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K-Pop Connection: Maintaining Fandom Loyalty in K-Pop and V Live
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Senior Thesis
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Introduction

“It’s almost like a drug—companies keep giving just a little bit more to maintain interest and fans always come back.”

- Alice, female 23-year-old K-pop fan from America

Korean popular music, more commonly known as K-pop, is a smaller branch of the Hallyu Wave. Hallyu refers to the international success of Korean popular cultural products such as film, music, television, radio, fashion, and computer games.¹ In recent years, K-pop has seen a tremendous rise in global popularity as more and more K-pop artists attempt to leave their mark on the Western music scene. However, the reasons for this success continue to elude scholars. Some, such as Solee Shin, believe that the answer lies in the way K-pop companies conduct their business and marketing strategies to appeal to fandoms. I am interested in the tension between K-pop companies and fans, specifically fandoms as a whole. This interest in K-pop fandom came about due to my own experience as a K-pop fan. As a fan for several years, I noticed certain aspects of K-pop fandoms differed greatly from fans of North American artists and I wanted to explore this topic more in depth. I was specifically interested in the power fandoms held, as they are the driving force behind maintaining longevity for a K-pop group’s career. These questions prompted my investigation into how do K-pop companies build and maintain fandom loyalty, specifically in North America. How influential is the role of livestreaming platforms, such as V Live, in this process? Are livestreaming platforms significant factors in maintaining fandom loyalty?

¹ Eunyong Jung, “New Wave Formations: K-Pop Idols, Social Media, and the Remaking of the Korean Wave.” In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 74.

In order to investigate how K-pop management companies maintain fandom loyalty in North America I interviewed five K-pop fans, two from Canada and three from the United States. As the interviews progressed, a few variables became abundantly clear. I first noted a wide spectrum of K-pop fans. Some fans were very involved in fandom mechanics and possessed a great deal of knowledge as to how K-pop companies operate and market their groups, while others considered themselves to be more casual fans who enjoy the music genre. The second thing that I discovered was that each fan experience remains deeply personal despite being contained within the robotic framework that K-pop companies operate in. Each fan experience, as described, was vastly different from that of other fans. For example, some fans became K-pop fans because they were introduced to K-pop by a sibling while others stumbled upon the music by chance in a YouTube video. The K-pop content each fan chose to interact with varied. At the same time, many fans said that even though they have not been able to meet a K-pop idol, they continue to feel an intimate bond with them. Based on these findings, I argue that a key factor and common denominator in maintaining fan loyalty in North America lies in the speed and consistency in which companies upload content and the ways in which companies utilize online apps, specifically livestreaming platforms, to foster a virtual personal connection between K-pop idols and their fans.

To provide the necessary background information, this paper will begin with a brief summary of my methodology and then an analysis of the current scholarship in the field and how my argument expands on specific scholarly topics. From there, I will proceed to discuss the various ways that K-pop companies maintain control over their K-pop artists. I will then discuss fandom mechanics in K-pop and give an overview as to how K-pop companies aim to build

fandoms in North America. Lastly, I will end with my findings from the interviews and discuss how companies maintain fandom loyalty and the role that livestreaming platforms play in this.

Methodology

As a part of my research I conducted a review of K-pop news websites and magazine reports. Many of the articles on websites like *Soompi* and *The Korea Herald* are written by journalists who are also K-pop fans themselves. Thus, they provide an excellent platform for my research into K-pop fandom mechanics. I also conducted participant observation of the interactions between fans and K-pop idols on V Live. V Live is a livestreaming phone app that many K-pop idols and other celebrities use to communicate with their fans. I chose to center my research of livestreaming platforms around this app due to its popularity within the K-pop community. I observed -- without participating myself -- two livestream sessions and took note of how fans and idols interacted. Many fans left comments in the chat section, posted stickers, and left hearts on the video to show their support. Downloading V Live also allowed me to learn more about certain mechanics of the app such as “Chemi-beat” and other exclusive material the platform provides.

For the fan interviews that I conducted, all the interviewees are between the ages of 18-24. I did not personally know every individual I interviewed beforehand. I first asked to interview two people I knew were K-pop fans due to previous conversations I had had with them. The other three were referred to me by mutual friends. Each of the interviews took place over the phone and were all at least 30-40 minutes in length. Some interviews extended longer than an hour. The phone interview method was used for several reasons, the first being that most of the interviewees reside in areas far from where I live. I did not have the funds to travel and interview them in-person. Additionally, I decided it would be in everyone’s best interest to

practice social distancing due to the COVID-19 Pandemic that was taking place during the interviewing period. The interview pool is on the smaller side, but I believe the small size catered to the purpose of my project rather well since it gave me the time to understand each person better and learn more about their fan experience.

Scholarly Background

A common area of discussion in the K-pop studies field is how Korean entertainment companies manage and market their idols to appeal to global audiences. John Lie was one of the first scholars to delve into this topic. His book, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, discusses K-pop's export imperative. He argues that K-pop was made to be exported and that this export-driven culture is one of the key factors to K-pop's global success.² He claims that this success is due to K-pop's long-standing history of companies adapting South Korean singers to particular export markets, an example of which can be seen in how BoA, a female solo artist, was intentionally marketed in a way to appeal to Japanese audiences.³

The scholar Dalyong Jin has expanded upon Lie's findings. Jin argues that the hybridization process, in the form of linguistic mixing of Korean and English and the fusion of musical genres, is a driving factor in the success of K-pop.⁴ While he acknowledges the role social media has in expanding K-pop's sphere of influence, Jin overemphasizes the power of hybridization in K-pop's success. As Lie points out, K-pop was a hybrid from its inception, but artists such as BoA and Rain failed to have success when they debuted in the United States in

² John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, (California: University of California Press, 2015), 138.

³ *Ibid*, 114.

⁴ Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2016), 122.

2007 despite the hybridization already present in their music.⁵ Jin utilizes the term “glocalization” to describe the business strategies Korean entertainment companies use when marketing their K-pop artists in foreign countries. He points out that a driving motto of glocalization, “think globally, act locally,” can be seen in the coproduction of songs by Korean and foreign producers and the way that business will adapt certain products to appeal to a more specific audience.⁶ For example, SM Entertainment, South Korea’s largest entertainment group, has established local branches in the United States. While I agree with his use of the term “glocalization”, I find that Jin overemphasizes the power of linguistic hybridization and has unintentionally ignored the influence of social media and its effect in garnering a large transnational fandom for K-pop artists.

Solee Shin takes a similar stance to Jin’s argument in her claim that “the entrepreneurship and organizational innovation by market makers who ceaselessly experimented with their arts of trade” is the key success to K-pop.⁷ Shin asserts that companies have “trained artists in foreign language skills, supported the production of foreign language albums, expanded overseas recruitment, diversified the revenue model, and incorporated more demand-responsive production strategies by monitoring digital traces left by fans online.”⁸ The phrase “digital traces” refers to any kind of fan activity online such as comments, tweets, song covers, or even specific pictures that fans like on Instagram and other social media sites. Shin’s argument reveals that companies have begun to consider more and more foreign audiences from a very early stage in the development process. While Shin does not mention linguistic hybridization, she does agree

⁵ John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 101.

⁶ Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave*, 123.

⁷ Solee Shin, “How K-Pop Went Global,” in *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, ed. Heejin Lee, Monika Mehta, and Robert Ku (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2019), 270.

⁸ *Ibid*, 277.

with Jin about the effectiveness of certain marketing strategies that companies have used. Shin expands on Jin's glocalization argument by highlighting EXO, a boy group whose members were initially divided into two sub-units at the time of their debut. The group was divided in EXO-K and EXO-M, the former promoted in Korean while the latter focused their attention on the Chinese market. While I agree with specific points in both Jin and Shin's arguments, the two heavily emphasize the power K-pop companies had in creating success for K-pop artists abroad and in doing so, they ignore the influence of "digital traces left by fans online."

These digital traces can be better understood in the context of Eunyong Jung's argument. Jung investigates how "a few recent K-pop boy bands and girl groups whose managing companies and fans around the world have been successfully utilizing polar social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and most importantly YouTube."⁹ Jung focuses her attention on how companies gather data on international fan online response. Her prime example is a recent trend in the K-pop fan community of K-pop flash mobs and "cover dance" contests. She argues that when companies cover dance contests and fans from around the world and upload a video on YouTube or Facebook, those same entertainment companies can at the same time gather focused data about where global interest in a specific K-pop group is strongest.¹⁰ Essentially, by utilizing social media, Korean entertainment companies are able to collect free data about international fan interest. Therefore, although Shin argues that corporate success relies on the glocalization strategy used by K-pop companies, she also acknowledges that this strategy, and its subsequent success, would not be possible without the K-pop fans' online responses.

⁹ Eunyong Jung, "New Wave Formations: K-Pop Idols, Social Media, and the Remaking of the Korean Wave." In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

The power of online fan presence is further examined by Jung Bong Choi. Choi argues that Korea is not in sole possession of the Hallyu Wave and that the elsewhere-ness is a central axis to the phenomenon. He expands upon Lie's export-imperative argument and claims that Hallyu can be seen as a national-institutional campaign that has been man-made and whose power South Korea may utilize as a form of soft power.¹¹ South Korea is responsible for the production of Hallyu content, but the global sphere is responsible for the wider production of the Hallyu phenomenon. Thus the "fan is a vital force interior to the workings of Hallyu as a cultural process, though exterior to the productive site of Hallyu content."¹² Choi's argument sheds light on the notion that entertainment companies possess the majority of the power when it comes to creating content for Hallyu even as the driving force behind the popularity of Hallyu lies with international fans.

In recent years, scholarship in K-pop studies has shifted its focus from only examining the robotic and manufactured qualities of Korean entertainment companies to looking at Hallyu as a global phenomenon and discovering the power that international audiences hold in the success of the Korean wave. My argument falls between Jung and Choi. I agree with Choi's point about the importance the elsewhere-ness holds in the Hallyu phenomenon, but I also believe that the way companies utilize data collected from the social media fan presence is incredibly important. I intend to expand upon their arguments by investigating the influence V Live has on maintaining fandom loyalty.

This paper also incorporates several theories from the field of fan studies. Thus, I believe it is important to give a brief overview of the scholarship in this area of study as well. The boom

¹¹ Jungbong Choi, "Hallyu versus Hallyu-hwa: Cultural Phenomenon versus Institutional Campaign." In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 40

¹² *Ibid.*

of academic interest in fandom began with *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins. In this book Jenkins constructs an alternate image of fan culture, one that goes against the stereotypical image of fans being isolated, and argues that media consumers are active, critically engaged, and creative. He defines fan culture as “culture that is produced by fans and other amateurs for circulation through an underground economy and that draws much of its content from the commercial culture.”¹³ He also asserts that fan communities, rather than defining themselves through localities, define their membership through affinities. These “virtual, ‘imagined’ and ‘imagining’ communities have existed long before the development of networked computers.”¹⁴ Lincoln Geraghty expands upon Jenkins’s investigation of fandom communities in his book *Cult Collectors*. Fans typically interact with some form of text or media but Geraghty aims to understand the “popularity of collecting items of popular media culture.” He argues that “collectible merchandise, rather than just the fictional text, becomes an object for trade, nostalgia, and personal identity.”¹⁵ In his book, he investigates convention spaces and the significance these locations hold for fans. Geraghty claims that convention spaces provide a location for fans to experience an emotional connection with, and consumption of, their favorite texts.¹⁶ However, the connection to this space should not be considered a generic one since “the interaction between people and objects within a real space enhances both the emotional and physical relationship fans have with popular media texts.”¹⁷ Thus, although fandom communities

¹³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 285.

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 137.

¹⁵ Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom, and Collecting Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014), Kindle edition.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid.

are virtual imagined communities, the physical space that convention centers operate in further enhances the relationship fans have to the popular media text as well as with each other.

One area of discussion within the fan studies field is the relationship between fandoms and media companies. Many scholars have positioned these two entities in opposition. Jenkins shows that many media companies were initially opposed to and sometimes overtly hostile to fan opinion. Companies assume that fan opinions are not representative of the general public and do not want “fans who make demands, second guess creative decisions and assert opinions; they want regular viewers who accept what they are given and buy what they are sold.”¹⁸ This sentiment has changed slightly since the rise of the Internet as companies are no longer so quick to shut down communities of fan engagement. Instead, fan studies scholars are finding that media companies exploit this type of fan engagement for their own benefit. It has long been considered that fans are not just observers but also producers by creating content and sharing their creations online.¹⁹ Paul Booth investigates the relationship between companies and fans in his book *Playing Fans* by analyzing “the spaces where media fans reproduce the object of their fandom, the texts in which media producers appropriate fan tactics, and the times when media producers parody fan practices.”²⁰ He claims that media companies have taken notice of fandom and that these corporations are attempting to harness the power of fandoms in order to “remix video to create advertisements or utilizing fans’ already-extant networks to create word-of-mouth publicity.”²¹ Thus, the opposition between media fans and media companies is an area that continues to be discussed within the field today.

¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 279.

¹⁹ Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, “Fandom and/as Labor,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 15 (2014): <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/16>

²⁰ Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*, (United States: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 19.

²¹ *Ibid*, 21.

Based on my findings, I argue that the relationship between K-pop companies and K-pop fandoms are much more nuanced than originally thought to be. These two entities are not in opposition the way that media companies and media fans in North America typically are, nor do K-pop companies possess complete control over a K-pop fandom. K-pop management companies are also not as overtly critical to fan participation as media companies in the United States. A K-pop management company will create certain environments to help fandoms flourish and provide a steady stream of content to maintain fan interest. However, fans are still able to retain a certain level of agency that allows each individual fan experience to remain personal and unique.

Corporate K-pop

The origins of K-pop can be traced back to the 1970's with the spread of trot music, a popular music genre known for its repetitive rhythm. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the development of K-pop as it began in the 1990's. In 1995, Lee Soo Man established SM Entertainment, an entertainment company dedicated to training and managing K-pop artists.²² The company is most known for developing the in-house training system that is widely used in the industry today. In addition to this, SM Entertainment founded some of the earliest successful K-pop artists such as H.O.T. and BoA, who each received global success in China and Japan respectively. In the late 2000's the K-pop industry began to see international success on a much larger scale. Early K-pop groups such as TVXQ saw great popularity across Asia with well-received Japanese and Chinese albums.²³ Due to the parallel rise of social media, artists who debuted in the late 2000's not only achieved international success at a much quicker pace but also in a wider scope. Singers began to tour Europe and North America in addition to South

²² Eunyong Jung, "New Wave Formations: K-Pop Idols, Social Media, and the Remaking of the Korean Wave," 74.

²³ Ibid.

Korea's neighboring Asian countries. Since then, many K-pop artists such as BTS and Blackpink have continued to expand their influence in the Western music industry.

K-pop is known for ear-catchy songs and visually appealing, but easy to follow, dance routines. This formula solidified in 2007 with the release of the hit song "Tell Me" by the Wonder Girls, a girl group from JYP Entertainment. The song was widely successful in South Korea and the dance was copied so often in dance cover videos that it was dubbed the "Tell Me Syndrome." This phenomenon was significant as it demonstrated how successful the in-house management system could be. Under this system, a K-pop entertainment company serves as the manager, producer, and distributor for any project a singer chooses to uptake. The companies possess a great deal of power and control over their artists, and the singers heavily depend on their company for any future projects they want to pursue.

Every K-pop group is imbued with a manufactured and formulaic quality. This rigid structure produces high quality music and dances that are appealing to a wide range of fans.²⁴ Korean entertainment companies have created a top-down business process which each K-pop idol group experiences. With the goal of creating an idol group, companies will recruit young teenagers via auditions or street casting. These teenagers then become trainees under a specific entertainment company, a process that is brutal and extremely competitive. For every 100,000 teenagers who audition, only 1 percent will go on to become trainees, and only 0.1 percent of the trainees will debut in a group.²⁵ As a trainee, a person must attend dancing lessons, singing lessons, and group practices.²⁶ If they are a foreign trainee, they must also attend Korean language class. Companies monitor a trainee's progress through monthly and year-end

²⁴ Jason, interview by author, Louisiana, March 19, 2020

²⁵ Seung-Ah Lee, "Of the Fans, by the Fans, for the Fans." In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 111.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

evaluations. These evaluations are extremely important for trainees, for a company will choose which trainees will debut in a K-pop group based on these performances. If a trainee does not consistently improve, a company can choose to terminate their contract. Trainees must not only be able to dance and sing, but also must be visually attractive, as visual appeal is a vital aspect to become a successful K-pop idol.

Although companies sign on individuals to train, the process is not free of cost. Once a K-pop idol group begins earning a profit, they must pay back the expenses accumulated during the training process.²⁷ Companies view these trainees as an investment that will earn them profits in the future. The training process is not the only aspect of K-pop which has been broken down into a robotic assembly line system; the way groups are constituted also follows a formula. Each group must have one member who is a talented rapper, at least one member who has strong vocals, one member who is funny and a good speaker, one member who is a skilled dancer, and lastly one member who is incredibly good looking.²⁸

Once a K-pop group has debuted, the management company will enforce strict rules and monitor the group's personal lives very closely.²⁹ This is because any type of scandal associated with a group has the potential to create backlash from the Korean media and result in a disappointed and betrayed fanbase.³⁰ Groups also live together in a dorm instead of separate apartments. This is for convenience and to encourage teamwork, but also so that a management company has an easier way to monitor their investment, their K-pop idols. Each K-pop idol group has at least one direct manager who oversees various aspects of daily life, such as driving

²⁷ Hyun-su Yim, "A rare glimpse of the 'factorylike' K-pop idol training system," KPOP HERALD, January 18, 2019, http://kpopherald.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=201901181819018493571_2

²⁸ Lee, "Of the Fans, by the Fans, for the Fans," 112.

²⁹ Ibid, 110.

³⁰ <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/korean-fans-demand-chen-leave-exo-marriage-news/>

the group to performance venues, buying food, and monitoring performance rehearsals. In the first few months of a debut, it is not uncommon for a manager to also live with the group. If an individual member wishes to leave their dorm for any reason, he or she must let the manager know. Later, usually after the first two years, the company's control over their K-pop idol group will loosen and the singers are able to exercise more agency.

In addition to monitoring group members' personal lives, K-pop companies also control every aspect of a new song and comeback released by each K-pop idol group. A comeback is a term used in K-pop to signify a new song or album release by a group. Each comeback has a theme or concept that is decided by the company months in advance.³¹ For example, EXO, a nine-member boy group, debuted with a superhero concept. Each member had their own unique "superpower" and their debut music video showed various scenes of the members using their powers to save "EXO Planet," the mythical planet that the members supposedly came from. Usually the concept holds no real significance and is used as a tool to help groups stand out in the sea of competition. In addition to the overall concept, the clothing, makeup, hairstyle, hair color, and any other visual aspects of the group are also decided by the management company.³² Even the more nuanced and detailed actions, such as the way they greet the audience or if they use a certain hand gesture, are discussed beforehand.³³ Sometimes a Korean entertainment company will even go so far as to decide on a group member's individual personality concept. For example, in the first few years after his debut, L, a member of popular K-pop boy band Infinite, was known for being very quiet and had a "silent and pretty boy" concept. However, he

³¹ Roald Maliangkay, "Uniformity and Nonconformity: The Packaging of Korean Girl Groups." In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 95.

³² John Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*. Read by Dion Graham. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), audiobook, 4 hr., 50 min.

³³ *Ibid.*

later revealed that this concept was imposed by the company itself and that the management encouraged him not to talk as much during events.³⁴ In an interview, L discussed how his real personality is not as quiet and that during his early years as an idol he found the restriction to be quite unfair.³⁵ Therefore, even though fans would like to think that they know an idol's true personality, various K-pop idols have come forward and stated that their true selves are much different from the personae they display in front of a camera.

The system in which these K-pop entertainment companies operate can be broken down into various levels. One level manages the business and finances for the company. The corporation oversees the marketing for their K-pop idol groups both in and outside of South Korea. Typically, the company also serves as the in-house producer of the music, which gives them full control over creation of artistic content. The companies may dictate large scale aspects such as a group's overall theme, but they also decide the smaller details such as the makeup, hair color, and outfit for each member. In some cases, even the personal lives of K-pop idols are monitored by these powerful corporations. The entertainment companies operate in a strict, hierarchal fashion that has allowed them to create and perfect an assembly-line manufacturing system to produce the next generation of K-pop idols. Due to the wide scope of control the company holds over their idols, it is only natural to assume that these corporation would be able to control an idol's fandom as well. However, as will be seen, the relationship between a company and a fandom is not as straightforward as the relationship that exists between a company and its K-pop idol.

Fandom Mechanics in K-pop

³⁴ Pao, "INFINITE's L Reveals 'Silent Guy' Concept Was Imposed By Company," Soompi, December 24, 2014, <https://www.soompi.com/article/682691wpp/infinites-l-reveals-silent-guy-concept-was-imposed-by-company>.

³⁵ Ibid

The robust and robotic in-house training system for K-pop groups allows companies to manage a wide array of activities regarding their idols. Such business strategies are typically thought to be the primary driving force behind the global success of K-pop. However, fandoms are another driving force behind the music genre and its success. The main goal for any K-pop group is to develop a strong fandom that will be able to support the idols during their career. The detailed monitoring system seen in the way companies manage their idol groups is also evident in the way K-pop management companies interact with K-pop fandoms. In this section, I highlight and examine K-pop fandom mechanics in order to provide a better understanding of why fan loyalty is so important for K-pop groups.

Fans can interact with K-pop idols through a variety of ways. Some may get the chance to see their idols perform live at a concert while others can only view them through a computer screen. Fans have the luxury of accessing various channels of communication and media due to technological advancements. The rise of social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube have altered the flow of content between corporations and audiences, a phenomenon known as convergence culture. Convergence culture, a term coined by Henry Jenkins, refers to the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences.”³⁶ The migratory behavior of audiences means that fans of certain cultural products will follow the content that they want to consume, even if that content is only available on a different media platform. Jenkins argues that media convergence “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences.”³⁷ Through convergence culture, industries, markets, technologies, and audiences are now more intertwined and one change in any one of them will affect the others. Companies now

³⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

have more platforms and easier ways to create products and market them to consumers. Consequently, audiences also now have multiple media platforms to interact with. Thus, convergence both changes the way media is produced and how it is consumed.³⁸

Kim Suk-Young draws upon Jenkins' theory of convergence culture and utilizes it in her argument that K-pop should be considered a multimedia performance. In her book, *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance*, Kim delves into a "theoretical investigation of 'liveness' as a technological, ideological, and affective mode in which human subjects interact with other human and nonhuman subjects in the digital age."³⁹ Kim contemplates what is "live" about K-pop when the industry focuses so heavily on digital performances. She argues that the liveness of K-pop extends beyond singing since many K-pop idols dance during their performances and therefore they have no way to fake or "body-synch" this movement. She uses Jenkins' notion of convergence culture as a framework to explain how "software platforms enabled two-way connectivity between the K-pop industry and worldwide fandom, particularly in terms of forging a different notion of liveness in the digital age."⁴⁰ Kim demonstrates that K-pop as a multimedia performance genre is able to achieve these multi-faceted qualities through convergence culture.

Mark Duffett, like Kim, also looks at how the internet and social media have transformed fandom. Duffett asserts that the internet has played an integral role in establishing imagined communities that fandoms naturally find themselves in.⁴¹ Duffett's book, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles, and Practices*, investigates what the word "love" means for a fan and

³⁸ Ibid, 16.

³⁹ Suk-young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 46

⁴¹ Mark Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

argues “that ‘love’ (as a rhetorical construct) is central in the creation of an imagined community (the fan base) which in turn helps to sustain actual social relationships.”⁴² He claims that fan “love” is seen as something collective but seemingly disappears when it is in an individual dimension or specified for romantic feelings. He offers up six different terms to help better understand music fandom as a whole: symbolic economy, knowing field, pull, collusion, counter-performance, and imagined memories. I will be drawing heavily from these terms to help explain specific fandom mechanics in K-pop.

The notion that a Korean entertainment company closely monitors a K-pop idol group’s fandom is not unique. K-pop companies are extremely involved in determining specific features of a fandom, something which makes a K-pop fandom fundamentally different than any other type of fandom. A K-pop fandom has an official fandom name, fandom color, fandom light stick, fan café, and other various merchandise that is officially produced and released by the company. For example, the notoriously large and powerful BTS fandom, ARMY, did not decide upon the fandom name on their own. Instead, the fandom name was officially released by Big Hit Entertainment, the management company for BTS, a month after their debut. This name, ARMY, has a specific meaning complementing BTS’s name. Initially, the English translation of BTS meant Bullet Proof Boy Scouts (this name has since been changed to mean Beyond the Scene as of 2017).⁴³ When BTS first debuted in 2013, the group centered their concept around a youth rebellion theme. The name ARMY stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth. Thus, the acronym fits in with BTS’s military and bulletproof theme. Even further, the fandom color, “Silver Gray,” also selected by the management company, is the main color that is used in the

⁴² Ibid, 34.

⁴³ The name change was accompanied by a complete group rebranding in 2017 that followed their tours in the United States. Since then BTS has altered their group concept to focus more on self-love and self-acceptance.

fandom light stick, which the company calls an ARMY Bomb. The fandom name, fandom color, and even the light stick are all entities that are crucial to a fandom's identity, however, the fandom has very little agency in deciding these items.

But why are these features so integral to a K-pop fandom? Fandom colors and names seem like arbitrary things, yet K-pop fans care deeply about them and what they represent for the fandom. This is because all these mechanisms promote an idea of exclusivity and help build the foundations for fan loyalty. Exclusivity in this sense means that fandom names, colors, and light sticks cannot overlap with that of another fandom. An inherent sense of possessiveness exists in fandoms and some fans will even assert their identity based on the natural exclusion that accompanies the exclusive nature of specific fandom mechanics.⁴⁴ Although exclusivity is important, fandom mechanics, such as a fandom name, or a light stick, give way to a more personal and shared internal space that is felt collectively among the fandom. This internal territory is what Duffett describes as the "knowing field." He defines knowing field as "an inner space of intense emotional conviction that fans collectively enter into when they notice engrossing aspects of a performance or persuasive elements in its context."⁴⁵ The knowing field is the ideal space that companies want fans to access. It shows that a fan "is not just a performed role, but rather a means of entry into a space of affect (emotional conviction) where one's experience of something strong and positive seems highly personal and yet more than individual, since it has a direction and intensity that is shared by many others."⁴⁶ Thus, the fan feels part of a collective community, while still retaining a personalized experience that is unique to them. As a K-pop fan of several years who has attended numerous concerts and interacted with other fans in

⁴⁴ Kim, *K-Pop Live: Idols, Fans, and Multimedia Performance*, 38.

⁴⁵ Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, 319.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 322.

person, I can attest that the unity and bond felt between K-pop fans is quite unlike anything else. If companies can provide the right environment for fans to gain access to this knowing field, then they will have laid the foundations for building fan loyalty.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define fan loyalty as the continued support of one specific K-pop idol group. What I mean by “continued support” is the continuous and consistent following of a bands’ activities through various means such as listening to their music or watching the idol groups T.V show appearances. “Support” in this context does not necessarily equate to monetary support. As some of my interviewees suggest from their own experiences, a fan can continue to be a loyal fan without needing to spend money.

One of the best ways to establish fan loyalty is to first create a personal connection between a fan and an idol. Obviously, fans cannot build a personal connection with their idol in the sense that the two extend their relationship beyond just that of a fan and an idol, although music fans will naturally seek a greater sense of intimacy with their idols.⁴⁷ One way that K-pop management companies provide fans with this more personal environment is through a *fansign*.⁴⁸ A fansign is an event where approximately 150-200 fans get to meet their idols in person and interact with them and ask questions, as well as have the idols autograph their albums. Idols will typically perform a few songs and maybe play a game or two on stage, but the focal point of the event is when each fan gets to go on stage and personally meet the idols. The members of the group will sit at a table, form a line, and each fan will have the opportunity to meet each member. A common practice is for fans to prepare questions that they have on post-it notes and tape them inside the album so that the members will answer them when they sign the album.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 324.

⁴⁸ Fansign is a Korean English word. It is a “loan word” that Koreans use, and this term is commonly accepted by K-pop fans who are non-Korean speakers.

Professional quality photos from the fansign event, taken by the fans themselves, and the answers to fan questions are quickly posted online and begin to circulate in the fan community within minutes.

The appeal of a fansign is the intimate environment where a fan can closely interact with their K-pop idol and establish a more personal connection, so that then the fan is more likely to remain loyal to their idol. What is so clever about the fansign event is that it is also an opportunity for the management company to gain financial profit from the encounter. Entry to a fansign is through a lottery system. Attendees are picked through this system with each album or CD a fan buys equating to one entry into the lottery. The purchase period of albums will be set, and fans will have to travel to specific stores and buy albums within the appropriate time frame to be eligible for entry into a fansign.⁴⁹ It is common knowledge among some fandoms that you must purchase a minimum number of albums to even have a chance of gaining entry. For extremely popular K-pop groups such as EXO, a fan can buy up to 200 albums and still not be guaranteed a spot in the fansign.⁵⁰ The fansign's layout reveals how the company's agenda is seemingly much more complicated than originally anticipated. The entertainment company will provide the environment for the fansign, which presents fans with the opportunity to interact with their K-pop idols and access the knowing field. Fans seek an intimate and personal connection with the idol singer, while companies hope to increase profit through this event. The company simultaneously aims to provide the fan with the chance to engage on a more personal level with the idol so that those personal interactions will translate into fan loyalty. Thus, the

⁴⁹ "K-Pop 101: How to Attend Fansigns," *Soompi*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.soompi.com/article/801015wpp/k-pop-101-how-to-attend-fansigns>

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

company can earn a profit, increase album sales, and work in maintaining fan interest and loyalty all through this one event.

Once fan loyalty has been established, an entertainment company must find a way to monitor the fandom and their responses to the group. The most official way a K-pop company is able to do this is through a fanclub. A fanclub or fancafe is an online community that is created and monitored by K-pop companies and is used for official updates regarding a specific K-pop idol group. The platform also provides another way for idols and fans to interact online. Idols are able to post in the fanclub. To register for a fanclub, the fan must create a unique login and will receive an ID number that they retain until they choose to leave the fanclub.⁵¹ It is only natural for some fans to stop being fans of a certain group for whatever reason they choose and companies are aware of this. To combat this, they make the fanclub membership renewable each year. I was unaware of this practice until I accompanied a Japanese friend to a K-pop concert in Osaka. My friend, a 22-year-old female Japanese college student, is a diehard fan of the K-pop band TVXQ. While we were waiting in line for the venue, she said that she needed to go to the fanclub booth and pay to renew her membership. Once at the booth, she handed the employee ¥2,000 and recited her fan ID. Initially, I was shocked at the fact that fans had to pay money to renew their membership, but as I thought more about it I realized that this was another way for K-pop companies to garner profit while also maintaining fandom interest in the group.

Fans are more likely to maintain their loyalty if they have access to a steady stream of new content regarding their idols. Entertainment companies will usually provide this content in the form of new song releases, album photoshoots, official Twitter posts, and fanclub posts. One

⁵¹ "K-Pop 101: How to Navigate Fanclubs vs. Fancafes," *Soompi*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.soompi.com/article/807807wpp/k-pop-101-how-to-navigate-fanclubs-vs-fancafes>

downside to fanclub posts is that certain idols do not post very often, leaving the fans without new content for weeks at a time. To make up for this gap, fandoms may access new content through fansites. A fansite differs from an official fanclub as it is not officially supervised or managed by a K-pop company; the agency of the fansite belongs to a fan. Fansites are unofficial fanclubs that are dedicated to one particular member of a band or the band as a whole. There is usually a team of individuals in charge of running the fansite and the main function of a fansite is to provide updates about a specific member or a band, usually in the form of photos and videos of the idols at public spaces.⁵² Fansites are most notable for the professional quality of photos that are taken by fans of their K-pop idols. Fansite photographers are highly committed to their idols. They will often set aside their own personal interest and not engage in typical fan activities such as cheering or singing along at concerts in order to instead take photos of their idols. Fansites will follow their idols to fansign events, official press events, or even to the airport and take snapshots of their idols which will then be posted online.

Fans can take on a multitude of positions such as supporters, consumers, marketers, and even producers. The action of fansites in assuming the role of providing new content for the fandom is indicative of a concept that Mark Duffett calls “collusion.” Collusion is defined as “the process by which fans take action in order to maximize their pleasures by fulfilling roles or interacting with other agents.”⁵³ Duffett points out that fans will “collude with external agencies in all of those roles in order to facilitate and extend their own pleasures.” A prime example of a fansite collaborating with an entertainment company is when Big Bang member T.O.P was discharged from the military, and his company, YG Entertainment, contacted his fans via fanclub

⁵² “More than just a pretty picture: Fansite culture in the K-pop fandom,” *Beyond Hallyu*, August 30, 2013, <http://beyondhallyu.com/k-pop/just-pretty-picture-kpop-fandom-fansite-culture/>

⁵³ Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, 326

and fansites.⁵⁴ Instead of going outside to speak with the Korean press, he exited through a different door and had a small meet and greet with various fans. The active role that fansites fill showcases a small perk in the way K-pop fandoms operate in Korea. It demonstrates that some of the heavy work in building and maintaining fandom loyalty is taken off the company and instead shouldered by the fandom. The fandom itself vigorously works to help provide new content and maintain fan loyalty.

K-pop fans not only eagerly support companies in their goal of maintaining fandom loyalty, but are also a key force during an idol's live performances. Perhaps the most unique aspect of a live K-pop performance is the energetic vocal role K-pop fans take through the recitation of a fanchant. A fanchant is an array of lyrics and other words that the fans will chant along with a specific song; it is typically used as a way for fans to show their support to the singer and to highlight the strength of the fandom as a whole. There is a great deal of organization that goes into the creation of a fanchant. A fanchant can be thought of as an accompaniment to the performance that is happening on stage. K-pop fans are not just screaming unintelligibly at the top of their lungs. The fans shout very specific phrases that are already found in a song; or during a dance break they will shout the names of the idol members. Oftentimes, the fanchant is created by the K-pop company and some bands will even release a video guide that showcases the members of the band shouting out the lyrics of the fanchant.⁵⁵ The goal of a fanchant is to be loud and boisterous, but it is also a unique form of collaboration between an idol group and their fans.

⁵⁴ "BIGBANG's T.O.P met fans and fooled the media on military discharge day," *SBS PopAsia*. July 8, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2019/07/08/bigbangs-top-met-fans-and-fooled-media-military-discharge-day>

⁵⁵ Seventeen, "HIT 응원법" (HIT eungwonbeop) recorded August 6, 2019, video.

The collaboration that occurs between fans and idols during a live performance using fanchants is part of what Duffett describes as “counter-performance.” Duffett claims that counter-performance “helps us to consider how fans interact with the performative templates set by their favorite texts or performers (and vice versa) so that they unlock the pleasures associated with the roles that they have assumed.”⁵⁶ Fanchants as a form of counter-performance provide fans with a way to increase the emotional rewards of their participation in the performance. This participation not only allows fans to take on a more active duty in the performance, but it also helps “establish a public association with a celebrity in a way that shows their solidarity with the rest of the fan base.”⁵⁷ The fanchant not only gives fans a novel form of collaboration with their idols but also helps maintain a strong K-pop fan community by, again, granting access into the knowing field.

The act of creating various elements integral to a K-pop fandom suggests that companies not only create idol groups but also the fandom identity. At the core of K-pop, the idol business is a fandom business. Thus, it is not surprising that a management company would want to foster a strong fandom for their singers as quickly and effectively as possible.⁵⁸ While it is clear that K-pop companies hold a great deal of power and control in a fandom they do not possess all of it. The relationship between a K-pop company and their idol’s fandoms is highly nuanced. This is evident in the way that fansites take on a proactive role in providing new content for the fandom. Although the management of a fansite could be considered a form of fan labor, K-pop companies do not exploit this labor in the same way that American media companies do. K-pop management companies do not actively seek out fans to provide marketing or have them

⁵⁶ Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, 327.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 328.

⁵⁸ Seung-Ah Lee, “Of the Fans, by the Fans, for the Fans.” In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Nojin Kwak and Youngju Ryu, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 116.

collaborate on artistic decisions. Rather, K-pop companies rely on the fan's own loyalty to the idol and the fan's want and need to provide new content for the fandom. K-pop companies also do not have the ability to dictate each fan experience. Fandoms are communities that work collectively. At the same time, K-pop fans will not always follow the lead of the collective. The K-pop company can provide the environment for fandoms to grow and flourish, but what each fan chooses to do within that framework is unique and very personal. Company involvement in fandom mechanics can give K-pop a robotic and manufactured quality; but at the same time the K-pop fan experience remains incredibly intimate due to the way K-pop idols can establish personal connections with fans.

Building Fandoms in North America

K-pop was meant to be exported. In the beginning, many K-pop artists tried to enter the Western music scene with little success.⁵⁹ However, in 2017 with the release of BTS's album, *Love Yourself: Her*, the momentum behind the Hallyu phenomenon seemed to hit a peak. The album became the highest charting Korean album when it hit No. 7 on the Billboard 200.⁶⁰ Since then, BTS has only continued to grow in success, winning numerous awards at American and Korean music award shows, becoming global ambassadors for Korea, and even giving a speech at the United Nations. I did not fully realize the extent of BTS influence until I conducted my fan interviews. Two of the interviewed fans became K-pop fans because of BTS and the singers were consistently mentioned in each interview. How did BTS achieve this type of success in America? How did they garner such a strong and dedicated fan following? Although a single answer to these questions does not exist, I can draw upon my findings from fan interviews in order to

⁵⁹ John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (California: University of California Press, 2015), 114.

⁶⁰ Tamar Herman, "How BTS Took Over the World: A Timeline of the Group's Biggest Career Moments." *Billboard*, May 14, 2014. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8455612/bts-takeover-timeline-bbmas>

highlight key steps that Big Hit Entertainment and other K-pop management companies have taken to create an environment for North American K-pop fandoms to flourish.

While there are hints of collaboration between K-pop companies and fandoms when it comes to maintaining fan loyalty and interest, the groundwork for building fandoms in North America is done mainly by the company. In order to gain a following in North America, a K-pop group first needs exposure. In 2020, this can be more easily done with the use of social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram. Nowadays, a group can go viral on Twitter if a tweet catches the attention of various K-pop fandoms which will then direct a flow of interest to the idols. Nonetheless, although social media has a great deal of power in terms of expanding a band's sphere of influence, companies cannot rely on the use of social media alone. Ideally, a group travels to North America and does a series of interviews or performances. An easy way for K-pop groups to gain early exposure in North America exists and that is through a large event called KCON.

KCON is an annual music festival dedicated solely to K-pop. The event was created and hosted by Koreaboo, a popular website dedicated to K-pop news, and CJ E&M America, a Korean media company. KCON hosts their festival in various locations throughout the year, allowing fans from different regions to travel and see their idols perform in person. It was first started in 2012 and has since expanded to eight different countries as of 2018 including Canada, Japan, and Thailand. KCON provides a wonderful platform for upcoming and veteran idol groups due to the sheer size of the venue and all the press exposure received. In 2018, it was reported that over 94,000 people attended KCON in Los Angeles that year.⁶¹ In 2019, the Los

⁶¹ "World's Largest Korean Pop Music and Culture Convention - KCON USA - To Take Place in New York on July 6-7 and Los Angeles on August 15-18," March 12, 2019, <http://k-popped.com/2019/08/kcon-la-2019-takes-over-downtown-los-angeles/>

Angeles event spanned the course of 4 days, held 243 program sessions and hosted 245 special guests.⁶² For K-pop companies, KCON is a goldmine of potential opportunities to expand in North America since the convention hosts several programs for idol groups to perform and interact with fans. In 2019, KCON started a new program called KCON Rookies. This event is specifically geared towards rising rookie K-pop idols and presents them with a chance to perform a series of fun challenges in hopes of gaining new fans. The official description on the KCON USA website is as follows: “This brand new, yet already KCON fan-favorite program, stars the brightest rookies in the K-Pop galaxy as they tempt you to fall into their fandom. Will you take the plunge?”⁶³ The language of the description suggests that the organizers of the convention are aware of how important an opportunity like KCON is for rookie groups. Thus, it is not surprising to see such star-studded lineups each year as companies vie for the chance to have their idols gain exposure through such a large convention in North America.

While KCON Rookies is certainly an exciting new program for rookie groups to build an international fanbase, the highlight of KCON is the KCON Stage. KCON Stage is a two-night concert that is hosted by M Countdown, a popular Korean broadcasting station, in the Staples Center in Los Angeles which can seat up to 20,000 people.⁶⁴ Unlike most traditional K-pop concerts, KCON Stage presents a wide array of artists in their lineup for both nights.⁶⁵ Therefore, fans get to see up to seven or eight groups perform in the span of one night. This layout is advantageous for companies since it increases the chance of their idols gaining even more fans in

⁶² “KCON LA 2019,” *KCON USA*, accessed March 28, 2020, <http://www.kconusa.com/la/history/kcon19la/>

⁶³ “KCON Rookies,” *KCON USA*, accessed March 28, 2020 <http://www.kconusa.com/la/kcon-rookies/>

⁶⁴ “New Dates and Venues Revealed,” *KCON USA*, accessed March 29, 2020 <http://www.kconusa.com/kcon-2019-usa-new-dates-venues-revealed/>

⁶⁵ “KCON 2019 LA Daily Lineup,” *KCON USA*, accessed March 29, 2020 <http://www.kconusa.com/kcon19la-daily-lineup-revealed/>

North America. The concert format is also an excellent way for fans to participate in activities such as counter-performance and entering the knowing field.

K-pop companies continue to push their artists to participate in KCON because of the media exposure they receive and the chance for the idols to appeal to fans in North America. However, for fans, KCON is appealing for several different reasons. Fans get to see their idols perform live, and additionally and importantly, the convention also presents fans the opportunity to connect with other fans. According to Lincoln Geraghty, convention spaces have served as “the primary location of mass fan gatherings for over 70 years,” with some of the earliest fan conventions dating back to 1939’s first World Science Fiction Convention in New York.⁶⁶ As previously mentioned, K-pop fandom thrives on a sense of exclusivity and an internal space that is shared among fans. Thus, while fans can interact with each other online, the in-person community is still important. KCON encourages the building of in-person communities through programs such as fan club meeting rooms. At the convention designated spaces that are specifically dedicated to fans of a certain group will be set aside. This allows fans of one particular group to meet and interact with other fans who share a similar interest. In addition to this, KCON also hosts a variety of workshops that go beyond just K-pop. Each year there will be dance workshops, K-beauty stalls, and Korean food booths for fans to partake in. Thus, KCON offers a layout that caters to K-pop companies’ needs in helping their idols build the foundations of a North American fanbase, while also providing fans with a place for them to interact with their idols and the fandom.

In addition to KCON, companies can provide their idols with the chance to gain exposure in North America through appearances on American talk shows. Girl’s Generation appearance

⁶⁶ Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom, and Collecting Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2014), 93.

on the David Letterman Show in 2012 was the first appearance by a K-pop group on a late night T.V. show.⁶⁷ Since then, various idols such as BTS, NCT, Black Pink, and Monsta X have appeared on shows such as The Ellen DeGeneres Show and The Late Late Show with James Corden. In 2019, BTS became the first K-pop act to perform on the popular comedy skit show, Saturday Night Live. These T.V. performances, and sometimes subsequent interviews, not only give international K-pop fans a chance to see their idols perform, but it also exposes these K-pop acts to a wider audience. Chloe⁶⁸, a female K-pop fan from Canada, states *“Some groups will go on American T.V. shows which lets other people who are non-k-pop fans see them and then they might become interested.”* While conventions allow K-pop fans to be introduced to more groups, T.V. show appearances appeal to outsiders who are not yet K-pop fans. Both platforms provide the chance for K-pop idols to gain media exposure and widen their audience.

North American K-pop fandom mechanics differ slightly from those of Korean K-pop fandom. Fans in North America are still able to attend fansigns and go to concerts, but they do not have the robust system of fansites that Korean fans have. Fansite members can be equated to the Korean version of paparazzi. They carry around giant professional cameras and release high quality photos for the fandom online. North American fans do not have this type of system and, as a result, the constant stream of content that fansites provide in Korea runs dry once a group travels in North America for promotions. Fans in the U.S. and Canada also do not have as many opportunities to attend live performances, fansigns, TV show appearances, or KCON. To combat

⁶⁷ “Girls' Generation brings 'The Boys' out on 'The David Letterman Show'” *Allkpop*, February 12, 2012.

<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2012/02/girls-generation-brings-the-boys-out-on-the-david-letterman-show>

⁶⁸ “Chloe” and other individual interviewees mentioned in this paper have been given pseudonyms in order to provide them with anonymity. From this point forward, any quote that is italicized indicates that the quote has been taken from a fan interview.

this, certain groups will release content that is directed towards North American fans so that a virtual personal connection may be fostered.

K-pop idol groups and companies will go about establishing this virtual connection in three different ways. The first is a method used at the start of a K-pop idol's career or even during an idol's pre-debut: filming an exclusive variety show in North America that is documented and put online. BTS is the most notable group to have done this with their miniseries, "BTS: American Hustle Life."⁶⁹ Released in 2014, the show's main concept centered around an American training camp theme. It showed the group training with their hip-hop mentors Warren G and Coolio in preparation for their new album. The show was well received among North American fans and provided a more natural and behind the scenes look into the group. The concept of American training camps is a trend that has seen a steady rise in K-pop. Rookie boy group, ATEEZ, also conducted a similar show called KQ Fellaz American Training. The show took place before ATEEZ debuted and was used as a way to garner early fan interest in KQ Entertainment's new and upcoming boy group. The company's strategy seems to have worked extremely well since ATEEZ is known for their immensely strong international fan following while being rather unknown among Korean fans.⁷⁰ The show concept works well for several reasons. In ATEEZ's case it was a way for the group to gain a rather large North American fan following in the early stages of their career. In the case of BTS it allowed the group to expand in the West and subsequently gain more fans. Most importantly, the show format provided content that international fans, specifically North American fans, could relate to. Fans covet new content of their idols whether that be in the form of videos, pictures, or fanclub

⁶⁹"BTS to Have a Reality Show Called 'BTS' American Hustle Life" *Soompi*, July 15, 2014.

<https://www.soompi.com/article/629211wpp/bts-to-have-a-reality-show-called-bts-american-hustle-life>

⁷⁰ Jeff Benjamin, "Ateez Sell Out Multiple Arenas on World Tour, Add More Seats For Sale: Exclusive." *Billboard*, January 13, 2020. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/live/8547884/ateez-add-tickets-world-tour>

posts. While they are able to have access to content online provided by the company and fansites in Korea, it is difficult for international fans to relate on a linguistic and cultural level to that specific content. Thus, when a group does a variety show in North America where idols are being filmed while they learn about American culture, a layer of intimacy is produced that these fans may lack access to.

The second way of forging a virtual connection is by companies creating more content for both international and Korean fans is through the use of a more natural and intimate “vlog” style of filming.⁷¹ Boy group, NCT, is famous for uploading videos filmed by the members in the style of a YouTube vlog. These videos hold a similar appeal to the training camp style in that both provide a plethora of content for fans to go back and watch whenever they like. However, the vlog style of filming that NCT utilizes is also appealing due to the eye-level camera angle adopted that helps produce a more intimate connection through the camera. The effectiveness of this type of filming style is encapsulated by Chloe: “*The candidness and behind the scenes aspect really helps generate a more personal connection.*” Kim discusses how this specific camera angle “produces a sense of touch and interaction despite the two-dimensionality of the images presented on screen.”⁷² What her findings reveal is that despite the heavy reliance on technology, K-pop is able to develop a sense of liveness and intimacy with their fans through “a real-time connection or a shared sense of immediacy and authenticity stemming from participants who congregate either online or offline.”⁷³

Lastly, K-pop groups are able to gain international media exposure through certain programs designed for that purpose in Korea. One of the most popular among international fans

⁷¹ A vlog is a video log and is a form of web television.

⁷² Kim, *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance*, 46.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 16.

is After School Club (ASC). The show is an English language variety show geared towards international fans of certain K-pop idols. The most notable aspect of the show is the inclusion of a select few lucky fans who are able to livestream directly into a monitor at the studio and interact with and ask questions to the K-pop idol on the show. “ASC claims to be qualitatively different from many other related shows, for its contents are supposedly produced and broadcast in real time so as to allow for the participation of a worldwide audience with access to the Internet.”⁷⁴ The use of English as the main language and livestreaming platforms allows international fans an opportunity to interact more actively with their idols than on other programs. Even if the idol or host speaks in Korean, ASC offers live translation typed-in as subtitles while the show is airing. Thus, international fans no longer need be concerned about the language barrier and can follow the show more freely.

One of the main goals for a K-pop group is to expand their international fan following, and K-pop management companies are able to do this by creating content that fans in different countries are able to relate to. Through this type of directed content, fans can foster a more intimate and personal connection with their idols through technology such as livestreaming. K-pop companies have perfected a way of creating conditions for North American fandoms to flourish by having their groups attend American T.V. shows or by performing at large venues such as KCON. In recent years, there also has been an increase in the number of K-pop groups who will sign with an American record label. In 2019, boy group NCT 127 signed with Capitol Records and the label will be assisting the group with distribution and marketing of their EP, NCT #127 We Are Superhuman.⁷⁵ This transfer of roles from K-pop management companies to

⁷⁴ Ibid, 78.

⁷⁵ Tatiana Crisano, “Capitol Music Group & Caroline Sign K-Pop Stars NCT 127 to Distribution Deal,” *Billboard*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8505641/nct-127-capitol-music-group-caroline-distribution-deal>

North American music companies suggests how serious K-pop groups are about their efforts to break into the Western music scene.

Maintaining Fan Loyalty in North America

While K-pop management companies can take certain steps to create the ideal environment for a fandom to flourish, if the fandoms that have been built collapse, the company and idol will suffer. As a result, it is important that, in addition to building fandoms, companies also find a way to sustain fan loyalty for their idols. The key to sustaining fan loyalty in North America lies in the creation of a virtual personal connection between an idol and North American fans. In order to foster that personal connection, a company must release a steady stream of content that fans may interact with.

To create a personal connection, North American fans must first have some type of content to connect with. Typically, management companies do this through the release of a new album or song. In advance of any new release, the company will first promote teaser photos and videos, music videos, dance practice videos, and behind the scenes footage from certain events. Although fans will interact with any kind of content, it does not serve the company's best interest to go through long periods of time without releasing some type of content. As Chloe so aptly puts it, "*Consistency is really important.*"

Consistency in this case refers to the speed at which companies will release content of their idols. This content is released both during active promotions of an album and while the group is on break. Maggie, a self-proclaimed ARMY from the United States who I found to be very knowledgeable about the business side of K-pop, says that "*It's hard to forget about BTS with how much they release content. With how fast the internet is now it makes connecting with other fans but also getting access to content so much easier.*" Maggie's comment reveals how influential a steady stream of content can be in maintaining fan interest. The internet's speed

combined with social media apps's popularity allows fans from all over the world to access content with ease. Further, the nature of social media is thus that when companies release a photo on Twitter or Instagram, fans can interact with other fans in the comments. Therefore, the company receives two benefits from uploading content on a consistent schedule. It helps maintain fan interest while simultaneously reinforcing the community of the fandom and allowing fans to access the knowing field.

North American K-pop fans heavily rely on the virtual connection they have with their idols. Similar to South Korean fans, fans in North America will also take on active roles within a fandom to provide content. Unlike Korean fans who take on the role of "sitemasters"⁷⁶ for fansites, North American fans turn to the digital world to create content. Chloe describes the role that she uptakes for the fandom. *"I like making gifs or fanart. For me it's not just the music, I really like interacting with the people in the fandom too. Like I'll talk to my followers on Tumblr a lot, it makes it feel more like a community."* During this interview, Chloe described how she enjoyed making gifs or fanart of the boy group ATEEZ. Her comment reveals an added benefit for companies any time they choose to release new content. After the first posting of a video or photo, an additional layer of circulation that comes from fans such as Chloe, who take the initial content and then edit it into a new format which then gets released once more. Fans are also aware of the role they play in maintaining a fandom. Emma, a 20-year-old American college student, shared her thoughts on how fandoms work together. *"Fandom is like a community that works together for a similar end goal. Fans don't want people to leave the fandom, so they'll work to like make content like YouTube compilations or other funny videos."* Emma's comment struck me as telling since she is a self-proclaimed casual K-pop fan who prefers to learn the

⁷⁶ The term "sitemaster" refers to the individual who is in charge of taking photos for the fansite.

dances and simply listen to the music as opposed to devoting herself to following one particular group. Despite this, she interacts with fan-made content and greatly enjoys watching YouTube video compilations of K-pop idols funny moments. As Emma describes it, fans do not want other fans to leave the fandom, since a smaller fandom equates to less support overall. In order to combat this, North American fans will take an active role to create and release new content. Fans will also act as translators of official updates from the company or even work on a team to provide subtitles for videos. This demonstrates that the role that certain fans will take to provide new content for the fandom is applicable to both South Korean and North American fans. Fans in North America may not have the robust system of fansites, but the fans have shifted their focus to a different form of content creation.

One factor that became clear as the interviews continued was that companies are attentive to fan response. One would normally assume that a Korean entertainment company churns out new photos and content like a well-oiled machine without taking into consideration what the fandom wants. However, Maggie's comments suggest that is not the case.

Big hit has surveys that they make you take in line during concerts. They have you fill out a survey and can exchange it for a photocard. It has questions about what more content do you want to see, what do you like about BTS? Questions like that. Big Hit treats its fans as customers but also as advisors on their team. It just goes to show that Big Hit pays incredible attention to the fan's responses.

The most interesting factor revealed here is how certain companies, such as Big Hit, acknowledge the importance and power fans have. Maggie recounted to me her experience of watching Big Hit Entertainment's livestream of their corporate briefing and how fascinating she found it. She describes the relationship between fans and Big Hit as that of business partners or

“advisors on their team.” The phrasing suggests that fans, such as Maggie, are well aware of the importance they hold to companies. Maggie not only follows her idols but also knows and interacts with the company managing them. This kind of fan awareness also suggests that fans as a whole, both in North America and South Korea, possess some form of agency in their relationship with the company. Big Hit’s strategy of taking in fan response in the form of surveys also serves the company quite well as evidenced by BTS’s surge in global success.

Although releasing a steady stream of content is important, the type of content that companies release is a deciding factor when it comes to maintaining loyalty. One common trend that I found in all the interviews was that the fans felt a personal connection to the idols because the content that was released showed a more casual and genuine side of the idols. An example of this connection can be seen in Alice’s response:

Interviews with other bands it always seemed like they weren’t being themselves and that they were being this character. But the interaction between BTS seemed more genuine so it feels like you know the members better. BTS showed more behind the scenes things that other groups wouldn’t show like fights and arguments. They weren’t afraid to break down this ‘fantasy’ that they were perfect and never fought with each other.

The connection that Alice, a senior in college who is also writing a thesis about K-pop, feels to BTS depends on the type of content that their company has released. She believes she understands the group better because they do not attempt to keep up the “fantasy” that she mentions. A similar sentiment can be seen in Maggie’s response where she claims that the “*The humanity of K-pop idols is what’s appealing.*” These two fan responses shed light on the fact that fans can distinguish between genuine interactions and this fantasy-like character that many idols will play in front of a camera. The candidness and casual quality that shines through in

certain videos or interviews is what fans are able to relate to. By highlighting the imperfections of a K-pop group and humanizing them in videos, the virtual personal connection between North American fans and idols is established.

This personal connection is taken a step further in the way that idols interact with their fans online. The connection between a fan and an idol is a two-way street. The idols must express their affection for their fans. In a way, they must become fans of their fans, since idols rely so heavily on the love from their followers.⁷⁷ One way that idols can express this affection is through the language they use when speaking to fans. As noted above, fans of a certain group are given a specific fandom name. This fandom name serves as an identifier and allows the fans to feel that they are part of a larger community. North American fans are able to feel this connection through virtual platforms as described by Alice.

With fandom names there's more of a recognition and personal connection. It becomes almost your name in a way. It gives an identity and personalizes it a bit. If I say, 'oh I'm part of ARMY' that feels different and I'm not entirely sure why. The language they use makes it seem more personal. It's like they're talking to you and they care about you.

The bond that Alice feels to BTS is further reinforced by the way that the band speaks to their fans. BTS, and many other idol groups, will lovingly refer to their fans by their fandom name in interviews or Twitter posts. A fandom name produces a feeling of closeness and intimacy between an idol and a fan, even when the fan cannot adequately describe the basis for such a connection. The connection allows a fan to feel closer to the idol as well as the fandom. Emma describes the bond by saying that “*The connection between the artist and the fandom goes beyond what is conventional of most singers.*” In the interview Emma described how at

⁷⁷ Kim, *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance*, 17.

times it seemed as if the management company and the K-pop idol themselves market themselves as a significant other. She claimed that this “fantasy” aspect can filter into how some fans build that personal connection. One of the most appealing qualities of K-pop is that idols constantly interact with their fans, allowing numerous opportunities for fans to connect on a personal level with them, in a way different than most other musical genres. However, in order to feel that bond the idol must also actively partake in establishing the personal connection.

Maintaining fan loyalty in North America lies in the establishment of a virtual personal connection that is fueled by a steady stream of content released by the company. Once that content is released it will go through an additional layer of circulation from fans who take the initial content and transform it in some way to add to the fandom. The active role that North American fans take, in combination with the way certain companies utilize fan responses to surveys, reveals that a K-pop fandom holds a certain degree of agency in their relationship with the company. The company may provide the framework for building and maintaining fandom loyalty, but a good deal of the work needed to create and sustain this relationship can also be credited to the fandom itself.

V Live: A Once in a Lifetime Opportunity

Creating the consistent flow of content for K-pop fans to interact with and needed to maintain fan loyalty, can become tiresome and expensive for K-pop companies. Fans thrive off a personal connection with their idols and, while companies can continue making vlog style videos of their singers, a lack of real time interaction between the fans and idols still exists. In response, Naver, the largest Korean search engine, has created an app that allows fans to establish a virtual personal connection and directly interact with their idols online. This app is called V Live, a

livestreaming service that launched in 2015 and was aimed at reaching global audiences in China, Taiwan, Japan, and Thailand.⁷⁸

The mechanics of V Live are quite simple. The app has over 700 channels from various Korean celebrities. The app can livestream a variety of shows such as live chatting sessions with fans, award shows, interviews, and variety shows. V Live was initially only launched on the Google Play Store but later expanded to iTunes.⁷⁹ No region blocks are present on the app, making it easier for users all around the world to participate. To provide some insight to the numbers of users from various countries, 27.4% come from South Korea, 6.9% of users are from the United States, and 13.2% hail from Indonesia.⁸⁰ Users can subscribe to certain channels and will receive a notification when that channel is starting a livestream. V Live is normally used for livestreaming sessions where celebrities can read comments that fans leave for them and respond in real time.

Three mechanisms are in every V Live session. The first is the video itself. The idol can start a livestream at any point in time and will typically use a cellphone to broadcast the livestream. Second, as fans watch the video on their phones, they can leave hearts for the broadcast by pushing a ‘heart’ button in the bottom right hand corner. This is important because as a fan leaves more hearts then their “chemi-beat” will increase. Chemi-beat is a short form of “chemistry beat” and it serves as a way for an individual to track their interaction with a celebrity through the number of beats.⁸¹ A ranking system exists for chemi-beats and the user’s rank will

⁷⁸ Hyungki Park, “Naver to launch global streaming app for K-pop,” *The Korea Herald*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150729000975>

⁷⁹Madi, “Linking You to Hallyu: The V Live Broadcasting App,” *Seoulbeats*, September 7, 2015, <http://seoulbeats.com/2015/09/linking-you-and-hallyu-v-live-broadcasting-app/>

⁸⁰ “Vlive.tv Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic,” *Alexa*, Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/vlive.tv>.

⁸¹ “What is CHEMI-BEAT?” *Vlive*, Accessed April 3, 2020, <https://m.vlive.tv/v2/intro/chemi?lang=en>

increase based on the number of activities between an individual and the channel. This system provides with a numerical value that correlates to their “chemistry” with the idol group. The third mechanism is the comment section. During a livestream, fans can leave comments or stickers that appear on the screen in real time. The benefit to this is that there is a high chance that the idol will see the comment and respond to it, which enables the opportunity for a personal and live communication between an idol and a fan.

The appeal of V Live is that as a livestreaming platform, the medium itself fundamentally establishes a personal connection between a fan and an idol. At the same time, there is a business element built into the app. Although the app itself is free, fans can pay for a monthly subscription to V Live+ or CH+. V Live+ refers to paid content types and downloadable content from certain channels. CH+ stands for Channel+ as certain channels will offer unreleased video footage or behind the scenes content that fans can pay for through V coins, V Live’s currency system. Through this clever arrangement V Live is able to gain profit while simultaneously providing fans with the content they desire. For K-pop companies, this content also serves as a way to help maintain fandom loyalty, since the majority of the footage is either unreleased or filmed in a casual behind the scenes setting. The last way that V Live operates as a business is through V Fansubs. V Fansubs is a service that allows users to submit their own subtitles for videos. These subtitles are checked by a team from V Live before they are published.⁸² Once again this shows how K-pop companies are able to utilize certain media apps for their own benefit. V Live serves as a platform that allows companies to profit while also providing fans with the content they need in order to establish personal connections with their idols. The subtitle service is indicative of how much work the fandom itself puts in to maintaining fandom loyalty as well.

⁸² “Guidelines,” *Vlive*, Accessed April 3, 2020, <https://subtitle.vlive.tv/guide/translation>

Now that a basic understanding of how V Live operates has been established, I will move on to presenting my findings from the fan interviews I conducted. As a general overview, I discovered that while V Live was launched with the intention of bridging the gap between South Korea and international audiences, not every K-pop fan in North America uses or even has downloaded the app. Out of the five people I interviewed, although all of them knew what V Live was and understood how it operated, only three had used the app before. When asked why V Live was so appealing, I received a wide spectrum of responses ranging from the livestreaming nature of the app to the timing and casual setting the broadcasts took place in.

The medium of livestreaming naturally creates an entry into the knowing field for fans and enhances the virtual personal connection between idols and fans. *“Just the fact that they’re filming it live makes it feel more personalized and intimate.”* Alice’s response was a very common sentiment among the fans I interviewed. For any video that gets released by an idol, the video will go through an editing round. Thus, when fans watch a vlog style video, they are aware that they are not witnessing everything that happened when the idol was filming. In livestreaming, that layer of editing is taken out and so fans naturally feel that they are in a closer and more intimate setting with their idol. Livestreaming also creates the feeling of experiencing a rare event. Chloe articulated this sentiment as: *“Because it’s live if you don’t watch it then you feel like you’re missing out on something. It’s sort of like a once in a lifetime opportunity.”* The livestreams on V Live are available for viewing even after the livestream has ended, meaning fans have the opportunity to go back and watch these videos whenever they choose to do so. At the same time, a livestream creates a sense of urgency in a fan and reinforces the idea that it is a “once in a lifetime opportunity.” I believe that this feeling of rarity stems from the connection that fans experience with the fandom community as the livestream is being broadcasted. Jason, a

male K-pop fan from Canada, stated that *“The connection feels stronger if you capture it live, there’s definitely a community aspect.”* The “connection” here refers to the connection between the idol and the fan but also connections within the fan community. During a livestream, fans are able to submit comments for the idol to read but they also have the ability to interact with other fans on the platform. Thus, the very nature of livestreaming creates a closer and more personalized setting for the fan but also reinforces the community aspect of fandom.

Another feature of livestreaming that makes V Live broadcasts feel more intimate for fans is the broadcasts’s timing. Sometimes an idol group will schedule a V Live broadcast ahead of time, usually for special events like a member’s birthday. However, in most cases, a livestream will happen spontaneously with no prior announcement to alert the fandom. Maggie recalled:

K-pop idols go onto V Live randomly, so it feels more natural and almost like they have a softer image. BTS did a V Live after their appearance on James Corden and we could see them relaxing in their hotel room. It feels like they’re winding down, and it’s more natural. We can appreciate them more as an artist.

Maggie’s response indicates how the timing of these livestreams can enhance the feeling of intimacy that fans experience during a V Live broadcast. Many fans only witness their idols on stage after they have gone through hours of hair and makeup. But the appeal of livestreams is that most of the times the idol will start a broadcast after they have done an event, such as performing on the James Corden show. As Maggie so aptly put it, the act of seeing a K-pop idol “wind down” makes the environment feel more natural. The more casual setting combined with the spontaneity of the livestream creates a more wholistic and softer image of the K-pop idol.

This image then factors into reinforcing a personal connection as fans now feel that they know this more genuine side of the idol that they would not have witnessed outside of a livestream.

While V Live has certainly made it easier for fans to establish a personal connection with their idols, the format does not work with every fan. *“I kind of didn’t see the point of livestreaming anymore because I couldn’t understand anything. I understand that it’s important but it’s not my personal style.”* Chloe used to watch V Live broadcasts, but she soon began to lose interest in the app as it was not her personal style, nor could she understand the Korean language. Alice detailed a similar situation in her decision not to use V Live. She explained that she knew that if she continued to use the app, the constant notifications for livestreams would overwhelm her. Instead, she has chosen to use Weverse, a new app developed by Big Hit Entertainment that is used only by artists in their agency. Alice and Chloe’s responses show that there is a wide spectrum of K-pop fans and that not every K-pop fan is going to enjoy the same things. While some fans, such as Maggie, enjoy V Live because she is able to better feel that connection to the artist and the fandom, other fans, like Chloe, do not use V Live as the primary tool to experience a connection to their idols. This is one of the most appealing qualities of K-pop. Companies can provide this plethora of content for fans to interact with and establish these connections, but the type of content and the way each fan chooses to interact with is different, allowing for a much more personalized fan experience in the robotic framework that K-pop so closely operates in.

One of the major benefits of V Live is that the platform does not only offer livestreaming broadcasts but acts as a host to several other variety shows. For example, BTS hosts a vastly popular weekly mini-variety show titled “Run! BTS,” with their latest episode airing March 31, 2020 and garnering over 3.4 million views in just 5 days. V Live also broadcasts a weekly radio

show called Idol Radio. The radio show has guest hosts each week and is also livestreamed each week. This indicates that V Live is not just restricted to the typical live chatting session with fans format. The app has been able to adapt to different types of shows, allowing companies to produce more content. The largest benefit to the versatility of V Live can be encompassed by this quote from Emma: *“Fans will take clips from the V Live or other shows on the app and put it on YouTube compilations. So then people who miss the V Live can go watch the clips on YouTube.”* Once again, the fandom takes on an additional position to edit and recirculate the initial content so that a wider range of fans may interact with it.

The potential of V Live is endless. Most idols will use the app to livestream small events in a more casual setting. However, BTS expanded the limits of V Live in July of 2019 when the group livestreamed their concert at the Wembley Stadium in London. This event is significant for several reasons. The first is that BTS was the first Korean act to perform in the iconic stadium. The show was sold out and each night the band performed in front of 60,000 fans.⁸³ In addition to this, the group livestreamed the concerts so fans from around the world could watch. The impact of this event can be succinctly illustrated by Maggie, who commented that *“When BTS livestreamed their concert it really just goes to show how Big Hit has taken livestreaming out from just their hotels and made it a more immersive experience for fans. And during their fan messages BTS also thanked the virtual audience so that was really cool.”* The “immersive experience” that Maggie describes refers to the app’s ability to provide a platform for North American fans to participate in certain fandom mechanics that were thought to be site specific. For example, the livestream may allow fans the chance to participate in fanchants as a form of

⁸³ Sungmi Ahn, “BTS performs at historic sold-out Wembley concert,” *The Korea Herald*, June 2, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190602000198>

counter-performance. The act of BTS thanking the virtual audience also reinforces a personal connection that so many ARMY's feel.

When I first began this project, I initially hypothesized that the role V Live played in maintaining fandom loyalty would be quite extensive. However, my findings through the interviews I have conducted have proved me wrong. V Live is not the most important app for maintaining fandom loyalty in North America, simply because there is no sole app or channel that is the most influential in terms of maintaining this loyalty. K-pop companies provide a framework of virtual content and channels that fans in North America can choose to interact with. This choice allows each fan experience to remain personal and unique. However, what V Live does provide is an *additional* and more *easily accessible* channel that companies may utilize to quickly establish a virtual personal connection between idols and North American fans. The benefit of V Live, along with any other content that the company releases, is that videos from the livestreams or other variety shows will go through an additional layer of circulation from fans who choose to take on an active role in spreading more content to the rest of the fandom.

Conclusion

K-pop management companies are able to maintain North American fandom loyalty by establishing and sustaining a virtual personal connection between fans and their idols. This connection is fueled by a steady stream of content that comes in the form of officially released videos and photos from the company, casual livestreams, unofficial photos from fansites, and other fan created content. V Live, and other livestreaming platforms are a single part in the overall scheme of maintaining fandom loyalty. However, what V Live does provide that is significant is a speedy and steady channel to establish a virtual personal connection with North

American fans. Livestreaming platforms like V Live are naturally intimate and personal due to the way the medium operates, thus enhancing the already established personal connection.

Another factor explored in this paper is the relationship between K-pop fandoms and Korean entertainment companies. Initially, I believed that these companies were responsible for everything in the K-pop performance and the K-pop idol's fandom. But as I continued my investigation, the agency that K-pop fandoms held became apparent. K-pop companies simply cannot control K-pop fandoms, both in South Korea and North America. These fandoms have agency. They possess agency on an individual level but also as a wholistic entity. As the experiences of Alice and Chloe suggest, fans can choose what kind of content they want to interact with which leads to a very personalized individual fan experience. However, fandoms as a whole also have agency. This is evident in the way that management companies actively gather data and responses from these fans. By seeking out and taking in fan feedback, management companies acknowledge the importance and power these fandoms possess. The proactive role that certain members of the fandom will take on to create new content for the overall fandom also demonstrates their agency. While some fan studies scholars may view this act as exploitation of fan labor by the company, I view it as a K-pop company's reliance on fandom. There is a limit to a management company's sphere of influence. In order to expand a group's audience, the company, to a certain extent, relies on the fandom to help spread any content that the management company releases. The fans will redistribute that content in a different form and perhaps on a different platform, thus adding a layer of circulation to the original content. This is not to say that fandoms hold power over the K-pop company, but rather that they are two forces who at times will unknowingly work together to achieve a similar goal. The best word to describe their unusual relationship is symbiotic.

Fandoms and companies are not quite collaborative, but they do demonstrate qualities of a symbiotic relationship, as both the fandom and the company mutually benefit from each other at times. This finding goes against many claims in both fan studies and K-pop studies. Due to the symbiotic nature of K-pop fandoms and K-pop companies, these two entities are not always in opposition to each other. There are certainly times where fans will be upset with a company, perhaps due to a policy change or a member lineup change, but both companies and fans benefit from the other in some form. K-pop companies benefit from the added layer of circulation that fan labor provides. Fans benefit from the musical and social content that K-pop companies provide. The mutual benefit that these two groups enjoy all filters into one goal: the success of a K-pop idol. Although fandoms and companies both want a K-pop artist to be successful, the motivation behind attaining that goal is different. K-pop companies seek success because it earns them a profit, whereas fans want their idol to be successful due to the personal connection and fan love they feel for the artist. Thus, both fandoms and companies will at times work together to help achieve that goal.

The complicated relationship between K-pop companies and K-pop fans is an area of study that has not been sufficiently investigated. There is an abundance of research on the business strategies K-pop companies employ to market their idols to a global audience and several scholars have also focused their research on how K-pop companies utilize and gather data from fan response on social media. This is not to say that this previous research is unimportant, it is quite the opposite. Rather, the use of these business strategies and utilization of social media platforms has resulted in a closely entwined symbiotic relationship between K-pop companies and K-pop fans. This relationship is an additional part of the equation in the

continuous search into why K-pop has successfully expanded into the Western market and should warrant further investigation.

In recent years, K-pop has grown in international popularity and the success of artists such as BTS and ATEEZ in North America indicates that the Hallyu Wave shows no signs of stopping. Technology and social media apps like YouTube and Twitter have allowed K-pop to expand its global reach and find success in the West. The sheer amount of content that management companies release through these platforms allows fans to pick and choose what kind of content they want to interact with, which results in a customized and unique fan experience. The virtual personal connection that has been established and sustained between idols and fans through these social media platforms only strengthens K-pop's ability to endure in the Western music industry. Gone are the days of K-pop being considered a passing and foreign trend. The Korean music industry has proved that not only can it endure in the Western market but that K-pop artists can compete with Western singers on a global stage.

Glossary

ASC: After School Club is a television show that incorporates livestreaming with fans as an integral part of the show.

Fan club: an official online website or platform for a specific idol group. Each group has their own fan club that is monitored by their company. On this platform members of the idol group can write posts or upload photos. Fans can create online discussion forums on the website.

Fanchant: an array of lyrics that the fans will yell during a performance. The fan chant typically consists of repetition of certain words in the song. The goal of a fan chant is to be loud and show the fans support for their idol.

Fansign: an event where fans have the chance to personally meet and interact with their idols. A fansign is usually a much smaller gathering of 150-200 fans.

Fansite: an unofficial fan account that is solely dedicated to one idol group or one specific member of the group. Fansites are known for providing high quality photos of idols and these photos are taken by the fans themselves.

Hallyu Wave: refers to the international success of Korean popular cultural products such as film, music, television, radio, fashion, and computer games.

V Live: a popular livestreaming app that is commonly used by K-pop idols and other Korean celebrities.

Vlog: a popular form of video log and web television.

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