups like NewJeans,⁵² it might seem permissible, even natural, for fanfic authors to hybridise their narratives as well. This complicates any simple division between "properly Korean" and "westernised" fics, and underscores the complexities of cultural representation in fan content, as authors balance authenticity, creative expression and accessibility within a global multicultural K-pop context.

Some interviewees explicitly choose to sidestep the need to portray Korean culture in detail by placing their K-pop fics in settings they know well (such as their country), or in an imaginary country. For instance, Interviewee H says that sometimes they place their fic in the USA, which feels more familiar to them and reduces the need for research on Korean settings and customs, while also lowering the risk of criticism. Interviewee N also stated that they set K-pop idols not in Korea but in the Philippines instead. When studying the Japanese fanfiction of the Hongkong star Leslie Cheung, Chin and Morimoto (2013), found that the Japanese fanfic writer "translate[d] Cheung not to a 'Japanese' cultural context, but specifically to a Japanese fan cultural context." That is different than what Interviewee N did with their fics, but also similar in a sense that they "translated" K-pop idols within a Filipino context, keeping only their Korean names. This complicates Kraidy's (2005) argument about critical transculturalism, because it shows that, in transcultural fanfic, it is not only globalised Western culture that shapes the power dynamics of cultural translation, but also the author's own local or regional context, regardless of how globally dominant that context may be.

Besides K-pop fanfic authors who make an effort to maintain Korean cultural elements in their fics, and those who transport the idols to another country, other authors like to keep the setting as vague as they can so to avoid mentioning Korean cultural elements out of fear of making mistakes. For instance, Interviewee J states that the reason they do not

⁵² NewJeans' songs have been notoriously known to have more English lyrics than Korean songs. Their latest hit songs Super Shy, Ditto, and How Sweet are great examples of K-pop songs that have more English than Korean lyrics.

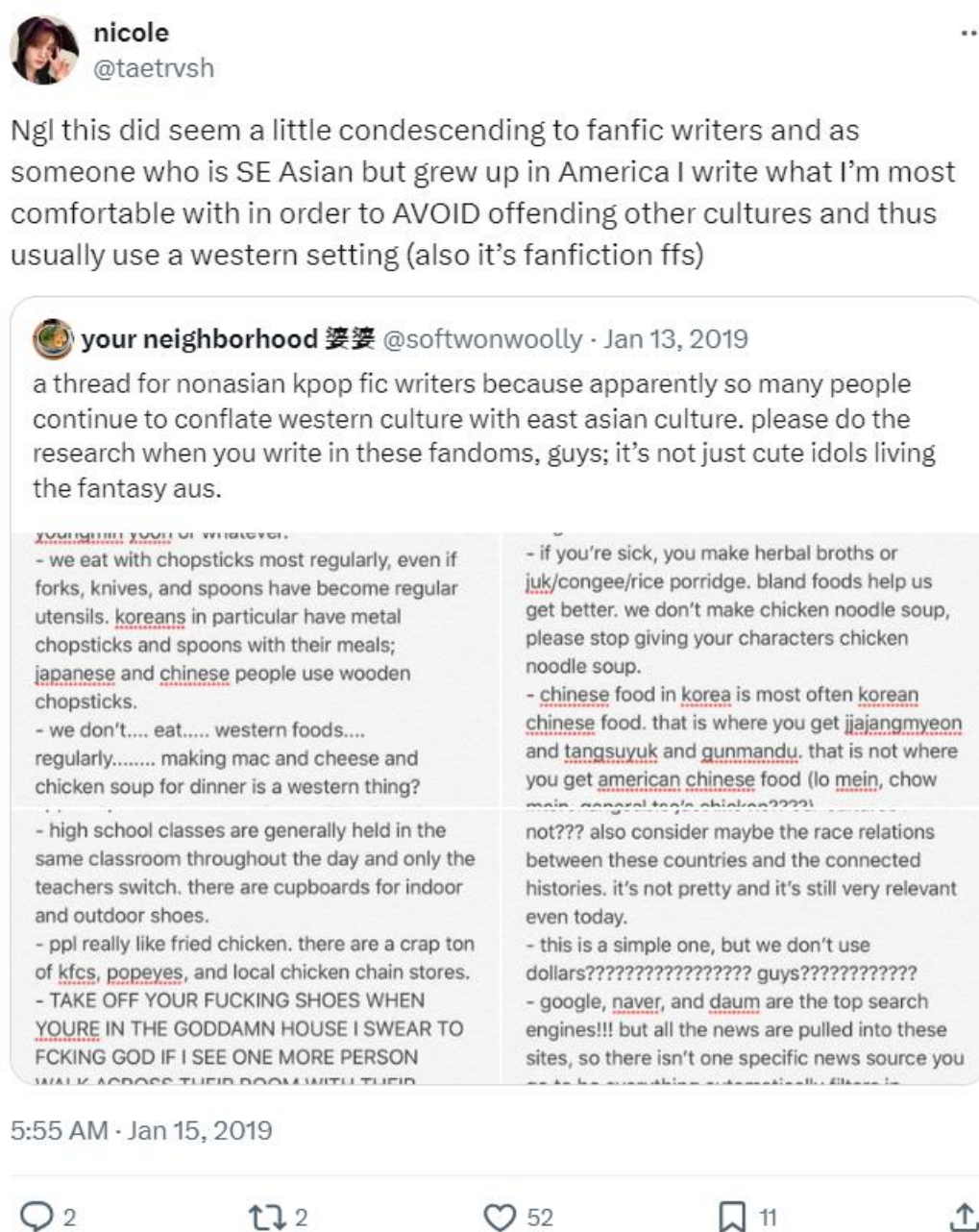
“focus on the details” because they “don’t like doing research and [are] not familiar with [Korean] culture unless absolutely “necessary to the story”. Likewise, Interviewee G mentions that they “usually keep the setting vague because quite honestly [they] don’t have time to research every little detail”. Another form of avoidance appears in how some interviewees say that they do not use honorifics in their K-pop fics because they “wouldn’t want to get things wrong and offend people” (Interviewee K). These examples recall Shawl and Ward’s (2005) concept of “the unmarked state”:

This particular term, “the unmarked state,” is drawn from literary criticism. It denotes the state of possessing only those characteristics that are literally not remarkable. A character in the unmarked state has a certain transparency; he (and we use the pronoun advisedly) allows readers to read the action of the story without coloring it with his particularity. (p. 11)

Shawl and Ward (2005) in their definition of “the unmarked state” focus on characteristics of characters, but in the context of K-pop fanfics, the notion also resonates with how some K-pop fanfic authors keep the setting and culture relatively “not remarkable” and gives it no “particularity”. By leaving the locale and everyday practices unspecified, K-pop fanfic authors can avoid the anxiety of misrepresenting Korean life and the potential criticism that might follow. However, this strategy also strips away most explicit markers of mediated Koreanness and effectively recentres an unmarked, often implicitly Western, default as the neutral background.

Some authors go further and openly defend their non-Korean conforming K-pop fanfics. This becomes visible when a subset of fans quote-posted the post thread shared by softwonwoolly and expressed their disagreement about the need for cultural accuracy in K-pop fanfics:

Figure 14. X user taetrvsh quote replying softwonwoolly⁵³

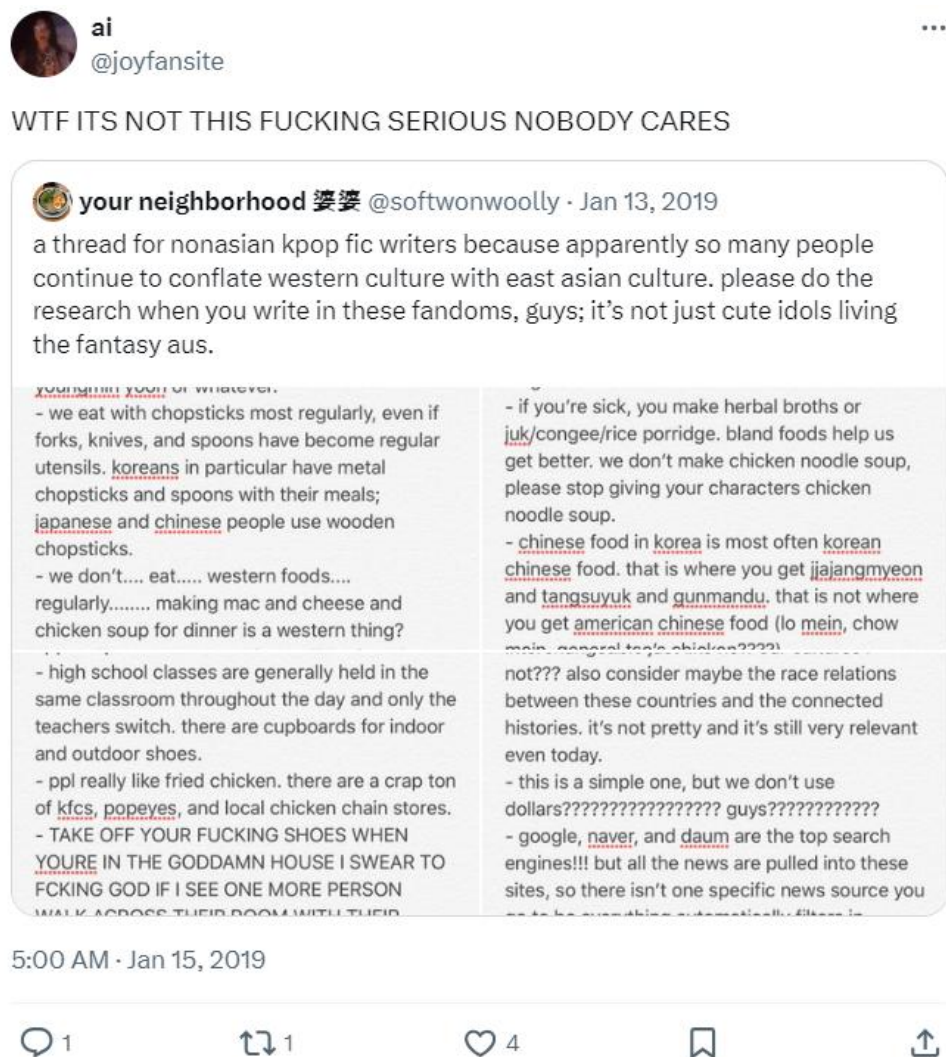


Starting with “Ngl”, an acronym for “Not gonna lie”, the X user kimtaelephants, like some of the interviewees quoted above, also defends themselves from the white-washing accusations stating that the Westernisation of their fics is a way to prevent any disrespect towards other cultures despite being South East Asian themselves. Interestingly, at the end of their post, they mention in between brackets that it is “fanfiction” adding “ffs” which stands for “for

⁵³ Accessed on the 8th of March, 2024. <https://x.com/taetrvsh/status/1085052824734572544?s=20>

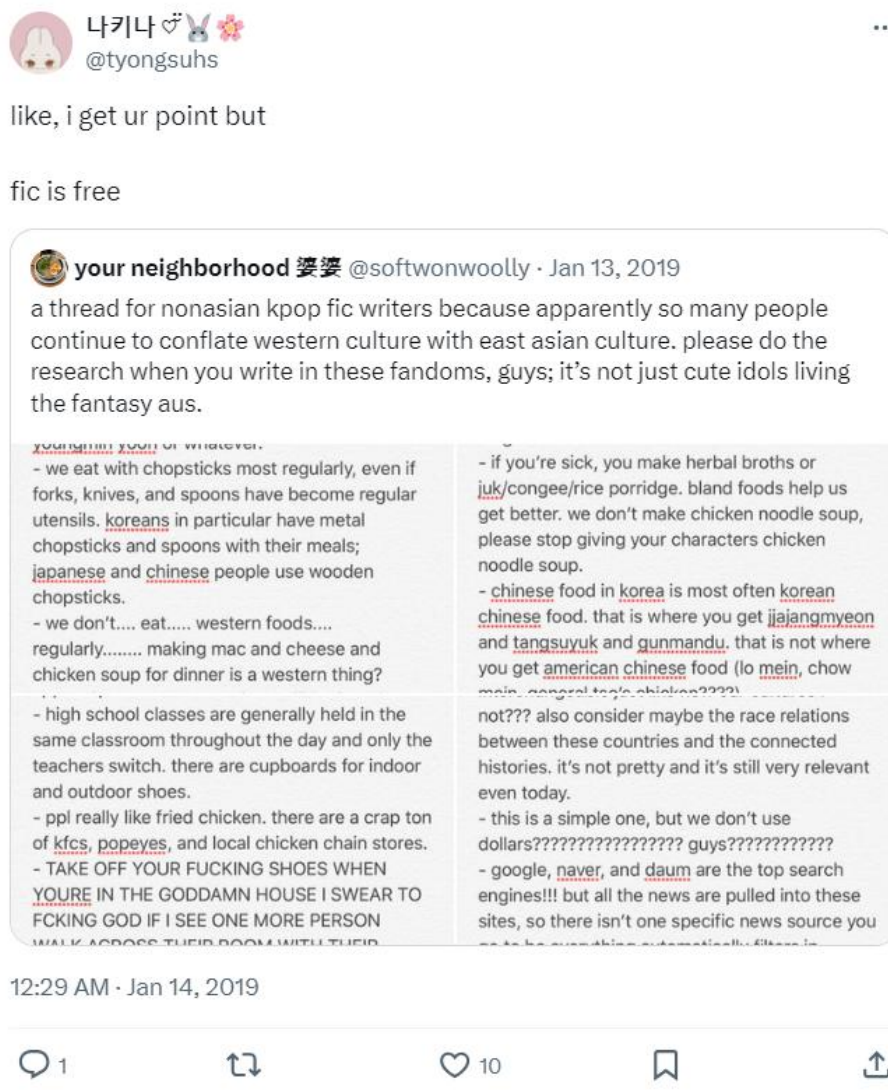
fuck's sake", showing how their lack of sensitivity to Korean cultural representation in fanfiction. That also happens in other posts quote-posting the thread of softwonwoolly as a subsection of authors, just to cite a few, expressed their disagreement with the thread:

Figure 15. X user joyfansite quote replying softwonwoolly⁵⁴



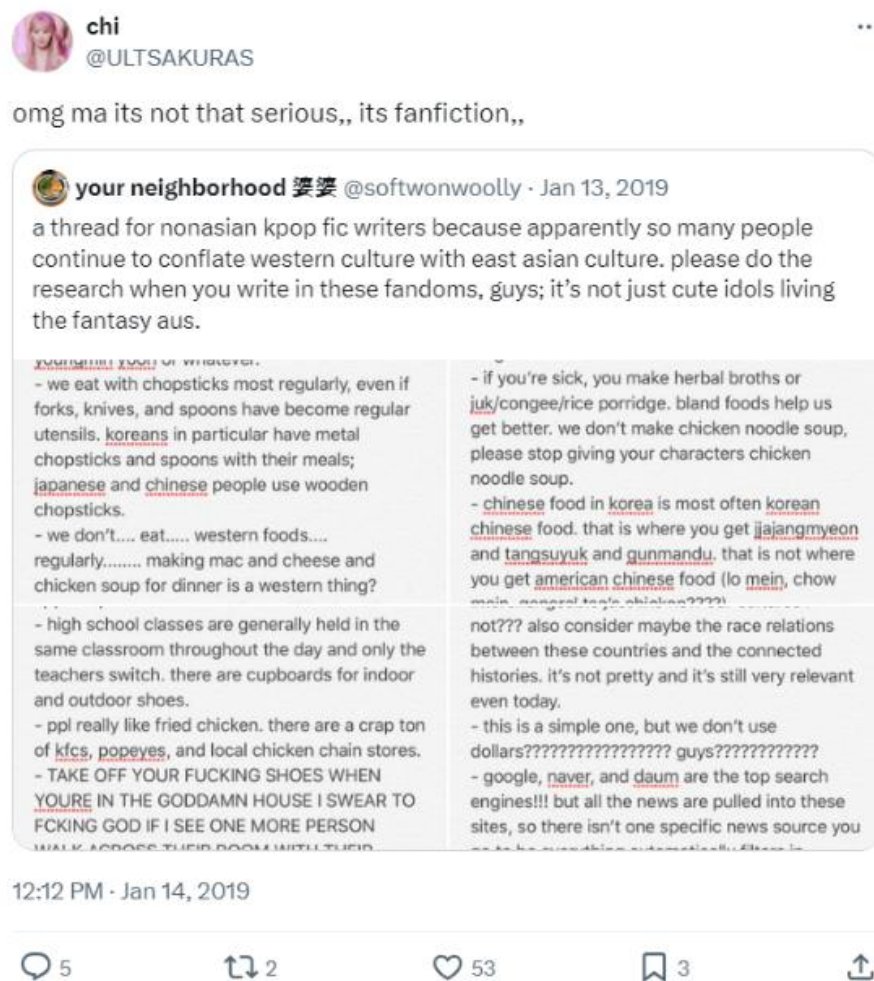
⁵⁴ Accessed on the 8th of March, 2024. <https://x.com/joyfansite/status/1085039095607287809?s=20>

Figure 16. X user tyongsuhs quote replying softwonwoolly⁵⁵



⁵⁵ Accessed on the 8th of March, 2024. <https://x.com/tyongsuhs/status/1084608436648566785?s=20>

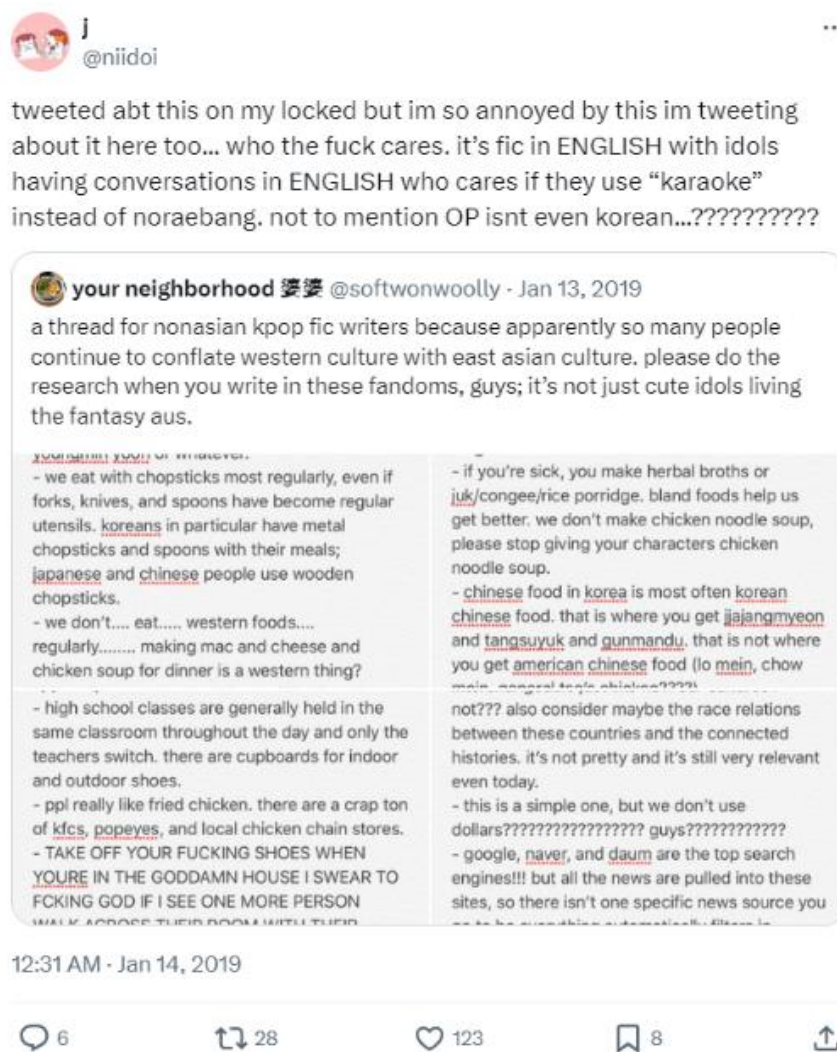
Figure 17. X user ULTSAKURAS quote replying softwonwoolly⁵⁶



⁵⁶ Accessed on the 8th of March, 2024.

<https://x.com/ULTSAKURAS/status/1084785326558568450?s=20>

Figure 18. X user niidoi quote replying softwonwoolly



X user niidoi's post, which gained 123 likes and 28 retweets, clearly exemplifies this lack of sensitivity about cultural representation by claiming that the mere fact K-pop fanfiction is written in English means it does not need to engage closely with Korean culture. Rather than simply arguing that fanfiction should not be held to high standards of accuracy, niidoi ends their post by attacking softwonwoolly (OP) for not being Korean, implying that they think that the latter is not qualified to speak about Korean cultural representation in K-pop fanfics.

An important stand in these conversations concerns the role of cultural proximity, as well as race. Some authors from Asian backgrounds suggest that their "Asian-ness" helps them understand sensitivities around Korean culture in K-pop fanfics. Softwonwoolly who

posted a helpful guide (though also angry, as noticed in the wording in their Notes memo and the frequent use of upper case letters), stated that they were not Korean in other three attached posts (which got combined together down below) after so many invalidating their information and opinion due to their different cultural background and nationality:

Figure 19. *X user softwonwoolly quote replying a no longer existing post to defend themselves*⁵⁷



Full post: hey yes i'm not korean. does that mean i can't talk abt these points, many of which also apply to my culture? no. but also, i'm not trying to silence anybody who is actually korean and i'm offering space to anybody who has more to say by linking it in the thread. if i hadn't said anything then we would have to wait until someone else gets upset enough to bring up the same salient points, which if that's something is more important, then fine, i can withdraw my point of view? i wasn't aware i needed the endorsement of actual koreans for my points to be valid? especially when so many of these things i've pointed out have been informed by my own personal experience.

[sic] (softwonwoolly)

⁵⁷ Accessed on the 8th of March, 2024.

<https://x.com/softwonwoolly/status/1084546683306983424?s=20>

This discussion around cultural representation in K-pop fanfiction highlights an interesting point about cultural proximity, as well as race. In her posts, softwonwoolly felt qualified to talk about how Korean culture is sometimes wrongly portrayed in these stories because of their own cultural background as an East Asian. This suggests that being culturally close to Korea might give someone a useful perspective on cultural matters, even if they are not Korean themselves. This idea also points to the potential for people who share some cultural similarities with Korea to offer meaningful insights into cultural representation, highlighting the role of cultural proximity and race in discussions about Korean cultural awareness and representation in K-pop fanfics.

Similarly, Interviewee I mentions that being “Asian” also helps them understand the sensitivities surrounding Korean culture in K-pop fanfics. This aligns with Oh and Han’s (2024) concept of racial translocalism. As noted earlier, in their discussion of the global reception of K-pop, they argue that fans’ racial and cultural backgrounds shape the ways in which they experience K-pop. Their argument echoes studies of Asian K-pop diasporas which show that consuming Korean popular culture can provide a way to negotiate identity in multicultural but racialised Western settings (Baudinette, 2020b; Ju & Lee, 2015; Sung, 2010; Yoon, 2017). Drawing on the illustrations and findings, racial translocalism is not limited to reception, but extends to the production of fanfiction as well. The patterns noted above demonstrate that K-pop fanfic authors’ racial and cultural locations sometimes shape how they navigate the representation of Koreanness in their stories. This further complicates Chin and Morimoto’s (2013) account of transcultural fandom as built primarily on affect, with nation treated as secondary. Their model may help explain other aspects of fandom and fan practices, but in fanfiction production, a site where Koreanness is negotiated and mis/represented, there is no escaping nation, culture or race. For some fans of Asian descent, engaging with K-pop can feel more “authentic” or legitimate because of perceived cultural

and racial proximity, and this position can translate into a sense of responsibility to advocate for better representation of Korean culture in fan spaces.

However, it is important to mention that not all fans of Asian descent feel that kind of cultural “advantage”. Self-described Indian Interviewee K said completely the opposite, implying that they do not know enough about Korean culture to feel comfortable representing it. Likewise, self-described Filipina interviewee N, who, as noted above, prefers to place their narratives in either the Philippines or an imaginary country, also states that they do not feel they share meaningful commonalities with Korean culture as a Filipina and therefore do not see their cultural or geographical proximity as helpful. These accounts highlight the nuances and dynamics even among authors of Asian descent regarding cultural representation in K-pop fics. In other words, proximity does not automatically translate into confidence or authority.

In their concluding remarks, softwonwoolly also shares insights into learning about Korean culture through personal experiences, shedding light on the diverse methods through which K-pop fanfiction authors gather cultural knowledge. The primary means of acquiring this knowledge include (1) conducting research, often via Google, (2) consulting friends who are Korean or have lived in Korea, (3) engaging with Korean dramas, shows, or K-pop fandom, (4) drawing from personal experiences with Korean culture, whether locally or from visits to Korea, and (5) referring to websites that compile reactions from Korean netizens. These channels, together, form the layered uneven mediated Koreanness that non-Korean fans work with when they write. While these sources provide valuable insights to varying degrees, they also have the potential to misrepresent or oversimplify complex aspects of Korean society. Dramas, for instance, are noted by Black (2009) for their limitations in fully or accurately depicting Korean cultural realities. Similarly, challenges arise in accurately understanding and using honorifics, which are often learned from translated content. Such

translations may not fully capture the subtleties of usage, leading to possible distortions in the portrayal of honorifics and other cultural elements, thus impacting the cultural translation and potentially altering the intended meaning. As Annett (2011) suggests, it is on this uneven terrain of mediated Koreanness, with its gaps, contradictions and unequal access to knowledge, that transcultural fans have to negotiate their representations, which helps explain why questions of “getting it right” or “overstepping” recur so often in K-pop fic debates.

To conclude, discussions of the portrayal of Korean culture in K-pop fanfics, highlighted by both interviewees and the incident with softwonwoolly, illuminate the inherent conflicts within the transcultural K-pop fanfic community. These conversations underscore a significant point: although the community is bound by an affective affinity for K-pop that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, as emphasised by Chin and Morimoto (2013) and Jung (2017), sensitive topics like cultural representation can still spark intense disagreements. Annett (2011) cautions that the Internet is far from a fully “equitable, utopian ‘public sphere’, reminding us that “political, geographical and especially linguistic boundaries” continue to uphold deep asymmetries online (pp. 181-182). This is mirrored in how conflicts emerge because both authors and readers of K-pop fanfics come from diverse cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds, leading to varying approaches to and understandings of Korean culture and to different views on how and whether it should be represented in English-language K-pop fanfics. This diversity, while a strength, also presents challenges in achieving consensus on cultural representation, reflecting the complex dynamics of transculturality within fan communities.

Annett’s (2011) adaptation of Tsing’s notion of “friction” is helpful for naming these dynamics, and in this case, not internally as witnessed in the section above, but among the K-pop fanfiction authors and fans more generally. Annett (2011) describes transcultural fandom as a space where people connect “across difference” (p. 174) while navigating the “awkward,

unequal, unstable and creative” (Tsing, 2004, p. 4) qualities of global interconnection. The clashes between Asian-descent fans, white or “non-Asian” writers and those who insist that “it’s just fanfiction” exemplify this kind of collaborative friction. In other words, unequal access to Asia literacy, linguistic and cultural capital produces asymmetrical global flows, but the resulting conflicts also prompt, what Annett (2011) terms “reflexive” discussion, informal education and the proliferation of multiple imagined Koreas within K-pop fic communities. Taken together with Oh and Han’s (2024) notion of racial translocalism discussed earlier, these debates show how fans’ racialised and national positions in their own local contexts shape who feels authorised to define “proper” Koreanness in fanfiction. In this sense, the section shows transcultural K-pop fandom is not only affectively unified, as Chin and Morimoto (2013) and Jung (2017) imply, but also internally stratified by race, language and location. Thus, debates over westernisation and cultural responsibility are not incidental, but constitutive of how this transcultural fan community organises itself.

Calibrating Koreanness: Supernatural AUs, Realist Fics and Transcultural Reception

The theme or setting of the story, particularly when writers shift into a supernatural AU (short for alternative universe), shapes how explicitly they mark K-pop idols as embedded in recognisably Korean worlds. Some of the interviewees noted that in some supernatural AUs, they feel the need to downplay or drop Korean cultural references altogether, especially when the story world is imagined in relation to Western fantasy conventions. Interviewee B, for instance, noted that they avoid using honorifics when their stories are built in a supernatural AU as follows,

korean[sic] honorifics may not work well on some stories whose supernatural elements are more 'western'-minded than 'eastern'.⁵⁸ (Interviewee B)

The interviewee notes that in supernatural stories with a more Western orientation, Korean honorifics may seem out of place, suggesting that the application of cultural elements in fanfiction can vary significantly with the story's setting and thematic elements. The interviewee states that linguistic choices in K-pop fanfiction in the supernatural genre might differ once the stories apply a more Western type of supernatural elements. Therefore, Korean honorifics might not fit such narratives due to their perceived Eastern nature. The interviewee here raises an interesting issue about how some K-pop fanfiction writers can overlook certain elements of Korean culture in certain genres but employ them in another. More elaborately, K-pop fanfiction authors might adjust their responses to Korean culture in their writing across different settings.

To explore this pattern, I selected the five most popular⁵⁹ K-pop fanfiction stories in the supernatural genre on both AO3⁶⁰ and AFF⁶¹. For each of these authors, I then chose one

⁵⁸ Interviewee B 26th of April, 2020.

⁵⁹. (Subscribing to a story on Asianfanfics means that you will receive a notification once a new chapter is updated. Also, those who read the stories after it is completed can still subscribe to show support even though there will be no more new chapters/notifications.)

⁶⁰ These stories were selected on the 22nd of February, 2021.

⁶¹ These stories were selected on the 22nd of February, 2021.

additional K-pop fanfic in a different (non-supernatural) genre to compare how they handled Korean references across their own works. On AO3, the top five K-pop stories were selected based on those with the most kudos under the K-pop tag with the “Alternate Universe” filter ticked in order to easily select supernatural stories. Meanwhile, on AFF, due to the website having a different system from the kudos one, the five most popular supernatural K-pop fanfiction were identified based on the most subscribed to stories under the “supernatural” tag. Read through the lens of how they deploy mediated Korean markers, these stories fall into three broad patterns: some authors markedly reduce or reconfigure Korean references in supernatural AUs, some keep the setting vague in both genres, and others maintain a relatively dense layer of Korean elements across their stories regardless of genre.

Because these fics circulate primarily among readers outside Korea, such formal decisions also help shape how K-pop itself is received transnationally: each AU offers a particular “imagined Korea” as the backdrop for idols’ lives, whether that is a fully located Seoul, a loosely Koreanised high school, or a largely placeless fantasy realm. In this sense, genre-ed experimentation in fanfiction becomes one of the ways global K-pop fans collectively imagine “Korea” as a cultural space, rather than simply consuming pre-packaged images from the Korean media industries. Following Anderson’s (2006) point that communities are distinguished “by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6), these AUs participate in an emergent, transcultural community of readers who share particular ways of imagining Korea and Korean idol life.

In the supernatural-themed story *Glitch* on AO3, for instance, maia_archives keeps the setting vague, providing no concrete indication that the story takes place in Korea or elsewhere. This aligns with Shawl and Ward’s notion of “the unmarked state”, in which characters or environments are left without particularising detail (2005, p. 11). Here, it is the setting rather than the character that remains largely unmarked in cultural terms. Meanwhile,

in the author's realist story *You Make me Dizzy* (here, "realist" means not containing any supernatural, fantasy or sci-fi elements), the Korean setting is made explicit. For example, the protagonist Jimin is described as studying at Yonsei University, a real institution in Seoul, and Korean honorifics appear in the dialogue, with Jimin referring to J-Hope as "Hobi-hyung" and addressing Hoseok at other times "sunbae".⁶² In this case, the same writer moves from a culturally unmarked supernatural world to a more concretely located Korean realist setting.

A different pattern appears in drannie's *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)* (realist) and *The Seven Deadly Sins* (supernatural). In both stories, the setting is left geographically non-specific; there are no explicit references to Korea. However, they did maintain honorifics across the two texts. The main difference between the two is that the currency used in the supernatural story, *The Seven Deadly Sins* is dollars, while *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)* does not specify any currency at all. Here, the author keeps a light but consistent layer of Korean linguistic markers while allowing other aspects of the setting to drift towards a more generic, possibly Western, frame.

These examples suggest that some AUs invite readers to imagine idols in relatively generic or Western-coded spaces where Koreanness becomes optional rather than obligatory. In these fics, "Korea" functions less as a necessary ground for K-pop than as one possible backdrop among others, which can be intensified in realist stories and dialled down in supernatural ones. This points to a mode of transcultural fandom in which idols are received as highly portable figures who can be detached from specific Korean places and histories and slotted into broad fantasy templates, even as a light layer of Korean linguistic markers (such as honorifics) is retained to signal their origin.

⁶² Sunbae/ 선배 translates to "senior" in English and is used to address those with more experience in a field.

Smiles offers an example of an author who maintains a strong sense of Korean location and context across both genres. In the supernatural story *Stars Lost in the Sea* and the realist story *Echo Chorus* on AO3, real Korean places such as Seoul, Busan, Pohang, Jeju Island and Gwangju are named. In *Stars Lost in the Sea*, the story takes place in 1933 Korea, and the author includes a disclaimer at the beginning of the story to inform their readers that they were aware of Japanese occupation of Korea at that time, but such events will not be of main focus in the story. This gesture towards historical framing indicates a high level of attentiveness to the period in which the story is set. In their realist story *Echo Chorus*, Seokjin, the main character, is a Korean idol (not a BTS member though), and the narrative echoes familiar accounts of idol life, including restrictions around dating and the need to keep relationships secret. In both cases, the author builds story worlds that closely resemble mediated images of Korea and the idol system, suggesting a sustained commitment to situating their fics within recognisably Korean contexts regardless of genre.

In terms of K-pop's reception outside Korea, this pattern foregrounds a different imagined Korea: one in which idols remain tightly bound to national history, specific cities and the structures of the entertainment industry. Rather than treating K-pop as generic “global pop”, these fics invite readers to engage with it as anchored in Korean time and space, with historical occupation, regional locations and idol labour conditions woven into the narrative texture. For transcultural fans, cultural and historical specificity here is not an obstacle to enjoyment but part of what makes the fandom meaningful, and the chance to add to the mediated Koreanness they already possess becomes folded into the pleasures of reading.

The author with the most visible differences, not only across genres but also in the same story is, Sharleena on AO3. In both of their stories *something lonesome about you* (realist) and *sleep well beast* (supernatural), the author uses honorifics, names real Korean places such as “Seoul”, and “Gangnam-gu”, includes Korean foods such as “tteokbokki”

(Rice cakes), and “kimchi pajeon” (Kimchi pancakes), and references the Korean currency, Won. In the supernatural story *sleep well beast*, however, narrative moves from contemporary Korea into a separate mythological universe inspired, as mentioned by the author on their Author’s notes by Richard Siken’s poem “Little Beast” and The National’s song “Sleep Well Beast”. The story revolves around BTS members Jimin and Suga as gods fighting in a battlefield. In this god-battlefield universe, honorifics and other explicit Korean markers disappear, and the story shifts into a more Western-coded fantasy register. The same fic therefore alternates between a world densely marked as Korean and a more culturally generic or Western-inflected supernatural world, illustrating that the distribution of Korean references can vary not only by genre but also between distinct universes within a single text.

This oscillation produces two different imagined Koreas: one closely tied to contemporary Seoul and its everyday textures, and another in which idols become almost de-nationalised gods within a mythic, Western-coded battlefield. For readers, this double structure offers both a grounded, recognisably Korean everyday world and a more abstract fantasy space in which Koreanness recedes. Such switching shows how AUs can simultaneously affirm K-pop’s Korean origins and experiment with stripping away explicit cultural markers, allowing fans to move back and forth between nationally rooted and more universalised versions of idols within a single narrative.

On AFF, similar variations emerge. In *The 7th Demon* (supernatural) and *My 12th Brother: Luhan* (realist), both by littlepenguins, the setting is described as Seoul. Although both stories are mainly set in high school, only the realist fic names a specific school; Yongnam High School, a real school in Seoul. Across both texts, the author explicitly mentions Korean food such as kimchi and kimbap, and uses Korean lexical items like “yeobo” (a term of endearment between spouses), “yah!” (an exclamation roughly equivalent to “hey!” often used in moments of irritation), “appa” (“dad”) and “umma” (“mum”). In this

case, the same range of Korean linguistic and cultural references appears in both the supernatural and realist stories, even though only one named an actual school.

dbsgirl4ever, the author of the supernatural story *The Girl and The Wolf (Mate)* and the realist story *Boys, Boys, Boys* similarly maintain a recognisable Korean frame while playing with fictional variations. *The Girl and The Wolf (Mate)* takes place in a fictional city called "Malhwa" but its residents speak Korean, eat Korean food, and use honorifics. Meanwhile, in *Boys, Boys, Boys*, the setting is stated to be Seoul but the high schools the story is based on are fictional high schools named after K-pop entertainment companies SM and JYP. Here, Korea remains visible as a backdrop, but the geography and institutions are partly invented, showing how authors can blend real and fictional elements while still drawing on mediated images of Korean life.

These stories suggest that, for a subset of authors and their imagined readers, part of the appeal of K-pop fanfiction lies in keeping the story worlds recognisably, if mediately, Korean even when they move into fantasy modes. Fictional cities, high schools or supernatural plots are layered onto, rather than substituted for, a Korean frame, so that the imagined world still reads as Korean through food, language and place names. For K-pop's reception outside Korea, this suggests a model where K-pop is not simply global content to be detached from its origins, but a gateway into picturing everyday and school life in Korea, albeit through a blend of accurate detail and invented institutions. Here, Korean specificity is treated as compatible with, rather than opposed to, the pleasures of genre play.

By contrast, crime-tsumi's pair of stories illustrates a more pronounced genre-based shift. In the supernatural story *The Curse*, an author's note explains that the narrative is set in an alternative-universe Seoul where magic and supernatural phenomena are normal. The fic uses honorifics such as "hyung" and includes Korean dishes like kimchi fried rice, grounding

the magical plot in a recognisably Korean everyday world. In the fairytale-inspired *I am no prince if not yours*, however, the story moves to a boarding school called Prince Academy, where young men learn “prince etiquette”. Here, Korean elements disappear: the kingdoms are generic rather than specifically Korean, and the princes do not wear Korean traditional clothing. This pairing shows how, for some authors, shifting into certain fantasy modes can entail stripping away most explicit markers of Koreanness, even when the characters are based on Korean idols.

From the perspective of K-pop's global circulation, the pairing demonstrates how readily idols can be relocated into largely Western-coded fairytale structures where few explicit markers of Korean setting or history remain. When princes inhabit generic kingdoms and wear no Korean dress, “K-pop” in this context risks functioning as a floating aesthetic layer, attached to idol names and faces but only loosely connected to the mediated Koreanness that other fics in this section carefully foreground. At the same time, the other fic by the same author shows that this is not simply a matter of ignorance; these writers are capable of building richly Koreanised worlds but sometimes choose not to depending on genre conventions. This underscores that transcultural fandom is not monolithic; the same fan can oscillate between Korea-anchored and culturally thinned-out story worlds, revealing how flexible the imagined Koreas of K-pop fanfiction can be.

To conclude, examining how authors handle Korean settings, language and cultural markers across supernatural and realist fics highlights the fine-grained ways genre shapes the deployment of mediated Koreanness in K-pop fanfiction. The inclusion or omission of elements such as honorifics, real place names or Korean food is rarely accidental; it is closely tied to how writers imagine particular worlds and to which genre conventions they feel they must satisfy. Some authors keep their story worlds culturally unmarked or only lightly inflected by Korean references, others maintain a dense, historically aware Korean backdrop

in both realist and supernatural narratives, and still others move back and forth between explicitly Korean and more generic or Western-coded spaces within a single fic.

Considered as a whole, these genre-based shifts show that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is less about importing a fixed package of “Korean culture” into any story, and more about calibrating mediated Koreanness across different story worlds and generic frames, as authors decide how far each fic needs or can sustain explicit cultural marking. This calibration is rarely smooth; it resembles what Annett (2011) terms “collaborative friction”, not only in individual craft decisions or tensions inside the K-pop fan community, but also at the level of world-building and genre, wherein authors experiment with how much Koreanness different genres or frames can carry. In this sense, these AUs contribute to what I develop more fully in Chapter Four as “imagined Koreas”: shared uneven mental maps of Korean places, histories and everyday life that circulate among non-Korean fans and shape how K-pop is received outside Korea. Rather than simply reflecting a pre-given national culture, these fics participate in the ongoing production of Korea as, following Anderson (2006), an imagined community for a dispersed transcultural readership, selectively amplifying, softening or bracketing Korean markers according to the demands of particular genres.

Queer Safe Spaces and Imagined Koreas: “if it’s realism people want then they can read a sociology book”

K-pop fanfiction, at least in the spaces I study, is overwhelmingly organised around romantic plots. Authors and readers gather around “ships,” and much of the pleasure of writing lies in imagining idols in romantic, or sometimes just sexual relationships. Same-sex pairings are particularly prominent. Among fifteen interviewees, only three publish heterosexual fanfics (usually combining boy groups and girl groups), while the remaining twelve write

exclusively about same-sex couples. Ten focus on male-male pairings, and two on female-female couples (what Anglophone fan studies would call femslash, though this term is rarely used in the K-pop spaces my participants inhabit). This pattern aligns with scholarship arguing that K-pop shipping and fanfiction have become key sites for queer fantasy and self-exploration. Baudinette, for example, describes idol shipping as a “form of fantasy play” that “queers dominant social understandings of sex and gender and allows for the expression of fans’ own gendered and sexual identities as desiring subjects” (2023b, p. 261). Kuo and their colleagues similarly frame shipping and K-pop fanfiction as “a form of creating queer representation, queer art, and a source of fantasy and escapism” for LGBTQ+ fans (2022, p. 16).

Earlier in this chapter I showed that authors in my sample do not agree on a single way to “get Korea right”: some undertake detailed research into food, transport, etc., others keep settings deliberately vague, some treat Korean language as a mark of respect, while others avoid it for fear of sounding “cringey” or Koreaboo. In other words, the K-pop fanfiction community is normatively contested around questions of realism, respect and appropriate engagement with mediated Koreanness. When it comes to homophobia, however, a striking point of convergence emerges. Although Korea does not consider queer behaviours as a criminal act (Chase, 2012, p. 154), the country has a history of discrimination against self-identified sexual minorities (Chase, 2012; Kwon, 2019; Iwicka, 2014). Such ideas stem from religious, traditional, and political factors as the rejection of queer sexualities has been greatly influenced by Confucianism, Christianity, and liberal-individualist beliefs (Yi et al., 2018, p. 1458; Kwon, 2019). In spite of the remarkable number of Christian congregations that have shown support for queers with the condition of refraining from engaging in same-sex acts (Yuan & Yuan, 2011; Yi et al., 2018, p. 1461), and the Korean public’s growing acceptance, both the Liberty Korea Party and the Democratic Korea Party refuse to improve

queer rights (Phillips & Yi 2020). Same-sex marriages, acknowledgement, and even laws that protect the LGBTQ+ community have been disapproved by the country's president, at the time, Moon Jae-in (Phillips & Yi 2020).

Following Halperin's (1995) formulation of queer as a positionality "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62), I read this shared refusal to script homophobic conflict not as a failure of realism but as a queer authorial choice. Regardless of how the authors differ over language, setting or cultural markers, these writers converge on the decision to construct story worlds in which idol characters in queer relationships can live, love and form communities without punishment. In doing so, they repeatedly imagine what I call "queer Koreas" which are alternative versions of Korea that depart from dominant heteronormative conditions not by mirroring existing struggles, but by re-organising everyday life so that queer intimacy is taken for granted.

None of my interviewees claimed ignorance of the discrimination present in Korean society towards the LGBTQ+ community. On the contrary, several noted that they "know" Korea is not an easy place for LGBTQ+ people. Yet homophobia is almost entirely absent from their stories. Additionally, when counting K-pop fanfiction stories⁶³ under the tag "homophobia" on both AO3 and AFF, there appeared to be 191 out of 848,286 stories from AFF and 7736 out of 377,649 from AO3, suggesting that explicitly homophobia-themed K-pop fanfics form a small minority. Interviewee F, for example, answered when asked whether they had included homophobia in their stories:

⁶³ These stories were counted on the 12th of March, 2021.

no i haven't! i've read that korea's view isn't very positive but if i were to ever include it, i'd see it more as a universal view since it's in an alternate universe [sic]⁶⁴ (Interviewee F)

The author is aware of Korea's negative view on the queer community, and also confesses they never portrayed homophobia in their stories. They do, however, say they would frame it as a "more universal" issue rather than a specifically "Korean" one, sidestepping the specificities of Korean homophobia. I suggest that this reflects a particular orientation towards queerness and world-building. Using Halperin's (1995) queer formulation here, these authors' decision to remove or soften homophobia positions their fic-worlds against dominant norms in contemporary Korea. What they construct are not mimetic portraits of queer life in Seoul but "queer Koreas", which come in the form of imagined social worlds in which same-sex relationships are ordinary and structurally safe.

Several interviewees framed this choice explicitly in terms of escape and safety.

Interviewee I, for instance, states:

my fics⁶⁵ are my escape and safe place

i dont want my characters to suffer there too

if it's realism people want then they can read a sociology book [sic]⁶⁶

(Interviewee I)

Rather than rejecting realism across the board, this answer points to a selective bracketing of certain aspects of contemporary Korea, in particular, homophobic violence and stigma. The author's fics are framed as an "escape and safe place" in which LGBTQ+ characters and readers are not required to relive those harms. In Halperin's (1995) terms, this is queer re-

⁶⁴ Interviewee F 16th of August, 2020.

⁶⁵ Fan fiction stories are occasionally referred to as fics.

⁶⁶ Interviewee I 28th of June, 2020.

organisation of the social world in which the author rearranges what counts as “normal” so that queer intimacy is structurally ordinary and homophobia is what feels out of place.

Interviewee M similarly explains:

That’s one thing I’m more lenient on because I don’t agree with it because I’m part of the LGBTQ+ community. Fanfiction is a lot of fun, yes, but it’s also a safe space for readers. So, that is something I’m a little more lenient on. I don’t like to include homophobia.⁶⁷ (Interviewee M)

Here, “lenient” does not mean indifferent to homophobia. Instead, it signals a conscious softening of its presence in the text. As someone who identifies as part of “the LGBTQ+ community”, the author is acutely aware of the realities of discrimination and the emotional weight such scenes can carry, but chooses to “be more lenient” precisely in order to protect fanfiction as “safe space for readers”. In practice, this lenience takes the form of deliberately excluding or minimising homophobic incidents, prioritising fun, comfort and refuge over exhaustive social realism. The safe space is thus not a naive denial of how queer life is lived offline, but an intentional re-drawing of boundaries around what readers and characters have to experience inside the fic. In this sense, the author is engaged in a form of queer world-building, reorganising the story’s social order so that queer relationships can unfold without punishment or stigma, even while knowing that such conditions do not yet exist in the Korea that idols and fans inhabit.

A similar logic shapes Interviewee H’s account, which makes explicit that the “safe space” imagined in these stories is not only for the writer but for a wider community of readers:

⁶⁷ Interviewee M 20th-21st June, 2020.

I just want the readers to know that there exists safe places in the world where they can be loved and accepted. The world is hard enough as it. My writing isn't a place where they have to suffer through that, too. I had a solid support growing up but I also knew that the world out there is tough. Yet, that didn't bother me because I have a community. If my writing becomes that community for other people, then I'd have done my job as a storyteller.[sic]⁶⁸
(Interviewee H)

Rather than relocating their stories to countries where same-sex relationships are more legally or socially accepted, this author keeps their characters Korean and often situates them in a recognisably Korean setting, but imagines those spaces as already safe and affirming. In other words, they retain Korean nationality, everyday culture and parts of the setting while bracketing the political and ideological structures that currently make queer life precarious. Ultimately, Interviewee M and H's accounts exemplify queer in Halperin's (1995) sense, not as a stable identity category, but a positionality outside the norm, achieved here by quietly re-organising what counts as normal in an imagined Korea so that queer intimacy is ordinary and homophobia is pushed to the margins.

This logic resonates strongly with existing work on K-pop fandom as queer space. Baudinette and Scholes (2024) argue that K-pop fandom "represented a safe 'queer space' where fans could explore LGBTQ+ experience" and that it functions as an "empowering space for LGBTQ+ fans who desired to legitimate their desires within social spaces that were actively hostile to queer experiences" (p. 1581). Kuo et al. (2022) similarly argue that fan labour and fanfiction can function as a form of empowerment for LGBTQ+ people, giving them space to produce and share their own narratives in ways that push back against exclusionary media portrayals and social contexts that marginalise or erase them. Drawing on

⁶⁸ Interviewee H 22nd-27th of June, 2020.

these accounts, my interviewees' refusal to reproduce Korean homophobia can be seen less as naive optimism and more as a deliberate, queer re-organisation of Korean settings into safe, affirming imagined Koreas.

Anglophone K-pop shipping culture provides the affective basis for this re-organisation. As noted above, Baudinette (2023b) understands idol shipping as a form of fantasy play that unsettles normative ideas about sex and gender and lets fans experiment with their own desires and identifications. In Chapter One, I discuss how Anglophone fans often reimagine idols as LGBTQ+ within their fanfiction and fanart, and use these narratives as spaces for self-exploration and community formation (see Chapter One). Baudinette and Santos (2024) extend this by arguing that non-Korean K-pop fans actively participate in queering K-pop and the Korean Wave, transforming it into a “queer social force through their aspirations for queerness” (p. 163). In this light, the authors in my study are not simply erasing uncomfortable realities, but they are actively using K-pop fanfiction to realise those “aspirations for queerness” at the level of imagined Korean storyworlds.

Baudinette's (2020a) notion of “creative misreading” is a useful starting point here, but it does not map neatly onto K-pop fanfiction. He uses the term to describe how Filipino gay men read Thai BL as if it reflected a “gay paradise,” largely because they are unaware of how conservative Thailand actually is. By contrast, the K-pop fanfiction authors mention that they know that contemporary Korea is not especially accepting of sexual minorities. Rather than misreading Korea, they consciously set those realities aside and write stories in which Korea becomes an accepting, non-homophobic space. It is therefore more accurate to describe what they are doing as “creative constructing”: they knowingly build an imagined Korea that departs from existing social conditions, instead of mistakenly assuming that the real Korea already works that way.

A comparative glance at BL and slash helps situate these choices generically. Studies of Western m/m fanfiction, or slash, emphasise how often homophobia and social conflict form part of the narrative arc. Kukka (2018), for instance, argues that Western slash often centres LGBTQ+ characters and their experiences of social discrimination, presenting what they call “multidimensional and realistic identity formation stories” (p. 105). Levi et al. (2008) caution against drawing a hard line between BL and slash, noting their shared emergence in moments when sexuality and gender were being publicly contested (p. 4), but they also observe that slash has often been read as a response to under-representation of queer characters in mainstream Western media, whereas BL is more centrally concerned with homoerotic fantasy (p. 4). Within BL, critics have shown how some works present m/m intimacy as entirely unremarkable. For instance, Armour’s (2010) reading of Tagame Gengorō highlights characters who are not explicitly identified as homosexual but nevertheless engage in sex with men in ways that “deterritorialise their hegemonic masculinity” and render same-sex desire nothing out of the ordinary (p. 461). Martin (2012) similarly describes Taiwanese readers’ category of “pure-love BL” in which homophobia largely disappears from the narrative world (pp. 368-369).

K-pop fanfiction draws on and transforms these traditions through transnational media flows. Kwon (2021) shows that Korean “fanfic” emerged as a digital BL subgenre centred on local celebrities, and that the K-pop idol system itself was shaped by J-pop and BL-inflected aesthetics.⁶⁹ The authors in my study participate in this broader tendency to normalise queer romance, but they also connect it to their own queer or ally positionalities and to a wish to provide respite for readers. Their stories thus inhabit a lineage of homoerotic fantasy spaces,

⁶⁹ Korean K-pop fanfiction is labelled as “Fanfic/팬픽” in Korean fan communities.

yet are also part of what Kuo et al. (2022) describe as “resistance” to erasure (p. 18). In other words, the authors use idealised queer Koreas to counter the hostility of the offline world.

In the discussion of gendered aesthetics within K-pop, Laurie (2016) notes that fanfiction authors sometimes overlook the actual challenges faced by sexual minorities, using these issues to fulfil personal fannish desires instead (p. 222). This tendency can be linked to the idealised, carefully managed homoerotic imagery that Korean entertainment companies promote around idols (see Chapter One). The adoption of visual and affective cues associated with BL to encourage the pairing of idol groups risks offering a misleading picture of how sexual minorities are treated in Korea, and can make it easier for fanfiction authors to minimise or ignore social discrimination in their works. At the same time, these idealised depictions provide raw material for writing queer safe narratives and imagined versions of Korea that readers may in turn take up and extend in their own stories.

Promoting homosocial or sometimes even queer-coded acts among idol members is commonly referred to as fanservice in K-pop fan communities (see Chapter One). These homosocial/queer acts are usually “nonverbal” interactions between two bandmates and are what inspires Korean Fanfic authors to write (Kwon 2019, location 1003). A similar dynamic appears in my interviews. Interviewee L, for instance, explains how they began shipping TaeKook after encountering fan-edited YouTube videos, well before they considered themselves a K-pop fan⁷⁰:

Honestly, I thought they were dating openly when I started getting into bts
kdenidnwjs I then informed myself of what was going on and fell on the
Taekook hole [sic]⁷¹ (Interviewee L)

⁷⁰ The pairing name for BTS members Taehyung and Jungkook. To see an example of their videos go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGVbKj3jAe8>

⁷¹ Interviewee L 23rd-24th of June, 2020.

The videos that the fans produced to highlight TaeKook's interactions led the interviewee to read them as a publicly out gay couple. For this impression to form, the clips needed to showcase intimate, plausibly romantic moments between the members. Since none of the BTS members (or the idols mentioned by my participants more broadly) have publicly identified as queer, these moments are better understood as part of the fantasy image constructed and sold by agencies. Once the interviewee learned more about how K-pop and fanservice operate, they were able to reinterpret these interactions as staged or playful rather than evidence of an actual relationship. Similarly, Interviewee G also reports that they started their shipping journey with VMin⁷² and YoonJin⁷³ after watching their YouTube videos:

TT videos on YouTube lol

a little embarrassing haha!

but it was before I got onto twitter so it was really the main source of any information for me! [sic]⁷⁴ (Interviewee G)

For this participant, YouTube functioned as the primary entry point into K-pop and shipping, providing curated compilations of the idol members' interactions that foregrounded homoerotic or emotionally intense moments. These examples underline how fanservice, as it circulates through fan-made video content, is central to the formation of queer ships long before fanfiction enters the picture.

Because fanservice is more heavily encouraged among members of the same group, the three interviewees who only wrote heterosexual couples reported rather different shipping

⁷² The pairing name of BTS members V and Jimin. To see an example of their videos go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n172ggf7Uwo>

⁷³ The pairing name of BTS members Yoongi and SeokJin. To see an example of their videos to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilxzQoYII_A

⁷⁴ Interviewee G, 9th – 10th of August, 2020.

trajectories. Interviewee N, for instance, describes when asked how they started shipping EXO's Sehun with Gugudan's Sejeong:

I ship them romantically, ever since they were casted in the netflix original
Busted [sic]⁷⁵ (Interviewee N)

Here, the source text is a scripted show rather than behind-the-scenes group content. This suggests that heterosexual shippers do not have access to the same density of intra-group fanservice as same-sex shippers, and instead often rely on dramas, variety shows or music videos that place male and female idols together in fiction or semi-fictional scenarios.

Interviewee O similarly recalls beginning to ship TiffHae⁷⁶ after watching a music video:

It might seem like I chose Tiffhae as my OTP because they are my biases but
no I ship them because they looked so cute in Kissing U MV⁷⁷ (Interviewee O)

Although Tiffany and Donghae are also this participant's biases, they frame their attraction to the ship in terms of the visual and affective "cuteness" of the pairing in the video, rather than simply bias alignment. As discussed in Chapter One, rumours of heterosexual relationships often prompt backlash and withdrawal of fan support, which leads agencies to deny or downplay such connections and to keep male and female idols apart in many promotional contexts. Heterosexual shippers therefore tend to depend more on occasional scripted interactions in media texts rather than on continuous, company-sanctioned fanservice.

Another motivation for writing heterosexual couples emerges in Interviewee B's discussion of YoonHae (Girls' Generation's Yoona and Super Junior's Donghae). Asked what attracted them to this pairing, they answer:

⁷⁵ Interviewee N, 11th of June, 2020.

⁷⁶ The pairing name for Girls' Generation's Tiffany and Super Junior's Donghae.

⁷⁷ Interviewee O, 21st of August, 2020.

maybe not so much in physical (though some consider them to be looking similar). More than the air/atmosphere about them, i guess? of course, when we're talking about personality, what kpop idols show on-cam would never 100% be their actual personalities (and fans always have each of their own perception of the idols' shown personalities). Having said that disclaimer, for me back then: yoonhae both have similar 'docile' atmosphere about them. Not loud, considered to be gentle, sweet, etc [sic]⁷⁸ (Interviewee B)

Here, “similarity” is located in perceived public persona rather than physical resemblance. The interviewee is careful to note the constructed and partial nature of idols’ on-camera personalities, yet still describes both Yoona and Donghae as sharing a “docile”, gentle atmosphere. This reflects how entertainment companies assign overlapping images and roles to idols, which fans then rework as raw material for shipping. In this sense, public persona, alongside music videos and shows, becomes a key source of heterosexual ships, whereas same-sex ships are more directly nurtured by intra-group fanservice.

Another source of shipping that writers of same-sex pairings mention is K-pop fanfiction itself. Interviewee G, for instance, who previously mentioned how they started shipping VMin (BTS’ V and Jimin) and YoonJin (BTS’ SUGA, using his real name Yoongi, and Jin) from videos, declare that they shifted to shipping NamJin (BTS’ RM, using his real name Namjoon, and Jin) due to fanfiction:

that was completely via fics and seeing Namjin as a side ship and thinking wow I want to read more of that so I started reading them as a main ship and it went downhill from there lol [sic]⁷⁹ (Interviewee G)

⁷⁸ Interviewee B 26th of April, 2020.

⁷⁹ Interviewee G 9th – 10th of August, 2020.

Even though this participant already had established ships based on video content, exposure to NamJin as a side pairing in fanfiction led them to adopt it as a main OTP. This indicates that K-pop fanfics can be both an outcome of fanservice and a generative force in their own right, inspiring new ships that may or may not be heavily foregrounded in official media. Interviewee K similarly emphasises the role of fanfiction in shaping how they see Sope (BTS' Suga and J-hope):

Hmm 😊 when I watch a lot of their videos I guess I just rly liked their dynamics with each other? Also how other writers write them made me like their fic dynamics if that makes sense. Like with sope it's the sunshine and broody trope kinda thing [sic]⁸⁰ (Interviewee K)

The interviewee gives credits to Sope fanfiction writers for making them view Sope in a different light. That is another case of how the view of a couple from fanfiction can differ from their representation in videos. The participant also mentions the “sunshine and broody trope” that K-pop fanfic authors seem to have established around Sope. The "sunshine and broody trope" in fanfics refers to a dynamic between two characters often seen in romantic or buddy narratives. One character, who is J-hope in the example, is the "sunshine" and is typically optimistic, cheerful, and often brings light and warmth to the story, much like the sun. They are usually characterized by a positive outlook on life and can lift the spirits of those around them. The other character, Suga, is the "broody" and tends to be more introspective, serious, or moody, often grappling with internal conflicts or a dark past. Such character might have a cynical view of the world or carry emotional baggage that makes them less open and more complex.

⁸⁰ Interviewee K 22nd of June, 2020.

In a similar way to how entertainment companies assign distinct yet complementary roles and images to idols, K-pop fanfiction authors develop characteristic dynamics and tropes around particular ships that then circulate through the fandom. Interviewee J who is a female-female couple K-pop fanfiction writer who has a long list of ships (former YoonYul, short for Girls' Generation Yoona and Yuri, who they never wrote fanfiction about, then Yulsic, short for Girls Generation Yuri and former member Jessica, Taeny, short for Girls' Generation Taeyeon and Jessica, WenRene, short for Red Velvet Wendy and Irene and Chenlisa, short for Blackpink Rose and Lisa), articulates the reciprocal relationship between videos and fanfics:

It's either you read them on fanfics then decided to watch videos of them or you saw a video of them then decided to read fic about them⁸¹ (Interviewee J)

With “them”, the interviewee is referring to their ships. They provide a view on the cycle that K-pop fanfiction authors (and readers alike) go through to ship in K-pop fandom. The shipping can occur from the videos (fanservice via Korean industries), or the K-pop fanfiction authors themselves who also might also have been influenced from fanservice.

Overall, these accounts sketch a multi-step circuit: BL provides queer and homoerotic templates for Korean media producers; entertainment companies adapt these into idol-centred fanservice; global fans consume and remix that fanservice in videos; and K-pop fanfiction writers transform these images into their own queer story worlds. Readers who fall for a ship through fic may in turn become writers themselves, extending this loop of idol-centred, queer world-building and contributing new “dynamics” and tropes that reshape how others see the couple.

⁸¹ Interviewee J 27th of June, 2020.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, scholarship on BL and Western slash broadly contrasts slash's tendency to foreground homophobia and identity struggle with strands of BL that normalise m/m intimacy and bracket discrimination (see Kukka, 2018; Levi et al., 2008; Armour, 2010; Martin, 2012). Here, the largely low-conflict queer Koreas imagined by my participants sit closer to this BL-derived "ordinary" queerness than to slash's emphasis on structural oppression, even as they are reworked within an Anglophone, RPF-based K-pop fandom.

The authorial choice to significantly disregard homophobia in their stories can be read as an indirect product of this blend. On the one hand, it aligns these K-pop fanfics with BL and "pure-love" conventions in which queer romance is structurally ordinary and largely untroubled by social sanction; on the other, it reflects Anglophone fan cultures' emphasis on fic as a space where readers should not have to re-live everyday marginalisation (see Chapter One). Framed through Halperin's (1995) definition of queer as a positionality against "the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62), these authors' choices are less about denying the reality of homophobia in contemporary Korea than about reorganising the storyworld so that Korean idols can inhabit queer lives that are not defined by injury. In this sense, K-pop fanfiction occupies a hybrid position: it inherits BL conventions that make queer intimacy unremarkable, but recombines them with idol fanservice and Western RPF norms. The "queer Koreas" in these stories are not direct copies of either BL or slash, but transcultural mash-ups that make Korean idols available as queer, cared-for characters in ways that exceed both Korean media industries and Western mainstream representation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that transcultural K-pop fanfiction writing is structured by friction rather than by a smooth, harmonious sense of global which Jung (2017) terms "we-

ness.” Drawing on Annett’s (2011) adaptation of Tsing’s concept of “friction” (2004), I showed that non-Korean K-pop fanfic authors experience internal friction in the everyday craft of handling mediated Koreanness: deciding when to research locations and institutions, how heavily to rely on food, language and honourifics, when to leave settings deliberately vague, and how far they can safely use Korean terms without sounding “cringey” or being accused of Koreaboo behaviour. These same questions become collaborative, and often asymmetrical, friction when they move into public debate. Bringing Oh and Han’s (2024) notion of racial translocalism into dialogue with this framework, I demonstrated that fans are not equally positioned when it comes to defining “accurate” or “respectful” representation. Interview material and online debates suggest that those of East Asian or broader Asian descent, and those with higher levels of Asia literacy, are often granted more authority to adjudicate how Koreanness should appear in fic, while white Western fans are more easily cast as potential appropriators. In this way, the chapter shows that transcultural K-pop fandom is not only affectively bound together, but also organised by racialised and geo-cultural hierarchies of expertise and entitlement.

The chapter also traced how this friction is calibrated across genres and world-building choices. By comparing authors’ realist and supernatural AUs, I showed that mediated Koreanness is not simply present or absent, but redistributed: sometimes thinned out in Western-coded fantasy worlds, sometimes densely retained across genres, and sometimes oscillating within a single story between carefully located Seouls and almost denationalised mythic spaces. I theorised these shifting configurations as multiple “imagined Koreas,” extending Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined communities into the realm of fanfiction: global readers do not encounter a singular Korea, but a set of fan-produced Koreas that selectively amplify, soften or bracket cultural markers according to genre conventions and authors’ comfort levels. At the same time, drawing on Halperin’s understanding of queer

as that which stands against “the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1997, p. 64), I argued that the normative contestation surrounding Koreanness largely disappears when it comes to queer world-building. Across my interviews, authors who disagreed sharply about realism, westernisation or language use nonetheless converged on the project of imagining Korea as a queer-safe space, where male–male idol relationships are unremarkable and homophobic violence is muted or absent. In these fics, Korea is reconfigured as a queer utopia rather than reproduced as a site of structural homophobia.

Lastly, these findings make three key contributions to debates on transcultural fandom and to my thesis overall. First, they refine transcultural fandom theory by showing that transcultural K-pop fanfiction is normatively contested: it is shaped by ongoing arguments about realism, appropriation and responsibility, not just by shared affection for idols. Second, they demonstrate that this contestation is unequally structured: racial translocalism and uneven access to mediated Koreanness mean that some fans are positioned as cultural mediators or gatekeepers while others tread more cautiously or withdraw into “unmarked” settings. Third, they highlight the importance of genre and queer world-building in organising these negotiations: different genres sustain different distributions of Korean markers, and queer utopian Koreas emerge as a special case where much of the friction around representation is temporarily suspended in favour of collective queer imagining. By foregrounding authors’ voices, Chapter Two thus establishes transcultural K-pop fanfiction as a space in which fans continually calibrate how much Koreanness each story can carry, under what conditions, and for whom, laying the groundwork for Chapter Three’s shift to readers, where I show how these contested imaginaries are taken up, backgrounded, or bracketed within everyday commenting practices.

Chapter Three: Transcultural K-pop FanFiction Readers

Introduction

The previous chapter centred on K-pop fanfiction authors and the frictions they experience when writing across cultures: how they negotiate mediated Koreanness, worry about Koreaboo accusations, and construct queer “safe” Koreas that depart from the realities of homophobia in contemporary South Korea. This chapter shifts focus to anglophone K-pop fanfiction readers and the ways they respond to those stories. Rather than assuming that transcultural fandom is simply reflected in the presence of Korean cultural markers, I examine when and how readers’ cross-border position becomes textually visible in AO3 comments, and when it remains backgrounded behind more general fanfiction norms. Put differently, I ask: what does the transcultural nature of anglophone K-pop fandom look like at the level of mundane, everyday commenting and how often does it show up at all?

To address this, I conduct a comparative study of comments on twenty multi-chapter Alternative Universe (AU) fics on AO3: ten K-pop RPF stories and ten Bandom stories. Using a combination of quantitative coding and qualitative content analysis, I trace which topics readers focus on (story, characters, setting, language, author), how they express affect, and how often they reference Korean language, culture or geography. I complement this corpus analysis with interview material in which K-pop fanfic authors talk about their habits and priorities as readers. Ultimately, these sources allow me to situate K-pop readers’ commenting practices within broader Anglophone RPF cultures on AO3, while still attending to the specific cross-border context of K-pop.

I argue that, despite K-pop’s status as a transnational media form, explicitly “transcultural” traces in K-pop readers’ comments are rare. References to Korean language, places or cultural practices form only a small fraction of the dataset and tend to appear in stylised ways, such as the playful use of Romanised Korean words or Korean–English hybrids. The vast majority of comments, however, focus on affective response (how the story made the reader feel, how much they love a ship or character) and on thanking authors,

echoing the criteria my interviewees named when they described a “good fic” primarily in terms of OTP, plot and readability. On this evidence, AO3 comment fields look less like spaces where debates over Koreanness and representation are worked through, and more like “friction-light” spaces organised around encouragement and emotional reciprocity.

This pattern aligns with Jenkins’s view of fanfiction as part of a participatory culture in which fans write and respond to texts from a mixture of fascination and frustration, and in which feedback circulates within dense, ongoing networks of shared norms rather than as one-off reviews (Jenkins, 1992). It also speaks directly to Busse and Hellekson’s characterisation of fanfiction communities as a “gift culture”, where stories are offered without profit and comments function primarily as reciprocation and social glue rather than as formal critique (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). In both my K-pop and Bandom samples, readers overwhelmingly use the comment box to say “thank you”, “I loved this” or “please update”, and to gush over characters. These are not trivialities: they are the everyday practices that sustain what Busse and Hellekson call the “fantext”, the shared web of stories and responses that gradually builds a fandom’s collective understanding of characters and settings.

At the same time, I situate anglophone K-pop RPF within a wider framework of transcultural fandom. Following Chin and Morimoto, I treat transcultural fandom as a structure in which fans in different locations become attached to foreign media not through prior cultural knowledge but through “moments of affinity” and operate within increasingly convergent fan-cultural contexts (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). In this chapter, I apply their insight specifically to the anglophone K-pop RPF space on AO3. K-pop readers share platforms, tagging systems and feedback conventions with Bandom readers; this shared infrastructure helps explain why their commenting practices look so similar, even though the idols and bands they read about come from very different industrial and regional histories.

Drawing on Annett's adaptation of Tsing's concept of "friction" as "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative" cross-cultural encounter (Annett, 2011; Tsing, 2004), I further argue that frictions around Koreanness and representation are not absent in this field, but largely displaced away from AO3 comments to other positions (for example, authors talking about their craft) and other platforms (especially X).

On this basis, in this chapter, I ask three practice-focused research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do K-pop fanfiction readers' comments display visible traces of transculturality (for example, references to Korean language, culture or global K-pop discourse), and how do these traces sit alongside other dominant functions of commenting such as praise, emotional reaction and requests for updates?
2. How do the commenting practices of K-pop fanfiction readers compare with those of Bandom readers, and what does this comparison suggest about shared norms of affect, evaluation and etiquette within Anglophone RPF communities more broadly?
3. How do K-pop fanfiction authors' accounts of their reading practices (ships, tropes, craft, ethics) align with or diverge from observed commenting practices on AO3, and what does this relationship suggest about how cross-border concerns are negotiated in everyday fanfiction reception?

Answering these questions allows this chapter to feed back into the wider argument of the thesis. I show that, in the case of anglophone K-pop fanfiction, transcultural fandom is structured by affect first and critique second. The everyday "grammar" of interaction on AO3 is provided by global fanfiction norms of gift culture and emotional reciprocity; questions of national culture, Koreanness and unequal power appear only selectively, in particular roles and on particular platforms, as moments of friction. By tracing how readers comment on K-pop and Bandom fics side by side, the chapter demonstrates both how K-pop fanfiction

becomes legible and “at home” within generalised Anglophone fanfiction commenting practices, and how debates about representation are displaced to other parts of the transcultural fan ecology rather than being present altogether.

Online Communities and Online Comments

With the emergence of the digital world came along multiple ways of online interactions which eventually contributed to forming online communities. The web has been considered

as a mediator of interactions and novel ways one can use to belong to a community (Costa & Torres, 2011, p. 49). Online commenting, specifically, is a highly significant fashion of interaction in the cyber world (Marmorstein & Sclafan, 2019). Such practice was initially developed in online discussion forms such as The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, abbreviated as WELL, bulletin board systems and Usenet platforms providing online users with a space dedicated to political or philosophical discussions which brought forth the concept of online communities (Mollen, 2018, p. 16). Along with the advent of the online world, online commenting has drawn the focus of a large number of researchers. Such practice has first gained traction in the academic world through journalism studies (Mollen, 2018, p. 19).

Mollen (2018) divided academic research on online commenting practices into three stages: (a) the digital institutions' expectations from their commenters, (b) problematic commenting, (c) and the ways in which news outlets react to comments' management (p. 19). The first stage includes academic works particularly centralised on media platforms' perspectives on online commenting in their spaces (See for eg. Marchionni, 2015; Reich, 2010; Robinson, 2010). Next, the practice of commenting including motivations behind it (see for eg. Barnes, 2015; Barnes et al., 2018; Springer et al., 2015), discourse quality (Santana, 2019), and mostly on uncivil comments known as trolling comments (see Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016; Rosner et al., 2016; Reich, 2010; Santana, 2019). The third phase focuses on the moderation and standardisation of online comments (see for eg. Meyer and Carey, 2014; Reich, 2010; Wolfgang, 2018).

Research conducted on triggers and motivations that drive online users to engage in online communities via commenting, as mentioned, has gained a fair amount of attention. It has been argued that "individual-centric reasons" such as "informational, personal, personal identity and entertainment motives" in addition to "social interaction" have been considered efficient triggers on why one engages in such practices (Barnes, 2015, p. 6; Barnes et al.,

2018, p. 119). In this space, fandom, known to be heavily internet-mediated, has received considerable attention in relation to how and why fans form and participate in online communities. However, fans' commenting practices have attracted relatively little attention.

To explain the reason for that, Jonathan Gray employs Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, which sheds more light on rational critical discourse and argues that fans' comments, which are thought to be derived from entertainment and enjoyment, are considered by some academics as "irrational" and therefore not worthy of serious scrutiny (2007, p. 76-77). Fan comments, indeed, can be perceived by others as biased or overly influenced by personal enjoyment, leading to an underestimation of the value these comments can add to understanding fandom dynamics. However, dismissing fan comments entirely ignores their potential to provide genuine insights into fan culture, community building, and social interactions within fandoms. Fans' comments, despite their subjective nature, can reveal important trends, collective attitudes, and the ways in which media is consumed and interpreted. Therefore, while acknowledging the potential biases, it is essential to recognise that fans' comments can contribute meaningfully to academic discourse on online communities and media consumption.

Meanwhile, in relation to fans forming their own online communities, several critics have argued that fans' desires and emotional connection are prominent in how fans engage with the media text (Fiske, 2002, p. 30; Jenkins, 2007). Grossberg, for instance, labels such investment as "affect" in which fans are emotionally attached to their fan object. Additionally, Barnes (2015) and Barnes et al (2018) apply Wetherill's notion of "affective space" as an emotion that drives people to communicate about their object of interest which results in a physical reaction and concludes that such "affect practice" triggers the action of commenting (p. 815; pp. 38-41).

Nancy K. Baym (1998) argues that online communities, specifically fans, adopt an exclusive “style” as to how they interact and virtually engage with each other and their object of interest based on a number of pre-existing factors: (a) “external contexts”, (b) “temporal structure”, (c) “system infrastructure”, (d) “group purposes”, and (e) “participant characteristics” (p. 38). In greater detail, the first factor, that is, external contexts, represents the outside environment of online users (1998, pp. 40-43). Second, temporal structure refers to the requirement of certain fans to go online at the same time so communities’ functions can occur (p. 43-44). Third, Baym regards the online platforms wherein the fans virtually meet as crucial to the communities’ style formation in terms of designs and regulations (p. 44-45). Fourth, group purposes allude to the reasons why online users initially join a community and choose to stay in it (p. 46-47). Fifth, participant characteristics are vital to style creation as each community enjoys different skills, attributes, knowledge and experience (p. 47-48).

When scrutinizing online Soap Opera fans in an online forum, Baym (1998) deduced a range of style characteristics that online communities adopt. He states that the most relevant characteristics are “the emergence of group-specific forms of expression, identities, relationships, and normative conventions” (p. 38). He argues that these factors may be “emergent rather than predictable” in which one cannot precisely guess what a certain community’s style is until further investment (p. 49). Ultimately, he considers such emergent factors as ways in which a group can form a community (p. 51).

In order to assess online communities, online interactions such as comments are suggested to be the most efficient tool to use (Barnes, 2015, p. 18) as they represent a “shared form of interactions, social ties among members and a sense of belonging and group identification—a sense of community” (Barnes, 2015, p. 13). That is why, in order to study K-pop fanfiction and Bandom readers, I chose to content analyse their comments on fanfiction stories instead of conducting an ethnography or other methods of research.

Commenting practices are also crucial in my study as they aid me to assess how K-pop fanfiction readers present themselves as transcultural fans of K-pop through sharing multiple norms, conventions, and attributes.

Mollen (2018) argues that one needs to be well-versed in the practices of online commenting in order to better understand the online communities under study (p. 52). In respect of this, I have used my personal fannish experience as a K-pop fanfiction author and reader in order to make sense of readers' comments on Bandom and K-pop fanfiction. For instance, my familiarity with common tropes, narrative structures, and community-specific language has allowed me to identify subtle nuances in the feedback provided by readers. Additionally, understanding the culture of engagement and the value placed on certain types of comments has helped me to interpret the significance of various responses within these fan communities. This insider perspective has been crucial in analysing how comments reflect readers' preferences, criticisms, and emotional investments in the stories.

In this chapter, the focus has shifted from the authors which I discussed in the previous chapter the readers, I have decided to conduct a comparative study of Bandom readers on AO3 and K-pop fanfiction in the same platform. The cause of that is the potential limitations that could arise due to platform differences. To expand on this, the space in which readers leave comments differs from one platform to another, and those differences have a major impact on commenting practices (Barnes, 2015). For instance, although online commenting has been considered as an act of freedom in which a user is liberated to voice out their thoughts (Mollen, 2018, p. 25), some sites apply certain regulations that might hinder the user's commenting behaviour.

An example of platform differences is visible when briefly comparing AFF to AO3. On AFF, a reader cannot comment on a story if they are not registered on the website.

Contrastingly, on AO3, readers can simply comment as guests in the story without having to create an account except if the story is archived-locked to avoid AI scraping. Additionally, guests can even leave kudos, a button in the fanfiction header that symbolises compliment and praise, on fanfiction stories they like. These attributes have a strong tendency to impact on the commenting practices of fanfiction readers. Readers on AFF are potentially predisposed to comment less or maybe differently as some might feel it burdensome to have to create an account. Meanwhile, *AO3* facilitates the practice of commenting for its readers.

Fanfiction Readers

The area of research concerning fanfiction readership has been prominently divided by fan studies critics into two sub-areas: the study of fanfiction authors as either critical readers of the canonical material, or as fans who write to deviate, add on, or eliminate a part of canon (Sauro, 2019). Unlike research into fanfiction authors and their use of source texts, little

research has been conducted regarding fanfiction readers in general (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015, p. 27; Steenhuyse, 2011), and even less has been done on K-pop fanfiction readers.

The nature of fanfiction as an active space helps us to scrutinise the relationship between the readers, the text, and the author thoroughly. This feature of cooperation is deemed vital in the fanfiction world and recognising it is fundamental to make meaning of how writing fanfiction works (Parrish, 2007, p. 42). This interactional sphere, also labelled as feedback, is vigorously supported by a great number of fanfiction websites (Parrish, 2007, p. 105). Additionally, fanfiction consisting of a large number of multi-chaptered, also known as "on-going" narratives, encourages the readers to comment throughout the story.

Busse and Hellekson suggest that the ongoing nature of fanfiction "invites responses, permits shared authorship, and enjoins a sense of community" (2006). This supports the view of online fanfiction as an interactional sphere. Julianne Chatelain further explains that "online fanfiction has a culture of relentless reviewing that is so frequently supported by customised code and tools" (2003, par. 1), highlighting the technical infrastructure that facilitates this interactive engagement. In other words, the amount of continuous and determined reviewing done in the fanfiction world happens because of website mechanisms that facilitate it.

There are even cases where readers playing a role of "critical respondents" are considered as "co-authors" (Parrish, 2007, p. 121) though, most of the time, comments tend to consist of an "update soon" or a short compliment. This implies that those mechanisms indeed facilitate and encourage commenting, but they do not always result in readers leaving lengthy and critical essays on the fanfiction they engage with (Chatelain, 2003, par. 6). Still, the most beneficial side of the comments' section wherein the fanfiction audience leaves their reviews is, as Busse and Hellekson (2006) explain, the fact that even if the story is published (either print or online), discussions among the readers (who, for some cases, also happen to be

authors) remain as "a whole new level of discourse that provides engagement in both positive and negative feedback" (par. 5). This justifies that feedback plays a prominent role as it contributes to maintaining fanfiction as an active discussion space. In other words, even after the fanfiction story is completely finished, the comments' section will still be active and new readers will still have the opportunity to leave comments on it as they discuss the story with old readers or even the author.

Previous research regarding fanfiction readers has focused on digital literacies in which they are considered as tools that assist fanfiction authors to improve their writing skills. In this area of research, fanfiction readers' comments have been examined as constructive feedback that fosters fanfiction authors' language learning (see Black, 2006; Korobkova & Black, 2014; Parrish, 2007) and their identities as competent writers (see Magnificio et al., 2015; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Campbell et al. (2016); Parrish, 2007).

Furthermore, Campbell et al. (2016) labelled fanfiction readers as "reviewers" who engage in "a networked experience [they] have termed distributed mentoring" wherein they consider readers' comments as an active space whereby "interactive, cumulatively, sophisticated and informal instruction" take place (par. 66). They additionally argue that the mentoring experience becomes more efficient when there is a great number of comments by the readers (par. 75). However, Magnificio et al. (2015) when conducting research through the use of linguistic analyses on reviewers on Fanfiction.net and Figment.com report that reviewers' comments, even if of large quantity, do not essentially contribute to the writing skills of the author (in their case, young adults) which makes it a necessity to consult experts (such as teachers) for feedback (p. 158).

Concerning the study of fanfiction readers as assistants who help writers build their identity as good writers, Rebecca W. Black, for instance, discusses the experience of Nanako,

a non-native English speaker and an anime fanfiction author who was encouraged by her readers to improve her English and also share some of her cultural values with them. That resulted in Nanako identifying as a competent fanfiction writer and as a cultural expert in her medium (2006).

Though Black (2006) approached cross-cultural exchange and identity in a subtle way wherein she explains how Nanako's being a Chinese immigrant in Canada helped her inform her readers about her local culture, the focal point of her paper was the means through which readers encouraged her writing which then resulted in the improvement of her literacy skills. Black (2006) assessed the comments' section of Nanako's fanfic and discovered the readers' consistent interest in the author's cultural identity, that is Chinese. In other words, the focus was placed on the readers' interest in the readers' cultural identity rather than the fanfiction characters' Japanese anime identities. In contrast with Black's (2006) work, instead of concentrating on the author's cultural identity, this chapter focuses on the ways K-pop fanfiction readers interact and react to K-pop fanfiction characters' cultural identities, and asks to what extent this cultural focus is actually visible in everyday commenting, if at all.

Only one study has been conducted on K-pop fanfiction and it dealt mainly with how both K-pop fanfiction authors and readers presented themselves as K-pop fans and well-recognised fanfiction writers and readers through which they form what Lee (2018) labels as a "border-crossing social group" (p. 50). In order to present themselves as such, as Lee (2018) notes, they produce and share their own "social languages" by means of incorporating hybrid Korean-English words into their fannish discussions (p. 50) which helps them build a form of unity (p. 86).

On that study, Lee (2018) scrutinises K-pop fanfiction spaces from a social point of view in which their focal point was to argue that the goal of these fans is to be recognised as K-pop

fans, which hence, results in the hybrid Korean-English use. While this work highlights one visible linguistic dimension of transcultural fandom, namely the creation of hybrid “social languages”, it says relatively little about the wider range of topics and evaluative norms that structure readers’ comments. Meanwhile, I deem it necessary to discuss how often and in what ways such hybrid language actually appears within the broader flow of comments, and how it sits alongside other, more general fanfiction-commenting practices. In this chapter, I will focus on how K-pop fanfiction readers, specifically, respond to K-pop fics in practice: which topics they foreground, which aspects of stories they praise or ignore, and how occasionally visible references to Koreanness or K-pop discourse fit into this wider commenting ecology.

Rather than assuming that the presence of Korean cultural markers in comments straightforwardly “measures” transculturality, I treat these markers as one possible trace of transcultural fandom among others, and I am equally attentive to their absence. I therefore examine whether K-pop fanfiction readers’ comments differ markedly from those in another RPF context, in this case, *Bandom*, or whether they largely follow the same affective and craft-focused norms that structure Anglophone fanfiction communities more generally. I will also more generally assess how K-pop fanfic readers’ commenting practices position them within a wider Anglophone RPF comment culture: do their responses appear specific to K-pop’s transcultural status, or do they suggest a more unified RPF community in which affective motivation, gift culture and shared platform norms take precedence over national-cultural concerns? To do so, I will be conducting a comparative study between readers’ comments in K-pop fanfiction and *Bandom* in AO3.

Both of those reading communities belong to the RPF genre and they share various commonalities that set them apart from other fanfiction genres. One of the most visible similarities is how both revolve around bands and most dominantly, male groups.

Additionally, they both involve shipping bandmates romantically and writing slash stories about them whether to predict what happens behind the scenes or imagine them in another universe. For this comparative study, AO3 was chosen as the research setting as a result of consisting of both Bandom and K-pop fanfiction.

For this study, I selected the most commented on 10 K-pop fanfiction stories and 10 bandom stories in February 2020. The twenty selected stories are all multi-chaptered and share one common theme which is Alternative Universe (hereafter AU), a fanfiction genre where characters are placed in a different setting than the original. The stories' dates of publication range from 2012 to 2019. A quarter of the comments were taken as the representative sample due to the huge number of data through the use of systematic sampling. Qualitative and quantitative methods were applied in order to retrieve and interpret data—I deployed both quantitative content analysis to code my data into relevant variables and an inductive approach to thematic analysis to analyse my findings.

Methodology

For this study, I employed qualitative content analysis on 3,235 comments from Bandom and K-pop fanfiction readers on 20 of the most commented AU-genre fanfictions on AO3: the 10 most commented K-pop AU fics and the 10 most commented Bandom AU fics at the time of

data collection. The first step was forming categories and sub-categories relevant to my research questions. 8 main categories and 31 sub-categories were coded. After that, I used systematic sampling and appointed a representative sample that reduced the number of comments (originally 15,959) to a quarter (now 3235). The process of sampling is shown in details in a form of tables (see table 1, 2 and 3) In terms of reliability, having supervisors assess the categories is efficient (Mayring, 2014, p. 114), I consulted my supervisors about my choice of categories and they helped me assess their compatibility before I started collecting my data. My data was organised in Excel along with categories and word count of each comment. Graphs of both main and sub categories were presented to display the results of my study, specifically the frequencies of these categories. Finally, I chose to discuss my findings by dividing results into three sections: *Affective Reading and Thin Cultural Marking*, *Age of Fandom and Informal Commenting Practices*, and *Shared Commenting Practices Across K-pop and Bandom RPF*. Also, all comments will be quoted as they are even if they have grammatical mistakes.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Karl Erik Rosengren has defined content analysis as a method employed “to characterize, to condense and elucidate the content, to bring out the essentials or point out certain typical characteristics” (1981, p. 111), aiming to unveil hidden, implicit and unobservable meanings in texts (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 25; Rosengren, 1981, p. 111). This method of analysis has

been most favourable to study textual materials, especially in the field of mass communications (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). While working with this method, the researcher is expected to form categories or codes relevant to their study then calculate the frequency or existence of such categories in the material (text or image) they are aiming to examine (par. 2).

Additionally, content analysis has been considered as “an empirically grounded method” that requires the researcher to “explor[e] in process” and sort inferences and predictions on the studied material (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 1). In other words, to conduct content analysis as a research method, the researcher is required to read between the lines of their texts or images. However, these inferences can only be applied once able to “systematically and objectively” extract features from the text (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, par. 2) which, thus, implies the quantitative nature of content analysis (par. 2) as quantitative methods, in contrast with qualitative methods that focus on “reflexivity”, undertake more “complex statistical techniques” (Brannen, 2004, p. 312).

Content analysis, being systematic and numeric, has been classified as a quantitative research method by multiple scholars. Bernard Berelson explains content analysis as a “research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (1952, p. 18). However, some opponents argue that it comprises of both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Krippendorff (2004), for instance, disapproves of categorising content analysis as wholly quantitative and emphasizes that the act of text reading is in itself qualitative, albeit transformed into numeric data later (p. 16). Furthermore, James Drisko and Tina Maschi refuse to label content analysis as mixed methods and label it as a method “hybrid” in its nature in which it consists of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. They regard the coding of characteristics in the text a qualitative approach and the digitization of results as quantitative (2015, p. 11).

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis have gained the attention of several academics (Drisko & Maschi, par.8). Following Berelson's (1952) definition of content analysis as a quantitative method, multiple scholars applied the newly emerging method (Drisko and Maschi, 2015) labelling it as qualitative content analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) in order to clearly distinguish it from the quantitative nature of basic content analysis. The German psychologist, Mayring (2014) was the first one to deploy the term in 1983 (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, par. 13; Mayring, 2014). Some academics criticize basic content analysis in which they argue that such word calculation is not an adequate analytic approach (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, par. 9; Mayring, 2014, p. 20).

Similarly, Schreier (2012) reported a list of characteristics that distinguish qualitative content analysis from basic content analysis whereby she presents certain qualitative content analysis elements: "(a) focus on latent meaning, (b) much context needed, (c) variable handling of reliability, (d) validity checks just as important as reliability checks, (e) at least partly data-driven, (f) more inferences to context, author recipients, (g) more variability in carrying out the steps" and quantitative content analysis as a method where "(a) focus on manifest meaning, (b) little context needed, (c) strict handling of reliability, (d) reliability checks more important than validity checks, (e) at least partly concept-driver, (f) fewer inferences to context, author, recipients, (g) strict sequence of steps" are required (p. 11).

Qualitative content analysis is still in its infancy and studies surrounding it contravene at times, particularly in terms of methods and techniques. (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, par.110). That resulted in various, and sometimes, contrasting definitions by its academics. Mayring (2014), for example, describes it as a mixed methods approach (p. 6) in which a qualitative approach is applied on text characteristics to extract meaning through category formation and a quantitative approach is deployed to frequency analysis of those categories (p. 10).

Moreover, Mayring (2014) emphasizes that, when content analysing, the text should not be examined in its complete form, but should rather be separated into “segments” (p. 51).

Meanwhile, Drisko and Maschi (2015) define qualitative content analysis as a purely qualitative method where there is no deployment of quantification (p. 1). However, one element that qualitative content analysis scholars agree on is that this method centres around both latent and manifest content (rather than manifest one as in basic content analysis) and interpretation (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, par. 73; Holsti 4; Schreier, 2012, p. 16; Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 403) and is a highly flexible method (Mayring, 2014, p. 39; Schreier, 2012, p. 8) that works efficiently with outsized data (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 42; Schreier, 2012, p. 7).

It is prevalent in the research methods realm for researchers to fail to differentiate qualitative content analysis from the similar method, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe and Yardley, 2004). Both methods aim to interpret and infer meaning from textual materials (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004) and are effective when dealing with enormous data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe and Yardley, 2004). This, according to Lindsey J. Thomas, led some scholars to consider these two methods as the same. Nevertheless, another group of researchers (Baxter & Babbie, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) argue that while thematic analysis is exclusively qualitative, qualitative content analysis is both qualitative and quantitative in the same sense Mayring (2014) has reported. In other words, qualitative content analysis comprises both the qualitative aspect of interpretation and inference and the quantification nature of frequency digitisation of such meanings.

I chose to conduct a qualitative content analysis on my data, first, due to the large size of online comments to be studied (see table 1, 2 and 3). As above-mentioned, qualitative content analysis helps to reduce data by shifting the focus from the complete materials to aspects

relevant to research questions. Second, this quantitative and qualitative research method serves to introduce both the frequency of categories I am focusing on and the interpretation of meaning in order to classify data into such categories. Put differently, through the inference of meaning from online comments, I could locate certain comments under their respective categories then quantify the times these categories were highlighted.

Additionally, the formation of these categories (including sub-categories) contained both manifest and latent meanings. For instance (as will be elaborated in the following part), 27 sub-categories consist of latent meaning in which the reader's message was interpreted, and 4 categories comprise manifest meaning whereby the focus was on the presence of emoticons/emojis, overly capitalised letters, exaggerated punctuation, and words with repeated letters. Lastly, qualitative content analysis is the most efficient for text-based data, especially that of communication wherein messages are produced and received within a social framework (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 19).

For my data analysis, I deployed both inductive and deductive approaches. Generally, qualitative content analysts use inductive data-driven approach in order to form categories from raw data while neglecting previous research (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 103; Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Mayring, 2014, p. 52; Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Meanwhile, if adopting a deductive approach which is theory-driven, the content analysis is expected to arrange categories based on prior research or literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83; Drisko & Maschi, 2015, 106; Mayring, 2014, p. 10). An inductive approach is preferred by qualitative content analysts because it “ensure[s] that the views and voices of research participants are given priority over the ideas and theories of the researchers” and helps those dealing with exploratory and descriptive research to modify, add or omit categories as they explore their data (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 103). Mayring (2014) also defends the inductive approach

stating that it helps to produce non-biased data (p. 79), yet suggests the use of both approaches when necessary (p. 104).

Just as data-driven approach to qualitative content analysis is essential, inconsideration of theory and prior research could result in the neglect of innovative notions and dimensions in categorisation (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 106; Mayring, 2014, p. 39). Joffe and Yardley (2004) even argue that no category can be exclusively inductive or deductive as a certain level of “knowledge and preconceptions” inescapably affect the research’s category coding. (par. 6). That indicates that both of approaches are naturally implemented in qualitative content analysis.

Although no further claims were made in relation to that argument, some scholars encourage the use of both approaches as they seem to work efficiently with regard to category formation (Schreier, 2012, p. 89; Mayring 104). That is why I took into account both approaches; I wanted to maintain ideas from prior research (for example, my previous chapter where debates around Koreanness was prevalent in transcultural K-pop fandom) to code my data aiming to determine the presence of transculturality in K-Pop fanfiction readers’ commenting practices, to be open to any kind of new angle in my raw data that is relevant to my research in the process of coding and finally, to omit deductive categories that I do not find relevant while collecting data (for example, K-pop fanfiction and Bandom readers commenting about asking for the contact details of the author.)

Unlike basic content analysis wherein reliability of the coding process is considered the most crucial, qualitative content analysis relies on the validity of categories; whether data is coded well enough to extract answers to the research questions or not is the most vital (Schreier, 2012, p. 16). Krippendorff (2004) opposes the idea of content analysts searching for a unified agreement in terms of coding by considering it a characteristic of basic content

analysis where only clear-cut parts of data is taken into consideration. He insists that, in qualitative content analysis, such agreement would be “pointless” (p. 23).

Likewise, Mayring (2014) states that it is rare for content analysts to come into agreement regarding data coding and further suggests three ways to achieve inter-coder reliability in qualitative content analysis: (a) to consult another person about a detailed process of data collection in written form (in my case, my codebook), (b) to provide a second coder with raw data and analyse together, (c) to consult a supervisor who has great knowledge about your research about the codebook. (p. 114). For the reliability of my study, I applied Mayring’s (2014) third suggestion of inter-coder reliability and consulted both of my supervisors by providing with my codebook before I started the data collection.

Setting: Archives of Our Own

AO3, as mentioned before, is one of the largest fan contributions websites with more than 66,180 fandoms, 6 million users, and over 11 million works as of 2024, 20th of June.

However, at the time I originally conducted this research the figures were: 35,660 fandoms,

2,299,000 users and 5,649,000 works (information retrieved on the 10th of February, 2020).

Although it is mainly associated with fanfiction, it hosts other fan works as well such as fanart, fan videos, and podfic. Due to its great contribution to fan cultures, the website was awarded a Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2019. This yearly award is concerned with science fiction related works.

AO3's index page is easy to manage and browsing the website is simple as tags are straightforward and well-organised. One can browse works by a specific fandom or, alternatively, a specific type of fan work. Additionally, there is a search button on the header of the website that helps the user circulate around. More interestingly, the user can also choose to explore extremely advanced searching options for specific results from the title of the story and author, genre, fandom, rating (if and to what extent the work contains mature content), archive warnings (if the story consists of trigger warnings such as rape, major character death, or graphic depictions of violence), most or least popular fan creations, to most or least commented on fan works.

In order to show appreciation to a fan work, the user can hit the Kudos button. The more Kudos the story has, the more popular it is. On AO3's faq page, Kudos is defined as "a digital token a visitor can leave on a work to show they have enjoyed it" Another way to detect a popular fan work can be the number of Hits which refers to number of times the fan work was accessed. Lastly, high numbers of comments are also regarded as a sign of popularity as it proves that readers are engaged enough to give feedback on a particular fan work.

As mentioned above, one does not have to create an account in order to comment on fan works, let alone browse the website. Still, AO3 has a high number of users who actively engage with different fan works. In relation to commenting practices, there exists a comment section under each published fan work. Readers can also choose to comment exclusively on

certain chapters of the story. Generally, in multi-chaptered fanfiction, some readers comment on each newly updated chapter.

On AO3, the user cannot type more than 10000 characters as a comment. Also, although account creation is not mandatory, anonymous users are still expected to fill in their emails and names in order to post a comment. Editing or deleting one's own comments is only possible for registered users, therefore guests cannot have such control. Interestingly, even if an account gets deleted, comments remain visible on the platform but the reader's username transforms into "Account Deleted" The date and time of when a comment was left is also permanently displayed.

Readers can comment on fan works, and they can also comment on other readers' or authors' comments. Such type of comments are called *Parent Thread* in reference to how a discussion stems from one main comment. In order to view whole comments on a certain fan work, a user can click on *Entire Work* at the top of the header of the fan work. Following this way, the entire fanfiction story will appear in one page, but comments will be paginated (20 main comments per page) However, *Parent Thread* comments can exceed indefinitely per page. Generally, authors are the ones who occupy the *Parent Thread* area as they reply their readers, mostly to thank them for their reading and attention.

The Alternative Universe Genre

Alternative Universe, mostly known as AU, is a commonly used genre among fanfiction authors. In this genre, authors shift their subjects from the original setting to a different place or time which results in its division into multiple sub-genres known as AU tropes (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015, p. 25). To list common genres, High School AU (wherein the story unfolds in a high school setting with main characters as high school students), Vampires AU (as the title refers, generally main casts as vampires), etc. There is almost an indefinite list of AU

genres in the world of fanfiction. Fanlore, practically the alternative of Wikipedia but specifically made by Organization for Transformative Works, outlines a great number of AU tropes under 5 key themes: (a) Character Transformations and Non-Human Characters, (b) Style, Theme or Setting, (c) Individual Elements, (d) Based on relationship to canon, (e) Based on tone. Each one of these themes centre around different aspects present in fanfiction, from the characters to the mood of the story.

AU has sometimes been the subject of critique from within the fannish community due to the fact that there is a possibility that authors might stray too far away from the original text or source (Thomas, 2006, p. 228). In some forums, readers and authors argue on the positive and negative aspects of AU and emphasize the extent to which the characters used in the narrative can deviate from characters in canon "without the story ceasing to be a fanfic that is still true to its source, and thus to its nature as fanfic opposed to original fiction" and even deem those who shift too far from the original source as deceiving authors who attempt to "attract readers" ("Rat Creature"). Simply put, such authors presumably post their fiction under the name of fanfiction aiming at the attention and dedication of fanfiction readers. In other words, when a certain fandom has a large and active readership, authors who are not genuinely a part of the fandom share their fanfiction starring practically the names and physical appearances of the targeted fandom's characters while drastically changing their characterisation as they please.

That stigma behind the AU genre explains why in multiple fanfiction sites, adherence to canon characterization is deemed as a trait of good quality fanfiction writing. Bahoric and Swaggerty (2015) note that fanfiction writing is limitless as long as there remains an "adherence to characterisation and a basic level of plot canon" (p. 25). That is to say, a fanfiction story requires a certain level of material loyal to the source. Additionally, for

authors to fulfil readers' expectations to remain loyal to the original source, they require a high level of understanding of canon (Busse & Hellekson, 2006).

All of the research done on the adherence of authors to the source material mentioned above refers to fanfiction of pre-existing fictional characters. In the case of RPF, such criteria might differ considering that the characters written about are public figures with manufactured and staged personae. A great number of RPF fanfiction stories revolve around celebrity life beyond the spotlight. In such narratives, fanfiction authors and readers alike attempt to imagine the real personalities of stars as well as predict their relationships with other stars. Nevertheless, that is not quite possible in the AU genre as fanfiction authors tend to transform celebrities to average human beings away from stardom. That invites fanfiction readers to view their favourite celebrities from an alternative point of view in which both the celebrity and the fan strip off their status. Fanfiction readers would presumably perceive the celebrity in the fanfiction story as a fictional character deprived from their reality. Though personality traits of the celebrity are expected to remain, such stance depends on if the author wants to adhere to fanfiction expectations in which canon should be a reference.

For my study, I have chosen to focus on the AU genre because I presuppose that fanfiction readers might find it easier to identify with celebrities in fanfiction if they are turned into average people. Also, it is crucial to see if fans completely neglect their status as fans while commenting on the text or keeping it to a certain extent. These factors will assist me in recognising how both Bandom and K-pop fanfiction readers treat their idols when they are not "idols" anymore, but rather commoners with no flashy lives. Specifically, how K-pop fanfiction readers, known to be consumers of Korean stars' image in comparison to music making, react to their idols' average life in AU. The question arises as to what extent would K-pop fanfiction readers suppress their transcultural consumption while reading stories about

practically fictional characters. In other words, how do K-pop fanfiction readers negotiate transculturality with characters who are no longer visibly Korean idols, but rather, fictional characters.

Sampling Procedures

Table 3. *Characteristics of 10 Selected K-pop Fanfiction Stories*

Archive Warning	Maturity Rating	Date of Publication	Comments	Readers- only	Direct Comments	Representative Sample	Comments word count
GDOV + MCD	Mature	2018-08-12 to 2019-08-25	4054	2055	1515	318	22513
CCNTUAW	Mature	2018-07-28 to 2019-03-21	3079	1797	1651	329	24443
GDPOV,+M CD	Mature	2017-09-17 to 2018-07-03	2113	1248	1079	215	12530
NAWA	TAUA	2017-02-19 to 2018-03-18	1273	686	574	114	11157
CCNTUAW	Not Rated	2018-04-26 to 2019-09-08	1099	626	498	99	9148
CCNTUAW	Explicit	2019-01-26 to 2019-10-22	1040	1015	981	195	6045
GDOV	Mature	2017-09-13 to 2018-03-23	962	695	616	124	4912
GDOV + R/N-C + U +	Explicit	2016-07-20 to 2017-06-28	785	629	569	113	4353
CCNTUAW	Mature	2016-02-04 to 2017-03-17	667	357	277	55	5069
CCNTUAW	Explicit	2017-08-15 to 2018-01-11	576	308	245	49	3127

K-pop Fanfiction	AU Genre	Main Cast	Kudos	Stories' Word
Nothing's Ever Built to Last	Gang World	BTS	1887	385057
Amor Omnia Vincit	High School	NCT	4469	219503
Oh, How the Mighty Fall (in	Gang World	BTS	3572	199617
Passing the Guard	High School	iKON	1591	312987
Fated by the Stars	Greek Mythology	BTS	1242	242254
Crystal Snow	Fantasy	BTS	4460	118092
Full Moon Fireflies	Medieval, Magic,	BTS	2621	135570
“Please, don’t...” (BTS	Not Mentioned	BTS	2740	160493
Fools	High School	iKON	1003	138105
Rule # 3	High School	Pentagon	973	123660

Table 4. *Characteristics of 10 Selected Bandom Stories*

Readers- only	Direct Comments	Representative Sample	Comments word count
878	756	189	7830
815	481	95	6274
1417	1009	188	9450
1096	787	153	6417
699	489	94	3550
1292	951	190	5930
713	1516	305	6089
917	487	95	3452
1115	781	153	5675
754	697	139	6827

Bandom	AU Genre	Main Cast	Kudos	Stories' Word Count	Archive Warning	Maturity Rating	Date of Publication	Comments
Stories 500 baskets	Not	TOP, FOB	2545	108554	NAWA	Mature	2016-01-28 to 2016-09-23	1625
Bondage	Not	MCR, The	583	202027	GDOV,	Explicit	2013-02-08 to 2014-08-17	1475
Mansion Down in the Forest	College/ University	Used FOB TOP	1382	285150	CCNTUAW	Mature	2016-07-01 to 2017-02-026	2658
Manners	Teacher- Student	MCR	1589	270986	U	Explicit	2016-12-29 to 2018-09-27	2073
Neighborhood Relations	Not	MCR	1620	255000	CCNTUAW	Explicit	2016-06-29 to 2017-09-04	1352
No one here is cis	High School	MCR, MSI, PatD, FOB,	727	257963	CCNTUAW	Mature	2016-06-13 to 2019-09-20	2386
The group chat au that nobody reads	High School	GD, MCR, PatD, TOP, FOB	2127	225271	NAWA	Not Rated	2016-10-07 to 2019-10-26	1339
Slave	Vampires	Adam Lambert,	289	228905	GDOV/R/N -C	Explicit	2012-07-04 to 2018-03-27	1620
Two Vatos locos full of carnalism	Soulmates, University	PatD, FOB, MCR, TOP	1582	207878	GDOV, U	Explicit	2015-05-12 to 2016-05-06	2057
Your crooked love is just a	Demons	FOB	235	89326	NAWA	Mature	2019-02-18 to 2019-06-30	1476

Table 5. *Representative Samples of Bandom and K-pop Fanfiction*

Fanfiction Reading Communities	Direct Readers Comments	Representative Sample	Word Count
K-pop Fanfiction	8005	1621 reduced to 1510	103297
Bandom	7954	1614 reduced to 1552	61494

This study deployed a qualitative content analysis method on the 10 most-commented Bandom and K-pop fanfiction stories, belonging to the AU genre, on AO3 in February 2020. In order to retrieve these stories, I used the Advanced Search option on AO3 and searched the tag “K-pop” and “Bandom” respectively while selecting the “Sort by: Comments” option. Among the most commented on fanfiction stories, I selected 10 of those belonging to the AU genre (interestingly, among the most commented on stories list, only 3 fanfiction stories were not in the AU genre)

Some fanfiction stories had an AU tag on their works, meanwhile, others did not. Therefore, a close look over the stories was carried out in order to determine whether the story fit the general definition of AU or not. For example, *Manners* did not have “AU” tagged but “Teacher-Student Relationship” was tagged referring to the commonly used Teacher/Student AU. Another example is *500 baskets* which was also not tagged as AU but the main characters, Tyler and Josh from *Twenty One Pilots*, were deprived of their celebrity status as they were presented as college students, a commonly used AU known as College

AU) Still, for those fanfiction stories that had absolutely no reference to an AU in their tags, I labelled their AU genres as “Not Mentioned” (see table 1 and 2).

The 10 selected Bandom fanfiction stories revolved mainly around 11 Bands including Fall Out Boy (FOB), Twenty One Pilots (TOP), My Chemical Romance (MCR), Panic! At the Disco (P!atD), Green Day (GD), The Used, The Brobecks, Mindless Self Indulgence (MSI), I Don't Know How But They Found Me (IDKHBTFM) and 1 solo singer Adam Lambert. Some stories included a certain band exclusively while others merged some bands together (see table 2).

Meanwhile, the 10 selected K-pop fanfiction stories centred on BTS (6), NCT, iKON (2), Pentagon. BTS is first in number of stories as they had 6 stories dedicated to them, iKON ranks second with a total of two stories. Of the remaining groups, NCT and Pentagon each had one fanfiction story among the 10 most commented on. Interestingly, although K-pop has a large number of female groups and some of them (such as Girls’ Generation or Blackpink) with a significant fanbase, the most 10 commented on K-pop fanfiction included only male groups’ stories.

The 20 selected fanfiction stories contained different types of sensitive materials that prompted the author to tag them with *Archive Warnings*. The 10 Bandom fanfictions, for instance, have 5 Archive Warnings including Underage⁸² (U), Graphic Depiction Of Violence⁸³ (GDOV), No Archive Warnings Apply⁸⁴ (NAWA), Rape/Non-Con⁸⁵ (R/N-C), and Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings (CCNTUAW). Similarly, the 10 K-pop fics

⁸² The content contains graphic descriptions or depictions of sexual activity by characters under the age of eighteen. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸³ The content contains gory, graphic, explicitly described violence. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸⁴ A creator can also select Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings if warnings may apply but they don't want to use them (for example, to avoid spoilers), or No Archive Warnings Apply if none of the warnings apply to their content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸⁵ The content contains non-consensual sexual activity. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

contain 6 Archive Warnings: Graphic Depiction Of Violence, Major Character Death⁸⁶ (MCD), No Archive Warning Apply, Rape/Non-Con, and Underage. Concerning mature content, the 10 K-pop fanfiction narratives consisted of the following content maturity rating: Explicit⁸⁷, Mature⁸⁸, Not Rated⁸⁹, and Teen and Up Audiences⁹⁰. Meanwhile, the 10 Bandom fanfiction stories included the tags: Mature, Explicit, and Not Rated.

I selected “Entire Work” view of the selected fanfiction in order to capture the whole comment section. Because the comments were paginated, I had to right click and Inspect the page then edit the html settings in order to make the whole comments appear in one page. After that, I saved the comments as web pages that I can still access offline and any change or update on them on AO3 would not be visible. K-pop fanfiction comments were stored on the 5 November, 2019, and Bandom’s on the 6 November, 2019.

Comments by the author on their own stories were not considered for this study as my focus is on readers. Additionally, “Parent Thread” comments were also excluded as they are mostly authors’ comments and are not regarded as comments on the story but as replies to the author’s reply. Such comments that had mediators (such as authors in this case) between them and the text are not taken into account in my study as I am focusing on readers reacting exclusively to the text.

Due to the large number of comments, a representative sample was selected by using systematic sampling (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 115). This method of sampling involves selecting every 5th comment starting from a random comment. This reduced the original number of comments to a quarter (see table 3). Therefore, a number of 3,235 comments were

⁸⁶ The content contains the death of a major character. Whether or not a character counts as a major character is up to the creator's discretion. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸⁷ The content contains explicit adult themes, such as porn, graphic violence, etc. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸⁸ The content contains adult themes (sex, violence, etc.) that aren't as graphic as explicit-rated content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁸⁹ This is the default option. For searching, screening, and other AO3 functions, this may get treated the same way as mature and explicit-rated content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

⁹⁰ The content may be inappropriate for audiences under 13. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

studied with 103,297 words for K-pop fanfiction and 61,494 for Bandom. Finally, comments were copied exclusively to Excel along with categories, sub-categories, word count, and the date the comments were posted in order to carefully content analyse data. During the coding process, there were exactly 111 K-Pop fanfiction comments and 62 Bandom comments of whose sense could not be determined, for example a comment with a single word such as “No!” or “YESSSS”. These comments were then deleted so as not to interrupt the data analysis. In line with the discussion of my insider aca-fan position in the Introduction of the thesis, my long-term familiarity with AO3 commenting norms informed my initial sense of what looked “typical” in this corpus, but the sampling, coding scheme and analysis were built iteratively from the comments themselves so that this prior knowledge was tested rather than simply reproduced.

The 20 selected fanfiction stories are all multi-chaptered stories. Serialised publication is a commonly used option in the fanfiction world and it is self-evident that it could attract more readers. Nevertheless, it is not always the case for every fanfiction reader to be attracted by a story due to its serialised publication. Additionally, some of those fanfiction stories have been published over the course of a year and some others up to 4 years. As a result, those stories published for longer are more likely to have more comments.

Access may be restricted by government policies as in the recent ban on AO3 by China, yet the archive is a public website where any user could access any story anytime as long as they are in a country with unrestricted access or the story is not privatised by the author (either uniquely for friends or subscribers). I clarify that none of the stories above are publicly inaccessible (i.e. they can be read by anyone, whether they have an AO3 account or not). However, to avoid any potential identification, the usernames of commenters are not included in the analyses.

Just as some readers might be generated from serialised publication, others can actively participate in the comments' section for multiple reasons. These readers are generally gained in different ways such as the high number of stories the author has published which thus made them popular; the large number of fans in a given fandom which commonly results in fans actively engaging in the fanfiction world; the small number of fans in a fandom which then pushes the fans to build their own niche community, where everybody knows each other and they are generally huge supporters of each other's fan works, including fanfiction. Throughout this chapter, I refer to K-Pop fanfiction readers and Bandom readers as reading communities. Finally, while discussing the findings, only the relevant parts of the comments will be quoted, rather than the entire comment.

Coded Categories

The coded categories will be explained in detail in the sections below. However, I want to note that the examples presented underneath are not part of the data. The examples are created to illustrate both those categories for which I found relevant comments and those for which I did not.

Comments on the Story or Chapter

This category is concerned with comments surrounding the story in general or a specific chapter. It consists of 5 sub-categories that highlight the readers' emotions towards the story or the chapter: Positive, Negative, Mixed, Neutral, Not Mentioned. Analysis of the reader's reactions to the story or the chapter is crucial to identify how both K-pop fanfiction and Bandom readers react to the story.

Positive: This sub-category includes comments in which readers compliment the story or the chapter such as "omg I love this story so much"

Negative: This sub-category involves readers' comments expressing any dislike towards the story or a certain chapter such as "this story is boring tbh"

Mixed: This sub-category is concerned with readers' comments that include mixed opinions about the story or the chapter such as "I love the beginning of the story but the ending turned me off"

Neutral: This sub-category includes readers' comments that express no opinion about the story or the chapter such as "this story is so long"

Not Mentioned: This sub-category involves comments where none of the sub-categories above are mentioned.

Comments on the Characters

This category represents readers' comments expressing their emotions towards the characters of the fanfiction story and consists of 5 sub-categories: Positive, Negative, Mixed, Neutral, and Not Mentioned. As aforementioned, the 20 selected narratives all belong to the AU genre and all of the characters are separated from their celebrity status by the author. Therefore, it is important to study readers' reactions to their idols portrayed as average human beings, to see

whether K-Pop fanfiction and Bandom readers behave differently towards their characters, and how that contributes to RPF commenting practices in general.

Positive: This sub-category involves all of the comments in which readers leave positive statements about characters whether these involve a compliment of the character's appearance, personality, or show sympathy for a character's situation. For example, "I really like Jimin!" or "Poor Patrick. He's been through a lot!"

Negative: This type of comment in this sub-category contains readers vocalising their dislike or disappointment in characters' behaviours such as "I really don't like Taehyung..."

Mixed: This sub-category consists of comments containing mixed emotions about one or more characters such as "I like Jimin but Jin is so annoying!"

Neutral: This type of comment is concerned with objective comments about characters. For example, "Gerard will have red hair in the next chapter apparently"

Not Mentioned: This sub-category consists of comments that do not mention characters.

Comments about the Setting

This category is related to comments surrounding the place in which the story happens and consists of a Yes and No sub-categories. In order to determine whether K-Pop fanfiction readers mention geographical elements in relation to Korea or not. Thus, the Yes sub-category refers to comments where any place is mentioned such as "When will Namjoon arrive in Seoul?" and the No sub-category refers to comments where no setting is mentioned.

Comments about the Author's Contact Details

This category revolves around comments from readers that ask about the author's contact details in order to discuss the readers as fans of the author. It consists of 2 sub-categories: Yes and No and both define the existence or non-existence of comments asking about the author's contact details. For example, "Do you have a Twitter account?"

Comments in a Foreign Language

This category includes any comment consisting of the use of a foreign language in order to examine whether K-Pop fanfiction readers use Korean in their commenting practices. This category contains Yes and No sub-categories referring to the existence or non-existence of foreign languages. An example of foreign language used is “Saranghae author-nim!”

Comments on Culture

This category revolves around comments including any cultural elements such as food, fashion, traditions, conventions, and/or honorifics. It consists of Yes and No sub-categories. For example, “Why isn’t Jimin using honorifics with Jin? Isn’t he younger?”

Style of Comments

This category includes the various styles that readers use to express their opinions and views on the narrative. This category consists of 5 sub-categories:

Emoticons and Emojis: This sub-category contains comments involving emojis or emoticons. Emoticons are expected to be more recurrent than emojis in this sub-category since AO3 only introduced the use of emojis in 2018, whereas most of the selected stories were published before that. For that reason, another separate sub-category is created to split emojis from emoticons. However, emojis and emoticons will still be presented together in the graph. An example of an emoji is “ ” and an emoticon (which is solely written on the keyboard) is “:) ”

Exaggerated Punctuation: This sub-category includes comments wherein there is an abundant use of punctuation such as “oh my god!!!!” or “no...you didn’t...”

All-Caps: This sub-category involves comments that contain overly capitalized words or sentences such as “I LOVE THIS STORY SO MUCH”

Repeated Letters: This sub-category is concerned with comments that include an abundant use of letters in a word. For example, “omg this is so goooooooooood”

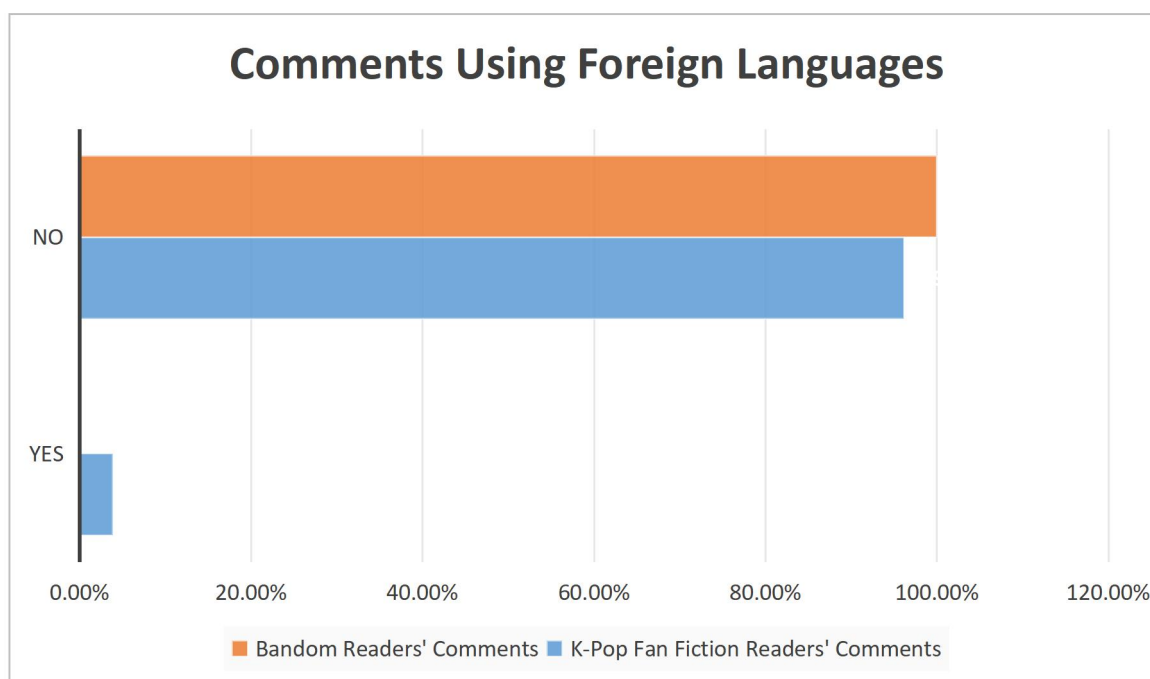
Plain Comments: This sub-category involves all of the comments that do not include any of the sub-categories above. Hence, these are potentially more formal comments such as “This story flows very naturally. Well done!”

Comments about Future and/or Previous Works/Chapters of the Author

This type of comment is concerned with readers who have comments asking or requesting for more of the author’s work. This category will help to determine how the author builds their niche fandom of readers. It consists of 2 categories: Yes (comments asking for the future works or mentioning the previous one) and No (readers not asking about the author’s other works or potential works). For example, “I love your story so much! Please write a sequel!” or “I was an avid fan of your previous story! I’m so excited to read that one!”

Affective Reading and Thin Cultural Marking

Figure 20. *Comments Using Foreign Languages*



As aforementioned, in order to determine traces of transcultural elements in K-Pop fanfiction readers' comments, aspects such as Korean language, culture and geography were initially aimed for. However, against the hypotheses suggested, K-Pop fanfiction readers only use one of these visible dimensions, and that is Korean language. Even then, their use of Korean language was not very common as only 3.86% of the readers deployed it (see Figure 21) and, most of it was what Lee (2018) labels as Korean-English hybrids and Khedun-Burgoine's (2022) "fandom lexicon". This finding suggests that the transcultural aspect of K-pop fanfic readers is only weakly foregrounded at the level of routine commenting, and that other priorities organise how they respond to fics.

Although using Korean language was not heavily common, its mixture with English in some cases is noteworthy. This "translingual" act (Lee, 2018, p. 37) is considered as a social language produced by a certain social group whose members originate from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Lee, 2018, p. 44). This is predicated on the need to be identified as fans of K-pop and competent writers and readers of fanfiction (Lee 2018). In this sense, hybrid wording functions as one localised way in which transcultural fandom becomes textually visible, rather than as its only or primary form. An example of a hybrid Korean-English word is visible in the following comment in *Amor Omnia Vincit*:

Hwaiting Sunmi!!...

In that comment, the reader used the word "Hwaiting" which can also be pronounced as "Fighting" (the Korean language does not have the sound "F" so they replace it with "H" instead) and is commonly used in Korean TV shows. Such a word is used to express encouragement and support among Korean people. The presence of such terms in comments indicates that some readers are drawing directly on expressions encountered in Korean media,

as outlined in the thesis Introduction about mediated Koreaness. Another K-Pop fanfiction reader used the same word in its alternative pronunciation in *Amor Omnia Vincit* as follows,

...I can't wait to see what you do from here on! Fighting~

The reader finishes the comment with a “fighting” in order to show encouragement to the author concerning the future of the story. K-Pop fanfiction readers also used other hybrid words commonly used by Korean people such as “hearteu” in the following commenting from *Full Moon Fireflies*:

...Awww I am in so deep this fic is oh my hearteu I am not using that ironically I cannot express my pleasure-pain any other way this is hitting all the right spots giving me a brain-orgasm

The reader places “hearteu” after “oh my” while referring to their “heart” in order to portray their immersion in the fanfiction story. They also assure that they are not using the word “ironically” afterwards which might explain the possibility that some fans might not use it seriously. Some other times, fans also use Romanised Korean words along with hybrid Korean English words such as the comment from *Passing the Guard*:

Saranghae author-nim!!! we love u!!!! ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

The word “Saranghae” used in that comment is a Romanised version of the Korean word 사랑해 which translates to “I love you”. That word is generally used among K-Pop fans and also K-Pop celebrities in order to show affection. In that comment, the reader is using to show their love for the author labelling them as “author-nim”. Previously mentioned hybrid terms such as “hearteu” and “fighting” have been generally used by Korean people, however, the “hybrid” word “author-nim”, consisting of the Korean suffix “nim” which indicates honour and respect and is often used for people with noble and prestigious statuses, is not

part of the Korean language. The suffix “nim” can also be attached to the word “Sunbae” which means “senior” and refers to people with more experience in a certain field. It is mandatory for younger K-pop idols to use the word “Sunbae-nim” to address senior groups. This form of seniority is probably how K-pop fans happened to attach the suffix to English words. Another example from K-Pop fanfiction readers is from *Please, don't... (BTS Slaves)*:

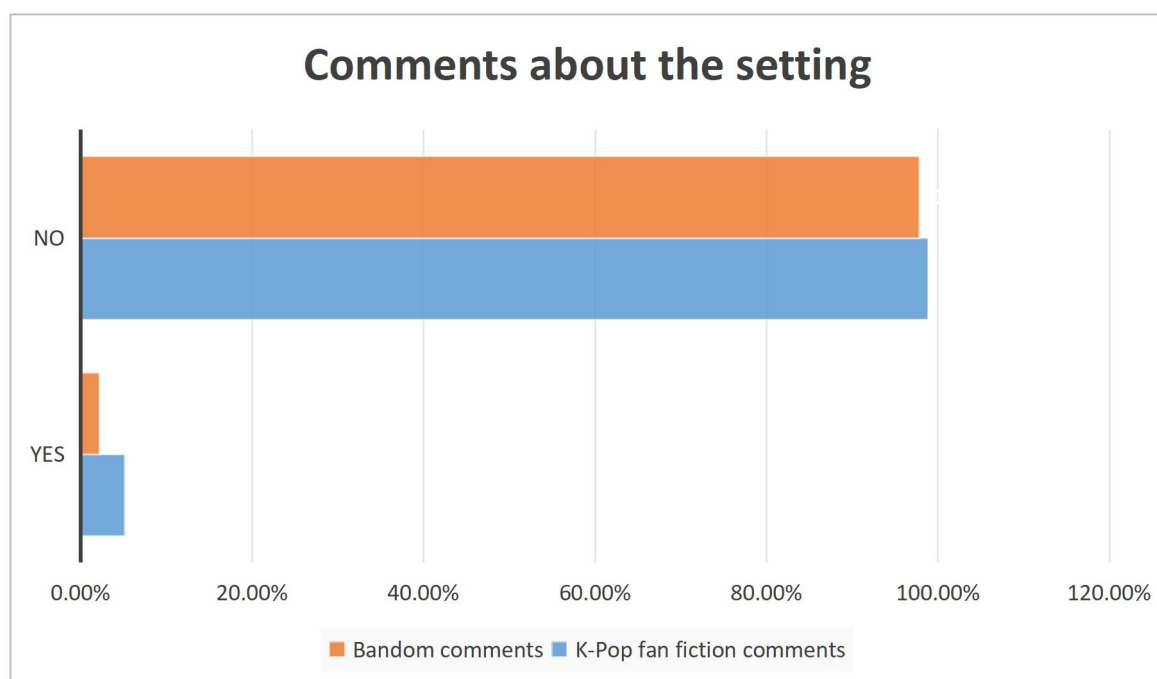
Just wanted to tell you that I love your story so much!! I am not that big of a fan on chaptered stories but this one is the best out of all I've read! Great work author-nim.

The reader opens the comment with plain English and closes it with the hybrid Korean-English word “author-nim” while complimenting the author of their “great work”. The sense of seniority is visible in this comment in a way which the reader is regarding the author as a higher position by praising their work. Additionally, the reader states in the beginning of the comment their discontent towards ongoing fanfiction stories in general but assures their appreciation for the author’s story. Therefore, it is possible that K-Pop fanfiction readers attach “author-nim” to compliments and appreciation of the author’s skills wherein the author becomes more respected and highly valued due to their impressive efforts. Still, despite this hybrid word deployed solely in the K-Pop fanfiction world, only a small number of K-Pop fanfiction readers employ it in their commenting practices.

The limited usage of Korean-English hybrid language in fanfiction may be influenced by concerns over being labelled as a “Koreaboo,” a topic discussed by K-pop fanfic authors in Chapter Two. Koreaboos are often viewed negatively due to perceptions of cultural appropriation, characterised by superficial engagement with the Korean language. This typically involves learning only a few words and relying heavily on the “fandom lexicon” (Khedun-Burgoine, 2022) without a deeper understanding of the language. This stigma associated with Koreaboos potentially contributes to the scarcity of Korean or Korean-

English hybrid expressions in the interactions among readers, as authors and fans may wish to avoid the negative implications tied to such appropriations. Read alongside the very small percentage of comments that use Korean at all, this pattern supports my broader argument that K-pop fanfic readers' transcultural practices in relation to Koreanness are not usually articulated through language play in comment fields, but are more often backgrounded in favour of affective response and encouragement.

Figure 21. *Comments about the Setting*



As K-Pop fanfiction readers on AO3 are generally not Korean, questions and enquiries regarding Korea's geography might be expected. 5.09% K-Pop fanfiction comments mentioned various places present in the story (see figure 22), but none of them were asking for further information about the setting. Rather than that, they only casually mention events that happened in certain places. For example, in one of the comments from *Nothing's Ever Built To Last (you're in ruins)* a K-Pop fanfiction reader posted about the Korean city, Busan, describing it as lovely due to the positive events occurred in it:

...As I keep calling it the Lovely Busan surprise seems to be on the move...

Another K-Pop fanfiction reader from the same story also mentioned Korea as a country in the comment below:

And I really really really hope that Samuel gets to stay in Korea

As seen above, the reader only mentioned the country because they wanted the character Samuel to stay in Korea. That demonstrates how K-Pop fanfiction readers occasionally mention the setting of the story only when it is relevant to an event of the story. In other words, place references tend to appear as part of emotional engagement with the plot, rather than as an invitation to discuss cultural accuracy or to seek extra information about Korea. In this aspect, they align with Bandom readers as the latter also only mention places relevant to the events of the story. For instance, a Bandom reader in *500 baskets* simply mentioned the setting of a scene while vocalizing their appreciation for the story:

This is so GReAT UgH I LoVED IT SO MuCh

TY AND JISH tALKING ON THE ROOF AND UGH CANNOT HANDLE THE
PERFECTION IM GONNA COLLAPSE

In a mixture of lower and upper case, the reader shows great affection for the scene that occurred on the roof. Another reader from *Bondage Mansion* also mentioned the setting of the scene while attempting to predict on what is going to happen next in the story as follows:

...I'm pretty certain that it's Bert who is also in the garden, and I'm absolutely dying to know how he will react...

The two Bandom comments above provide a straightforward description on how Bandom readers react towards the setting of the story. Similar to K-Pop fanfiction readers, they only mention the setting in order to either describe their feelings towards a certain scene or to predict or expect future events from the story. None of the reading communities raise

any type of questions about the accuracy of the places included in the fanfiction narratives. This does not mean that readers are unaware of possible inaccuracies, but rather that commenting norms on AO3 position the comment box primarily as a space for affective response, not for geographical correction.

This pattern is consistent with fanfiction's "gift culture", in which comments are framed as thanks for the gift of a story rather than as sites for critique (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). In both K-pop and Bandom, readers very rarely use the comment box to question geographical or cultural accuracy: in the Bandom corpus this is perhaps unsurprising, since stories are set in familiar US contexts, but the K-pop data show that even when the setting is a less familiar country, readers still do not treat comments as a space for asking about, or correcting, Korean details. Directly pointing out potential errors would risk breaching norms of politeness, which helps explain why friction around Koreanness and representation surfaces more readily on X than in archive comments, as discussed in Chapter Two. In other words, debates about mediated Koreanness and unequal power are not absent from this transcultural fandom, but are displaced onto platforms whose affordances and norms are oriented towards meta-commentary and argument rather than gratitude.

In addition to geographical aspects, K-Pop fanfiction readers also did not raise any issues concerning Korean culture. Since the selected K-Pop fanfiction stories all take place in Korea and star Korean singers, the author is expected to include at least some elements from Korean culture in the narrative. Similarly, K-Pop fanfiction readers as transcultural fans might be expected to mention Korean culture in their comments as a reaction to the characters' culture, as they do on social media platforms when engaging in the collaborative friction.

A prominent example would be LGBTQ+ presence in the stories, given that the issue is still widely stigmatised in Korea due to its Confucius traditions and religion (see Chapter Two). It is noticed that in all of the 10 selected K-Pop fanfiction stories, all of the main pairings are male-male. Yet, none of K-Pop fanfiction readers mention any issues surrounding homophobia in Korea. In other words, none of the K-pop fanfic readers opt for “realism” and share their opinions in relation to the discrimination that the queer community faces in Korea. The readers straightforwardly discuss LGBTQ+ relationships of the characters, merely as romance.

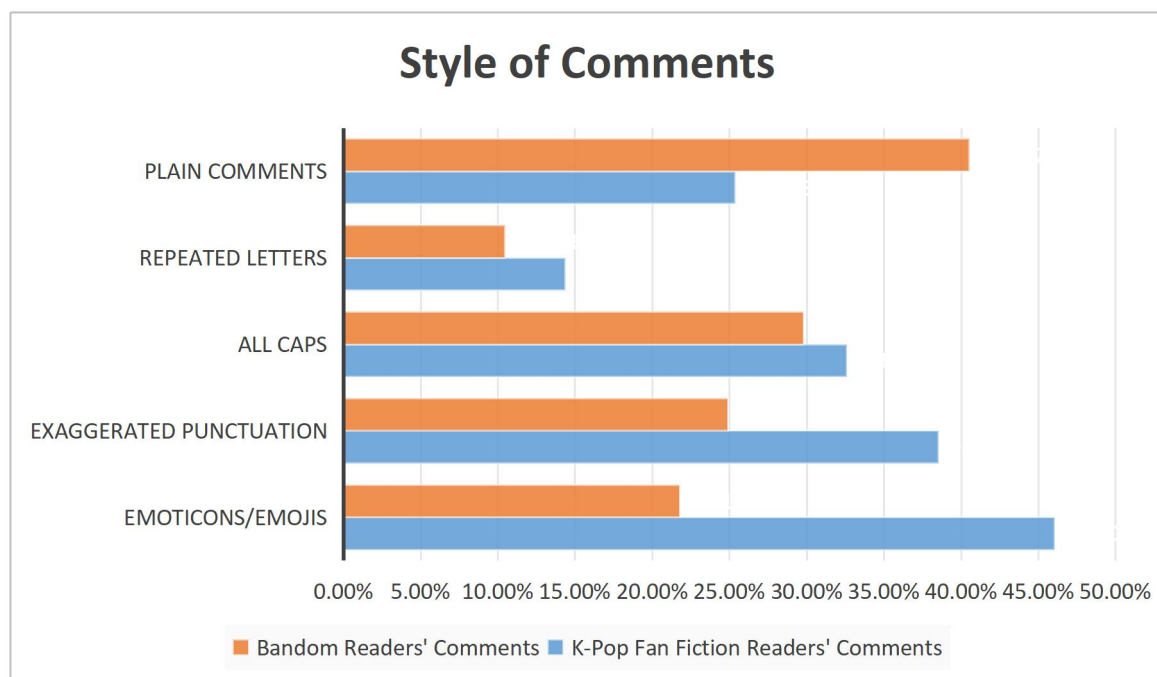
The reason K-Pop fanfiction readers ignore such issues might be because the author has not introduced LGBTQ+ as an issue to begin with. As discussed in Chapter Two, K-pop fanfic authors aim to build a safe “queer” Korea wherein barely any homophobia exists, opposite to Korean realities. Nevertheless, even in that case, there could still be comments highlighting that it should have been regarded as an issue, mainly for readers who valorise realism. Consequently, the absence of such discussions concerning queer communities despite it being highly stigmatized in Korea implies that K-Pop fanfiction readers also form their own “safe space” wherein no such issues are brought up.

Put differently, the same queer safe “imagined Koreas” that authors construct at the level of narrative are largely maintained at the level of response: readers take the homophobic realities of contemporary Korea as backgrounded, and choose to inhabit the fic’s romantic universe on its own terms. Similar to the authors’ intentions of building a “safe space” for themselves and their readers, the readers also keep that safe space even in the comments’ section, further emphasising K-pop fanfics as an imagined Korea where discrimination is absent. Considered together with the linguistic and geographical patterns discussed above, this suggests that in comment fields, transcultural K-pop fans operate primarily in an affective reader mode, in which shared feelings, ships and narrative pleasure are

foregrounded while national and cultural questions recede into the background. The “friction” around Koreanness, representation and unequal power that I traced among authors and on X in Chapter Two is therefore not erased, but largely absent from AO3 comment threads, which function as low-friction, gratitude-oriented spaces within a wider, more conflictual transcultural fandom.

Age of Fandom and Informal Commenting Practices

Figure 22. *Style of Comments*



K-Pop is a more recent genre in comparison to rock music, which might explain the reason K-Pop fanfiction readers deploy more informal types and styles of speech in their commenting practices. The rock bands specifically used in these analyses who also happen to have the highest number of comments on AO3 are all more than a decade old with Green Day placed first for having been active since 1987. Meanwhile, the K-Pop groups starring in the 10 top commented on fanfiction stories on AO3 are relatively more recent as all of them are less than a decade younger with BTS the oldest as a 11-year-old group and Pentagon and NCT as the youngest for having been active or 8 years now. The duration these groups have

been active for indicates that rock bands are more likely to have older fans in contrast with K-Pop.

The exact demographics of K-pop and Bandom readers are difficult to determine. Although readers of both sets of stories tick the “over 18” box that AO3 requires for accessing mature content (all selected stories include mature content and/or trigger warnings), there is no guarantee that all of them are in fact adults. AO3 profiles also do not display age. In this context, the longevity of each genre and band can only serve as a tentative proxy when thinking about the likely age profile of each reading community, rather than as firm demographic evidence.

The age of the fandoms also seems to be reflected in the styles of writing used in their comments. These styles range from the use of emojis and emoticons to exaggerated punctuation, repeated letters and words written in all caps (see Figure 21). Emojis and emoticons are widely seen as indicators of informal everyday written language (Dürscheid & Siever, 2017, p. 8) and are often used to stand in for facial expressions or tone (Riordan, 2017, p. 76; Kaye et al., 2017, p. 66). Meanwhile, although there is no academic work specifically on exaggerated punctuation, repeated letters and all-caps in fan comments, it is self-evident that these forms do not align with formal writing. Only 25.38% of K-pop fanfiction comments are “plain” (containing none of these informal features), compared to 40.52% of Bandom comments.

Almost half of K-pop comments include emojis and/or emoticons. Overall, K-pop comments contain 1,307 emoticons and 437 emojis, while Bandom comments contain 449 emoticons and 222 emojis. Given that the selected K-pop stories are, on average, more recent than the Bandom ones, this may partly reflect broader shifts in online writing norms, with emojis becoming more widely used over time. At the same time, that K-pop readers also use

more emoticons suggests that they actively choose these devices to intensify or visualise their emotional responses. For instance, a reader from *Fated by the Stars* uses the sad-face emoticon four times to express their sympathy for the characters:

i'm :(i don't even know what to comment, it's just :(so sad :(my babies noooo :(

The repeated sad-face emoticon amplifies the mood of the comment and underlines the reader's emotional attachment to the characters, whom they call "my babies". Bandom comments also use emoticons for similar purposes. For example:

OhMYGOD ; ----- ; No Tyler...:'((((

I hope he's going to be okay:'(

Here, a reader of *500 baskets* uses three crying emoticons to convey distress over Tyler's situation. In both fandoms, readers deploy emoticons repetitively to dramatise their feelings. The difference is one of degree rather than kind: this informal way of signalling affect is used in both groups, but more frequently and intensely in K-pop fanfic comments, which may be linked to a younger or more online-native readership.

A similar pattern appears with emojis. In K-pop comments, some readers use a large number of emojis in a single comment. One reader of *Fated by the Stars*, for instance, uses 25 emojis in a single response:

Me before studying english: uwaaaa my mind * 🤔 😊 * my heart * 🥰 🥰 * my body
* 😊 😊 *

Me after studying english: the red rose 🌹 symbolises my 🙄 🙄 🙄 red cheeks after a
thorough clappage to the 🖐️ 🖐️ whomp Whomp WHOMP of my 🖐️ 🖐️ 🖐️ 🖐️ 🖐️
heart 🥰 🥰

But naaaah fam i understanding of namjoons problem of being smart but too fucking dense cos i would probably b thinking the same thing as i didn't know a friend was in a relationship until she kissed her gf i be boo boo the tool. But taegi bickering and being wholesome makes my 🤔🌑🥰🤪 heart warm and they be more obvious then s**** cranium f***** the l****lady on a good Wednesday nite

This chapter be lit and im gonna skurt skurt my study thanks bb 🥰🤪

Like the use of emoticons, the reader is also displaying their emotions through the use of emojis. As noticeable in that comment, the reader seems to elaborate on their words with the use of emojis as if providing an illustration as to how they are feeling. For instance, after typing “the red rose”, they followed it with an emoji of a red rose. Similarly, they used the heart emoji after the word “heart”. Another way of illustrating their feelings is replacing words with emojis. For example, while describing how Taegi (the pairing name of Taehyung and Yoongi from BTS) bickering warms their heart, they use the four emojis 🤔🌑🥰🤪 which consecutively symbolize mature content, a new moon face, a woozy face, and a crazy or playful face. In this case, the reader used these four emojis as a substitute to describe their “warm heart” which seems to be full of mature content, playful and woozy. Another example is when they use the exploding head emoji 🤯 while simply typing “my mind” before it to give explanation on what is happening to their minds. This form of substituting words with emojis thus indicates the informality of the comments.

In Bandom comments, comments with a myriad of emojis were not common. The maximum of emojis usage in Bandom was 3 emojis in a comment. For example, a Bandom reader in *Your crooked love is just a pyramid scheme* commented:

Oh my god with this chapter! 🥰🤪🤪

The reader used two crying emojis and a heart eyes emoji in order to portray their affection for the chapter. In comparison to the aforementioned K-Pop comments, it appears to be less sophisticated and more straightforward. Another example is a comment from *The Group Chat AU That Nobody Asked For* where the reader uses one laughing emoji to express their emotions:

Oh my GOD that was so funny 😄

In these cases, emojis still signal heightened emotion, but in a more compact and straightforward way. The data, thus, suggests that K-pop readers not only use emojis more frequently, but also experiment with them in more elaborate combinations, whereas Bandom readers tend to deploy them more minimally. This difference supports the interpretation that K-pop comments, on the whole, lean towards more informal, expressive styles of writing, perhaps reflecting a younger or differently socialised online fan base.

Alongside the use of emojis and emoticons, exaggerated punctuation, capitalisation and repeated letters also appear frequently in both reading communities. 38.53% of K-pop comments contain extravagant punctuation (such as strings of question marks or exclamation marks); 32.60% include overly capitalised words, and 14.36% include words with repeated letters. A K-pop reader commenting on *crystal snow* provides a typical example in which all three features appear together:

MM
MM I WONDER WHO THAT ISSS??????????????????????????

Im v excited

The reader could simply use one question mark while asking about the unknown character, but instead, they used a myriad of question marks following an all-caps statement that in a

simpler form would look like that “Mmm I wonder who that is”. The continuous question marks symbolise the readers’ curiosity which also indicates their high interest in the story. That intense immersion is also portrayed in how the reader typed the statement in capital letters generally known as a symbol of emphasis and intensification according to *Urban Dictionary*. As seen in the comment above, K-Pop fanfiction readers often combine a mixture of all-caps sentences, an abundance of punctuation and repeated letters. Another example of such combination is a comment from *Full Moon Fireflies*:

OKAY????

But i literally trew myself at the wall and pray for my lungs what are in pain chos over dramatic fangirling

AND WHO IS ??? IM LIKE NO

AND NO NO NO NO I CANT TAKE THIIIISS

But, yes, im looking forward to hoseoks coming-back-and-saving-the-day scene and YOONGI (and mah boe baekkie (even tough i know it wont happen))

Cheerings and bye-byes with lots of love and pain <3<3<3

The reader has also added emoticons to the combination mentioned above. Starting with a capitalized “okay” in a form of question then following it with a low case conjunction “but”, the reader shifts from a screaming mode to a calmer mode. The reader does this transition two times by asking questions in capital letters with exaggerate punctuation and also protesting in after the section question stating their opposition to what is happening in the story. Following the conjunctions used in the comment, the reader seems to set a more

serious mode as they try to describe their feelings and what is happening in the story. The transition from the screaming mode to the serious mode in the comment thus might explain the readers' light-heartedness around the story. Such transition was also deployed by Bandom readers such as the following comment from *Down in the Forest*:

NEXT DOOR! WHAT?!?!?!?!?!?!?

ughhhhhh I cannot. why. ughhhh.

But hey Brendy was right when he said the guy was hot.

So whats the name of the band Josh told Ty to listen to? I am too lazy to look it up.

The Bandom reader opened the comment with a capitalised statement and a question to express their shock at an event in the story. Following their complaint about the event, they added the conjunction "but" stating their opinion about an event in the story in a formal and serious way. From both Bandom and K-Pop fanfiction readers' comments, the capitalised sentences and/or words mostly connote a negative meaning. This negative connotation, however, is barely serious and generally light hearted which is probably why fanfiction readers choose to type using such informal form of speech.

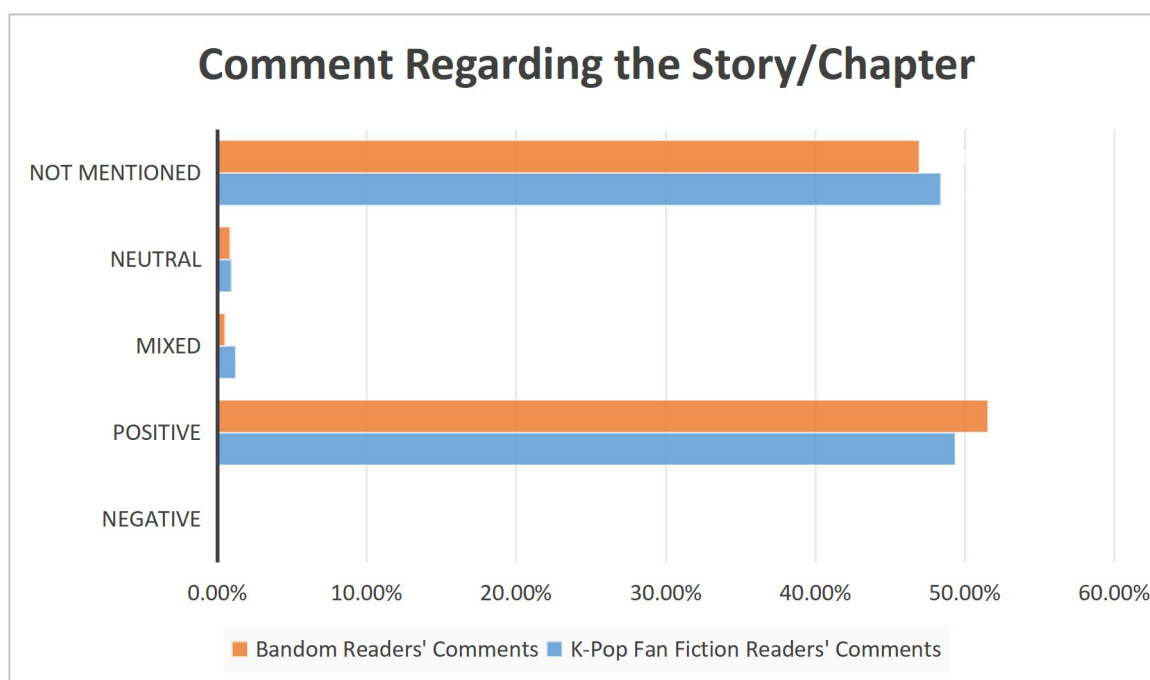
Overall, then, both K-pop and Bandom readers rely on informal typographical devices such as emojis, emoticons, all caps, repeated letters, exaggerated punctuation, to perform and intensify their affective responses. The differences between them are largely stylistic and scalar rather than fundamental: K-pop readers use these features more frequently and in more elaborate combinations, while Bandom readers use them more sparingly. In the context of this chapter's broader argument, this suggests that age of fandom and the likely age profile of participants shape the tone of RPF commenting practices, but not their basic orientation. Across both communities, comments function primarily as sites of affective display and

gratitude within a shared gift culture, rather than as spaces where readers foreground transcultural critique or debates over representation

Shared Commenting Practices Across K-pop and Bandom RPF

Drawing on quantitative data, K-Pop fanfiction and Bandom readers share a striking set of commenting practices, from how they respond to stories and chapters to the ways they talk about characters. The initial purpose of this research was to determine how K-Pop fanfiction readers present themselves as transcultural in their commenting practices, particularly in comparison to Bandom. Aside from the small amount of evidence that explicitly foregrounds Korean language or setting, however, the analysis reveals a different pattern: the most visible commonality across both communities is an emphasis on affective response and appreciation rather than on cultural critique or correction. This suggests that, at least on AO3, K-Pop and Bandom readers participate in a shared RPF commenting culture structured by gift exchange and emotional reciprocity, even though the fandoms themselves emerge from very different industrial and cultural histories. Bearing in mind that K-Pop fanfiction develops around a non-Western Korean idol industry, whereas Bandom emerged from predominantly Western rock scenes, I initially expected these different trajectories to produce more marked dissimilarities between the two reading communities. Nonetheless, there were more similarities than differences according to quantitative data (see Figure 24 and 25)

Figure 23. *Comments Regarding the Story/Chapter*



Half of both K-Pop fanfic and Bandom readers left comments appreciating the fanfiction stories or specifically the chapters they had read (see Figure 24). A Bandom commenter, for example, on *500 baskets* wrote:

I'm loving this story so far, it's great and I think the parallels are a good idea, keep up the good work!

Here, the Bandom reader simply state they love the story while appreciating the efforts of the author. That comment is an example of those readers who leave simple comments of appreciation. Another example is from the same story:

This is such ab awesome story! I can't wait for the next update! Thank you so much for writing this story! :D

The reader in the comment above also praises the story and also expresses their gratitude to the author for writing the story. This act of gratitude is widely common in the fanfiction world as it is known for its gift culture. The term gift culture refers to the non-

profit fanfiction creation, i.e. fanfiction is created by authors for readers with no intended profit (Busse, 2017; Murdock, 2017, p. 50). This framework helps explain why appreciative comments are so prevalent in both datasets (see Figure 24): readers respond to the “gift” of a story by reciprocating with thanks, enthusiasm, and demands for more. As fan studies scholars have noted, fanfiction circulates within what Busse and Hellekson (2006) describe as a “gift culture”, where stories are offered without profit and commenting functions as a form of reciprocation rather than formal review. Jenkins (1992) and Karpovich (2006) similarly emphasise that fan writing develops within dense networks of feedback, shared vocabularies and expectations, in which commenting is part of an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off judgement. In this context, short messages of thanks, enthusiasm and encouragement are not trivial; they are the everyday practices that sustain the collaborative fantext and motivate authors to keep contributing to the archive. K-pop fanfic comments display the same logic. A reader on *rule #3* wrote:

Woah, I just... woah, I finished reading and I feel so satisfied, it was so good!! you're very talented, im so sad that it's over already bcs I became really attached to the characters but Im going to read all of your fics. Please keep writing and good luck <3

The K-Pop fanfiction reader opened the comment with a shocked expression in which they expressed their amaze from the story. Following that, they praised the author on their talent and informed that they were going to follow the author’s work as well. As stated before in the methodology section, some fanfiction authors succeed to form their own reading niche in which they have fans of their own who follow their stories, at times regardless of the characters or fandom they write about. In the comment presented above, for example, the reader in a clear manner assures the author that they are going to read all of their fanfics. The reader does not specify whether that includes future work as well, but their “keep writing” at the end of the comment indicate that they might be talking about both past and future works.

Concerning the future works of authors (whether it is a new story or a new chapter), 22,29 % K-Pop fanfiction readers and 12.64% Bandom readers have left comments asking or requesting the author to either update their fanfiction story with a new chapter, to add on a sequel, or to publish a new fanfiction story.

Such comments are another form of affective reciprocity: readers convert their emotional investment into pressure for more content, helping to build what Busse and Hellekson (2006) describe as ongoing “fantext” where individual fics are embedded in a larger web of stories, authors, and expectations. This, thus, might be a demonstration on how fanfiction authors build their own fandoms in the RPF world. The comment *rule #3* below is a clear example of how fanfiction authors might also attract fans from other fandoms:

aye just wann preface by saying i: don't stan pentagon but I LOOOVE this fic so MUCH I only read it before i go to bed bc that's the only quiet time i get and I literally look forward to it all day. wow i'm realizing this is an old fic BUT ITS OK I LOVE IT STILL !! i'm glad i randomly decided to read pentagon fic (im a triple h stan so im drawn to em) bc this is so good and i dearly lov !

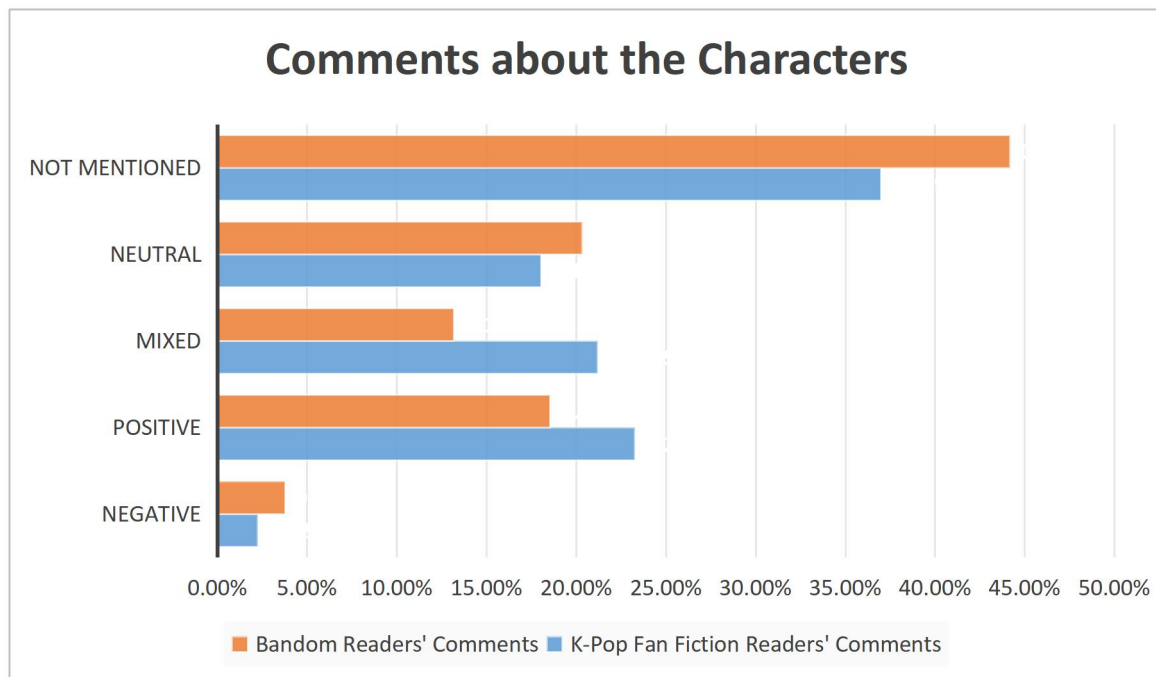
The K-Pop fanfiction reader in the comment above specifies their fandom to be only limited to Triple H, a unit which consists of the currently former Pentagon member Dawn.⁹¹ Through that comment above, that K-Pop fanfiction reader has displayed their appreciation towards the story despite not belonging to the Pentagon fandom. Not only does their different fandom not prevent them from enjoying the fanfiction story, but the 'age' of the story also does not affect their appreciation. The reader types in low case starting with a “wow” about their realisation that the story is old but then reassure that in upper case that they “still” love it.

⁹¹ That comment was published on the 18th of August 2018. Dawn left Pentagon on the 18th of November 2018, the still member of Pentagon Huya, and the female solo singer who was from the same company as Pentagon, HyunAh

This resonates with Jenkins's argument that fans are drawn to fanfiction by a mix of fascination and frustration, and stay for the affective rewards of ongoing participation (1992). It also speaks to Busse and Hellekson's notion of the fantext as a shared, ever-expanding web of stories and responses: readers move across fandom boundaries in search of particular tropes, ships and emotional tones, and their comments help weave individual works into that larger tapestry.

Interestingly, the most frequently highlighted theme among the comments of both communities is in relation to appreciation of the fanfiction story. Additionally, the fact that both communities left almost the same number of such comments demonstrates the unified nature of RPF in terms of appreciation of gift culture. That, thus, implies that despite the two reading communities belonging to two disparate fandoms of groups from different cultures and languages, they still share commenting practices, as a result of their shared gift culture and affect. In other words, this suggests that "moments of affinity" with a ship or story can override both national and fandom divisions, drawing readers into a shared Anglophone RPF space organised around gift exchange and affective reciprocity rather than strictly bounded fan identities (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Jenkins, 1992).

Figure 24. *Comments about the Characters*



A similar convergence appears in comments about characters. More than a half of both Bandom and K-Pop fanfiction readers provide great focus on the characters of the stories they are engaged with (see Figure 25). The readers show affect in multiple ways in their commenting practices. These comments range from positive comments which praise the character or sympathise with them, negative comments in which they disagree with a character's actions or show disapproval towards them, mixed comments wherein they leave a mixture of opinions and/or neutral views about a certain or multiple characters, to neutral comments where they only mention the character with no opinion on them. The results from both reading communities do not contain a significant difference.

Drawing on quantitative data, both Bandom and K-Pop fanfiction readers focus the most on the positive aspect of the characters. 23.26 % of K-Pop fanfiction readers and 18.54% Bandom readers leave comments consisting of their appreciation or sympathy towards the characters. For example, a K-Pop fanfiction reader from *Amor Omnia Vincit* commented:

...

...I'm glad hyuck's fine now ~^O^~ taeyong is such a good big brother . I wish i have
a big brother like him too ≥_≤

The reader shows concern towards Hyuck and at the same time praises Taeyong as a responsible old brother. They even show their gratitude towards Hyuck's wellbeing with a smiling emoticon. In order to show their appreciation towards Taeyong, they even state that their desire to have a brother like him followed by a laughing shy emoticon. Another example showing concern over characters from another K-Pop fanfiction reader on *Amor Omnia Vincit* is:

I was almost starting to get worried, but knowing you Chenle will be home safe :)))
right haha :)))

The reader states their worry over Chenle, and most importantly, hints to the author to keep them safe in a subtle way. According to *Abbreviations* website, the smiling emoticon with multiple or double parentheses, the highest rated definition of this emoticon is “passive aggressive”. Put differently, this emoticon is generally used when an individual is attempting to warn or threaten another person. The K-Pop fanfiction reader in the comment above has used the emoticon twice while adding what is assumed as a sarcastic “right haha” which demonstrates how the reader is thus displaying their worry about Chenle by warning the author subtly.

The level of affection the K-Pop fanfiction readers have towards their characters is also remarkable in Bandom readers. One Bandom, for instance, commented on *Manners*,

Damnnnnnn I want a friend like Colin!...

Similar to one of the comments given above, this Bandom reader also displays affection by stating their desire to have a friend like Colin. Their exaggerated “damn” at the beginning of the comment indicates how intensely they present their appreciation. After all, showing affection towards RPF characters is not strange as the character is the most important element of the RPF story knowing that it is all built around real people. Therefore, being a fan of the celebrity and the reader of the RPF story collide at times. Put differently, it is difficult to part the status of a fan and an RPF reader from each other as, most of the times (except for those cases in which readers read for the author and not for the celebrity), the fans read RPF due to being fans. An example of that would be the Bandom reader from *500 baskets* wherein they commented,

This was great. I love Patrick. I mean, I literally always love Patrick in every fanfic where Patrick is, ever, and even more in real life, but sometimes my love for Patrick overflows into the world. 10/10, wonderful small man.

The Bandom reader simply opens the comment with a very short simple sentence to compliment the story. Meanwhile, they dedicate the rest of the comment to describe their appreciation for Patrick both as the character in *500 baskets*, the character in other stories, and the celebrity. The Bandom reader stating that they love Patrick in every fanfic suggests how the readers separate the character from their original celebrity status with the help of the AU genre. This argument is better highlighted in negative comments surrounding the characters. For fans to be able to portray their idols in a negative light means that they deprive them of their celebrity status and view them objectively as normal people who belong to another universe. For instance, a K-Pop fanfiction reader from *Please, don't... (BTS Slaves)* commented:

Kim Seokjin is my Ultimate and somehow I hate him in this fic... TBh i love the story of the fic though its unique but I cry a bit inside seeing how Jin is too bitchy

The K-Pop fanfiction reader started the comment with a statement that Jin is their favorite BTS member by using the word “Ultimate” which is commonly used in K-Pop fandom and refers to a fan’s favorite group member. The reader also uses the real full name of Jin, Kim Seokjin to address the character. After stating their dislike towards Jin, they add three dots which is defined by the *Urban Dictionary* as an indication of long silence. Hence, the reader uses the long silence three dots to represent their resentful state towards their idol. Still, they voice out their appreciation for the story but then go back to complaining about how they do not like their idol in this story. Additionally, how they mention that they love the story then uses the conjunction “but” to express their disapproval of the characterisation of Jin implies that their dislike towards Jin did not lead them to dislike the whole story. Therefore, the K-Pop fanfiction reader separates K-Pop idol Jin from *Please, don't... (BTS Slaves)*’s Jin in a way which Jin is deprived from their celebrity status and seen as a character in the alternative universe where the fanfiction story takes place. An example of such separation also occurs in *Bondage Mansion* when the Bandom reader posted:

I'm going to be frank here Bert's being a lil bITCH

But really well written I am loving it oka y

Similar to the K-Pop fanfiction comment above, the Bandom reader also opened the comment by expressing their disapproval of Bert’s characterisation. Before doing so, they assured that they were honest before vocalising their dislike for frank by calling him “a lil BiTCH”. As aforementioned, the use of all-caps word can signify lightheartedness. Hence, the Bandom reader possibly did not want to paint their disapproval of Bert in a serious light. Additionally, they assured that in spite of their opinion, they still approve of the story. In that case, the

Bandom reader also separated The Used's singer Bert from *Bondage Mansion's* Bert and their disliking for Bert did not stop them from enjoying the story.

Meanwhile, there are other type of negative comments regarding characters wherein the readers are blunt and straightforward towards their disliking of characters. For instance, a K-Pop fanfiction reader commented on *Amor Omnia Vincit*:

Sicheng really needs to stop all this bullshit

In a short simple sentence, the K-Pop fanfiction reader directly voiced out their disapproval of Sicheng's behavior in the fanfiction story. Unlike the previous given examples, they did not compensate by announcing they still enjoy the story neither did they had any introductions as to why it is unpleasant to dislike their idols in the story. However, the common part between the two types of comment is that both split the celebrities from their star status in which they judge them solely based on their characterisation in the alternative universe. Another example wherein the reader bluntly announces their hatred for a character is from a Bandom reader commenting on *no one here is cis* as follows:

Oh my god pete's such an asshole ahhhhh

Starting with the startled expression "Oh my god", the Bandom reader then highlights their resentful feelings towards Pete by labelling him as "an asshole". Following that they type a long "Ah" which generally symbolises a screaming voice. It is evident in the comment how the Bandom reader directly addresses their hatred on Pete with no introductions or other claims. That demonstrates how RPF readers separate their idols from their celebrity status in various ways. Some choose to soften their hatred by stating their love for the real celebrity, others assure that their disliking of the character does not affect the reading of the story, and some others bluntly and directly express their resentfulness towards the characters they do not like.

Ultimately, these findings support the claim that, at the level of AO3 commenting, K-Pop and Bandom readers participate in a shared Anglophone RPF community of practice, grounded in gift culture and affective engagement. However, Chapter One shows that this apparent unity is layered over very different genealogies of RPF and shipping in East Asian and Western contexts. While Bandom developed within predominantly Western rock and alternative music scenes, where RPF has historically been marginalised yet also embraced as a way of deconstructing performance and identity (Hagen, 2015; Fathallah, 2017), K-Pop RPF is deeply shaped by East Asian traditions of shōjo manga and BL, as well as by the specific logics of idol production, fanservice, and shipping in Korean and Japanese fandoms.

As outlined in Chapter One, shipping in East Asia emerged through girls' culture and BL, with its *seme-uke* dynamics and stylised homoerotic relationships, and later migrated into Japanese and Korean idol fandoms (Kwon, 2019; Baudinette, 2023b). In contrast, anglophone K-Pop fans often approach shipping through LGBTQ+ identity politics, using fanfiction and fanart to explicitly “queer” idols and to construct K-Pop as a “resource of hope” for imagining alternative futures and identities (Baudinette & Santos, 2024; Kuo et al., 2022). At the same time, anglophone K-Pop RPF inherits Western RPF traditions and platforms, in this case, AO3, where norms around tagging, triggers, and gift culture have been shaped by decades of media fandom.

The similarities in comment patterns between my K-Pop and Bandom samples thus do not mean that K-Pop and Western RPF are culturally identical. Rather, they show what Chin and Morimoto describe as a “convergent transcultural context” in which fans from different backgrounds operate within shared infrastructures and adopt overlapping habits of response (2013, p. 104). On AO3, the everyday “grammar” of interaction is provided by global fanfiction norms: thanking authors, requesting updates, gushing over favourite characters, and occasionally venting frustration at them. Within that grammar, questions of national

culture, Koreanness, or different regional logics of shipping are largely backgrounded. They surface more strongly in other positions (for instance, when the same people speak as writers rather than readers) and on other platforms (such as X, where fans debate queerbaiting, Koreaboo behaviour, and cultural appropriation). The next section turns from anonymous commenters to my interviewees' reflections as readers, in order to see how their everyday criteria for "good fic" align with and help explain the comment patterns discussed above.

Interviewees as Readers: Affective, Craft-Based Judgements Beyond Koreanness

Alongside the comment data analysed in this chapter, my interviewees also offered reflections on their habits and preferences as readers. Their accounts suggest that, when choosing what to read, criteria such as ship, plot, tropes and readability tend to matter far more than questions of cultural representation. “Korea” is usually the assumed backdrop for K-pop fanfiction, but it is rarely what makes a fic “good” or “bad” in these readers’ eyes.

Across the sample, the first filter many interviewees mentioned was OTP, in other words, the ship. Several described themselves as reading “OTP first then plot” (Interviewee J), or “filtering” by ship and tropes before anything else (Interviewee B). Interviewee C similarly lists “OTP first” and then “writing aspects as in grammar, spelling, capitalisation, punctuation... good plots” as the factors that decide whether they keep reading. For others, OTP is less rigid but still present as a background preference. Interviewee M, for instance, states that they are happy to “read any ship” if the summary catches their attention, while Interviewee N foregrounds “mainly the main characters and the plot if it’s my type”. In all of these cases, readers frame K-pop fanfiction primarily as a space to follow particular couples and narrative set-ups they find emotionally satisfying, built on affect they feel for their ships and for the fics written about them.

A second, equally strong theme is the importance of readability and craft. Interviewees repeatedly emphasise basic legibility such as paragraph breaks, punctuation, grammar and coherent perspective, as central to whether they experience a fic as “good”. Interviewee F, for example, explains that they do not think “a fic can be inherently bad”, but will stop reading if they “don’t like the format (ie: no breaks between paragraphs)”. Interviewee H similarly defines a good fic as “sensible and readable”, with a plot that “makes

sense and doesn't try too hard" and "complex characters, flawed characters that make mistakes", while listing "badly spaced, badly punctuated fics" and unfocused point of view as key reasons to stop reading. Interviewee I, who offers the most technical description, cites "solid plot", "use of language, syntax, prosody, vocabulary, prose", "consistent pacing" and "engaging dialogue" as central criteria, adding that "a bad fic for me makes me not want to read the next chapter".

Within this shared emphasis on readability, there is also a recurrent awareness that many K-pop fic writers are non-native speakers of English. Several interviewees explicitly frame minor errors as acceptable and even expected. Interviewee M notes that "a lot of writers in the fandom, English isn't their first language", and therefore they will not stop reading "just because the language is a little off". Interviewee F echoes this, saying they "don't mind a few errors here and there so long as it's legible", and Interviewee L, themselves a non-native speaker, comments that "we all start somewhere" and that poor English can "be looked past" if "the plot is good and the characters are good". Others are more stringent. Interviewee A, for instance, says they "wouldn't read fics written by people whose first language isn't English" and Interviewee I states they would not continue a fic with "really poor English", yet even these more selective readers tend to justify their choices in terms of wanting to learn from strong writing, rather than in terms of cultural accuracy or representation. Interviewee N, for instance, emphasises that they "take [authors'] skills in consideration since I want to learn from them."

The participants also draw clear ethical and affective lines around certain tropes, particularly in relation to sexuality and power. Several list themes they refuse to read regardless of the story written about their ships. Interviewee K mentions "hard kinks", "paedophilia", "bestiality" and "large age gaps" as automatic exclusions. Interviewee D avoids PWP ("porn without plot") and "daddy donghae" scenarios, explaining that they

prefer “feelings explanation and love a good plot” and that their aversion is rooted in “personal choice and personal triggers” rather than cultural or religious principles. Interviewee I similarly refuses to read BDSM tropes, and Interviewee L rejects narratives in which “one’s really rude/mean to someone but it’s ok because they have a crush or something”, expressing their dislike towards such characterisation. Interviewee K is the only participant who elsewhere said they would stop reading a fic that sprinkles random Korean words; however, when I specifically asked what, apart from Korean language use, would make them stop reading a fic, they did not return to cultural issues and instead foregrounded sexual content they were uncomfortable with. These responses show that readers are attentive to questions of consent, characterisation and emotional tone, but frame these in terms of personal comfort and fannish ethics rather than national or cultural representation.

Platform choice itself is sometimes narrated through perceptions of writing quality. Interviewee O, for example, explains their decision to publish on AO3 rather than AFF by recalling that they “used to read some authors’ fanfics in AFF that were very immature and absurd” and now associates AO3 with “appealing stories and smart audiences”. While they acknowledge that AFF “could be different by now”, the distinction they draw rests again on perceived maturity of writing and readership, not on differences in how “Korean” the stories are.

In conclusion, these accounts of interviewees-as-readers complement the comment data discussed above in this chapter. When these K-pop fans describe their practices as writers, some foreground worries about “accuracy”, “realism” and “respect” in their handling of mediated Korean settings, language and customs, while others openly prioritise convenience or emotional focus over detailed cultural work. When they speak as readers, however, their evaluative vocabulary shifts towards ships, tropes, narrative craft and ethical comfort. Honouring or correcting Korean settings, language and customs hardly appears in

their lists of what makes a fic worth reading. This gap helps explain why AO3 comment fields, too, are dominated by affective response and gift-culture reciprocity rather than by visible friction over Koreanness: cultural representation is an important site of reflection and self-regulation for some authors, but it is not the primary axis along which fics are valued or dismissed in everyday reading practice.

Conclusion

This chapter brings together work on fanfiction, RPF and transcultural fandom to clarify how anglophone K-pop fans' transculturality appears (and fails to appear) in everyday reading practice. Following Jenkins, I treat fanfiction comments as part of a participatory culture in which fans respond to source texts through a mix of fascination and frustration, and in which writing and reading are embedded in dense networks of feedback and shared norms rather than isolated acts (Jenkins, 1992). Building on Busse and Hellekson's account of fanfiction as a non-profit "gift culture", I argue that AO3 comment fields are structured first and foremost by gratitude and affective reciprocity, rather than by critique (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). In this context, the predominance of "thank you", "I loved this" and "please update" comments in both my K-pop and Bandom samples is structurally significant: it helps explain why readers rarely use these spaces to correct geographical details or contest an author's handling of Korean culture, even when they may notice inaccuracies. At the level of AO3 feedback, anglophone K-pop readers do not form an exotic or fundamentally different readership, but participate in the same gift-culture feedback economy as Bandom. K-pop RPF thus becomes legible as part of a broader Anglophone fanfiction commenting culture organised around affective appreciation and reciprocity, even though its industrial and regional origins differ.

At the same time, I locate anglophone K-pop RPF within a broader framework of transcultural fandom without collapsing it into Western bandfic. Chapter One shows that K-pop shipping has its origins in East Asian fandoms shaped by shōjo manga, BL and idol fanservice, while anglophone K-pop fans on platforms like AO3 work within Western-dominated fanfiction infrastructures and often draw on LGBTQ+ identity politics when they "queer" idols in fic. In this chapter I extend Chin and Morimoto's notion of a "convergent transcultural context" specifically to describe this anglophone K-pop RPF space (Chin &

Morimoto, 2013). K-pop readers share platforms, tagging systems and feedback norms with Bandom readers, and this shared infrastructure fosters overlapping habits of response at the level of comments, even though the underlying genealogies of K-pop RPF and Western band RPF remain distinct.

The theoretical contribution here is twofold. First, I show that in this convergent context affective appreciation and gift-culture etiquette organise the “everyday grammar” of interaction, relegating debates about Koreanness and representation to other positions and platforms. Drawing on Annett’s adaptation of Tsing, I suggest that what she terms “collaborative friction”, the “awkward, unequal, unstable and creative” negotiations of cultural difference online, does not disappear in K-pop RPF, but is displaced (Annett, 2011; Tsing, 2004). Secondly, I argue that anglophone K-pop fandom operates through an oscillation between these universalised fanfic pleasures and more situated concerns about Korea and queerness, which surface unevenly across reading, writing and social-media discourse rather than in a single, consistent way. Debates about Korean representation, Koreaboo behaviour and the ethics of RPF are key moments of this friction, but they take place primarily on discursive platforms such as X, where quote-tweets and threads invite meta-commentary and argument, while AO3 comment sections remain largely affect-driven and “friction-light”. It is possible that, as these conversations continue to intensify within K-pop fandom, some of this critical discourse may eventually migrate into archive spaces as well, but in my dataset such a shift remains nascent at best.

Chapter Four: The Imagined Koreas: transcultural K-pop fanfiction and the College AU

Introduction

College AU (hereafter CAU), also known as University AU, is a fanfiction genre in which the story centres on characters who are students in college or university. It is one of the most renowned AUs in fanfiction and, in particular, in K-pop fanfiction. On AO3, there are 155,546 works tagged as “Alternate Universe – College/University”, of which 42,120 are tagged as K-pop; 13,889 BTS fics, 6,371 NCT fics, and 4,681 Stray Kids fics rank first, third, and fourth respectively under this tag. Although there is no clear, documented origin for CAU as a fanfiction trope, its indebtedness to the fictional American college familiar from Hollywood films and television series is difficult to ignore. CAU circulates across fandoms as a portable narrative template for imagining “normal” student life, which K-pop fan writers adopt and adapt in diverse ways.

Media critics have long argued that universities and college experiences depicted in Hollywood productions are inaccurate and misrepresent the American college experience (Bourke, 2013; Fedorov, 2019; Reynolds & Tobolowsky, 2017). Reynolds and Tobolowsky (2017) suggest that the American fictional college has been portrayed consistently as a space where students prioritise partying and fun over academic success, organised around recurring themes of tradition, hierarchy, homogeneity, separatism, involvement, learning, and conservatism versus progressivism. At the same time, “college” also appears as a setting in East Asian media such as manga, anime, manhwa, K-drama, and BL. While there are relatively few works that focus exclusively on college life, such as the Japanese music-focused series *Nodame Cantabile* (2001–2010), a growing number of Korean manhwas and

K-dramas such as *Cheese in the Trap* (2016) or *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (2018) use university environments to stage romance and friendship.

These texts often incorporate specifically Korean practices, such as MTs (Membership Trainings, a key rite of Korean university social life), after-school clubs, and structured drinking with seniors (Y. Kim, 2015), while de-emphasising the more overt sexualised party culture associated with Hollywood collegiate narratives. Thai BL, especially since *SOTUS* (2016), has further popularised university settings, frequently using engineering and other “prestigious” majors as male-dominated spaces that can be repurposed for queer romance. In other words, the college template itself is already transcultural: first consolidated through American media, then reworked in various Asian contexts to fit local values, gender norms, and audience expectations.

In this chapter, however, I do not approach CAU primarily as a question of realism or accuracy. Instead, I draw on Benedict Anderson’s (2006) notion of imagined communities to argue that College AU K-pop fanfiction participates in a broader community project of imagining Korea. For Anderson (2006), nations are imagined not because they are false, but because members “will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). K-pop fanfiction operates in a similar way; dispersed fans who will never meet one another, and who often have limited direct experience of Korea, nonetheless share and reproduce particular images of Korea in their fanfiction through shared texts, tropes, and platforms. As Anderson (2006) notes, communities are distinguished “by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6), and K-pop fanfiction is not simply a loose collection of stories but an ongoing, collective process of imagining Korea in different styles, depending on genre, fandom norms, and transcultural identity. Rather than claiming to reveal how Korean universities “really” work, I treat these CAU narratives as mediated, partial, and situated imaginaries produced within a largely

Anglophone, transcultural K-pop fandom by authors whose relationships to Korea are diverse and mediated.

At the same time, I situate CAU within broader work on transcultural fandom that emphasises not only affective affinity but also tension and disagreement. Drawing on Annett's (2011) adaptation of Tsing's notion of "friction", I understand transcultural fandom as marked by the productive but uneven encounters between different cultural repertoires, media systems, and power relations. CAU K-pop fanfiction is both a product and a generator of such friction. It emerges out of fans' uneven access to and knowledge of Korea and "college", and it in turn sparks debates about Americanisation, misrepresentation, and what a "proper" Korean campus should look like. Framing my analysis through Anderson and Annett together allows me to see CAU both as a community project of imagining Korea in particular styles and as a site where those styles are negotiated, contested, and sometimes fought over.

Accordingly, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. How do transcultural K-pop fanfiction authors construct different "imagined Koreas" in CAU narratives through their use of campus settings, everyday practices (such as food and social life), and linguistic choices?
2. In what ways do College AUs mobilise, blend, or erase specifically Korean elements in favour of global or Americanised college tropes, and how do these choices rework mediated Koreanness into distinct configurations such as an Americanised campus Korea, a hybrid everyday Korea, and a queer Korea?
3. What do these imagined Koreas reveal about the transcultural nature of K-pop fandom, particularly how Anglophone fans negotiate Koreanness, Western college imaginaries, and queer desire, and how these negotiations generate the kinds of

frictions around authenticity, Americanisation, and “proper” Koreanness traced elsewhere in the thesis?

Rather than assuming that CAU functions as a straightforward vehicle for representing “real” Korean universities, I use these questions to explore how CAU operates as a site of transcultural exchange in which Korea is continually reimagined. In this sense, it is more accurate to speak of imagined Koreas in the plural. The Koreas produced in K-pop fanfiction are not singular or stable; they overlap, resemble one another, and share certain motifs, but they also diverge and adapt to different narrative needs and cultural backgrounds. In this chapter I focus on three recurring configurations. First, I identify an Americanised campus Korea in which the spatial and social organisation of university life is patterned heavily on Hollywood “fictional higher education” with Korean idol characters simply inserted into an essentially US campus template. Second, I outline a hybrid everyday Korea, where the same CAU frame is peppered with recognisably Korean cues such as food, address terms, sunbae/hoobae hierarchies, selected institutional names, that anchor the storyworld in Seoul even as everyday routines remain strongly Western-coded. Third, I trace an imagined queer Korea, in which campus life is saturated with multiple queer idol–idol relationships, homophobia is largely bracketed out, and queer intimacy is woven into the mundane rhythms of student routines. These configurations are not discrete boxes; individual fics often move between them, but combined together they reveal how transcultural K-pop fans imagine Korea as Americanised, hybrid, and queer all at once.

It is also important to mention that in using the term “queer” in this chapter, I follow Halperin’s (1995) understanding of queer not as a stable identity category but as a positionality “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62). The imagined queer Korea I discuss is therefore less about empirically mapping LGBTQ+ communities in Korea and more about tracing how CAU narratives reorganise campus life so that non-

normative desires and relationships become structurally ordinary rather than marginal. At the same time, the corpus is dominated by cis same-gender pairings (both m/m and f/f). While some stories gesture to broader LGBTQ+ communities, there are no explicitly trans or non-binary characters in the sample, which means that the imagined queer Korea I analyse is primarily built around cis queer configurations. This absence is itself significant and shapes the limits of the “queer” campus that can be envisioned here.

Because CAU is considered by many fans to be a mundane, almost “normal” AU, the educational setting is not always the explicit focus of the plot. In the corpus of 39 CAU K-pop fics analysed here, some narratives centre almost entirely on college life, while others feature only one student character and spend much of their time off campus. Rather than discarding the latter, I treat this variety as productive. The everyday nature of CAU means that it frequently opens onto other ordinary spaces such as restaurants, cafés, dormitories, shared flats, and part-time jobs, where cultural markers such as food, language, address terms, and social practices are made visible. It is precisely through such mundane details that imagined Koreas are constructed, whether through the use of Korean food as student “comfort food”, the selective deployment or erasure of honorifics, or the hybrid linguistic practices that mix English internet slang with Romanised Korean.

Methodologically, I combine close readings of a smaller set of key fics consisting of the top 9 CAU fics, with more distant reading of a wider CAU consisting of a wider corpus of 30 additional CAU fics under “Alternate Universe – College/University” tag on AO3. Across these texts, I focus on textual patterns rather than on authorial intention: how setting, food, language, and relationships are described on the page, and what kinds of Korea those descriptions cumulatively make imaginable.

This chapter also builds directly on my earlier discussion of shipping and queer K-pop fandom in Chapter Two. As I showed there, shipping emerges as a transcultural fan practice through which fans “deploy homoerotic imaginaries... not only to explore their sexual desires for the attractive idols but also to express the intensely affective experience of fandom itself” (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 250; see also Kwon, 2019; Glasspool, 2012). CAU K-pop fanfiction can be read as one specific extension of this practice: a form of shipping in which popular pairings are fixed into longer, everyday narratives that relocate idol characters into seemingly “ordinary” university life. In doing so, these stories not only rework idol images through Americanised and hybrid campus imaginaries, but also participate in the wider process through which fans use K-pop as a queer-affirming “resource of hope” (Baudinette, 2022; Baudinette & Scholes, 2024; Kuo et al., 2022).

Drawing on the 39 selected CAU K-pop fics on AO3 tagged “Alternate Universe – College/University”, I argue that these stories intricately weave themes from the fictional American college into K-pop idol culture and selected elements of Korean society to construct multiple imagined Korean university environments. In some texts, this results in an Americanised campus Korea that looks and feels strikingly like a US university, only populated by Korean idols. In others, authors create hybrid campuses that combine American CAU conventions with Korean foods, address terms, and everyday practices derived from K-dramas, variety shows, and partial knowledge of Korean student life. Alongside these spatial and cultural configurations, I further contend that CAU K-pop fanfiction produces a specifically queer Korea in which multiple idol–idol queer relationships are normalised and largely untouched by homophobia.

Finally, I read these imagined Koreas in relation to both K-pop’s own industrial hybridity and the mediated Koreanness it helps produce. As scholars argue, K-pop has long been characterised by the strategic blending of Korean and non-Korean elements into a

commodified “pseudo-Koreanness” designed for global circulation (Jung, 2009; Kim, 2017; Lie, 2012; Jung, 2011). This pseudo-Koreanness is one key component of the mediated Koreanness that reaches global fans through idols, K-dramas, tourism campaigns, and other media. Seen from this angle, the Americanised campus, the hybrid everyday Korea, and the queer Korea that emerge in CAU fanfiction are not simply “inauthentic” distortions of a stable national culture, but fan-produced reassemblies of mediated Koreanness within the college AU frame, through which transcultural readers and writers make Korea narratively liveable and emotionally meaningful. At the same time, these CAU storyworlds are both products and generators of what Annett (2011) calls friction in transcultural fandom: they emerge from uneven, sometimes conflicting repertoires of knowledge about Korea and “college”, and they in turn spark debates among fans about misrepresentation, Americanisation, and what a “proper” Korean campus should look like.

Ultimately, this chapter speaks directly to the broader argument of the thesis about transcultural and global fandoms. By tracing how Anglophone K-pop fans imagine multiple Koreas through the flexible CAU template, I show that transcultural fandom is not only a matter of crossing borders to consume Korean media, but of collaboratively world-building new, hybridised Koreas out of uneven repertoires of knowledge, affect, and genre. The Americanised campus, the hybrid everyday Korea, and the imagined queer Korea I outline here are all products of global fan infrastructures: they draw on US “fictional higher education” tropes, on selectively appropriated Korean food, language, and university hierarchies, and on shipping and queer fan practices that already circulate transnationally. In this sense, CAU K-pop fanfiction makes visible how global fans negotiate Koreanness in ways that are at once creative, constrained, and contested, echoing the frictions and possibilities discussed elsewhere in the thesis. Chapter Four therefore complements the thesis’s focus on authors, readers, and specific fan texts by foregrounding setting and world-

building as key sites where transcultural fandom takes shape, and where “Korea” itself is continually reimagined within a global fan commons.

College AU and Its Origins

“College? Like the fanfiction AU?” (Tumblr user: floreuce)⁹²

CAU is a fanfiction genre in which the main characters are mostly college or university students; in some rarer cases, only one half of the main pairing is a student while the other is situated outside higher education. Bahoric and Swaggerty (2015) trace the appeal of such AUs to the fact that many original texts do not allow their characters to experience college, either because they are “too young or too old” or because the setting is a fantasy world where higher education, as we know it, does not exist (p. 29). CAU, then, offers a way of gifting characters a “normal” student life they are denied in canon. Additionally, CAU does not restrict itself to the campus proper: dormitories, shared houses, cafés, restaurants, and off-campus parties all become important spaces. In other words, CAU is less about the university as an institution and more about a particular stage of life (being “college age”) and the social worlds attached to it.

Although there is no sustained academic or fannish history of how CAU emerged, stories about student life are deeply embedded in popular culture. In literature, early campus novels such as *The Groves of Academe* by Mary McCarthy (1952) and *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis (1954) focused largely on lecturers rather than students (Shirdevi, 2011, p. 1–3). Later “varsity novels” shifted attention towards student-centred narratives, as in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) or Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992). More recently, Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013) explicitly connects college life with fanfiction writing, demonstrating how higher education settings have become fertile ground for exploring both youth and fandom. Parallel to literary traditions, film and television have

⁹² This a popular Tumblr post published on the 16th of November, 2021 under the “college au” tag and has over 32k notes as of 11th of November, 2022. <https://www.tumblr.com/floreuce/667965047289544704/college-like-the-fanfiction-au?source=share> Accessed on the 23rd of March, 2024

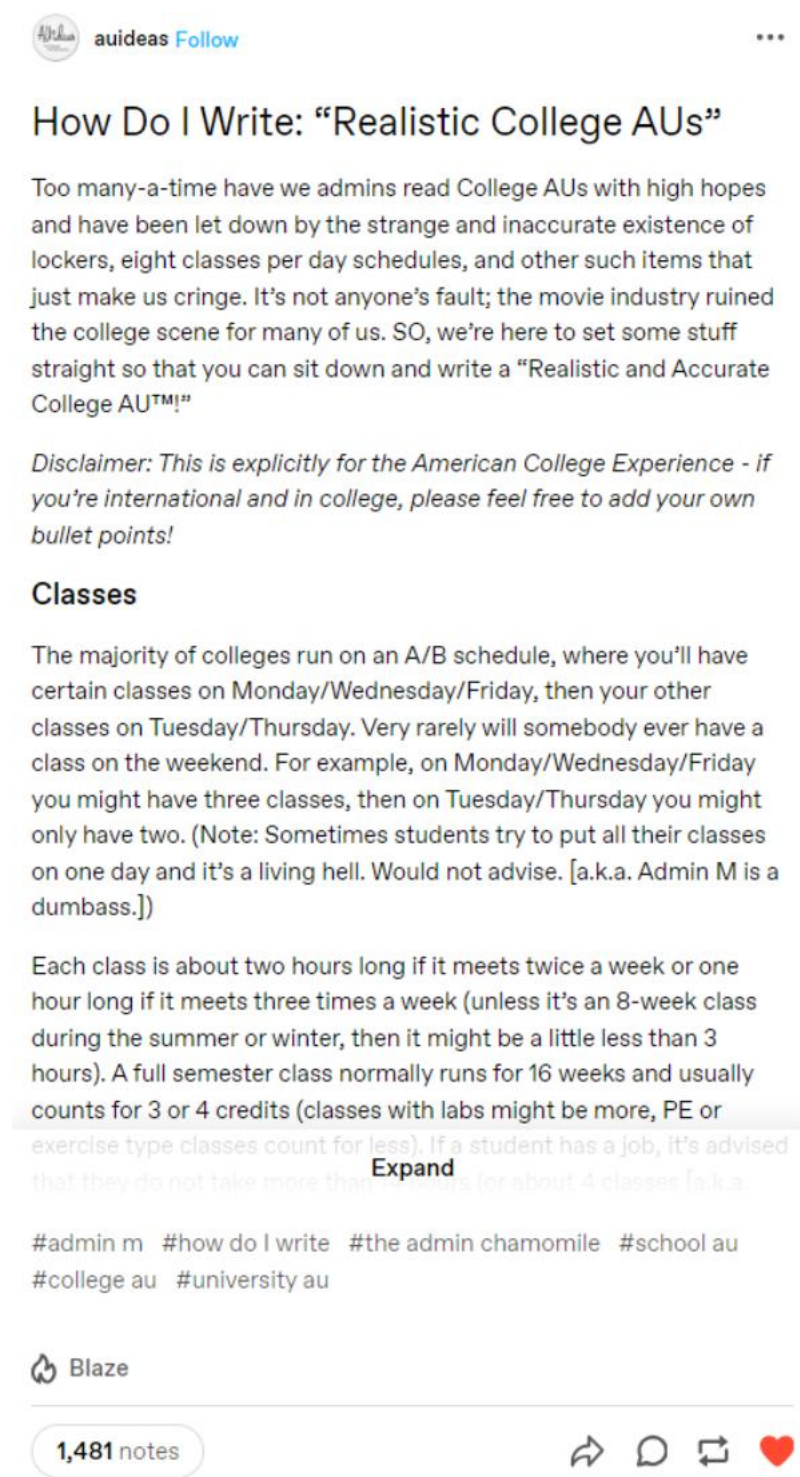
elevated the college setting into a major genre in its own right. Since the 1990s, Hollywood productions such as *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Sydney White* (2007), and *Pitch Perfect* (2012) have circulated a highly recognisable imaginary of American campus life (Bourke, 2013; Conklin, 2008; Fedorov, 2019; Reynolds & Tobolowsky, 2017).

Scholars argue that these depictions constitute a “fictional higher education” that both distorts and selectively mirrors real US college experiences (Conklin, 2008, location 43–45). Bourke (2013) notes that such media often present students as prioritising fun over academic rigour, foregrounding parties, impulsive decisions, and the sidestepping of institutional rules; faculty and teaching assistants frequently appear as obstacles to be circumvented (p. 466–467). Building on this work, Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017) identify recurring themes across college-themed films, series, comics, novels, and games, namely tradition, hierarchy, homogeneity, separatism, involvement, learning, and the tension between conservatism and progressivism. Together, these tropes offer a stable repertoire through which audiences can recognise “college” as a genre, even when the specifics of real campuses vary widely. CAU fanfiction draws heavily on these elements: age-homogeneous student groups, dormitories and roommates, classroom and library scenes, exams, Greek life and campus clubs, declared majors, and, above all, parties, often symbolised by the iconic red plastic cup.

At the same time, fans are not unaware of how stylised and partial this imaginary is. A widely circulated Tumblr post by the user *auideas99*, published in February 2017 and accruing over 1,400 notes⁹³, offers a guide to “writing realistic College AUs”, explicitly blaming Hollywood college movies for many of the errors that appear in fanfiction. The post corrects misconceptions about classes, teachers, foreign language requirements, lockers, transport, dorm arrangements, and partying, insisting on the gap between media representations and everyday student life in the United States.

⁹³ As of the 11th of November, 2022.

Figure 25. *Tumblr user auideas shares a post to write realistic College AUs fics*⁹⁴



⁹⁴ <https://auideas.tumblr.com/post/156769604957/how-do-i-write-realistic-college-aus> Accessed on the 11th of November, 2022. Tumblr post posted on the 3rd of February, 2017.

It implicitly targets fan writers who have not attended an American college, highlighting the extent to which CAU has become a globalised genre whose authors may not share the educational contexts from which its tropes originate. Guides such as this do not simply police accuracy; they also reveal how central the fictional American college has become as a template for imagining student life in fan communities.

In the context of K-pop fanfiction, these pre-existing college imaginaries function as a crucial part of the raw material from which authors construct their stories. Following Anderson's (2006) notion of imagined communities, we can see CAU not only as a set of narrative conventions, but as a shared style for imagining what "college", and more generally "Korea" look and feel like. When transcultural K-pop fans place Korean idols into CAU settings, they are rarely working from detailed knowledge of Korean universities; instead, they draw on this transnational stock of fictional higher education and then adjust it, to varying degrees, to align with their own understandings of Korea and K-pop. The question is therefore not whether K-pop CAU fics simply replicate the American fictional college or accurately portray Korean universities, but how they appropriate, modify, or displace this inherited college template in order to produce different imagined Koreas. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how these Hollywood-derived themes and tropes are reconfigured when Korean idols become students, and how the resulting Americanised, hybrid, or placeless campuses illuminate the transcultural dynamics of K-pop fandom.

K-pop Fandom and College AU

As previously mentioned, CAU emerges as one of the predominant AU genres within K-pop fanfiction on AO3. This popularity likely stems from fans' desire to imagine their favourite idols experiencing a form of ordinary student life that is rarely visible in their public careers. Bahoric and Swaggerty (2015) argue that the emergence of CAU more generally is linked to characters' limited opportunities to display college experiences in canon (p. 29); this is strikingly similar to the case of K-pop idols, many of whom either do not attend university, or attend under conditions that make it difficult to share their campus lives.

Although an increasing number of idols have been pursuing higher education alongside their schedules⁹⁵, they often face privacy invasion when they do so. There have been incidents of idols being surrounded by classmates during lectures, sometimes with professors tacitly encouraging such behaviour.⁹⁶ For fans, then, the university experiences of idols are at once known, hinted at, and inaccessible. This aligns with Jenkins' (1992) argument about fans writing fanfiction as a result of both fascination and frustration. It might be due to that frustration in which K-pop fans long for imagining their idols living normal student lives and engaging in romantic relationships with each other that CAU is born. CAU K-pop fanfiction can be read as a response to this opacity: they construct imagined Koreas in which idols are not global celebrities but "normal university students", attending class, living

⁹⁵ An example of that would include but is not limited to: All BTS members, Nayeon of Twice, Yoona, Yuri, Sooyoung, and Seohyun of Girls' Generation, Siwon and Heechul of Super Junior, G-Dragon of Big Bang, etc.

⁹⁶ There is a notable incident that occurred to Girls' Generation's Yoona when she attended a class at Dongguk University on the 19th of May, 2014. The female idol was captured uncomfortable by the overwhelming amount of classmates asking for her autograph. It was reported by an attendee that the professor ended the lecture 30 minutes earlier and ordered Yoona to introduce herself in front of her peers, turning the class into a show. A video can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVnoHpf_m1k&feature=emb_logo accessed on the 12th of November, 2022.

in dorms, and navigating friendships and romance away from cameras. Through constructing such imagined Koreas, K-pop fanfiction authors are being active cultural producers rather than passive consumers via the reconstruction of the original text, (Jenkins, 1992) which is in this case, K-pop idols, their lives, and Korea.

The inclination of CAU K-pop writers to portray idols as ordinary students also reflects their own life stage and desires. Survey data on fanfiction authors suggests that many are in, or near, higher education themselves. A 2013 survey by *centrumlumina*, a prominent fanwriter and admin of *Femslash Revolution*, found an average age of 25 among 10,005 respondents. Duggan's (2020) study of *Harry Potter* fan writers similarly reports that 56.7% of participants were university students or young adults, with teenagers making up 19.8% and only 0.2% being of retirement age. Within my corpus of 39 CAU K-pop fics, paratexts such as author's notes further hint at this connection. *8moons2stars* mentions being busy with higher education, while *Hiraeth's* author, *haruday*, apologises for slow updates due to returning to college after the Christmas break. The author of *The Bet* references having a roommate, and *trulyfine* (*ssstrychnine*) notes being occupied with assignments. At the same time, other writers explicitly acknowledge their lack of college experience: *ILJIDO*, author of *Kiyub*, states they have never been to university, and *locks* shares that they are in the process of applying to college in their notes for *Fall Asleep (Fall for You)*. Additionally, a large number of the CAU K-pop fic authors might be of college age (18 years old or above) considering that numerous of CAU K-pop fics contain mature content⁹⁷; the authors and readers have to claim that they are older than 18 years old to publish or have access to explicit and mature fics. Ultimately, these examples suggest that CAU is written both by

⁹⁷ As of the 12th of November, 2022, there are 7203 explicit CAU K-pop fics and 6066 mature ones making them both make 13,269, which is more than any other tags in CAU K-pop fics rating tags.

those with lived experience of higher education and those for whom college remains imagined or aspirational.

This diversity of educational backgrounds complicates any straightforward claim that CAU K-pop fics simply mirror their authors' real-life student experiences. For some writers, particularly those facing socio-economic barriers or restrictive educational systems, attending college may be difficult or impossible. In such cases, higher education itself can function as a fantasy space, especially in contexts like the United States where university is often framed as a costly privilege. The campus, then, becomes a doubly imagined site: a place the writer has not inhabited in reality, and a place in Korea they may never visit. When such authors place idols into CAU settings, they are not only imagining Korea but also vicariously inhabiting an idealised student life alongside them. Writing idols doing what "an average person" of a certain age might do such as sharing dorm rooms, procrastinating on assignments, flirting in libraries, allows fans to build an affective connection with their idols grounded in relatability rather than distance. CAU here becomes a collaborative project of imagining both college and Korea, producing an imagined Korea that feels emotionally proximate to the writers' own aspirations.

Another factor behind CAU's appeal in K-pop fandom lies in its suitability for stories of romance and friendship. College is widely constructed, in both Western and Asian media, as a liminal period between adolescence and adulthood, characterised by new freedoms, diminished parental supervision, and intensified peer relationships. It offers a flexible backdrop for narratives about co-educational spaces, late-night gatherings, and the formation of enduring bonds. CAU K-pop fics draw on this association: they place idols into campus environments where they can fall in love, make close friends, and experiment with different identities, often in contexts where queer relationships are normalised and unremarkable. In doing so, they help to build imagined Koreas in which universities are not just sites of

academic learning but key stages for emotional and relational development, aligning with CAU conventions more broadly while inflecting them with K-pop’s specific affective economy.

Figure 30. X user lovelybangta shares a post about Jackson's common role in CAU K-pop fics⁹⁸



K-pop fans’ engagement with CAU is not confined to AO3. On platforms such as X, CAU has become a recognisable fanon frame in its own right. After running a search about “college au kpop” on X, there appeared to be more tweets *about* the CAU rather than the

⁹⁸ That post was posted on the 4th of December, 2019.
<https://twitter.com/lovelybangta/status/1202193390969864194> accessed on the 11th of November, 2022.

CAU fics themselves. The tweets were in a commentary style and often discussed popular things in the fan community in relation to CAU. The post above, for instance, has more than 21.5k likes, 1,507 quote tweets, and 5,956 retweets making it the most popular CAU related tweet in the K-pop fan community on X. The photo attached to the tweet is a screenshot of Jackson Wang in as an audience in Mnet Asian Music Awards (MAMA) that the fans were apparently watching collectively on livestream. The X user starts the tweet with the assumption that some fans might know who he is (considering GOT7, the boygroup he is part of, debuted all back in 2014 and are no longer being as active as they were), and immediately gets to the conclusion that the fans will definitely know him through CAU K-pop fics. That does not mean that Jackson Wang is not famous enough for people to recognise him outside of K-pop fics, but such tweet implies more an inside fandom joke about how known he is as the one who hosts house parties in CAU K-pop fics.

There are also a number of other tweets who throw the same joke about Jackson Wang being the party host in CAU fics. On one hand, that portrays how popular the genre is not only on the AO3 side of K-pop fandom but also on X. On the other hand, it shows how fans and more specifically CAU K-pop fanfic material move across platforms which thus helps fanon to circulate wider within the fandom. It is important to note that such wider circulation would not have been possible without the fans actively engaging with the fics on the platform AO3, hence having a unified understanding of the context that the Jackson Wang tweet is referring to. Moreover, here, we can see Anderson's (2006) imagined community at work: fans who will never meet one another nonetheless share an internalised repertoire of CAU character functions and settings, which they recognise instantly in a single image or line.

Another example of the fans having a shared understanding about K-pop CAU fics is also evident in `kpop happenings_` post and the amount of fans interacting with it:

Figure 31. *X user kpophappenings_ shares a post about CAU K-pop idols inspiring fic writers*⁹⁹



That post further illustrates how CAU fanon circulates across platforms. The post alludes to “kpop boys” whose behaviour “inspires College AUs”, and in the replies, fans quickly identify NCT 127 as the group in question, sharing a clip of the members playing table tennis with red beer cups in a dorm-like common room.¹⁰⁰ This moment is read not simply as idol content, but as raw material for CAU: the members already “look like” characters in a CAU, and fans explicitly position the video as a source of inspiration for writers. CAU thus moves bidirectionally between official media and fan production: idol content helps shape how college-aged idols are imagined, while CAU narratives and jokes on X shape how fans see and interpret later idol behaviour.

Those examples above show transcultural K-pop fandom as a fanfiction community in which they circulate fanfiction inside jokes and inspirations in platforms other than the

⁹⁹ That X account is a popular K-pop fan account with a number of followers exceeding 246k and is dedicated to posting cryptic messages about K-pop idols, groups, or fan communities and the fans have to use their common understanding to know what the post is referring to. Usually, the fans would comment in the replies section or on the quote retweets whom they think the tweet is about.

¹⁰⁰ The link of the fan’s tweet with the video: <https://twitter.com/ISlexy13/status/1226596339770953728>

platforms fanfiction is originally published on. That symbolises how transcultural K-pop fandom uses social media platforms such as X not only as a way to promote K-pop and act as cultural ambassadors (B. Kim, 2015; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013; Samosir and Wee, 2024), but also as a way to perform their fanfiction engagements, and thus create an imagined community based on K-pop fanfiction, as well. Fanfiction communities more generally are known to be a collaborative, continuous, collective project in which meaning is negotiated, revised and redistributed (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Karpovich, 2006), and what K-pop fans are doing here is performing that collective collaborative nature rooted in fanfiction communities as well as their own transcultural trait as a collaborate global fandom on digital platforms (Roy & Das, 2022; S. Keith, 2023; Kim, 2012) wherein a large and significant amount of fan practices and debates take place. That, therefore, shows the compatibility of transcultural K-pop fandom and the collaborative nature of fanfiction, especially in terms of redistribution not only of fics themselves but fanfic inspiring material as well as fanfic jokes, creating an imagined community.

Fanart provides another visual layer to this CAU imaginary. One popular example is a series of drawings depicting members of BTS and TWICE as university students, with each character labelled with a major. Down below is an example of a BTS and Twice collection of fanarts posted by X user bangdungie on the 30th of August, 2020 with 383 retweets, 26 quote tweets, and 1,486 likes:

Figure 32. *X user bangdungie shares CAU fanarts of Twice and BTS*

BTS and TWICE in uni au and their college major

@BTS_twt @JYPETWICE





(X user: bangdungie)¹⁰¹

The fanarts above has 383 retweets, 26 quote tweets, and 1,486 likes, and present Twice and BTS members split into 2 pairs (mostly 2 boys and 2 girls) except for the last one in which Jeongguk is put with Sana, Dahyun, and Tzuyu because Twice is one member more than BTS. The idols are assigned majors in the fanarts; some majors, such as dance for J-Hope or Mina, or food and nutrition for Momo, clearly map onto idols' existing roles, talents, or well-known habits. The image would resemble a generic group portrait were it not for these annotations; it is the majors that mark the figures as college students and situate them within a CAU frame. Seeing how both group members have been coupled up shows that the artist was attempting to portray a romantic college au or “uni au” as they name it. The main point that classifies that collection of fanarts as college students is their majors written on top of their heads. Other than that, it would look like a normal group of people. The artist, therefore, made sure to annotate each member's major to make them specifically resemble college students.

¹⁰¹ The X post was shared on the 30th of August, 2020.
<https://twitter.com/bangdungie/status/1300046591739322370> accessed on the 11th of November, 2022.

The selection of majors for characters in CAU K-pop fics may also be influenced by both canon and, at times, fanon elements as will be discussed later in this chapter. Put simply, in many instances, majors are chosen based on factors such as a K-pop idol's role within the group (such as dancer, singer, visual, rapper, etc.), as well as their personal hobbies and interests. Examples from the provided illustrations include Momo majoring in food and nutrition, reflecting her dedication to fitness and healthy eating habits. Similarly, Hoseok (Jhope) is assigned a dance major due to his prominent role as a main dancer in the group, alongside Jimin. Another example is Mina, whose major in dance aligns with her passion for ballet and her position as a main dancer alongside Momo

Another fanart example found is one of BTS members Suga (named Yoongi in the tweet) and Jimin, together called YoonMin in a tweet that has 905 retweets, 78 quote tweets, and 4,750 likes:

Figure 33. X user *anji_art13* shares a YoonMin CAU fanart¹⁰²



¹⁰² The tweet was posted on the 6th of January, 2021.

https://twitter.com/anji_art13/status/1346815272468901889 accessed on the 11th of November, 2022.





That widely shared fanart shows BTS’s Yoongi and Jimin (YoonMin) in a university library, exchanging shy, romantic glances across a table piled with books. Though “library” and

“class” are mentioned, the space is not primarily academic; it is romanticised, serving as a backdrop for silent mutual longing. These images visualise the same imagined Koreas that appear in written CAU fics: campuses where idols’ majors are tailored to their canon personas, and where educational spaces such as libraries are refunctioned as sites of intimacy.

All the examples above; posts, memes, and fanarts show that CAU in K-pop fandom is not merely a tag on AO3 but a shared imaginative framework that circulates across platforms and media. They reveal a fandom-wide understanding of what “college” looks like for idol such as party hosts, red cups, dorm common rooms, majors that mirror group roles, libraries as romantic spaces, even when few participants have access to either Korean universities or the idols’ real student lives. In this sense, K-pop CAU is one of the key genres through which fans collectively produce imagined Koreas: sometimes closely aligned with fictional American campuses, sometimes hybridised with glimpses of Korean culture and idol canon.

To sum up, all those examples above also show how fan practices such as fanfiction can function as transcultural circulation. In other words, because fan practices, in this case fanfiction, circulate “in ever-tightening circles of influence within an increasingly convergent transcultural context” (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 104), CAU fanfiction vocabularies spread across platforms. Moreover, transcultural Kpop fans using X as a digital platform is similar to what Anderson (2006) labels the imagined community’s print media. That reveals how social media platforms, in this case X, helps transcultural K-pop fandom imagine its community by engaging in, not only in debates, but also in engaging with shared fanfiction inside jokes, raw idol material as inspiration, and CAU fanarts. It also ultimately shows how transcultural K-pop fandom is dispersed throughout both fanfiction and social media platforms, and migrates their discussions of fanfiction to social media platforms (such as what was discussed in

Chapter 2), and also how transcultural K-pop fandom forms a shared understanding of K-pop fanfiction norms, despite the friction that occurs within the fandom.

Methodology

To select CAU stories for this chapter, I employed a systematic approach using AO3. I began by navigating to the "Search" section and selecting "Work Search" to access the fanfic database. To maintain a consistent scope, I filtered the search to include only completed works, exclude crossovers, and limit the language to English. This ensured that the stories were accessible and manageable for analysis.

The K-pop groups selected for this study, BTS, Red Velvet, and EXO, enjoy significant popularity on AO3 and other platforms. Additionally, my familiarity with the groups made it easier to assess their characterisations in the stories in relation to their public personas. As discussed in the Introduction chapter of the thesis, my long-term immersion in AU-based K-pop fanfiction means the College AU template is already deeply familiar to me. In this chapter, thus, I draw on that insider knowledge to identify recurring motifs and departures, while working against uncritical immersion by combining close reading with more distant, pattern-oriented analysis. Out of the 155,600 College AU tagged fanfiction stories on AO3, 42,129 are K-pop fics, with BTS being the most written in this genre with 13,891 stories.¹⁰ To focus on these groups, I applied the "Alternative Universe – College/University" tag and sorted the results by kudos to prioritise the most appreciated works by the fan community.

After reading a plethora of CAU fics for leisure, I already had the idea that the stories followed a certain pattern, and therefore, selecting them did not happen because they were different, but because they were the same. From the top results, I selected the 13 most popular stories for each group. Of these, 3 were chosen for close reading and detailed qualitative analysis, while the remaining 10 were selected for distant reading, to support the

detailed the qualitative analysis. This dual approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of transcultural elements in CAU K-pop fics.

The corpus consists of 3 BTS fics titled *refrigerator humming*, *chewing gum and instant karma*, *i forget to breathe (when i'm with you)*, and *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, 3 EXO fics titled *Is That A Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me?*, *that love that keeps me shaking*, and *Thread of the Fates*, and 3 Red Velvet fics titled *You make me forget all fear*, *kiyub*, and *a kiss*. Although close-reading will only be done on these nine selected stories, I have studied a minimum of 10 other stories for each of the fandoms mentioned as a result of further reading which turns the corpus into a total of 39 stories.

The stories were selected from AO3 rather than other platforms like Asianfanfics or Wattpad due to AO3's superior browsing and search system, which is more user-friendly and practical. AO3 effectively organises alternate universes (AUs) through tags that are widely used by fanfiction authors. Additionally, AO3's tag wrangling system ensures consistency by aligning alternative tags like 'Academia AU' or 'Campus AU' with the main tag. This system captures keywords and standardises them, making it easier to find relevant stories and maintain an organised database. Second, AO3 had an easy way to download a PDF version of the stories for storage. The text of the fics was not the only part included in the analysis; paratexts, such as the author's notes were also assessed.

The Imagined Korea One: The Americanised Campus with Korean Idol Characters

Imported US College Imaginary

In the first configuration of CAU K-pop fics, Korea is imagined through a largely Americanised campus geography: the buildings are unnamed, the institutional culture is generic, and what makes the setting legible as “college” are not specifically “Korean” structures (like MTs or student clubs) but the familiar iconography of the fictional American university such as frats, house parties, and red cups. Korean idols’ bodies are placed inside a campus imaginary that is, for the most part, imported wholesale from Hollywood and other Anglophone media.

This is where Anderson’s formulation that communities are “distinguished... by the style in which they are imagined” (2006, p. 6) becomes particularly useful. In this version of an imagined Korea, the style is very clearly that of the American campus movie: alcohol-fuelled parties, Greek life, and a constant prioritisation of social and romantic involvement over academic achievement. Seen through my earlier notion of mediated Koreanness, this first configuration shows what happens when the repertoire that mediates “college” for these fans is overwhelmingly American: “Korea” is present primarily through idol casting and a few linguistic cues, while the underlying campus space is borrowed almost wholesale from Hollywood and other Anglophone media. The idols are Korean, but the campus they inhabit is not recognisably “Korean”; instead, CAU writers mobilise what Reynolds and Tobolowsky (2017) term “fictional higher education” as their default template for depicting student life, with its emphasis on tradition, hierarchy, homogeneity, separatism, involvement, learning outside the classroom, and the tension between conservatism and progressivism.

In many of the fics, this imported US college imaginary is most visible in how involvement is staged. Rather than MTs, department circles, or student clubs, social life happens in house parties and dorm parties. The most explicit examples are those stories which introduce full-blown Greek life into otherwise Korean-coded narratives. In *That love that keeps me shaking*, Chanyeol and Kyungsoo's first encounter takes place at a frat party in the "Alpha Kappa Phi" house, a pointedly American space whose very name evokes US business fraternities and collegiate branding.¹¹ The story makes no attempt to reinscribe this party into a Korean context; instead, Korean characters simply move through a recognisable frat-party script of alcohol, flirting, and crowded sociality.

Hiraeth goes further in spelling out the American college frame as the default meaning of "college". In the author's note, haruday pauses the narrative to gloss Greek-life terminology for readers,

...

Frat terminology mentioned:

N.I.B- newly initiated brother

Pledgicide- students who die or are injured during hazing

Hazement- basement where hazing takes place

GDI- An acronym for God Damn Independent, a term referring to individuals who loathe the Greeks. (haruday)

In addition to that glossary, haruday also includes "fratboy jeongguk" among the tags of the fic. The glossary does two things at once: it assumes that "frat culture" is intrinsic to the idea of college, and it acknowledges that not all readers will be familiar with this very US-specific

system. The note implicitly marks Greek life as the “proper” CAU framework, even as it has to be taught to an international readership.

Across the corpus, this pattern recurs without necessarily invoking explicit fraternities. Parties are staged in off-campus houses, shared apartments, or dorm common rooms, with alcohol served in red plastic cups which is another strongly Americanised visual shorthand. In several fics, characters drink rum and coke or similar Western mixed drinks at parties, even when other parts of the story still gesture to Korea through names or occasional honorifics. The “red cup party” functions as a portable trope that instantly signals “college” and “fun” in the CAU imagination, regardless of whether such parties actually exist in Korean universities.

What is striking in this first imagined Korea is not only what is present, but what is almost completely absent. MTs do not appear in any of the 39 CAU K-pop fics, and after-school clubs are only mentioned in two. Instead of bonding on MT trips, first-years in these stories get drunk in cramped apartments, flirt in frat basements, or meet their future partners at house parties. Likewise, the campus café or dining hall, when it appears, usually serves Western food or generic “cafeteria” fare rather than a recognisably Korean menu, and the university itself is often unnamed, with only the vaguest of descriptive detail. The result is an anonymous campus architecture largely stripped of locally specific Korean institutional detail, onto which US campus film conventions are mapped, with Korean idol characters moving through it. A similar dynamic is at work in *Thread of the Fates*, where Sehun, Kai, and their friends attend a residential academy whose dormitories, dining hall, and house-based social life closely resemble Anglophone boarding-school and college fiction rather than any recognisable Korean university structure; the school is nominally located in Seoul, but its institutional culture is effectively a generic Western campus with Korean idol characters inserted into it.

This does not mean that authors are simply ignorant of Korean college culture. Some writers explicitly acknowledge their reliance on American reference points and the inaccuracy this produces. One author notes that they “based the little school-y bits... on my own personal experiences” (8moons2stars), explicitly disavowing knowledge of the Korean system and quietly defaulting to their domestic one. Others insert disclaimers that their depictions of university life are “definitely not accurate” (ILJIDO) because they themselves have not been to university, or because they are borrowing from the generalised “college movie” imaginary they grew up watching. These paratexts reveal an important aspect of the transcultural process: rather than attempting to reconstruct an empirically accurate Korea, many writers lean into a globalised, media-driven idea of college that is already circulating transnationally. For these authors, both “Korea” and “college” are mediated objects: they know Korean universities largely through K-pop, K-dramas and online content, but when writing CAUs they rely far more heavily on the Hollywood college imaginaries and domestic experiences that feel narratively available to them.

As portrayed above, readers and fans are clearly aware of this dynamic. On X, posts about CAU K-pop fanfiction often take the Americanised college as an inside joke. The viral tweet about Jackson Wang being “that guy who throws the house party in every college au” works because thousands of readers share a tacit understanding of what “the college party guy” looks like, and that image is patterned on US frat/party culture rather than on Korean MTs or soju tents (street bars serving soju and snacks). Other posts explicitly demand “red cups and sex” as the minimum requirements for something to feel like a “real” CAU, indicating how deeply these US tropes have been naturalised as the genre’s core markers. When searching “kpop red cups” on X, there were a number of posts who spoke about the red cup in CAU K-pop fics phenomenon, albeit in different ways. User @ddalgitxt, for instance,

is an example of K-pop fic readers (or writers) who view the red cups tradition as an automatic CAU characteristic even in CAU K-pop fics:

Figure 26. X user *ddalgitxt* shares a post about CAU K-pop fics¹⁰³



The user refers to their friend who complained about Txt (written as xtx in the post so people would not find the post while searching the group's name) lacking fics that truly feel like CAU, and expresses in all caps and four exclamation marks (to put great emphasis) two of what the user deems representative of the CAU: red cups and sex.

At the same time, some fans push back against this Americanisation, complaining that fics set in “Korean” universities feel wrong when they import red cups and late-night house parties into contexts where Korean students would more plausibly be drinking in restaurants or going on MTs. For instance, X user @songqingluo expresses their disapproval in two consecutive posts as follows:

¹⁰³ <https://x.com/ddalgitxt/status/1531398356622270465?s=20> Post accessed on 3rd of August, 2023.

Figure 27. X user songqingluo shares a post about misrepresenting Korean college in CAU K-pop fics (part one)¹⁰⁴



Figure 28. X user songqingluo shares a post about misrepresenting Korean college in CAU K-pop fics (part two)



The user refers to their last retweet (abbreviated as lrt) and continues to praise BTS fic writers, but also highlights how they are using their own culture (presumably American) instead of BTS' culture, that is Korean. They especially point out the red cups and late night partying. In a following post, the user suggests more realistic ways of partying in Korean college life, and asks for CAU K-pop fic authors to do some research, flagging their frustration at what they see as mismatches between fic and their own understanding of Korean campuses. The frustration present in their posts echoes the rising debates surrounding the misrepresentation

¹⁰⁴ <https://x.com/songqingluo/status/1331798707499458560?s=20> Post was accessed on the 3rd of August, 2023.

of Korean culture in K-pop fics. Those debates might not be as vocal as in other East Asian fandoms such as *The Untamed* fandom, but they have risen slightly in the past few years. The oldest post that could be tracked on X in relation to those debates was posted as early as 2017 by the user @jazz_tae who replied to @nieniekoto's post about the Americanisation of non-American setting fics:

Figure 29. *A conversation between two X users about misrepresenting Korean college life in CAU K-pop fics*¹⁰⁵



User @nieniekoto expresses an apparently commonly practised pattern in fanfiction in which the setting is not America, but it looks obvious that an American author wrote it, presumably from how Americanised the stories were. It is unclear which fandom @nieniekoto belongs to, and/or what fandoms/fanfics they were specifically targeting, but @jazz_tae could relate the post to their experience as a K-pop fic reader. @jazz_tae's reaction to the American elements (house parties, red cups, and wearing shoes at him) present in a K-pop fic they once read was

¹⁰⁵ <https://x.com/nieniekoto/status/915084504032612352?s=20> Post was accessed on the 3rd of August, 2023.

that they felt “weird” and adds a “lol” afterwards, probably to display lightheartedness about the situation, instead of serious offense.

The tension between those who embrace the American frat imaginary and those who call for research into “how Korean college actually works” is itself part of the transcultural negotiation. That kind of tension also echoes the debates discussed in Chapter Two, and is a description of what Annett (2011) terms “friction”, a trait inherent to transcultural fandoms. From the perspective of transcultural fandom, what we see in this first imagined Korea is not simply a failure of authenticity, but a specific way of imagining Korea through existing Anglophone fan infrastructures. Much of the CAU community is Anglophone, and many writers are themselves students or avid consumers of Western media wherein college life is often depicted. It is, therefore, unsurprising that when they “send” their idols to university, they draw on their own experiences and media repertoires: Greek life, dorm parties, campus bars, late-night house parties, and the fantasy of university as mainly a space of intense social life and romantic discovery. K-pop idols are thus recoded as “normal college students” not by being immersed in “Korean” institutional detail, but by inhabiting globalised scripts of young adulthood that have been heavily shaped by US media.

In Anderson’s terms, K-pop fanfiction here is a community project of imagining Korea in a particular style. The community does not sit down to agree on what Korean universities “really” look like; instead, through countless fics, tags, memes, and fanarts, they collectively stabilise a set of expectations about what “college” looks and feels like in K-pop CAUs. The idols’ Koreanness is crucial; it is precisely the novelty of seeing BTS, Red Velvet, or EXO members carrying red cups or joining fraternities that gives these fics their charge, but that Koreanness is layered onto an American campus template that remains largely unquestioned. This imagined Korea is thus neither a faithful representation of Korean higher education nor a purely American setting; it is an Americanised campus with Korean bodies,

produced through fans' affective investments and media histories. My use of "Americanised" here does not imply that practices such as flirting in hallways, late-night conversations in dorms, or campus romance are uniquely American. As noted earlier, college has long functioned as a popular site for youth romance and friendship across East Asian media and Thai BL as well as in Hollywood. Rather, "Americanised" signals the specific repertoire of tropes that originates in US "fictional higher education" that has become a dominant template in Anglophone fan cultures for imagining student life more broadly.

When I describe my first configuration as an "Americanised campus Korea", then, I am tracking the provenance and visual grammar of these tropes, not claiming that campus intimacy or romantic possibility belong exclusively to the United States. This configuration matters for my argument because it demonstrates one end of the spectrum of "imagined Koreas" produced in CAU K-pop fanfiction. At this end, the transcultural process operates mostly through the importation of US college imaginaries into K-pop: the idols are transported into a recognisably American "fictional higher education" with only thin threads tying the narrative back to Korean social realities, and to the mediated Koreanness that fans encounter through idol content and Korean media.

American/Western Food on Campus and at Parties

In this first imagined Korea, the university foodscape looks far less like a Korean campus and far more like the generic, Hollywood-inflected “college” that circulates in Anglophone media. Cafeterias, dorm kitchens, and party snacks repeatedly reproduce an American or broadly Western repertoire, pancakes, bacon, burgers, lasagne, casseroles, and rum-and-coke, despite the fact that the bodies moving through these spaces are explicitly Korean idols. Rather than simply being “wrong” or “unrealistic”, these choices help to stabilise a particular style of imagined Korea: a Korean university that is legible as “college” because it imports the US campus imaginary almost wholesale, and then inserts K-pop idols into it.

A good place to see this is the campus café. In *Kiyub*, the unnamed Seoul university has a central canteen-like café which functions as a social hub for Seungwan, Joohyun, and their circle. Yet the food served there is not rice, kimchi stew, or set menus with banchan; instead, the café’s signature comfort food is soufflé pancakes, frequently paired with bacon. The most cherished campus dish is therefore an Instagrammable brunch item which would not feel out of place in an American or European brunch spot, rather than a Korean student meal. The café still performs all the narrative work of a “Korean” campus hub but the menu quietly relocates the university into a Westernised culinary landscape. What is “Korean” here is not the food, but the bodies and names of the characters, and the occasional use of honorifics elsewhere in the fic. The everyday infrastructure of student life, by contrast, is imagined through Americanised food.

Is That a Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me? pushes this even further. When Jongdae’s parents visit, they fill the dorm fridge with what the narrator calls “basically anything a college boy could ever want”: a large pan of lasagne, a tub of tuna casserole, fried chicken, chilli, macaroni and cheese, and pies (MitchMatchedSocks). Later,

the campus café offers burgers and pizza as the default, and Baekhyun’s staple drink is rum-and-coke, the American college party signature drink, rather than any recognisably Korean beverage. There is a brief mention of a rice cooker in the dorm, but there are no kimchi side dishes, no rice-and-soup sets, no kimbap lunch boxes. The fic thus constructs its “normal” student food entirely through American comfort food, even though all the main characters are K-pop idols, most of them canonically Korean. Rather than suggesting that the author does not know Korean food at all, this pattern signals that “college” itself is being imagined through a US template: if these boys are college students, then of course they eat pizza and mac and cheese, because that is what a college boy “could ever want”. The American college food imaginary becomes the default, and Korea is slipped in only at the level of casting and naming.

The same logic plays out in nightlife. In *That love that keeps me shaking*, Chanyeol and Kyungsoo’s university social life is organised around house and frat-style parties. They first meet at an “Alpha Kappa Phi” party, explicitly named after US Greek-letter fraternities, where alcohol is served in red plastic cups and mixed drinks like rum-and-coke circulate as the iconic party props. Food appears in the form of Western dishes such as potato gratin and creamy potato-based side dishes, which again echo American party and potluck cuisine more than anything specific to Korean student life. Similarly, in *Is That a Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me?*, the party scenes revolve around alcohol-heavy house gatherings, with rum-and-coke once again positioned as Baekhyun’s drink of choice, despite the fact that in real-life fan knowledge he is known for low alcohol tolerance and a preference for beer or soft drinks. Here, characterisation bends toward the demands of the Americanised party script: a “proper” frat-boy party requires mixed spirits and red cups.

These examples show that the imagined Korean campus is being built out of American college food symbols. Soufflé pancakes and bacon in *Kiyub*, Jongdae’s dream

fridge of lasagna, casseroles and pies in *Python*, and the rum-and-coke, red cups, and potato bakes of *That love that keeps me* shaking all function as shorthand for authentic college life, but “authentic” here means consistent with Hollywood’s fictional higher education, not with contemporary Korean university cafeterias and drinking culture. Rather than simply failing at authenticity, the authors are drawing on a widely shared repertoire of what college is supposed to feel like, a repertoire shaped by US films, series, and CAU fanon across multiple fandoms. When these fics are read alongside each other, that repetition produces what Anderson would call a community “distinguished... by the style in which it is imagined”(p. 6): an imagined Korean university that tastes like mac and cheese and rum-and-coke, and looks like an American campus, even as it is populated by Korean idols.

This also helps explain why American/Western food often appears as the unmarked, “neutral” option, while Korean food is pushed to specific spaces or occasions elsewhere in the chapter. In other CAU fics I discuss, Korean food is sometimes marked as cheap, everyday “local” food (e.g. gimbap, Korean rice rolls dish, in convenience stores, humble restaurants serving japchae, Korean glass noodles dish, or kimchi stew), whereas Western dishes and Western-style plating are reserved for special, “fancy” occasions such as charity events or rich families’ dinners. In the Americanised campus Korea I am outlining here, that division is displaced onto the campus itself: everyday student life is saturated with Western student food, pancakes, cereal, burgers, party casseroles, while Korean food either vanishes from the university space or is relegated to scenes outside the CAU core (family homes, off-campus restaurants, or non-university AUs). The result is not a straightforward misrepresentation of Korea, but a layered imagined Korea in which US college tropes silently structure what counts as normal, and Korean-ness has to be grafted onto that structure in selective ways.

From a transcultural perspective, then, these Americanised foodscapes tell us more than “fans get Korea wrong”. They reveal how K-pop fanfiction writers negotiate between multiple cultural repertoires; the US fictional college they know from films and other CAUs, the Korean food and everyday life they glimpse through K-dramas and mukbangs, online videos where someone eats large amounts of food while interacting with viewers, and their own lived experiences of university or non-university life. In this first imagined Korea, the balance tilts decisively toward the imported US college imaginary. “Korea” is not absent from these stories: the idols are still Korean, some honorifics and Korean words surface elsewhere, but the campus and its parties are rendered primarily through Western food and drink. In Anderson’s terms, K-pop CAU is a community project of imagining Korea in a particular style, and here that style is decidedly American: a Korea where the university dining hall serves macaroni and cheese, the campus café does pancakes and bacon, and every idol knows how to hold a red cup at a house party.

Language and Social Relations as Western-coded

If, as Anderson (2006) argues, what defines an imagined community is less whether it is “real” or “accurate” and more the particular style through which it is imagined, then the linguistic and interpersonal “style” of CAU K-pop fanfiction becomes central to understanding how particular Koreas are being co-created. In the Americanised campus strand of CAU, Korean idols move through environments that look like universities in name, but the ways they speak, flirt, and position one another socially are overwhelmingly shaped by the fictional American college.

This becomes especially clear in *Hiraeth*, where the narrative is built around US-style Greek life. As a forementioned, the author not only situates Jungkook as a “fratboy” but also opens the fic with a glossary of fraternity jargon in the author’s note carefully explaining in English for readers “unfamiliar” with American Greek culture. That pedagogical moment is telling. The author assumes its audience may not know US frat vocabulary, and so it pauses to educate them; at the same time, no equivalent explanatory labour is spent on unpacking Korean cultural logics, despite the fic also using Korean honorifics and being nominally set in Korea. In other words, the text naturalises the American college as the key interpretive frame that readers must be inducted into, while Korean culture is left to operate as unmarked background texture. The imagined Korea produced here is not a detailed Korean campus, but a fraternity-centred American college world with Korean idol characters inserted into it.

The social relations in *Hiraeth* also follow this Western template. Fraternities and hazing rituals structure masculine bonds and hierarchies, mirroring the themes Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017) identify as central to “fictional higher education”: involvement through Greek life, parties, alcohol, and the performance of masculinity. These are the social institutions that matter in the fic; Korean campus traditions such as MTs, after-school clubs,

or sunbae/hoobae hierarchies are either marginal or absent. The emotional arcs of the characters are therefore anchored in American collegiate scripts, pledging, frat reputations, hazing trauma, rather than in specifically Korean patterns of university life. Although it does not feature Greek life explicitly, *Thread of the Fates* likewise frames social relations through Western-coded peer intimacy wherein students address one another on a first-name basis, flirt and argue in a casual, bantering register, and move through shared dorm rooms and common areas with little sense of age-based hierarchy, reproducing the flattened, roommate-style dynamics familiar from Anglophone campus and boarding-school narratives. The result is an imagined Korea where Korean idols inhabit a deeply Americanised social universe, and readers learn more about US Greek life than about Korean student culture.

A similar pattern appears in *That love that keeps me shaking*, where Chanyeol and Kyungsoo's relationship is scaffolded through recognisably Hollywood-style college scenes. Their first major encounter takes place at a fraternity party, with alcohol, flirting, and casual social mixing framed as entirely normal and expected. The interpersonal tone is notably informal: characters meet for the first time at a party and immediately move into first-name address and relaxed banter. There is no moment of asking "how old are you?", "what year are you in?", or any other age/positioning questions that would usually be crucial in a Korean chomyeon (초면) situation, where honorific choice and address terms must be negotiated before a relationship can proceed. In sociolinguistic descriptions of Korean interaction, as scholars such as Brown (2011) and J. Lee (2021) note, age, relative status, and the initial encounter play a decisive role in whether speakers adopt *contaymal* (formal) or *panmal* (informal), and in whether one can safely move to first-name basis at all.

In the fics, however, these negotiations simply do not happen. The social script is much closer to the fictional American college described by Conklin (2008) and Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017): students meet at parties, move quickly into teasing intimacy, and

classrooms later serve mainly as backdrops for romantic distraction rather than sites where hierarchical relations are linguistically worked out. Korean idol characters are thus imagined speaking and relating according to US youth-fiction norms. The Korea that emerges is one where hierarchy, honorifics, and age-based etiquette are backgrounded in favour of a flattened, peer-like student culture modelled on Hollywood college romances.

Ultimately, these examples show that the “Americanised campus” imagined Korea is not only about red cups, fraternities, and house parties; it is also about how language and social relations are coded as Western. Authors invest significant effort in importing and explaining American campus jargon, while Korean modes of address, *chomyeon* etiquette, and university traditions are either simplified, selectively adapted, or left unelaborated. The imagined community that coalesces around these fics is therefore a transcultural, Anglophone one in Anderson’s sense, but its shared frame of reference is the fictional American college, with Korea functioning as a flexible backdrop rather than a fully realised social world. The CAU K-pop college, in this first imagined Korea, is thus a hybrid space where K-pop idols’ bodies and names move through an affective and linguistic landscape that is overwhelmingly Western-coded.

Imagined Korea Two: Hybrid Everyday Korea

Hybrid campus: Koreanness cues in a US-shaped frame

As with the first configuration, what is at stake here is not a direct representation of “how Korean universities really are” versus “how American universities really are”, but a particular way of assembling what I earlier called mediated Koreanness: fragments of “Korea” and “college life” drawn from K-pop and other media, and then recombined within CAU fanfiction. If the first imagined Korea in CAU K-pop fanfiction looks like a straight import of the American campus with Korean idol characters dropped into it, the second imagined Korea is more hybrid. Here, the narrative frame of college life still follows the familiar script of the “fictional higher education” identified by Tobolowsky and Reynolds such as dorms, parties, majors, libraries, and an overwhelming focus on social life over studying, but this time the frame is peppered with recognisably Korean cues. In these stories, Korea is not entirely displaced; instead, it is layered onto a US-shaped campus in selective, sometimes quite strategic ways.

A good example of this hybrid campus appears in *Kiyub*. On the one hand, the story is clearly anchored in a Korean university context: the narrative names Seoul National University, and the *sunbae/hoobae* hierarchy is central to how characters relate to one another. Juniors like Seungwan and Seulgi defer to seniors Yongsun and Joohyun, and Joohyun preparing lemon honey tea for Seungwan when she is ill aligns with Korean expectations that seniors “take care” of juniors. At the level of structure and social organisation, then, the campus draws heavily on widely recognised features of “Korean” life. On the other hand, when we move into everyday spaces such as the campus café, the menu leans heavily towards Western food: soufflé pancakes and bacon are highlighted as the students’ favourite canteen items, rather than rice, soup, and banchan of the kind that are often described in accounts of

Korean university cafeterias. The result is a campus that feels visually and atmospherically close to the American CAU template, with Korean hierarchies and idol-based characterisation layered on top.

The linguistic environment in *Kiyub* further reinforces this hybrid quality. Texting scenes between Joohyun and Seungwan, for instance, rely on English-language internet slang and correction conventions (“yongsjn” corrected to “yongsun*” during texting), mirroring Anglophone online fan practices rather than everyday Korean messaging styles. At the same time, the story also deploys Korean address terms such as *unnie* and the use of full Korean names (“yah kim yerim!”) when characters are scolded, and even adapts Korean terms into English grammar by pluralising “unnie” as “unnies”. Put differently, *Kiyub* imagines a campus where social relations and naming conventions are recognisably “Korean”, but the textual surface, the food, the digital language, the pacing of campus life, is organised through a US-coded CAU grammar.

You make me forget all fear operates in a similar register, but it pushes the hybridity even further at the level of food. The campus cafeteria scene in which Irene eats rice with chopsticks is one of the only moments where the university dining space clearly looks Korean. Elsewhere, the everyday foodscape of the fic is much more mixed. Breakfast is almost exclusively Western, pancakes, waffles, bacon and eggs, even once Seungwan moves in with Joohyun and begins cooking for her. Korean food appears more prominently at lunch and dinner, often tied to intimacy in the domestic sphere rather than to public campus spaces. The “cheesy tteokbokki” (tteokbeokki is a rice cake Korean dish) scene encapsulates this hybridity neatly: Joohyun complains that Seungwan’s romantic line is “cheesier than the tteokbokki” that they were eating in the scene, which only really makes sense if we imagine the dialogue in English, since the idiomatic link between “cheesy” and “corny” does not exist in Korean. The fic therefore scripts its characters as Korean and feeds them Korean food, but

the emotional and linguistic logic of the scene remains firmly grounded in Anglophone fandom culture.

The charity event in *I forget to breathe (when I'm with you)*, although not strictly limited to campus, also illustrates how the hybrid imagined Korea can slide into awkward transcultural mismatches. Taehyung and Jeongguk attend a celebrity charity function where guests are served *pajeon* (green onion pancakes, a traditional Korean dish) alongside champagne, an upscale pairing that ignores the traditional association of *pajeon* with rainy days and *makgeolli* (a Korean alcoholic beverage made of rice). Here, Korean food functions as a visual cultural marker (“we are in Korea”), while the logic of the event such as champagne, celebrity glamour, charity banquet aesthetics, follows a globalised upper-class script. The scene thus reveals both the reach of Hallyu culinary imagery and the limits of non-Korean authors’ knowledge of everyday Korean food cultures.

On the other hand, the story retains Korean elements through the use of address terms such as *hyung*, and through the casting of real idols whose canon roles (main dancer, vocalist) are reworked into majors and hobbies. One does not find it extremely difficult to imagine characters from CAU K-pop fics majoring in music or arts more generally as they are canonically musicians. More often than not, the majors employed in CAU K-pop fics belong to the humanities and arts majors, especially in relation to music and dance. A few examples of that would be *Fall Asleep (Fall for you)* where Taehyung playing Saxophone for his arts major, and Jungkook majoring in dancing, and Chanyeol’s music major in *That love that keeps me shaking*. Even when some majors are not related to music and dance, there would be at least music or dance interests as part of the characters’ hobbies and extracurricular activities. For example, Seulgi is in a dance club in *Kiyub* and is also canonically the main dancer of Red Velvet, and Irene models on the side on Instagram, which might not be music

related, but is also canonical since K-pop stars often participate in sponsoring deals in relation to fashion and as a result become partially Instagram models.

Additionally, Irene is also the visual and centre of Red Velvet making her more suitable for being a model in fics. Similarly, Chanyeol who is a music producer that produced a number of songs for his group EXO is a music major in *That love that keeps me shaking* for the same reason. The fic titled *a kiss* offers a quieter version of this hybrid campus in which Irene and Seulgi share an unnamed university space organised around dorm rooms, shared homework sessions, and hoodie-swapping rather than explicitly Korean institutional markers, yet their Korean idol personae and names continually anchor the story in a loosely imagined Seoul. The campus, then, is structured via US-style CAU expectations, but peopled with K-pop idol personae and Korean relational vocabularies.

Across these examples, what emerges is not an attempt to reproduce a “real” Korean university, nor to simply transplant K-pop idols into a fully American college. Rather, authors co-produce a hybrid imagined Korea in which the built environment and rhythms of student life follow the American “fictional higher education” template, while Korean markers such as language, hierarchies, idol personae, selected foods are sprinkled across the surface. This is where Anderson’s (2006) insistence that communities are distinguished by their style becomes particularly helpful. CAU K-pop fanfiction does not imagine one singular Korea, but generates a shared style of “Korean-ish” campus that is legible to Anglophone fans: readers recognise the dorms, parties, majors, and red-cup aesthetics from Hollywood, yet also know they are in a space where people call each other *unnie* and *hyung*, eat *tteokbokki* and *gimbap*, and move through hierarchies derived from the K-pop idol system.

In this second imagined Korea, then, transculturality is not simply a matter of adding Korean content to an American frame. It is a negotiated style of imagining in which K-pop

fans weave together the global CAU template, their partial and mediated knowledge of Korea, and the affective attachments they hold to idols. The hybrid campus becomes a compromise formation: Korean enough to feel faithful to the celebrities at its centre, but Americanised enough to remain navigable for a global Anglophone readership whose idea of “university life” is still largely shaped by US media.

Food as a Marker of Koreanness

In this second imagined Korea, food becomes one of the main ways that “Korea” is made visible in an otherwise fuzzy, hybrid university space. It works in two directions at once: as ordinary, cheap student food that quietly anchors the story in Seoul, and as a globally prestigious, K-branded cuisine that circulates through Hallyu and mukbang culture. In many CAU K-pop fics in my corpus, the most “Korean” thing about the campus is what people eat. Ramen in shared kitchens, convenience-store gimhap, cheap gimhap or japchae in small restaurants. These work as mundane, almost throwaway details, yet they do a great deal of imaginative labour. They tell the reader, without lengthy description, that “this is (supposed to be) Korea.”

In *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, Taehyung’s diet of instant ramen and the huge plate of fried rice that “could probably serve more than ten people” (drannie) for a dorm full of boys marks him as a recognisably broke college student, but also a specifically Korean one; these are widely recognised student staples in Korean media and everyday accounts, not, for example, frozen pizza or macaroni and cheese. Likewise, the giant pan of fried rice is presented less as an exotic dish and more as practical survival food, cheap, filling, and shareable, which situates Koreanness in the everyday rather than in spectacle. In *I forget to breathe (when I’m with you)* and *refrigerator humming, chewing gum and instant karma*, gimhap and simple Korean restaurant food function as local, affordable options for poor students and workers. Jeongguk grabbing supermarket gimhap because it is cheap and easy, or Taehyung taking Junseo to a humble restaurant that serves japchae, kimchi, and bean sprouts, frames Korean food as ordinary, low-priced “local” food, the opposite of the glamorous, Instagrammable K-BBQ that circulates internationally. Here, food quietly marks the storyworld as Korean not through overt nationalist rhetoric, but through the everyday *bapsang* logic of cheap rice-based meals.¹⁴

This is where Anderson's framework is particularly useful: nationhood is not only imagined through grand symbols (flags, anthems), but also through repeated small practices such as what he calls the "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (p. 26) of ordinary life. Shared assumptions about what students eat for lunch, or what counts as cheap comfort food, become part of the style in which "Korea" is imagined in these fics. Readers who recognise ramen, kimchi, japchae or gimbap from K-dramas, mukbangs, or idol content can slot these details into an existing, mediated mental map of "Korea". That map is built less from direct experience than from repeated media exposure, but it nonetheless makes the campus legible as "(supposedly) Korea" even when the university itself is unnamed or barely described.

This patterned use of food as an everyday marker of place also echoes how Koreanness is constructed in Korean media itself. Istad and their colleagues (2022), for instance, describe "banal Koreanness" in multicultural-themed television shows, where nationally coded items such as ramyeon (instant noodles), kimchi, or convenience-store snacks appear not as overt symbols of heritage but as part of the unremarked background of daily life. In a similar way, the CAU fics I discuss do not usually foreground food as a didactic lesson about "Korean culture," but mobilise a small, familiar repertoire of dishes as a shorthand for Korean everydayness within a hybrid, often Americanised, campus frame. At the same time, these fan-produced foodscapes are shaped by Hallyu's own global circulation of "K-food" as a soft-power brand, in which dishes like tteokbokki, ramyeon, and Korean fried chicken are repeatedly packaged as visually appealing, exportable icons. Fan-authors are therefore not inventing their Korea *ex nihilo*; they are reassembling elements that already circulate transnationally through K-dramas, mukbangs, and promotional images, and compressing them into a limited but highly recognisable palette of "Korean" student foods.

At the same time, this everydayness is patchy. Breakfast is almost always Western: cereal, toast, pancakes, waffles, bacon and eggs recur across *You make me forget all fear* and *I forget to breathe (when I'm with you)*, even in stories that otherwise feature quite a bit of Korean food. The traditional Korean breakfast, essentially another version of rice, soup, kimchi and side dishes, rarely appears. Instead, “Korea” tends to surface more at lunch and dinner, the meals most visible in mukbangs and idol content. In other words, authors reproduce the parts of everyday Korean food culture that Hallyu itself foregrounds, and leave out quieter, less spectacular routines that rarely appear in global media flows.

Birthdays work similarly. In many accounts of contemporary Korean life, idols and ordinary Koreans alike are described as eating miyeokguk (seaweed soup) on their birthday, but in *refrigerator humming*, *chewing gum and instant karma* and *I forget to breathe (when I'm with you)*, Junseo and Jeongguk only get a cake. The stories use a generic, global birthday script and drop the specifically Korean birthday food. Even when Korean dishes are present in the storyworld, the deeper ritual logic of when and why particular foods are eaten is therefore only partially understood or selectively adopted.

Alongside this everyday Koreanness, the same stories also stage Korean food as globally cool and desirable which is very much in line with how Korean state and industry actors have promoted “K-food” as part of Hallyu. Korean cuisine has been actively branded and exported, from government-backed campaigns to the explosion of mukbang on YouTube, with creators such as Tzuyang or Zach Choi turning dishes like ramyeon, tteokbokki and Korean fried chicken into transnational visual icons. This promotional discourse positions Korean food as both a health-conscious “K-diet” and a trendy, indulgent K-snack culture.

My corpus reflects that duality. In some moments, Korean food is used to signal a kind of proud, everyday Koreanness *and* to plug into a global K-brand. When Jungkook’s

favourite food is given as samgyeopsal, Korean grilled pork belly, in *refrigerator humming*, *chewing gum and instant karma*, or when Seungwan's obsession with tteokbokki in *Kiyub* mirrors her real-life love for the dish, the fic is doing two things at once: it reinforces character realism (this is "how the idol really is"), and it aligns the story with a recognisable, globally circulating image of Korean food as tasty, fun, and slightly iconic.

Here, favourite foods function as fan knowledge, gleaned from variety shows, interviews, vlogs, and mukbangs, that fans "write back" into the fic. In Andersonian terms, these are small, shared details that allow scattered fans to imagine themselves as part of a community that "knows" the same things about idols and their food preferences. The imagined community here is not the Korean nation but a transnational K-pop fandom, yet what is being co-imagined is still "Korea" as a place where idols eat samgyeopsal and tteokbokki.

At the same time, some scenes show how Korean food is re-ordered within a global hierarchy of taste. In *I forget to breathe (when I'm with you)*, the charity event serving pajeon with champagne is a good example. Pajeon, commonly associated with makgeolli and rainy-day comfort in Korean food culture, is repackaged as chic event food that can sit next to champagne flutes. This pairing is culturally odd from a Korean perspective, but it makes sense within a global prestige logic: champagne reads as "classy" and internationally legible in a way makgeolli might not for many readers. The result is a slightly off-kilter, transcultural menu that reveals more about globalised class imaginaries than about Korean culinary practice.

A similar hierarchy emerges when Western food marks luxury and Korean food marks ordinariness. In several fics, expensive steak dinners, wine, and fork-and-knife table settings are reserved for wealthy families or special occasions, while rice, gimnap or

supermarket snacks belong to broke students. *I forget to breathe (when I'm with you)*, for instance, juxtaposes Jeongguk's cheap supermarket gimbap with Taehyung's family's Western-style, knife-and-fork steak dinner in Busan. The implication is that "real" Korean food is cheap and local, whereas Western food still carries the aura of cosmopolitan prestige, a pattern also visible in many K-dramas, where chaebol houses serve steak and wine rather than kimchi jjigae (Kimchi stew). In that sense, the imagined Korea of CAU fics is not a simple "authentic" Korea but a Korea already shaped by global hierarchies of taste. Korean food appears as both comforting home staple and stylish export commodity. The stories reproduce that tension: they draw on the state-and-industry narrative of K-food as one of the "cool" faces of Korea, but they also, sometimes unintentionally, reinscribe Western food as the ultimate marker of class and sophistication.

Across these examples, fan-authors selectively pick and choose which aspects of Korean food culture to import into their college AUs. Some dishes and practices such as instant noodles, fried rice, tteokbokki, samgyeopsal, cheap gimbap are used to make everyday Korean student life feel plausible. Others, such as miyeokguk at birthdays or makgeolli–pajeon pairings, are ignored or misused. Western food often fills the gaps, especially for breakfasts, cafeteria menus, and elite occasions.

This selectivity reflects the broader transcultural condition of the corpus. Authors are writing from different locations and uneven knowledges: some have direct experience of Korean food, others know it almost entirely through dramas, idols, and mukbangs. Rather than judging these fics simply as "accurate" or "inaccurate," the imagined Korea / mediated Koreanness framework allows me to show how they collectively produce a Korea in which: (1) food is one of the most visible markers of Koreanness in an otherwise generic or Americanised campus; (2) Korean dishes circulate alongside Western ones in ways that

mirror, but also distort, contemporary Korean foodscapes; (3) idols' real preferences are mobilised as fan knowledge but reshaped when narrative characterisation demands something "stronger" or more glamorous (for example, Jungkook preferring Scotch rather than beer in *refrigerator humming, chewing gum and instant karma*). In other words, food is one of the key places where transcultural exchange becomes legible. Fans do not merely "get Korea wrong"; they imaginatively reassemble Korean and global food cultures into a set of shared, affectively charged routines through which their own imagined Koreas become liveable and narratively satisfying.

Honorifics as Affective

As I outlined earlier, the Korean honorific system is conventionally understood as a highly codified structure that organises everyday interaction according to age, status, and social distance, with failures to use appropriate forms often carrying serious social consequences (Brown, 2011; J. Lee, 2021; Yoon, 2004). Within this framework, address terms such as *hyung*, *unnie*, or the suffix *-ah* are not simply optional stylistic choices but tightly bound to Confucian-inflected expectations of deference and propriety (Brown, 2011, p. 107; Yoon, 2004, p. 195-196). In the CAU K-pop fanfics examined here, however, honorifics rarely operate in such a strictly hierarchical manner. Instead, they are repeatedly mobilised as affective resources: they index emotional closeness, irritation, attraction, or care more than they map neatly onto age or institutional status. In other words, the imagined Korea that emerges in these stories retools honorifics as a flexible, feeling-centred system rather than an immutable social rulebook.

One recurrent pattern is that characters treat honorifics as something that must be “earned” affectively rather than automatically granted on the basis of age. In *refrigerator humming*, *chewing gum* and *instant karma*, Taehyung explicitly reflects that he only “breaks out honorifics” for people who, in his view, genuinely deserve them (locks). His refusal to use *hyung* with Jeongguk, even after learning that the latter is older and his boss, is framed less as a transgression of Korean politeness and more as a moral judgement; Jeongguk’s casual womanising and emotional carelessness mean he is not worthy of linguistic deference. When Jeongguk eventually insists that Taehyung “should start using honorifics,” Taehyung’s angry retort that he “doesn’t deserve them” attaches the honorific directly to affective evaluation rather than to fixed hierarchy. By contrast, we see Jungkook himself deploying *hyung* selectively for Haejin and Joon, men he clearly views as trusted older-brother figures,

while addressing other older subordinates without honorifics. Here again, the presence or absence of *hyung* signals intimacy and respect grounded in feeling, not simply age.

A similar logic of “earned” honorifics appears in *Fall Asleep (Fall for You)*. Yoongi initially allows Taehyung to call him by his stage name “Suga” in an overly familiar way, but only up to a point; once Taehyung’s repetitive chanting tips from playful to annoying, Yoongi reasserts distance by demanding to be addressed as “Yoongi-hyung” and literally kicking him off the bed. The shift from nickname to *hyung* is less about suddenly remembering age hierarchy and more about managing irritation. At the same time, Taehyung does not apply the same standard to Jeongguk. Even after discovering that Jeongguk is younger, he does not insist on being treated as *hyung*, despite having earlier agreed with Jimin that Jungkook’s refusal to use honorifics is inconsiderate. The result is an asymmetrical and highly personalised honorific landscape: Yoongi polices his own address when annoyed; Taehyung withholds *hyung* from some older men out of anger, but does not demand it from younger ones he is emotionally entangled with.

Honorifics also become key markers of intimacy and tenderness, both in familial and romantic relationships. In *refrigerator humming, chewing gum and instant karma*, Taehyung is deeply moved when Junseo shyly calls him *hyung* rather than the more distanced *ahjussi*. The term is framed as evidence that Junseo sees him as an older brother rather than a hired babysitter, and Taehyung’s emotional reaction centres on that affective recognition. Significantly, Junseo later sometimes drops the honorific altogether and simply calls him “Taehyung”; this inconsistency is never reprimanded. Instead, both *hyung* and the bare name function as signs of closeness, not as graded levels of respect that must be carefully maintained.

In *You make me forget all fear*, the affective re-signification of honorifics is explicitly eroticised. When a drunk Seungwan slips and calls Joohyun “Joohyun-ah” rather than *unnie*, Joohyun’s reaction is not shock at the breach of hierarchy but physical arousal: she internally describes the term as “hot” and later explicitly tells Seungwan that she loves being addressed both as *unnie* and as “Joohyun” or “Joohyun-ah”. The same address term can therefore operate in two registers at once; *unnie* as a cherished, affectionate marker of age difference, and the dropped honorific or nickname as a sign of romantic and sexual intimacy. What would be a serious breach of etiquette in many representations of Korean interaction becomes, in this imagined university Korea, a flirtatious move that intensifies the romance.

Crucially, these stories rarely show characters negotiating honorifics through *chomyeon* in the way described in sociolinguistic accounts of Korean speech (J. Lee, 2021). In first encounters across several CAU fics, characters exchange names but do not ask each other’s ages, years, or statuses, nor do they explicitly decide which address terms to use. In *Kiyub*, Seungwan learns to call Byulyi *unnie* because Seulgi introduces her as “Byulyi-unnie”, not because age is directly discussed between them. In other fics, such as *You make me forget all fear*, the reader never sees the moment when Seungwan shifts from using Joohyun’s name to calling her *unnie*; the honorific simply appears later, as if it has emerged organically from growing closeness rather than from a formal negotiation of hierarchy. The imagined Korea of CAU thus downplays the socially fraught labour of establishing correct honorific usage and instead foregrounds the emotional trajectories of relationships.

Ultimately, these patterns suggest that CAU K-pop fanfiction constructs a distinct, transcultural honorific system. Address terms drawn from Korean are retained as key stylistic markers of “Koreanness”, but their function is subtly transformed. Rather than rigidly encoding age and status, *hyung*, *unnie* and the dropping of these forms become ways of

dramatising affection, resentment, desire, and trust. This reworking produces an imagined Korean campus where the weight of Confucian hierarchy is softened, and where linguistic practices that, in real life, are tightly policed can be flexibly adjusted to suit the emotional needs of queer, idol-centred romances.

Fandom Lexicon and Code-mixing

A final key feature of this second imagined Korea is linguistic: CAU K-pop fanfics construct a hybrid, highly stylised language that borrows from Korean, English, and broader East Asian fandom vocabularies. Rather than attempting to reproduce plausible Korean dialogue, these stories stage an imagined linguistic environment that makes sense first and foremost to Anglophone, online fan communities. In this space, Korean idols speak in English, slip into Romanised Korean, deploy Japanese fandom terms, and use global internet slang in ways that would be largely unintelligible in most everyday Korean contexts but are entirely legible within transnational fandom.

One visible layer of this hybridity is the incorporation of fandom-specific lexicon, including words that entered K-pop fandom via Japanese anime and manga communities. As Crow (2019) notes, Japanese terms such as *senpai* circulate widely in pan-Asian fan cultures and are routinely repurposed across contexts. This circulation is evident in *Fall Asleep (Fall for You)*, where Jimin refers to a “senpai” rather than using the Korean “sunbae”. In diegetic terms, this makes little sense: Korean university students would not normally reach for Japanese honorifics in everyday speech. Yet within fandom, “senpai” functions as a recognisable, playful trope of senior–junior crush dynamics. Its presence signals not linguistic realism, but the way CAU K-pop fics are written inside a shared intertextual field of anime, BL, and K-pop fan practices, in which a pan-Asian otaku lexicon is treated as common property rather than carefully separated by language or nation.

Alongside this pan-Asian lexicon, English internet slang dominates representations of digital communication. Text messages between Korean characters are not written as they would realistically appear in Korean, but as English chat populated with typos, abbreviations, and playful misspellings. In *refrigerator humming*, *chewing gum* and *instant karma*,

Taehyung's texts to Jungkook are full of shortened words ("u", "gddd", "some1", "4"), uncorrected typos ("woujdnt"), and self-corrections marked with an asterisk ("swer / swear*"), mirroring Anglophone online practices. Likewise, as aforementioned, in *Kiyub*, Irene corrects "yongsjn" to "yongsun*" using the same asterisk device familiar from English-language social media. These choices produce a linguistic texture that immediately situates the stories within global fan cultures on X, Tumblr or AO3, even as the characters are ostensibly Korean and the setting is framed as Korea. The imagined Korea of CAU is therefore not only spatially but linguistically anchored in Anglophone digital fandom.

Code-mixing also appears in more subtle ways, particularly in how English expressions are mapped onto Korean cultural objects. As mentioned before, In *You make me forget all fear*, Joohyun jokes that Seungwan's romantic line is "cheesier than the tteokbokki". Here "cheesy" is not describing flavour but an English idiomatic sense of corniness or cringe. There is no equivalent Korean expression that links emotional excess to cheese, yet the line works perfectly for an Anglophone readership, precisely because it fuses an English metaphor with a Korean food term in a single phrase. The result is a small but telling example of everyday hybrid language: the scene invites readers to imagine Korean characters thinking in English idioms while eating a canonical Korean dish. This everyday hybridity is part of how CAU fanfics build an imagined linguistic Korea that is globally accessible rather than locally accurate.

At the same time, Korean words and address terms do appear, but often in Romanised and grammatically adapted form. Stories routinely sprinkle interjections such as "yah!" alongside English insults ("Yah! You little shit!" in *Kiyub*), creating utterances that are structurally English but peppered with Korean particles to index Koreanness. Suffixes like "-ah" are added to names ("Joohyun-ah", "Taehyung-ah"), just as in fansubbed variety shows,

but are grafted onto English sentences. Even plural forms are Anglicised: Seulgi casually refers to “unnies”, adding an English plural “-s” to the Korean *unnie* instead of using a Korean plural marker. In these moments, Korean functions less as a fully fledged linguistic system and more as a pool of stylistic resources such as names, particles, and kinship terms, that can be slotted into English grammar to signal intimacy, affection, or “K-pop flavour”.

Perhaps the clearest example of this Romanised, fan-produced Korean appears in the soulmate AU *Kiyub*, where Wendy’s wrist is tattooed with the first word Irene ever says to her. The word is “kiyub”, a Romanisation of a Korean exclamation Irene once used in a real-life interview. In the fic, it appears on Wendy’s skin in Comic Sans, described as a “five-letter word” taking up her entire wrist which are details which only make sense if the term is imagined in Latin script. Here, Korean is literally inscribed into the body as fan-Romanisation, not Hangul. This move underlines how deeply fan translations and subtitles shape the linguistic imagination of non-Korean authors: the “Korean” that circulates in these CAU universes is the Romanised Korean of YouTube captions and X memes, not the Korean language as lived and written in Korea, and thus becomes what Khedun-Burgoine (2022) terms fandom lexicon.

These practices of lexicon borrowing, internet slang, and code-mixing show that the linguistic Korea of CAU fanfiction is a thoroughly transcultural construction. Korean, English, and Japanese fandom vocabularies are stitched together into a coherent but invented speech community in which Korean idols effortlessly text in English slang, drop Romanised address terms, and deploy anime-derived honorifics. This imagined Korea is not meant to reproduce the complexities of real-life Korean language use; instead, it reflects the communicative norms, shared jokes, and translational habits of Anglophone K-pop fandom. In Anderson’s (2006) terms, what matters is not linguistic authenticity but “the style” wherein

the community is being imagined. Here, a style in which hybrid language both marks belonging to a global fan collective and makes “Korea” readable and writable for those who do not speak Korean, yet feel entitled to imagine it.

K-pop’s own hybridity helps to explain why a hybrid, “Korean-ish” campus emerges so naturally in CAU fanfiction. As I outlined in the literature review, scholars consistently argue that K-pop’s global success rests on its ability to combine Korean elements with Western musical styles, Japanese idol systems, and other transnational influences in ways that feel both familiar and distinct to audiences (Kim, 2012; Jung, 2017; Jung, 2009). Rather than presenting an unmediated, “authentic” national culture, K-pop circulates what Gooyong Kim calls a commodified “pseudo-Koreanness” designed for international consumption (2017), and both Shin (2009) and Lie (2012) go so far as to suggest that there is “almost nothing Korean” about K-pop in any essentialist sense. Jung (2011) similarly describes Korean popular culture as fundamentally hybrid and “non-national,” while also emphasising that this very quality enables it to function as a cultural contraflow that unsettles one-way Western dominance (Kim, 2017; Han, 2017; H. Park, 2021). In other words, global fans are already habituated to engaging with a Korea that is presented to them as flexible, mixed, and mobile rather than bounded and “pure”. Seen from this angle, the hybrid imagined Korea of CAU not an aberration but an extension of K-pop’s existing aesthetic logic.

In earlier chapters, I used the term “mediated Koreanness” to describe this process whereby global audiences encounter “Korea” primarily as a curated mix of local and global elements, filtered through K-pop and K-drama rather than through unmediated contact. The same hybridity that enables K-pop to travel transnationally also licenses transcultural fans to assemble their own hybrid Koreas in fiction: they take for granted that “Korea” is already a mediated blend of local and global forms, and thus feel entitled to rework that blend at the

level of everyday spaces, food, and language. CAU's hybrid campuses can therefore be read as fan-produced echoes of K-pop's industrial hybridity: imagined university environments that translate the genre's pseudo-Koreanness and "multi-layered, multi-directional" character (Jung, 2009) into spatial and narrative terms, making a hybrid Korea not only consumable but livable within the storyworld.

Imagined Queer Korea: A queer campus Korea

In many of the CAU K-pop fanfics I analyse, queerness is not simply present as a theme; it structures the everyday reality of campus life. Rather than being framed as marginal or exceptional, queer relationships are treated as ordinary, abundant, and largely unremarkable. Drawing on Halperin's understanding of "queer" not as a stable identity or essence but as a position "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1995, p. 62), I read these stories as imagining a Korea in which queer life is folded into the mundane rhythms of student experience. I understand this configuration as another version of "imagined Korea": a specifically queer Korea in which campus life is organised around non-normative desires and relationships, rather than merely accommodating a few exceptional queer couples at the edges of an otherwise heterosexual world.

Halperin's formulation is helpful here because it defines queer in relational rather than substantive terms. What matters is not a fixed set of traits, but the way queer attachments and subjectivities are positioned in relation to social norms of gender and sexuality. In my corpus, the imagined queer campus Korea works in precisely this way. These stories do not simply add more gay and lesbian characters to an otherwise unchanged Korea; they relocate idols into narrative worlds in which queer desire becomes the default vantage point from which campus life is narrated and made intelligible. Queerness here functions less as a fixed identity label than as a positionality: a way of organising social relations and emotional life that stands "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" heteronormative structures of both the K-pop industry and contemporary Korean society (Halperin, 1995, p. 62).

A first striking feature across the corpus is what I would term queer saturation. In *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, for example, the central romance between Taehyung and Jungkook unfolds within a wider network of queer relationships: Jimin and Yoongi form a side couple,

and their intimacy is woven into the same friendship group, classes, and dorm spaces as the main pairing. Their relationship is not coded as scandalous or controversial, but as another expected axis of emotional life in the group. The fic thus constructs a campus world where multiple queer couples co-exist as part of the same social fabric, and where straight characters, if they exist at all, feel like the minority rather than the norm.

A similar pattern appears in *Kiyub*, where Seungwan/Joohyun is accompanied by another central queer pairing, Sooyoung/Seulgi. The story populates its university setting with women who love women, so that queerness becomes the default mode of desiring and relating rather than an exception. In *Is That a Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me?*, the campus is again saturated with queer possibilities: Sehun and Baekhyun form the main romantic focus, while Baekhyun's attraction to Yixing further complicates the network of queer desire. A comparable density of queer pairings structures *Hyperionova's Thread of the Fates*, where the central Sehun/Kai romance co-exists with the established couple Kris/Shixun and other hinted pairings, so that queer relationships form a web of attachments across the school rather than isolated exceptions. Across these fics, the university is not just a place where a single queer couple survives against the odds; it is a social world in which queerness circulates, multiplies, and becomes structurally ordinary. From this perspective, the proliferation of queer couples in these CAU fics is not random but directly continuous with idol shipping cultures, in which fans have long paired members together and used homoerotic imaginaries to express both desire and affective attachment to idols (Kwon, 2019; Baudinette, 2023b).

This saturation is reinforced at the level of everyday scenes. In *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, for instance, Jimin and Yoongi's relationship is woven into mundane routines: they share beds during sleepovers, bicker over music and coursework, and appear in group scenes

in ways that assume the legitimacy of their coupledness. The story does not pause to justify or explain why they are together; they simply are, just as Taehyung and Jungkook are. Likewise, in *Kiyub*, the flirtation between Seungwan and Joohyun is embedded in ordinary university activities such as attending classes, working on assignments, and sharing food. Moments of queer intimacy occur in libraries, cafés, and shared flats, and are treated as part of the normal emotional landscape of student life.

The same mundane embedding of queer intimacy is evident in hopclair's *a kiss*, where Irene's dawning recognition that she has "always" adored girls unfolds through routine activities such as doing homework with Seulgi on her bed and trading hoodies, and their eventual first kiss is folded into that domestic college scene rather than marked as a dramatic rupture. In *Is That a Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me?*, the banter, jealousy, and sexual tension between Sehun and Baekhyun play out in club environments, parties, and dormitory settings that closely echo the Americanised CAU template, but are refilled with queer Korean idol bodies. *Thread of the Fates* offers a more fantastical variation on this everydayness: Shixun and Kris share openly affectionate, "very tongue-ey" kisses in the school dining hall in front of friends who mainly complain that they are eating, normalising queer coupledness as part of the ordinary social fabric rather than a spectacle. The effect across these texts is that queer desire is not framed as a special plot device, but as the taken-for-granted background condition of campus sociality.

This queer saturation directly reshapes how "Korea" is imagined. On the one hand, these stories draw heavily on the Americanised CAU repertoire. On the other hand, they fill those familiar settings with Korean idol bodies and queer couplings, effectively displacing the heterosexual homogeneity that characterises both the fictional American college (as summarised by Tobolowsky and Reynolds, 2017) and many accounts of contemporary South

Korean society, where heteronormativity is institutionally privileged. Instead of the straight white male majority typical of “fictional higher education”, I find campuses where most main characters are Korean idols and most central relationships are queer. The homogeneity remains, but it has been inverted: rather than reproducing straightness as the unmarked norm, these CAU fics imagine a Korea where queer desire is the standard background condition of campus life. As with the other configurations in this chapter, this queer Korea is best understood as a form of mediated Koreanness: a Korea assembled from globally circulating images of idols and BL-inflected fanservice, K-drama romance codes, and media and scholarly accounts of queer life in South Korea, rather than from direct experience of Korean campuses. Following Anderson’s argument that communities are distinguished “by the style in which they are imagined” (2006, p. 6), this queer Korea is not defined by its factual accuracy to contemporary Korean campuses, but by a shared stylistic repertoire: multiple queer couples, the near-total bracketing out of homophobia, and the seamless embedding of queer intimacy into everyday campus routines.

What is particularly important here is not just the number of queer couples, but how little homophobia they encounter. Across the corpus, queer relationships are largely accepted by peers, families, and institutions. Conflicts in *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, *Kiyub*, or *Is That a Python in Your Pants or Are You Just Happy to See Me?* seldom emerge from characters’ sexual orientation; instead, they are about miscommunication, jealousy, class differences, or personal insecurity. In *Kiyub*, for instance, the focus falls on the anxieties of the soulmate mark and idol image rather than on the possibility that a woman loving a woman might be socially condemned. In *Fall Asleep (Fall For You)*, the narrative is more concerned with whether Taehyung and Jungkook will emotionally align than with whether their relationship is socially acceptable. Even when homophobia is explicitly named as a potential threat, as when Seungwan worries that Joohyun might react “homophobically” to her confession in *You*

make me forget all fear, the narrative quickly displaces that fear: Joohyun's response is framed through jealousy and desire rather than prejudice, and no structural consequences follow from Seungwan's queerness. The possibility of homophobic rejection is acknowledged but ultimately kept outside the emotional core of the storyworld.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, several of the interviewed K-pop fic authors explicitly stated that they avoid including homophobia because they want their stories to function as safe spaces for themselves and for queer readers. This resonates with wider accounts of fanfiction as a resistant and reparative practice through which marginalised writers, especially women and queer fans, rewrite mainstream media to centre their own desires and modes of belonging (Derecho, 2006; Jamison, 2013). In the CAU corpus, this politics of safety manifests as a consistent softening or erasure of structural violence: homophobic remarks, family rejection, and social stigma are largely bracketed out of the narrative world. Rather than reading this as a naïve erasure of "real" oppression, I understand it as a queer reorientation in Halperin's sense: a deliberate refusal to reproduce "the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1995, p. 62) structures of homophobia, in favour of imagining a Korea where queer intimacy is protected rather than punished. This deliberate softening of structural violence is therefore part of how an imagined queer Korea is produced, rather than simply an oversight or a lack of realism.

Reading through Halperin's lens, these CAU campuses can be understood as actively queer worlds, and the Korea they depict as an imagined queer Korea in which non-normative desires and relations form the backbone of social life rather than its margin. They are queer not only because many characters are gay or lesbian, but because the entire social order is reconfigured so that heterosexuality is no longer the default and queer relationships are neither punished nor pathologised. The imagined Korea that emerges here is one where idols

can walk across campus hand in hand with a same-gender partner, share dorm rooms, flirt in lecture halls, or kiss in libraries without fear of public backlash. In other words, the stories relocate idols from the tightly controlled, heteronormative idol industry and from a national context that does not legally recognise same-sex marriage, into a campus space where queer love is structurally possible, normal, and even expected.

This has important implications for how transculturality operates in CAU K-pop fanfiction. These writers are drawing on Anglophone multi-fandom slash cultures, where same-gender pairings have long been central to fanfiction practice and community identity (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Jamison, 2013), as well as on East Asian boys' love traditions that normalise male–male romance as a popular, transnational genre (McLelland & Welker, 2015; Nagaike & Aoyama, 2015; Baudinette, 2023a). At the same time, they are guided by their own stated desire to create homophobia-free, comforting spaces for themselves and their readers, as my interviews show. The resulting campus is not a simple copy of an American college or of a Korean university, but a hybrid, imagined Korea in which queer life is both banal and utopian. Banal, because the stories are full of everyday routines with queer couples simply folded into those routines as roommates, classmates, lab partners, or co-workers. Utopian, this is not yet how queer life is lived in most empirical accounts of queer life in Korea (Kwon, 2019), where legal, social, and institutional structures still mark non-heterosexual relationships as risky or illegible.

These imagined queer campuses are also closely tied to the longer history of shipping and queer fan practices in K-pop fandom. As I outlined in Chapter One, shipping entered Korean idol culture in the 1990s as fans drew on Japanese BL manga to interpret idols' interactions as romantically or sexually charged, developing transnational habits of reading homoerotic potential into celebrity bodies (Kwon, 2019; Glasspool, 2012; Baudinette, 2023a).

Shipping has since become a central transcultural fan practice through which fans “deploy homoerotic imaginaries... not only to explore their sexual desires for the attractive idols but also to express the intensely affective experience of fandom itself” (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 250). CAU K-pop fanfiction extends this logic by fixing popular ships such as Taehyung/Jungkook or Seungwan/Joohyun into fully realised narrative worlds where they are not merely hinted at in fanservice moments but allowed to live together, study together, and inhabit stable queer relationships. In *Kiyub*, for instance, Seungwan retrospectively frames her feelings for Joohyun as a “gay awakening”, a phrase drawn from online queer and fandom slang rather than medicalised or tragic coming-out discourse. Her self-description is playful and self-affirming, and the fic treats her shift from compulsory heterosexual dating history to lesbian desire as emotionally intense but fundamentally positive. This tone mirrors the broader queer Korea of the corpus, where queer discovery is dramatised as awkward and tender, but not as life-ruining.

Additionally, occasional throwaway uses of “gay” as a teasing insult, such as Sehun’s friends joking about his supposed crush in *Thread of the Fates*, do appear, but they are not backed by institutional or familial sanctions. Instead, they register more as remnants of a heteronormative script than as sustained antagonism. The narrative focus remains firmly on queer desire as viable and unpunished. In this sense, the imagined queer Korea of CAU participates in the broader process through which K-pop fandom becomes a queer-affirming space and a “resource of hope” (Baudinette, 2022; Baudinette & Scholes, 2024), offering fans alternative futures that are “emancipatory and empowering” (Baudinette, 2022, p. 51). Following Kuo et al.’s (2022) argument that shipping and fanfiction constitute key modes of queer representation and escapism for LGBTQ+ K-pop fans, I, therefore, understand these campus AUs as one specific textual site where transcultural fans turn the fleeting queer possibilities of idol performance into sustained, everyday queer worlds.

Ultimately, the CAU fics' imagined Korea is not only Americanised in terms of its parties, dormitories, and social involvement; it is also deeply queer in its social organisation. By saturating campus life with multiple queer couples, drawing on global slash and BL repertoires, and systematically containing or erasing homophobia, these stories produce an imagined Korean university where difference is normal and where queer, in Halperin's sense, names a position that is structurally "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1995, p. 62), even as it is rendered narratively ordinary. At the same time, this imagined queer Korea has clear limits. Queerness is almost exclusively organised around cisgender same-gender couples; trans and non-binary identities do not appear, and bisexuality is only obliquely acknowledged through characters' past heterosexual relationships rather than named as such. Reading alongside the Americanised campus Korea and the hybrid Korea discussed earlier in this chapter, this queer Korea demonstrates that there is no single "imagined Korea" in CAU K-pop fanfiction, but a shifting set of overlapping, sometimes contradictory, imagined Koreas produced through different combinations of setting, culture, and desire. This imagined queer Korea is therefore not a mirror of existing realities, but a collective fan project of world-building, a shared fantasy of what Korean campus life could look like if K-pop's homoerotic fan practices, regional BL genres, and global fanfiction norms were allowed to fully reshape the social order.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have treated K-pop College AUs as a key site where transcultural fans collaboratively imagine Korea through the portable template of “fictional higher education.” Rather than measuring these fics against an implicit standard of how Korean universities “really” work, I have approached them as reassemblies of mediated Koreanness. Read through Anderson’s (2006) notion of imagined communities, CAU emerges as a community project of imagining Korea “in a particular style” (p. 6), in which Anglophone fans who will never meet each other nonetheless share recognisable campus Koreas through tags, memes, and recurring narrative routines. At the same time, following Annett’s (2011) emphasis on friction, these shared styles are not static or harmonious; they are produced through uneven encounters between US “fictional higher education,” mediated Koreanness, and fans’ own local experiences, and they become the focus of debates about misrepresentation and Americanisation on platforms such as X.

Across the corpus of thirty-nine CAU K-pop fics, I have traced three recurring configurations of these imagined Koreas. The first, an Americanised campus Korea, maps Korean idols’ bodies onto an institutional and social world that is overwhelmingly patterned on Hollywood college films and wider Anglophone CAU fanon. Here, only a thin slice of mediated Koreanness is taken up while other elements readily available are sidelined. The second, a hybrid everyday Korea, retains the same CAU frame but layers recognisably Korean cues more densely across it producing hybrid campus worlds. Linguistic practices in this hybrid Korea likewise combine English internet slang, Romanised Korean, and otaku-derived lexicon, reflecting not plausible Korean dialogue but the communicative norms of Anglophone online fandom. In both configurations, fans do not simply “get Korea wrong”; they translate mediated Koreanness unevenly through their own repertoires of CAU and

everyday life, assembling campus Koreas that are legible, pleasurable, and sometimes jarringly Americanised.

Bringing these strands together, the chapter has shown how CAU K-pop fanfiction answers the research questions I posed in the introduction. First, authors construct different imagined Koreas primarily through patterned choices in setting, everyday practice, and language; Second, these narratives blend, displace, and rework specifically Korean elements in favour of global or Americanised college tropes in ways that translate mediated Koreanness into distinct configurations: an Americanised campus where “Korea” is mostly casting; a hybrid everyday Korea where Korean food, language, and hierarchies are sprinkled across a US-shaped frame; and a queer Korea that reorganises campus life around cis queer relationships while erasing many forms of structural violence. Third, these imagined Koreas reveal that transcultural K-pop fandom is shaped by both affective affinity and friction. Fans draw on K-pop’s own industrial hybridity and on long-standing slash and BL traditions to make CAU into a queer-affirming “resource of hope” (Baudinette, 2022), but they also argue among themselves about red cups, frat parties, and what a believable Korean university should look like. CAU worlds are therefore both extensions of K-pop’s pseudo-Koreanness and flashpoints where mediated Koreanness is challenged, corrected, or defended.

Finally, situating this chapter within the wider thesis, the CAU corpus underscores that transcultural fandom is not only about crossing borders to consume Korean media, but about collaboratively world-building new Koreas out of uneven repertoires of knowledge, affect, and genre. The Americanised campus, the hybrid everyday Korea, and the imagined queer Korea I have traced here are products of global fan infrastructures: they draw on US “fictional higher education” tropes, on selectively taken-up Korean food, language, and university hierarchies, and on shipping practices that circulate across multiple fandoms. Read alongside my chapters on authors, readers, this analysis foregrounds setting and world-

building as crucial sites where transcultural fans work with mediated Koreanness (repeating some elements, softening or erasing others) to make “Korea” narratively liveable for themselves and each other. In doing so, CAU K-pop fanfiction makes visible both the creative possibilities and the political limits of imagining Korea from elsewhere.

General Conclusion

This thesis explores how K-pop fanfiction authors and readers navigate their positions as transcultural fans when producing and consuming fanfiction about K-pop idols, and the kinds of imagined Koreas they construct in doing so. Across the chapters, I show that the English-language K-pop RPF community is a space where affective attachment and friction coexist rather than cancel each other out. Authors and readers are bound together by shared investments in idols, ships and fanfiction conventions, yet they are also unequally positioned in terms of language, race and cultural authority, and these asymmetries shape how “Korea” can be imagined, claimed and contested in fic.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the “friction” Annett (2011) identifies in transcultural anime fandom does not only occur at the level of consuming media, but also at the level of fan practices such as writing and debating K-pop RPF. Among my participants, this friction takes several forms. First, there is internal friction, as individual non-Korean authors struggle with decisions about how much mediated Koreanness to include, which sources to trust, and how to balance enjoyment, plausibility and respect. Second, there is asymmetrical friction within the fandom itself, where fans from different racial and cultural locations dispute what “Korea” should look like in fanfiction, who is entitled to correct whom, and how to present Korea in K-pop fanfiction. Here, I extend Oh and Han’s (2024) notion of racial translocalism beyond reception studies to show that racialised hierarchies of knowledge and authenticity also shape fan production and the re-imagining of Korea in K-pop RPF. Ultimately, these tensions make transcultural K-pop fandom, at the level of fanfiction production, a normatively contested space marked by unequal powers between Asian and non-Asian identities.

These negotiations do not produce a single, stable image of “Korea”, but a range of imagined Koreas built from mediated Koreanness. In my corpus, Korea is sometimes “westernised” through Americanised campus templates, sometimes rendered as a more hybrid everyday Korea that selectively foregrounds foodways, hierarchies and language, and sometimes reconfigured as an explicitly queer-safe environment where multiple idol–idol pairings are unremarkably woven into ordinary life. These imagined Koreas are further shaped by AU genealogies and genre norms: different AU traditions offer different affordances for how Koreanness can be backgrounded, stylised or intensified. Yet across these variations, they converge around a shared project of constructing queer-safe spaces, which I theorise as queer Korea: a set of storyworlds that, following Halperin (1995), position themselves against dominant heteronormative and homophobic norms in contemporary Korea while allowing readers and writers to inhabit more liveable queer futures.

At the level of reception, however, much of this friction recedes from view. My analysis of AO3 comments shows that K-pop fanfiction readers’ practices align closely with broader Anglophone fanfiction norms organised around affect and gift culture. In this space, readers overwhelmingly prioritise gratitude, emotional response and encouragement towards the story, the ship or the author, rather than policing cultural accuracy or debating mediated Koreanness. Building on Busse and Hellekson’s (2006) account of fanfiction as a gift culture, I argue that AO3 comment fields function as affective reciprocation for the “gift” of a story, not as primary venues for adjudicating unequal power or cultural authority. The friction that characterises transcultural K-pop fandom at the level of writing is therefore displaced rather than absent: it surfaces most sharply in authorial self-reflection and on social media platforms such as X, where debate and meta are normative, while comments on archives remain comparatively friction-light.

By tracing these dynamics, the thesis makes two main contributions. For transcultural fandom studies, it refines Chin and Morimoto's account of affective affinity by showing how affect and friction are distributed unevenly across roles (writer, reader, meta-commentator) and platforms, and by demonstrating how racialised authority and local histories inflect who can speak for "Korea" in fanfiction. For fanfiction studies, it foregrounds K-pop RPF as a hybrid site where global fanfic conventions, mediated Koreanness and queer world-building are collaboratively negotiated, expanding discussions of gift culture, RPF ethics and slash beyond Western media fandoms and into the terrain of Hallyu.

A suggestion for future research is to examine how other transcultural fandoms around non-Korean media negotiate fanfiction production and reception. For instance, future studies could explore J-pop, anime, Thai BL, danmei and other non-Western media texts to compare how fans in different contexts take up, contest and rework mediated cultural imaginaries in their fic. Such comparative work would make it possible to see which aspects of the dynamics I identify here: affective attachment, friction, racialised authority and queer world-building, are specific to anglophone K-pop RPF, and which might travel across other transcultural fan communities.

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Glossary

- Asianfanfics: A website dedicated to Asian-oriented fan fiction, mostly K-pop.
- A creator can also select Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings if warnings may apply but they don't want to use them (for example, to avoid spoilers), or No

Archive Warnings Apply if none of the warnings apply to their content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)

- Bandom: Fan fiction generally written about Western bands.
- Explicit: The content contains explicit adult themes, such as porn, graphic violence, etc. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Graphic Depictions Of Violence: The content contains gory, graphic, explicitly described violence. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Hallyu is Chinese name for K-pop which became widely used in fandom and Korean popular culture studies.
- K-pop: Korean pop.
- Major Character Death: The content contains the death of a major character. Whether or not a character counts as a major character is up to the creator's discretion. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Mature: The content contains adult themes (sex, violence, etc.) that aren't as graphic as explicit-rated content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Not Rated: This is the default option. For searching, screening, and other AO3 functions, this may get treated the same way as mature and explicit-rated content. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Rape/Non-Con: The content contains non-consensual sexual activity. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- RPF: Real People Fiction: fan fiction written about real people, generally public figures.

- Teen and Up Audiences: The content may be inappropriate for audiences under 13.
(Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Underage: The content contains graphic descriptions or depictions of sexual activity by characters under the age of eighteen. (Archive FAQ: Tags)
- Bias: most favourite member in a group.
- OTP: stands for One True Pairing and is a couple romantically shipped together.
- Ship: to support, usually romantically, two people to be a couple.

Appendix

Personal interviews

Interviewee A. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 16 June 2020.

Interviewee B. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 26 April 2020.

Interviewee C. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 12 May 2020.

Interviewee D. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 29 April 2020.

Interviewee E. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 20-25 Aug 2020.

Interviewee F. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 16 Aug 2020.

Interviewee G. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 09-10 Aug 2020.

Interviewee H. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 22-27 June 2020.

Interviewee I. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 28 June 2020.

Interviewee J. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 27 June 2020.

Interviewee K. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 22 June 2020

Interviewee L. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 23-24 June 2020.

Interviewee M. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 20-21 June 2020.

Interviewee N. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 11 June 2020.

Interviewee O. Interview. Conducted by Imene Meddoudi, 21 Aug 2020.

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