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“At War for OPPA and Identity”: Competitive Performativity among Korean-Pop Fandoms

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“AT WAR FOR *OPPA* AND IDENTITY”: COMPETITIVE PERFORMATIVITY AMONG
KOREAN-POP FANDOMS

Introduction

The Korean-Pop (hereafter referred to as K-Pop) fandom has made its mark internationally amidst rapid globalization, technological developments, and the strategic backing of South Korea's government.¹ In fact, even with national boundaries, the international K-Pop fandom has flourished and garnered worldwide attention. These K-Pop fandoms, to be sure, are a product of South Korea's successful enforcement of soft power.² Recent achievements demonstrate K-Pop's true global reach not just among fans but in mainstream media and in public spaces.

Recently, K-Pop has gained traction in the global media scene as music influencers specifically boy group Bangtan Boys' with their appearances during the month of November 2017 on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* show, the *Late Late Show with James Corden* as well as the *American Music Awards*.³ Next, in April 2017, fans banded together to purchase billboard space in New York City's Time Square to commemorate EXO, one of South Korea's leading boy bands, and their group's 5th anniversary exemplifying how soft power has

¹*Oppa* means "older brother" in Korean (from the female perspective) but can also be used to denote some type of (close) relationship between a female and male (again, from the the female directed to an older male). Among international K-Pop fans, this term is used to denote an "adoring relationship" with a male idol (ie. G-Dragon oppa, I love you!)

²Soft power, a term coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr., refers to a country's ability to shape other's preferences through appeal and attraction instead of coercion through force.
G. John Ikenberry, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014,
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>.

³ Tamar Herman, "BTS' ARMY Reflects on Seeing Band on 'Ellen', 'Kimmel Live!', & 'Late Late Show,'" *Billboard*, November 28, 2017,
<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8047080/bts-army-reflects-seeing-band-us-tv>.

influenced the intensity of K-Pop fan culture.⁴ As an example of soft power disseminated as diplomacy in the political realm, during early April 2018, girl group Red Velvet performed in North Korea and were received well by Kim Jong Un as indicative of his reaction where he stated he was “deeply moved”.⁵ Additionally, EXO and CL, a well-known artist and in the global fashion scene, performed during the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics’ closing ceremony and amassed a whopping 8 million tweets from thrilled K-Pop fans worldwide in the span of just four hours.⁶

These formidable global achievements and ever-growing K-Pop fandom culture overseas strongly suggest that K-Pop idol culture is a phenomenon to be reckoned with, one that demonstrates the actual significance of celebrity culture at the core of K-Pop’s influential power. Specifically, I suggest that with K-Pop celebrity culture, the connection idols actively create with their fandoms is such that for some fans, their K-Pop fan identity aligns strongly with their personal identity. Moreover, when their idols succeed, fans feel as if they have succeeded and when their idols are the best, fans feel as if they are the best. Individual K-Pop fans then can be

⁴C. Hong, “Fans Plan Huge Time Square Billboard Project to Commemorate EXO’s 5th Anniversary,” *Soompi*, April 2, 2017, <https://www.soompi.com/2017/04/02/fans-plan-huge-times-square-billboard-project-commemorate-exos-fifth-anniversary/>.

⁵Andrew Flanagan, “Kim Jong Un was ‘Deeply Moved’ After K-Pop Performance,” *National Public Radio*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/04/02/598812832/kim-jong-un-was-deeply-moved-after-k-pop-performance>.

⁶Tamar Herman, “K-Pop Stars CL & EXO Impress at Winter Olympics Closing Ceremony,” *Billboard*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8219143/olympics-closing-ceremony-cl-exo-performance-video>.

expected to put an amount of effort they deem appropriate into ensuring success for their idols and fandoms.

Furthermore, with success defined the way it is (through music chart rankings, albums sales, social media presence, fan projects, and more), fans from different backgrounds are given a tangible goal to reach. Overall, this special connection with idols encouraged by the industry makes it that for some fans, the K-Pop fandom becomes their life. These competitive activities gives fans control and makes them feel as if they are the “in-group” that knows how K-Pop works.

The following snippet from the survey of fans conducted for this research paper perfectly encapsulates the celebrity culture that makes the K-Pop fan-idol dynamic worth researching:

“If we can learn from the Beatles (arguably the first major instance of fandom culture in music), it's basically turning something you like into idolization (Marx is rolling in their grave rn) and then taking any criticism or anything that gets in their way as a personal attack to the artist themselves and then by proxy, the competitive fan themselves.”

Thus, differing intensities and ideals of fan loyalty inspire differing fan competitive activities. What then can be gained by allowing toxic competitive fan practices to go fully (or even just partly) unchecked? The industry and idols certainly stand to gain online exposure from ongoing, widespread fan hysteria which gives K-Pop fan support activities online and offline its infamy. In fact, these K-Pop entertainment agencies and the industry as a whole is for the most part hands-off when it comes to fandom activities and conduct. The extent of their influence is to control certain avenues of domestic fan support (for example, whether or not fan gifts are allowed or how many fans are allowed to attend a fansign event) or to pursue legal

action with online defamation issues⁷, again domestically. Given what I term a “hovering-hands” policy when it comes to global fandom conduct, it is no wonder why toxic conduct, still remains.

What then are these toxic forms of fandom competitiveness? The unveiling of hundreds of rigged votes, scathing tweets bashing groups with different beliefs, YouTube comments peppered with pledges of loyalty, heated arguments over the legitimacy and authenticity of highly public figures: while this may sound like politics as usual, what we have witnessed is a concept I’m calling “toxic competitive performativity” among Korean-Pop fandoms. Important to note however is that the aforementioned competitive acts are what I deem “toxic” competitive practices whereby fans no longer just support their idols’ music and highlight their successes but in the process demean or even directly attack idols’ or fandoms just because their interests and beliefs don’t align.

It is important to note the distinction between toxic and healthy “competitive performativity”. At its core, competitive performativity is essentially where fans of certain idol groups engage in activities online and offline that put them on the offensive and/or defensive role specifically in regards to their idols’ and fandoms’ image and success. Impressive competitive fan activities more towards the “healthy” end of the spectrum include conducting bulk album group orders, meticulously putting in hundreds of music chart votes, staying up late into the night to rack up views for these idols’ newest music videos, proudly donning idol merchandise, and steadfastly defending the honor of their fandom in forum comments without being

⁷KpopJoA, “Netizens Who Left Malicious Comments Claim They’ve Been Sued by Big Hit and Pledis Entertainment,” *Allkpop*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2017/07/netizens-who-left-malicious-comments-claim-theyve-been-sued-by-big-hit-and-pledis-entertainment>.

demeaning. Competitive fan activities also have the potential to make positive impacts that reach outside the boundaries of the “K-Pop realm”. For instance, fans will band together for a charitable mission in honor of an idol’s birthday, organize food trucks for the cast and staff of a television drama their idol is working on, and more.

Notably, current literature surrounding K-Pop is mostly focused on the bright side of the fandom--fan practices, the music’s appeal and so on. But it would be dangerous to ignore the dark side of the K-Pop fandom and the structures (whether through the industry, idols, or fandom) that sustain it. Despite the shared K-Pop fervor, this fandom is not exactly a united, homogeneous unit peacefully gushing over their favorite idols. The international K-pop fandom contains highly-opinionated and sometimes obsessive individuals which has created discourse on/offline alight with ideological and cross-cultural clashes involving the industry, idols, and the fandom itself. Categorical clashes at the core of fandom values and ideal conduct center on varying ideals of first, the “good, successful” idol group and subsequently and second, the “good, supportive” fan. These characteristics are in quotations as these ideals are decidedly subjective.

Stemming from these clashes is fandom competitiveness which can escalate into toxic fan conduct. The term “fandom war” specifically, for many K-Pop fans, triggers pained and weary expressions. Why is this the case? Toxic fandom war is competitive performativity turned up a notch with a tinge of misdirected loyalty. It is as dramatic as one imagines it can be, with one whole fandom outwardly attacking the fandom of another (usually in the name of their idol group) via a barrage of snide Twitter posts. But it can also be the act of a single fan spending countless hours casting fake votes on music charts.

How then do international fans negotiate their identities as loyal K-Pop fans given the negative stigma entrenched by the toxic side of fandom competitiveness? Fans engage in Merryn Ekberg's concept of "reflexive modernity"⁸, which involves a "continuous monitoring and surveillance.." and of enacting changes as the latest and most "accurate" knowledge becomes available. Reflexive modernity is also a mature modernity that "acknowledges its errors... guided by vigilance and caution."

Thus, given the online communities' focus on the fandom's faults, rather than just being receivers of pop cultural affect, fans now also take on a reflexive role (given their own cultural lenses). This reflexive role is largely seen on online platforms where non-Korean fans will actively converse about what they consider "problematic" events surrounding certain fandom practices. Given the emergent risk of cross-cultural identity negotiations (ie. the ideology clashes emerging from being both a cultural outsider and an adoring fan), fans need to feel a sense of agency; engaging in reflexive discussions and shedding light on certain issues serves as an outlet to do so. Fans no longer use communicative technology just to connect with their idols and other fans but are actively questioning the very industry, idols, and community that sustain their interest in K-Pop.

Furthermore, I contend that fans act on these reflexive practices through their own policing structure. First, Foucault's idea of "biopower"⁹ serves as a template where governmentality instead stems from the bottom-up or through the larger population; in this case

⁸Merryn Ekberg, "The Parameters of the Risk Society: A Review and Exploration," *Current Sociology* 55, no. 3 (2007): 354-6, doi: 10.1177/0011392107076080.

⁹Foucault's idea of biopower states that governmentality is depended on to create, manage, and control large populations.

Shunya Yoshimi and Anne Allison, "The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2-3 (2017): 102, doi: 10.1177/0263276409103118.

the fandom. This is a reverse in conventional wisdom where biopower is usually thought of as top-down in terms of controlling consumer roles/values and cultural formations/flows. In this age of reflexive fan activity, fans reflect on and control their own roles and values. Specifically, my past unpublished research has revealed that by utilizing biopower, fans have created a policing structure (form of gatekeeping) and movements meant to maintain fandoms that actively and positively contribute to the global community. Within this study, in direct relation to fandom reflexivity, fans were found to be mainly concerned with the good fan v. bad fan differentiation and the negative effects of fandom competitiveness. Lastly, Yoshimi and Allison's¹⁰ concept of "subversive potential" is concerned with channeling into loyalty, affection, and connection to create new communities and movements.

Thus, competitive performativity among international K-Pop fans does three things: first, it reinforces loyalty towards and promotes chosen idols and fandom. Next, it combats non-/fans' conceptions of their fandom/idols and finally is a performative and simultaneously reflexive act (through self-policing) as they negotiate their "good, authentic" fan identity, given the belief that the idol, fandom, and company they support reflects on their own values, morals, image, and lifestyle.

International K-Pop Fan: Role, Identity, and Practices

Reception, Appeal, and Consumption

The following section surveys the current academic literature focused on the function and culture of the K-Pop fandom.

¹⁰Yoshimi and Allison, "The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth," 106.

In Dani Madrid-Morales and Bruno Lovric's 2015 study on the K-Pop fandom in Spain and Latin America, they found that this pop culture form provided a fantasy that allowed fans an appealing escape from reality.¹¹ Furthermore, the online imagined communities created a trans-atlantic connection and made social support possible between fans that weren't necessarily in physical proximity. Interestingly, male Hallyu fans cited the "ideal" Korean culture and absence of over-sexualizing concepts as appeals.¹²

Chuyun Oh's piece takes another perspective, specifically surrounding the western female fans' consumption of K-Pop male dancing bodies. Arguably, the androgyny of male idols gives fans an avenue to enact female desires challenging white masculinity. Additionally, through these online interactions and video compilations, fans shift from being observers to intentional performers by bringing the focus to the idol's bodies and movements (transforming them into subjects of the gaze) which in turn enacts different forms of sexuality and gender roles that ultimately goes against the western gender binary.¹³

Practices, Participation and Promotion

Sun Jung's article on fan activism, cyber vigilantism, and othering lays out the diverse voices surrounding the K-Pop entertainment industry which ultimately influence, for better or worse, the decision processes of consumers and the industry. K-Pop fans online activities and

¹¹It is important to note that the literature review section has been taken directly from a paper I submitted in APS 636 entitled "Spilling the Tea on K-Pop: International Fan Reflexivity on the Fandoms, the Industry, and the Idols."

¹² Dani Madrid-Morales and Bruno Lovric, "'Transatlantic Connection': K-pop and K-drama Fandom in Spain and Latin America," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 37-8, doi: 10.1386/jfs.3.1.23_1.

¹³Chuyun Oh, "Queering Spectatorship in K-pop: The Androgynous Male Dancing Body and Western Female Fandom," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 59, doi: 10.1386/jfs.3.1.59_1.

conversations across varying societal groups can be meaningful as shown through their responses to, for example, a natural disaster. Participatory fan activism allows them to engage in discourse surrounding issues/events and common discourse which has the potential to lead to actual social activism.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Ju Kim's study on the shifting image of K-Pop fans in Korea posits that the fans' participatory culture is responsible for building their public image. The donation activities of these fans in particular effectively reshapes negative stereotypes pertaining to the idol fandom, connects the fandom with the Korean public, and attributes new meaning to the fans' existence.¹⁵

Benjamin Han, in his piece on the K-Pop fandom in Latin America, states that it is a transcultural fandom as it moves outside of the east-west paradigm in globalization. Moreover, K-Pop is normalized into the mainstream through online fan activism and further exposure in mass media distribution.¹⁶ San-Yeon Sung's research on K-Pop participatory culture in Austria shows the shift of the fans' role as observer and participant to provider and sponsor. In particular, fans have organized K-Pop events, dance festivals, and other fan-culture gatherings.¹⁷

Identity, Relations, and Meaning-making

¹⁴Sun Jung, "Fan Activism, Cybervigilantism, and Othering Mechanisms in K-pop Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 10, doi: 10.3983/twc.2012.0300.

¹⁵Ju Oak Kim, "Reshaped, reconnected and redefined: Media portrayals of Korean pop idol fandom in Korea," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 89-90, doi: 10.1386/jfs.3.1.79_1.

¹⁶Benjamin Han, "K-Pop in Latin America: Transcultural Fandom and Digital Mediation," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2265-66.

¹⁷Sung-Yeon Sang, "K-pop Reception and Participatory Fan Culture in Austria," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 9 (2013): 90, <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/e-journal/articles/sung.pdf>

Patrick William and Samantha Xin's study on the formation of authentic K-Pop fan identities in Singapore reveals that fans negotiate their understanding of the "authentic" fan identity by comparing themselves to the contested and undesirable *saesang*¹⁸ fan identity. Mass media forms make it so that deviant fan identities become a sort of media consumption commodity. The *saesang* casts negative stigma around K-Pop fans that must be negotiated by fans who want no association with the deviant identity. Furthermore, fans construct authentic identities through a categorical/status lens specifically on a mainstream fan to *saesang* fan spectrum.¹⁹ Harking back to Han's study on the transcultural K-Pop fandom, he posits that this transcultural fan identity stems from the fans' consumption from varying transcultural fandoms. Notably, fans found tension with this interest in K-Pop and their mass culture. Lastly, as fans consume K-Pop, they negotiate with their own social identities while resisting existing class hierarchies.²⁰

Overall, the findings point towards the current research focus on the reactionary, participatory, promotional, consumer and identity-forming role of non-Korean fans. However, this leaves room for further venturing. Specifically, current online fan discourse suggests that fans actively engage in bottom-up reflexive and/or critical discourse surrounding the industry, idols, and fandoms which leaves room for further research on fan reflexivity surrounding competitive fandom practices in particular.

Description of the Study and Research Questions

¹⁸A *sasaeng* fan is an overly obsessed K-Pop fan with the tendency to engage in activities that are considered an invasion of privacy such as stalking or breaking into idols' dormitories

¹⁹J. Patrick Williams and Samantha X.J. Ho, "Sasaengpaen" or K-pop Fan? Singapore Youths, Authentic Identities, and Asian Media Fandom," *Deviant Behavior* 37, no. 1 (2016): 81,92, doi:10.1080/01639625.2014.983011

²⁰Han, "K-Pop in Latin America: Transcultural Fandom and Digital Mediation," 2265.

Taking into account the current literature and remaining questions, we ask what competitive fandom practices and subsequent themes are prevalent, when competitiveness becomes problematic or “toxic”, what values inform these practices, and lastly, how fans are being reflexive, if at all, when examining this phenomenon. Current research has examined how transcultural relations has affected reception and meaning-making of K-Pop (and only very briefly on reflexive thinking) but further examination into transcultural negotiations, specifically in inter-fandom competitive relations, given a more critical/reflexive lens would prove beneficial to the growing academic research on the ever-shifting K-Pop fandom and fandom culture in general. Moreover, this research points towards the importance of celebrity culture and its power in drawing in people looking for a place, an identity, and a purpose which is highly applicable to any type of fandom in the global sphere.

This research is valuable as well to the K-Pop industry, idols and fandom since the findings will (1) allow the industry and idols to better understand the values and practices of their international fans (2) allow the industry and idols to connect with fans and better address problematic events stemming from fandom wars and (3) make possible a theoretical framework through which fans and other researchers can reflexively examine these particular competitive practices. International K-Pop fans are more than just consumers and subservient supporters waving lightsticks at laptop screens. They are impressively loyal to their idols and have proven what their reflexive practices and subversive potential as a fandom can achieve. Hence, it is imperative to examine how competitiveness might spiral out of control and how fans police, if at all, these toxic fandom practices.

Given the prevalence of competitive performativity within the K-Pop fandom and fans' reflexive role, I ask the following questions: (1) What overall themes (practices, beliefs, and values) are at the core of K-Pop international fandom competitive performativity? Specifically, which practices and beliefs are promoted by but also bind the industry, idols, and fandom? What does this suggest for cross-cultural and inter-fandom relations? At which point does competitiveness become toxic? and (2) How do fans reflexively examine their competitive fandom practices, if at all? I will determine whether discourse among fans exists that critiques toxic competitiveness. I am also interested in whether or not fans actually tap into their subversive potential to alleviate problematic competitive situations for the sake of the K-Pop fandom image.

Method and Procedures

This study incorporated a combination of methods: discourse coding analysis, critical discourse analysis in addition to the application of the conceptual frameworks of reflexive modernity, (adapted) biopower and subversive potential. To approach my research questions, I first coded for types of competitive fan practices by combing through news articles and creating categories for the main, common competitive fan practices. Second, I ran a coding analysis of online non-Korean K-Pop fan article comments surrounding certain K-Pop events/issues (involving the fans themselves) from 2015 to 2018 then applied the reflexive modernity framework to determine the common emergent themes from these competitive clashes and if and how fans are reflexive/critical of these competitive practices. Specifically, I examined roughly 100 fan comments for each news article. Furthermore, I unpacked the implications of these

competitive practices and reflexive comment themes and determined what fan beliefs/values shape and are shaped by these practices.

I chose to look into Allkpop, a major K-Pop online news sources with a large amount of viewership and regular participation from foreign K-Pop fans. These particular news articles were chosen because of the significant fan response and categorization as either competitive fan events or “problematic” fandom competitive events by the fans themselves.

The online survey (hosted on Google forms) was circulated among non-Korean K-Pop fans to qualitatively assess how and why fans (1) have participated in competitive performativity (and if so, in what ways) (2) reflect on toxic/competitive practices and (3) tap into, if at all, subversive potential to offset the negative image tacked onto fandoms due to toxic competitive practices. This survey was circulated across online platforms that receive heavy international K-Pop fan foot traffic (for example, fan pages on Facebook, Allkpop forum, Reddit threads, and so on.) A disclaimer in the beginning of the survey assured participants that their identities would be anonymous. I used findings from the coding analysis to tailor questions to address my research questions.

For the interview section I utilized both convenience sampling (reaching out to my personal social networks) as well as more targeted sampling (K-Pop related Facebook pages, K-Pop news sites, K-Pop forums, and so on) to gather five participants. Prior to meeting with each person, interview protocols were created to guide the direction of the sessions. The interviews were audio-recorded in-person and choice sections transcribed in order to pinpoint the recurring themes surrounding fan competitiveness, reflexivity, and subversive potential. Lastly, I applied the biopower and subversive potential frameworks to fifteen case studies of

international fan-initiated movements or projects. These fan projects/actions were chosen as they targeted some “problematic” theme or issue mentioned in the fan’s online reflexivity. Notably, I used the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method across the qualitative survey and interview data in order to examine fan discourse as a social practice entrenched with certain ideologies.

Participants

With the quantitative section, 364 participants representing forty-seven countries contributed their experiences and insight. A significant amount of participants hailed from the United States (49.7%, n=181), followed by Australia (6.6%, n= 24), then Canada and the UK (both 5.5%, n=20). The majority of participants identified as female at 78.3% (n=285) with males at 21.7% (n=79). Ages ranged from 13 to 48 with the average age being 22. The top three respondent groups claimed to be White at 41.2% (n= approx. 150), then Asian at 40.9% (n= approx. 149), followed by Black or African American at 3.3% (n= approx. 12).

Additional background information on the participants revealed that 63.9% (n= 229) of respondents have been active K-Pop fans for less than one year up to five years, followed by 31.3% (n=114) who have been fans from six to ten years, and lastly 5.7% (n=21) of participants who indicated they have been fans for eleven years or more. Participants’ prevalent gateway to getting into K-Pop was just coming across it at 38.7% (n=138) (for example through YouTube recommendations), then through friends or family at 36.7% (n=131), and finally through television shows or other media mediums at 19.9% (n=71). Next, the most common reason for

why fans were drawn to K-Pop was due to the music and choreography at 58% (n=211), followed by the overall unique production value at 18.7% (n=68), and third the visual aesthetic in terms of style and idol attractiveness at 9.3% (n=34). Lastly, when asked about official fandom affiliation 22% (n=80) of respondents identified as multifandom fans, 17.9% (n=65) stated they did not identify with a fandom, and 14% (n=51) stated they were ARMY fans.

After the survey portion, I interviewed five non-Korean, international fans named Angela, Katrina, Natalie, Millie, and Denzel. Their ages were respectively twenty-three, forty, seventeen, twenty-four, and twenty with all except Denzel (he identifies as male) identifying as female. Important to mention is that all the interview participants were American.

Results

Online Article Themes and Comments

Before approaching K-Pop fan reflexivity it was crucial to pinpoint common competitive fan practices and subsequently the main categorical clashes at the core of these practices. More specifically, I examined the most common ideological or cross-cultural conflicts surrounding the idols, the industry, and the fandom itself across forty-eight articles published between 2015 and 2018.

One category of competitive fan practice involved “international & domestic music company and industry avenues”²¹ of competitive fan practices. These practices included the following: conducting massive (and sometimes systematic) physical/digital K-Pop album purchases (which are often incentivized with chances to interact with the idols), supporting idol

²¹A Wannable (Wanna One fan) spent \$4000 in albums for a chance to win a spot at a fansign meeting. Needless to say, the fan still did not manage to win a spot and took to social media to air her frustrations. It’s a tough world out there for fans competing for that one-time meeting with their idols.

groups (either through votes or twitter hashtags for example) for domestic and international music award shows, and purchasing goods from idol brand-deals to increase idol brand value. The other category of fan competitiveness was “Fan-directed avenues of competitive acts”. Furthermore, this category of competitive practices can be divided into these sub-categories: inter-fandom competition, fandom-fandom competition, and fandom-outer competition.

I define inter-fandom²² competitiveness as confrontational or defensive acts between fans in the same fandom or between fans in the wider K-Pop fandom. Fandom-fandom competitiveness involves confrontational or defensive challenges from one whole fandom to another (or a single/few fans’ competitive acts proclaimed to be on *behalf* of their respective fandom). Lastly, “fandom-outer competitiveness” is where fans, separate fandoms, or even the K-Pop fandom as a whole engages in confrontational or defensive acts with non-K-Pop fandom entities (for example, Western artists, producers, actors, and so on).

First, inter-fandom competitive practices involve monitoring, defending, or attacking an idol’s or fandom’s good image, actions, or beliefs (this can be done through at-length debates online or offline, circulating image-damaging messages surrounding a certain idol member via viral Twitter hashtags, or through the acknowledgement of non-/exemplary fan actions such as civil behavior at events).

²²NU’EST fans were praised for their exemplary conduct after an event specifically with cleaning up after themselves--not a small feat at all! This is one way fandoms, within the larger K-Pop fandom, compete for a good fandom image.

Next, fandom-fandom²³ competitive practices included threats to idol or fandom safety or experience (for example, threatening or being inconsiderate to event attendees or symbolically through merchandise destruction), threatening or defending the positive image of an idol or fandom whether it be about personality, behavior, artistry, what success entails, and so on (through social media), threatening or defending self-conceived or company-provided ideas of fan identity (debating over similarity of official fandom colors or whether to uphold designating seating sections to certain fandoms), debilitating fandom or company avenues of communication (such as by hacking a Twitter account or official website), systemically, mass-demonstrating support for one group and on the flip side then systematically, mass-demonstrating lack of support towards a certain group (through “black oceans”²⁴ , chanting name of other group).

Finally, “fandom-outer competitiveness”²⁵ was demonstrated through the following practices: defending or enforcing positive conceptions of idols, fandoms, or even Korean culture which can again be about idol musical prowess, musical ownership, artistry, fan conduct, or political fan beliefs (through petitions, use of lightsticks, or often through social media such as the dissemination of Twitter hashtags, postings through blog sites, through Instagram comments,

²³A BTS ARMY fan was allegedly responsible for hacking into and taking over an EXO-L Twitter fan account, rendering the fandom avenue of communication useless. This is toxic fandom-fandom competition as it sabotages the fandom of another for the sake of inconvenience rather than to be constructive.

²⁴“Black oceans” refer to where K-Pop fans will purposefully and systematically choose not to light up their lightsticks during a K-Pop group’s performance. This is a most effective toxic competitive act when done during a concert. This can be done to demonstrate non-support and can cause quite the scene as it becomes obvious when a section of the concert audience isn’t lit up with lightsticks.

²⁵K-Pop fans spread the Twitter hashtag #RIPMileyCyrus after Miley Cyrus fans made allegedly racist remarks regarding K-Pop. The Miley Cyrus fan had also claimed that “K-Pop is only known in Asia” which garnered more angry responses.

and so forth) and finally through protecting self-conceived notions of fan identity (for example fans voicing dissent against outside usage of a special phrase bestowed upon them by their idols).

Tables 1 through 4²⁶ break down the themes found across 4,760 comments surrounding the aforementioned online articles involving competitive fan practices and events. In 2015,²⁷ the competitive fan practices most frequently discussed or enacted by international fans were threatening idol safety, encroaching upon, defending or enforcing the positive image of an idol(s) or fandom, and supporting idol groups for domestic and international music award shows. After quantifying the non-/reflexive themes found across these international fan comments, the most frequently occurring themes were systematically compiled.

When examining fan reflexivity, there were a few instances of a comment theme occurring more than half of the time. First, among reflexive comments regarding threatening or defending an idol's positive image, the most recurring theme was good versus bad fan beliefs and conduct as well as the escalations to fandom wars. For fan practices that were "threats to idols", the most common theme, which happened to occur over half of the time for one event, was again good versus bad fan beliefs and practices, followed by bad fandom characteristics, and third whether a fan should be viewed in a good or bad light. In terms of industry-provided

²⁶See appendix A for table data sets 1-4.

²⁷Pakman, "Netizens notice similarities between G-friend's 'Glass Bead' and Girls' Generation's 'Into the New World'; alim17, "Tao regrets his harsh reaction to Kris's departure + explains the video of him shoving Baekhyun"; alim 17, "Fans shower EXO's Chanyeol with love on Twitter in response to hate hashtag" jubilantj, "Data shows Seventeen topped rookie group albums sales so far in 2015"; alim17, "One Direction fans and K-Pop fans duke it out on Twitter?"; mssylee, "Russian ARMY comes to defend BTS, receives criticism from K-netizens"; alim17, "EXO fan apologizes for threatening to bomb Big Bang's concert?"; alim17, "Burning of Taeyang's picture stirs up further resentment in the VIP fandom"; serendipity, "M! Countdown' addresses EXO-L and VIP's concerns regarding the faulty online voting system this week"; neefa, "Super Junior and their fans win at the 'Teen Choice Awards 2015'"; Pakman, "g.o.d fans criticize Cube Entertainment over BTOB's official color + protest using T.P."; Sassygrrrl, "Seventeen were the victims of the notorious 'black ocean' during their 'MAMA' performance?".

platforms of competitiveness, the data again revealed that the most frequent reflexive theme was good versus bad fan beliefs and conduct followed by bad fandom characteristics. Next, pertaining to fan identity, fan comments talked about good versus bad fan beliefs and conduct more than half of the time and then perceived differences in fan culture across fandoms. Finally, common themes surrounding activities to show non-support for a group also revealed that reflexivity mostly centered on discussions regarding good versus bad fan beliefs & conduct.

Next, for the year 2016 the top-most occurrences of international fan competitiveness involved attacking or defending an idol or fandom's positive image followed by threatening or defending (company or fan-formed conceptions of) fan identity.²⁸ No reflexive comment themes occurred more than half of the time. Across all reflexive fan comments pertaining to instances of idol or fandom image threats, the most frequently present themes were conceptions of the good versus bad fan (specifically pertaining to issues of behavior and values) as well as themes surrounding moral conduct and general characteristics regarding fandoms as a whole. Among reflexive comments surrounding acts that threaten or enforce fan-identity, the most common recurring theme was good versus bad fan values and conduct followed by contested ideals of fandom organization and acceptable practices. Lastly, across reflexive comments regarding

²⁸jubilantj, "EXO-Ls apologize for their crass words toward Kim Hwan Hee and Seo Shin Ae"; jennywill, "BTS shows love for EXO at MelOn Music Awards"; beansss, "Anti-fans plan Twitter attack against BTS + ARMY respond"; alicel01, "Korean ARMYs criticized for being inconsiderate about Lay's condition"; jubilantj, "Miley Cyrus gets dragged into fan war between Justin Bieber and EXO fans with #RIPMileyCyrus"; GhostWriter, "Rapper B-Free says he's going to bitch slap BTS the next time he sees them"; alicel01, "Which K-Pop fandoms participated in the anti-President Park protests?"; beansss, "Fans divide up seats for '2016 Dream Concert' into designated fandoms"; alicel01, "EXO fans are angry at IOI's Pinky after 'Show Champion'"; jubilantj, "BTS ARMY infiltrates and takes down EXO's biggest Twitter fan account?"; yekim124, "BTS fans criticized for unmannerly behavior at '2018 PyeongChang Olympic K-Pop Festival'"; SassyGrrrl, "Chinese Big Bang fans use questionable voting methods to push EXO out of first on Gaon".

interfering with company or fan-run communication channels, threatening fan experience, and participating in company or industry-enforced modes of competitive practices, the most common themes included debates between good and bad fan characteristics and the unnecessary nature of fandom wars.

Third, in 2017 the most common forms of competitive performative practices were attacking or defending the positive idol or fandom image and entertainment company or industry-lead modes of competition.²⁹ Within reflexive comments regarding fan acts meant to defend or attack an idol's or fandom's image, the most frequently mentioned comment themes were bad versus good fan beliefs and conduct, then ideal fandom behaviors, and lastly anti-fandom war sentiments. Second, across comments responding to company and industry-lead competitive avenues, the most prevalent themes were good versus fan behaviors and values (notably for one articles this was the case more than half of the time) and how fandom wars are unnecessary. Lastly, for reflexive comments surrounding practices that express lack of support and that interrupt official or fan-run communication platforms, the most frequent themes were good versus bad fan characteristics, the unnecessary creation of fandom wars, and problematic fandom conduct.

²⁹jennywill, "EXO-Ls ask fans to stop creating Blue House petitions"; jennywill, "MONSTA X, BTS, and EXO fans furious at Singaporean blogger after she makes derogatory statements about the groups"; KpopJoA, "Netizens express concerns for TWICE member Tzuyu's weight gain"; yckim124, "Fans trend hashtag demanding apology from reporter who accused BTS of cheating at 'BBMA'"; jennywill, "Turkish 'The Voice' contestant demands Starlights apologize instead"; mkim93, "Netizens praise NU'EST's fans for their awesome manners"; jennywill, "Antis collaborate together to vote EXO's fandom as the worst fandom?"; KpopJoA, "ARMY band together hoping BTS will be nominated for the '2017 Teen Choice Awards'"; yckim124, "Wanna One's debut album pre-sale orders are rapidly catching up to the records set by EXO and BTS"; elliefilet, "Mnet addresses voter fraud for '2017 MAMA'"; yckim124, "ARMYs apologize for chanting BTS during NCT 127's performance at 'KCON Mexico 2017'"; yckim124, "Big Hit Entertainment website gets hacked, BTS MV replaced by TWICE's 'Knock Knock'".

Finally, in 2018 the top-occurring competitive fan practices included the following: the attack or defense of an idol's or fandom's positive image, music company or industry-initiated avenues of competitiveness, and lastly threats to fan or idol experience.³⁰ None of the reflexive comment themes occurred more than half of the time but it came close to doing so for the theme of "good versus bad fan characteristics" specifically in regards to fan actions that threaten or defend idol or fandom image as well as industry or company-run forms of competitiveness. Across reflexive comment themes regarding attacking or defending idol or fandom image, the most prevalent theme was good versus bad fan characteristics, conduct and values followed by the questionable nature of fandom wars. Second, within reflexive themes surrounding industry or company modes of competitive practices, good versus bad fan conduct and beliefs occurred the most again, followed by the themes of fandom expectations and negative perceptions towards fan wars. Third, within fan practices that threatened fan event experience, the most frequent reflexive comment theme was bad overall fandom characteristics then the good versus bad fan debate.

Overall, the main ideological conflicts that appeared to spark these competitive practices included differing ideals when it comes to conceptions of the good, deserving, successful music

³⁰Mkim93, "Male fans burn Red Velvet Irene's merchandise upon finding out she read a feminist novel + netizens react"; jennywill, "EXO and CL to perform at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics closing ceremony"; yckim124, "Fans attack 'Great Temptation' cast for leaving out Red Velvet's Joy"; jennywill, "Producer Marz, who works with SM Entertainment artists, belittles BTS and their fans?"; mkim93, "Vietnamese artists Phuc Bo and Ha Le accused of plagiarizing WINNER Song Min Ho's 'Body'"; Patrick_Magee, "An Exclusive Interview With Controversial 'K-Poppers' EXP Edition"; jennywill, "Sana, Irene, and Arin are the top ranked girl group members in terms of brand value in January"; KayRosa, "Hana Financial Group releases an analysis for prospective K-Pop scenes, predicting the top two rookies of 2018"; jennywill, "BTS records the highest copies of an album sold in Gaon history"; jennywill, "BTS' ARMY wins 2018 iHeartRadio Music Awards' 'Best Fan Army' category"; beansss, "Fan expresses frustration after spending \$4,000 to attend Wanna One's fansign, still doesn't get a spot"; mkim93, "Netizens criticize ARMY for the behavior at a recent BTS fan meeting event".

company (but more specifically) idol as a legitimate artist and respected public figure. A second conflicting ideology was the varying beliefs/values regarding ideal and expected fan conduct (including ideal levels of loyalty and its demonstration) and subsequently. The last categorical conflict was the distinctive levels in which one's K-Pop fan identity is entrenched to one's personal identity. All of these clashes can differ in intensity and focus from fan-to-fan, fandom-to-fandom, or cross-culturally which demonstrates the ongoing negotiation of values fans must face in competitive situations.

Furthermore, the prevalence of reflexive comments suggest that international fans have indeed created their own bottom-up policing structure (at least as far as demonstrated in the online sphere) whereby "proper" fan conduct and values are enforced, monitored, and critiqued as seen fit. However, it is important to note that the core clashes that trigger competitive fan practices in the first place can also cause tensions in this reflexive policing practice. In particular, fans' reflexive lenses differ given their varying cultural and K-Pop fandom backgrounds which makes the act of policing fan behavior complex. The question then becomes what is done with this reflexivity? This is addressed in later sections.

Survey Data

First, it was imperative to glean how international K-Pop fans even begin to define competitive fan practices. To be sure, this definition will vary across different fans and fandoms given their different cultural and fandom backgrounds. The most prevalent definition of fan competitive practices (at 43.4% with n=158) was to show idol group support through avenues like music show votes, album purchases, social media support, music video streaming, and so on. The second most common definition (at 23.6% with n=86) was that competitiveness emphasized

the need to show idol group or fandom superiority through the constant aim of “one-upping” the opposition. The third-most frequent definition of competitive activities (at 23.4% with n=85) referred to these activities’ tendency to be “cringey” or to go overboard especially in regards to fan acts that were degrading or insulting towards fans or idols. This suggests and affirms that while fans largely acknowledge industry-lead avenues of competitiveness, fan competitiveness also has negative stigma attached to it especially in regards to “over-the-top” fan conduct.

Next, fans were asked for specific examples in which they have participated in competitive performativity.³¹ For inter-fandom competitiveness personally experienced, among respondents, most asserted that they haven’t participated in inter-fandom competitive acts (83.5%, n=304), some have competed over good versus bad fan ideals (6.6%, n=24), and others have protected industry-formed or self-conceived images of their idols (3.3%, n=12). In terms of fandom-fandom competitiveness, fans mostly recounted that they did not engage in such competitive acts (61.9%, n=229), that they took part in industry, company, or fandom-lead competitive acts (23%, n=85), and finally that they have protected or attacked conceptions of their idols or respective fandoms (9.2%, n=34). Pertaining to fandom-outer competitive acts, participants cited the following as their most frequent experiences: they have not partaken in fandom-outer activities (62.9%, n=229), they have defended against conceptions of their idols, fandom, or K-Pop as a genre (17%, n=62), and third, fans have participated in industry-lead avenues of competitiveness or actively promoted the music (15.9%, n=58).

The next section of the survey focused on fan reflexivity in regards to what values and beliefs sparked occurrences of fan competitive activities and when fan competitiveness escalated

³¹See appendix B for table data set 5.

into toxic fandom war.³² First, when asked about why competitive acts are triggered, respondents mostly referred to some fans' narrow-mindedness whereby they must defend why their idols are the best at any given moment (62.9%, n=229), followed by the desire to provide their idols' deserved recognition (15.4%, n=56), and fans' strong self-identification and "bond" with the idol and overall feeling of achievement (13.2%, n=48). Additionally, participants stated that competitiveness escalated into toxic fandom war when (1) comments from one fandom to another fandom become irrationally, non-constructive with the intent to tear the other fandom down (more so through words) (41.2%, n=150), (2) when malicious actions were taken in order to inflict extreme sabotage (such as through actionable conduct like spreading rumors or casting fake music poll votes) (30.2%, n=110), and lastly (3) fans actually stated that they saw no discernible differences between competitive fan practices and toxic fandom wars (9.6%, n=35).

Lastly, respondents were asked how if at all they addressed these toxic competitive fan practices. 58.2% (n=212) of participants asserted that they actively chose to ignore fandom war situations and any confrontations stemming from this, 25.5% (n=93) stated they have attempted to mediate or diffuse fandom war situations, and 13.2% (n=48) said that they have seen or personally policed fans in regards to ideals of the good versus bad fan (for example through moderating forum posts).

To recap these survey findings, across the board in terms of inter-fandom, fandom-fandom, and fandom-outer competitive acts, fans claimed that they did not engage in competitiveness. However, when they did, these competitive practices were sparked by the following ideological clashes which notably reaffirm the findings from the previous section: (1)

³²See appendix B for table data set 6.

varying ideals of the good, deserving, successful idol as a legitimate artist and respected public figure then (2) differing beliefs/values pertaining to “good” expected fan conduct (including ideal levels of loyalty and its demonstration) and lastly (3) differing levels of fan loyalty which was dependent on how intensely one identified as a fan of their idol(s) as well as on one’s ideals surrounding appropriate intensity levels of fan support. Participants’ responses also indicated that competitiveness escalated into toxic fandom conduct depending on whether or not there was a non-constructive, malicious intent behind fan conduct. What then do fans do with this reflexivity? Fans have demonstrated that they tap into their subversive potential in order to enforce their own “policing structure” whereby they choose to either distance themselves or mediate and enforce “good” fan ideals that discourage toxic fan practices.

Interview Data

Participants were initially asked about their experiences surrounding examples of competitive fan activities. They recounted the following:

Katrina: ..buying ads and things to support--or buying food trucks to support their like--look our fans are so great that we can support our idols by providing them with coffee or ...but without being like we’re better..

Angela: I know of fans who like literally buy like thirty albums to try to push them up on the charts even more and they just end up like leaving the albums on a table for people to take...

Denzel: I guess like promoting their comeback and album and videos and like sharing it through Twitter...also I’ve seen a lot of people say this member should be the leader because the original.. they don’t think she’s leader material...

Millie: I’ve seen fans be competitive by like promoting certain albums more than like other groups... posting on like social media saying like this group is the best like you guys should come support them..

Natalie: ..when a music video first comes out and I want them to be number one on the music charts.. I'll stream it for the first 24 hours... when I see others being competitive it's usually.. making sure the entire fandom's engaged.. Let's hit 20 million (views) by tomorrow..

In these recounted experiences with competitive acts, these industry and fan-lead avenues of competition clearly serve to make their idol groups (or favorite members) as successful as possible whether it be with music video views, role position, album sales, or music chart rankings. These competitive acts also simultaneously enhance the fandom's "good" image as these achievements (when met) reflect on the abilities and prowess of the fandom. Notably, it is this feeling of accountability and ability to have a say in the success of their idols that makes this "quantifiable" measure of success in the K-Pop industry so sustainable.

Next, the interviewees discussed their reflexive views and experiences surrounding how fandom competitiveness can morph into toxic fan conduct or fandom wars:

K: The wars break out when someone is actively saying..that a group or a singer is not good and they don't like them and then everyone else gets like really prickly about it. I guess the wars really start from... people not liking that other people don't like something that they like...

A: Fan competitiveness is when you're actively supporting your own group to try and make them more successful whereas fan wars really are when like someone says I really don't like this group and starts to bash on them even like things that aren't true and making up rumors sometimes.. The antis they'll actively go out and try to make the group that they don't like look bad instead of just making the groups they like look better..

D: Fanwars are insane... when they start like bashing another girl group and like comparing people even though they have a different concept...it becomes war when fans act a fool..

M: Competitiveness is just seeing the other side and respecting it knowing yours can do just as well... fanwar is where it gets toxic. They start arguing like trying to showing their group is better and not respecting the other group as much.

N:...it's like sports like you can be competitive but when you start going under the belt..that's when it's become a war..

Given the interviewees' reflexive commentary on the line between competitiveness and toxic fandom war, the key characteristic that determines whether an act is toxic is the intensity of loyalty from a fan which differs according to what amount and type of loyalty a fan deems appropriate. A fan with a fervent unwillingness to look past the "godliness" of his/her idol would indeed feel more likely personally slighted when someone happens to dislike the center of his/her universe. Of course, not all K-Pop fans would feel this strongly connected to their favorite idol group. When a fan so intensely defends an idol's image, it is in some cases not just simply because of genuine well-wishes for their career, but because those successes reflect on them as fans and as "successful" human beings.

Third, regarding examples of toxic competitiveness, participants disclosed the following examples:

K: Wanna One accidentally started filming...one of the boys was caught cursing... some anti (fan) put a fake translation of what they were saying..talking about masturbating to pretty saesang fans... trying to make them sound not nice..

A: ... they'll create an anti-account to try and get all the people ... to hate them even more or they'll do really obscene edits or they'll write like I'm gonna kill you, stuff like that.

D: ...they would pinpoint like how a member would be fat and they would counter.. argue that the other group can't sing live

M: ..with like EXO-L and ARMY I've seen them tweet against each other with hashtags saying like EXO-Ls have done this what have you guys done and it'll go back and forth.. mostly over who has better fans..music..looks better..petty things

N: ..it's just them kinda fighting over who has the better musicality..like who's more popular even..

Similar to the findings in the survey portion of this research, toxic activities seem to have the underlying characteristic of being confrontational in an especially malicious or damaging way. In the provided examples, the toxic competitive acts appeared to mainly involve and target the idol and fandom image (whether or not the accusations are based on facts). This demonstrates again how for some fans, personal identity can be strongly tied to their K-Pop fan identity which is why these competitive acts can become so brutal and personal. Furthermore, with these toxic acts it become less of a healthy competition, less about the music, and more about fan-conceived ideals surrounding the right way and level of intensity to show support.

And finally, when asked about how they have actively approached these toxic practices (specifically whether or not they have acted in response to toxic fan conduct) given their reflexive stance on problematic fan activities, the interviewees answered in the following manner:

K: I try not to get too involved to be honest ... I was sort of just like trying to step out of it gracefully ... it's also like trying to smooth over when a cat's all like puffed up... I just don't understand fandom wars like to me they're just pointless. I love so many groups that I just don't understand how you can be so passionate about one that you have to hate on others.

A: ..sometimes the attacks get really personal... I have actually stepped in and said you know she's not saying that that group is worse... there are different types of music.. who are you to say that they have bad taste?

D: ..I don't see the point of typing a three-page essay about how good your group is even though the conclusion is they're both (idol groups) equally good.. I just report it or sometimes I just ignore it I don't engage in it.. I don't wanna waste my time typing...

M: ..they have like a tunnel-vision type of mindset... I've never been involved, I stay out of it.. I've never paid attention to the competitive side.

N: ..it's a sense of pride, immaturity and feeling of control.. adoration gone overboard.. I try to stay out of it but ..personal attacks.. I'd be like if you don't have anything nice to say don't say anything at all...

The general consensus among all interviewees was that they saw no point in personally partaking in toxic fan activities and that this more extreme form of competitiveness seems to be especially present among fans with a strong “only one-group is best” mindset. This suggests and reaffirms that the stronger one self-identifies with an idol or fandom, the more likely they are to engage in the toxic spectrum of fan activities. These fans for the most part also actively tried to stay away from approaching any toxic competitive situations. However, if they did choose to engage, it was to mediate (either through discussion or avenues like website reports) and enforce the beliefs or values they believe the “good”, non-problematic fan should hold.

Subversive Potential

International K-Pop fans have demonstrated their reflexivity regarding ideal values and conduct of the “good” fan. The previous sections have also highlighted the ways in which fans have formed their own policing structure whereby fans either actively stay away from toxic competitive situations or address or mediate it depending on their respective fan values. Aside from this monitoring function, fans also have the power to tap into their subversive potential and conduct massive fan projects that enhance the fandom image (given the negative stigma toxic competitiveness brings) and also has the ability to bring genuine, positive change to the world outside of K-Pop. The following are examples of systematically organized K-Pop fan projects.³³

³³The following “Subversive Potential” section was directly taken from my APS 636 paper entitled “Spilling the Tea on K-Pop: International Fan Reflexivity on the Fandoms, the Industry, and the Idols.”

K-Pop fandoms arguably go above and beyond with congratulatory gifts for their idols. One such case happened April 2017 in honor of the group EXO's 5th debut anniversary.³⁴ One member, Chen's, fan group planted a third forest (part of the "Star Forest" project) in lieu of the anniversary. This was a collaborative effort by his Korean and Chinese fans. Fans proudly stated that Chen should always grow like the trees and that they were happy to contribute to adding more greenery to urban areas. Fans have banded together to reflexively address an issue that affects the global community, in turn effectively polishing the fandom and EXO group image. Similarly in 2011, international fans from ten different countries worked together to help aid in the Japan disaster relief effort on behalf of their idol group, KARA's, 4th year anniversary.³⁵ The fans' message of well wishes to KARA expressed the desire to support and protect KARA no matter what. Again, the mixture of feelings of loyalty and the ability to mobilize an international fandom helped fans successfully aid in a situation affecting the world outside the fandom and K-Pop industry.

It is customary for K-Pop fans to set up various donation drives in honor of an idol's concert. In 2013, for example, JYJ Junsu's international fans worked together to gather rice, coal briquettes, and eggs.³⁶ A hugely generous amount of these good were then given to starving children, those in need, the elderly, and the national food bank. Additionally, any goods donated

³⁴C. Hong, "EXO's Chen's Fans Plant Third Forest In His Name In Honor Of 5th Debut Anniversary," *Soompi*, April 9, 2017, <https://www.soompi.com/2017/04/09/exos-chens-fans-plant-third-forest-name-honor-5th-debut-anniversary/>.

³⁵"KARA's international fans unite to help Japan," *Allkpop*, March 29, 2011, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2011/03/karas-international-fans-unite-to-help-japan>.

³⁶"Junsu's international fans donate coal briquettes, eggs, and rice," *Allkpop*, January 1, 2013, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2013/01/junsus-international-fans-donate-coal-briquettes-eggs-and-rice>.

during his other events have been given away to help the disabled. Fans' biopower here has been used to gather donations to then make a significantly positive impact on the communities that need it most.

However, while fan biopower and subversive potential can be used to help the global community, it can also be used to effectively police the wider, global fan population into being "good, ideal" fans. One way fans engage in biopower to monitor other fans is by educating fellow fans about the differences between being a fan that respectfully appreciates the Korean culture and being a "Koreaboo" that practically throws away their own culture in order to "become" Korean. A YouTube video, entitled "K-POP Fan VS Koreaboo" shows a lighthearted view of how you can differentiate between a "normal" K-Pop fan and a koreaboo that very noticeably inserts random Korean words and phrases into english sentences.³⁷ This is an effective and accessible means for fans to spread awareness and create a fandom-wide mentality about what is considered offensive fan behavior. In the same fashion, a blog post was created in early 2017 to spread awareness about EXO Suho's infamous *saesang* (overly obsessive) fan, Rion.³⁸ The post lists out in details some of her disturbing deeds as essentially a relentless stalker. Writers of these types of informative, reflexive (on the boundaries fans can cross) posts have the subversive potential to not only create awareness but to help change fandom culture for the better.

³⁷"K-POP Fan VS Koreaboo," YouTube Video, 4:55, posted by "YVKU," October 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ2x2v4YBV0>.

³⁸ExactDani, "Suho's Sasaeng fan makes a disgusting poster about Suho?!", *Amino Apps*, March 4, 2017, https://k-pop.aminoapps.com/page/blog/degsuhos-sasaeng-fan-makes-a-disgusting-poster-about-suho-deg/LmI8_uYkk0kP5lq04JegV4jZ0d8K5g.

As illustrated by the various examples of fandom power being converted into subversive potential, I argue that on the flip side of toxic fan competitiveness, fans have effectively tapped into their loyalty and connection to create movements that address not only important fandom issues, but issues affecting the global community.

Conclusion

Overall, competitive performativity among international K-Pop fans includes industry and entertainment company-lead avenues of competition (music chart voting), inter-fandom competition (debating with fellow fandom members over the better group member), fandom-fandom competition (Twitter battles over the better group), and fandom-outer competition (pushing for K-Pop group victory in a global music award show). These practices reinforce and perform loyalty towards chosen idols and fandom, combat non-/fans conceptions of their fandom or idols and reflexively monitor fan conduct. This happens (mainly through self-policing) as fans negotiate their “good, authentic” fan identity, given the belief that the idol, fandom, and company they support reflects on their own values, morals, image, and lifestyle.

Furthermore, the categorical clashes that trigger these practices include differing ideals surrounding the “good, deserving, successful music company,” and the idol as a “legitimate artist” and respected public figure. Next, there are varying beliefs regarding ideal and expected fan conduct (including ideal levels of loyalty and its demonstration). Finally, we’ve considered the distinctive levels in which one’s K-Pop fan identity is entrenched to one’s personal identity. For individual fans, these clashes can differ in intensity and focus (given their fandom and cultural background) which implies that fans must consistently renegotiate their values when approaching competitive situations.

I showed how competitiveness escalated into toxic fandom conduct depending on whether or not there was a non-constructive, malicious intent behind fan actions aimed at fandoms other than your own. Entwined with this malicious intent was a significant level of fan loyalty which differs per individual. Specifically for a fan whose personal sense of accomplishment was strongly tied to the successes and image of their idols and fandom, they would be more susceptible to partaking in problematic fandom activities that reinforce the “only my idol can be the best (only *I* can be the best) mindset.

Despite this toxic side to fan conduct, K-pop fandom competitiveness also inspires fan-lead activism (includes policing and subversive potential projects). In particular, it inspires a form of fan cyber-vigilantism which aims to promote, protect and police the K-Pop fandom and personal conceptions of idols and respective entertainment companies-- but also the government-produced national brand.

Furthermore, the prevalence of reflexive comments suggest that many international fans have tapped into their subversive potential and formed their own bottom-up policing structure (at least as far as demonstrated in the online sphere) whereby “proper” fan conduct and values are promoted, monitored, and critiqued as seen fit. Notably, it appears most international fans choose to steer clear of interfering but when they do step in, it is to mediate and discourage toxic fan practices. However, it is important to note that the core clashes that trigger competitive fan practices in the first place can also cause tensions in this reflexive policing practice. In particular, fans’ reflexive lenses differ given their varying cultural and K-Pop fandom backgrounds. One direct method in which fans engage in “image-enhancing” on behalf of their fandoms is by banding together to conduct fan projects--such as conducting massive

tree-planting initiatives, pooling funds for disaster relief, and gathering food donations for the hungry--that not only benefit the world of K-Pop but the global community.

The dynamics of K-Pop fan competitiveness and subversive potential demonstrate South Korea's economic and cultural soft power which foster nation-brand and cross-national celebrity loyalty. This loyalty is especially strong in cases where one's K-Pop fan identity is more strongly embedded in one's personal identity. For those looking for a place, an identity, and a purpose, the K-Pop fandom can be the perfect haven. Fans are part of a movement larger than themselves and these hard-working idols never seem too distant as they have developed special ways to connect to their fans whether that be through fanservice³⁹ at concerts or V Live broadcasts.⁴⁰

Fans can look up to and live vicariously through their idols while feeling their idols' successes as their own. After all, the industry-lead avenues of competition foster this feeling of shared success. All in all, fandom competitiveness is the perfect avenue to demonstrate loyalty and identity. However, it is when fans develop a sort of tunnel vision for their idol and fandom that this competitive spirit can become toxic. Fortunately, the fans' subversive potential (as exercised through their self-policing structure and enthusiasm in fan support projects) reveals there is indeed still a bright side to the global K-Pop fandom that deserves its recognition.

³⁹K-Pop concerts are a whole other experience. The arenas are always filled with fans waving specially created lightsticks in unison, their voices singing (or screaming) a pre-planned fanchant. Additionally, idols ensure they make as much contact (whether it be physical or just sight-wise) with their fans, really engaging and ultimately strengthening that idol-fan connection.

⁴⁰ V live is a Korean livestreaming service where K-Pop idols (seasoned groups to rookie groups) will do live broadcasts and chat with their fans from around the world including countries such as China, Indonesia, USA, Thailand and more.

SBS PopAsia HQ, "Who were the most popular K-pop artists on VLive in 2017?" *SBS*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2018/01/24/who-were-most-popular-k-pop-artists-vlive-2017>.

Other developing (or already developed) countries can learn from South Korea's government supported form of celebrity culture that effectively and intensely influences fans identities, values, and actions globally. This feedback loop of fandom competitiveness and national brand protection is something that can prove to be a self-sustaining process in maintaining soft power; but one not without its own issues (such as with cross-cultural clashes).

This rigorous analysis of online discourse, survey, and interview data highlights the voices of individual international fans and their experiences with competitive and K-Pop fan practices. The most loyal K-Pop fans are truly an invaluable asset for these idols given the fans' intense willingness to support their music and defend their positive image. On the other hand, the most loyal K-Pop fans can also be a problem for an idol or fandom's public persona especially when this support warps into toxic competitiveness. Fortunately, for the idols, fans, and the global community, fans have banded together and proven they are capable of not only enacting change in the K-Pop realm but of also making a positive impact in the world.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Themes Among International K-Pop Fan Comments Surrounding Competitive Fan Practices (2015)

Attacking or defending positive idol/fandom image				
SNSD & G-Friend Similar Concepts	Sounds/looks similar 27 of 100 27%	Good v. bad fan 21 of 100 21%	Similarities are bad 18 of 100 18%	One group is better 11 of 100 11%
Tao Regrets Dissing Kris	Fans should forgive Tao 23 of 100 23%	Don't forgive Tao 18 of 100 18%	True nature of issue 16 of 100 16%	Good Tao opened up 9 of 100 9%
Hate Chanyeol Hashtag	Good v. bad fan 21 of 100 21%	Chanyeol in wrong 11 of 100 11%	Antis/trolls responsible 11 of 100 11%	Support Chanyeol 7 of 100 7%
Super Rookie Groups	Support 17/iKON 20 of 100 20%	Attacking group/co. 15 of 100 15%	Criteria for success 14 of 100 14%	Good v. bad fan 13 of 100 13%
K-Pop Fans vs. Directioners	Directioner fan conduct 36 of 100 36%	Good v. bad fan 32 of 100 32%	Misconstrued situation 4 of 100 4%	United K-Pop fans 4 of 100 4%
Russian ARMYs vs. Netizens	Good v. bad fan 24 of 100 24%	Fandom wars unnecessary 17 of 100 17%	Saejaegi accusations false 15 of 100 15%	Don't generalize K-Netz 5 of 100 5%

Threats to idol/fandom safety				
EXO-L Threatens Big Bang Concert	Good v. bad fan 47 of 100 47%	Bad EXO-L characteristics 12 of 100 12%	Forgive her 9 of 100 9%	Insincere apology 7 of 100 7%
EXO-L Burns Taeyang Pic	Good v. bad fan 51 of 100 51%	EXO-Ls in wrong 8 of 100 8%	Culprit is horrible 7 of 100 7%	EXO-L right to defend idols 3 of 100 3%
Music company/industry avenues of fan competitiveness				
EXO-L & VIP vs. Faulty MNET Votes	Good v. bad fan 37 of 100 37%	Bad EXO-L characteristics 15 of 100 15%	MNET at fault 6 of 100 6%	Support other group 4 of 100 4%
SJ Wins at TCAs	SJ recognition 47 of 100 47%	Fandom pride 17 of 100 17%	Taunting non-Kpoppers 7 of 100 7%	Good v. bad fan 1 of 100 1%
Threatening/defending fan identity				
GOD & BTOB Fans' Similar Fan Colors	Good v. bad fan 52 of 100 52%	Understandable fan culture 10 of 100 10%	Statute of Limit. 7 of 100 7%	Fan color alternatives 6 of 100 6%
Mass-demonstrate non-support				
Black Ocean for Seventeen	Not a black ocean 24 of 100 24%	Support 17 21 of 100 21%	Good v. bad fan 11 of 100 11%	17/other is better 5 of 100 5%

Source: Allkpop 2015.

Table 2. Themes Among International K-Pop Fan Comments Surrounding Competitive Fan Practices (2016)

Attacking or defending positive idol/fandom image				
EXO-Ls Lash Out at Non-Fans	Good v. bad fan	Bad EXO-L characteristics	EXO-L did not do this	Doesn't rep. all EXO-Ls

	29 of 100 29%	11 of 100 11%	10 of 100 10%	5 of 100 5%
BTS & EXO Relations	ARMY/EXO-L worst fans 14 of 100 14%	Good relations cover-up 13 of 100 13%	Fandom wars unnecessary 12 of 100 12%	Support the friendship 10 of 100 10%
ARMY Response to Antis' Twitter Attack	Anti-fan conduct 29 of 100 29%	Defend BTS & ARMYs 21 of 100 21%	Plagiarism accusations false 8 of 100 8%	Bad ARMY characteristics 6 of 100 6%
ARMY Comments on EXO's Lay	Good v. bad fan 17 of 100 17%	Taunting ARMYs/EXO-Ls 12 of 100 12%	ARMY did not do this 11 of 100 11%	Ignore trolls 7 of 100 7%
K-Pop Fans V. Smilers	Fandom wars unnecessary 20 of 100 20%	Good v. bad fan 16 of 100 16%	Bad fans in all fandoms 11 of 100 11%	Certain fandoms bad 8 of 100 8%
ARMYs V. B-Free	Insult B-Free 21 of 100 21%	Good v. bad fan 13 of 100 13%	BTS success 9 of 100 9%	Bad fans in all fandoms 7 of 100 7%
K-Pop Fans V. Former Pres. Park	Awe at lightstick usage 16 of 90 17.8%	Don't involve K-Pop 14 of 90 15.6%	United K-Pop fans 10 of 90 11.1%	Fandoms present 5 of 90 5.6%
Threatening/defending fan identity				
Dream Concert Seating Chart	Unnecessary separation 26 of 100 26%	Fandom divis. normal 18 of 100 18%	Group(s) missing 10 of 100 10%	Questioning sec. size 7 of 100 7%
EXO-Ls V. IOI Member	Good v. bad fan 29 of 100 29%	EXO-Ls phrase 26 of 100 26%	Ridiculous reaction 18 of 100 18%	Fandom wars unnecessary 4 of 100 4%

Debilitating fandom/company avenues of comm.				
“ARMYs” hack EXO-L Twitter	Fandom wars unnecessary 15 of 100 15%	Good v. bad fan 14 of 100 14%	Culprit Speculation 12 of 100 14%	Defend BTS 8 of 100 8%
Threats to fan experience				
ARMYs at Olympic K-Pop Festival	Good v. bad fan 30 of 100 30%	Doesn’t rep. all ARMYs 22 of 100 22%	ARMYs worst fandom 9 of 100 9%	Disassociate with fandom 9 of 100 9%
Music company/industry avenues of fan competitiveness				
Chinese VIPs Unfair Votes	Good v. bad fan 16 of 100 16%	Fandom wars unnecessary 16 of 100 16%	Doesn’t rep. all VIPs 8 of 100 8%	Support Big Bang 6 of 100 6%

Source: Allkpop 2016.

Table 3. Themes Among International K-Pop Fan Comments Surrounding Competitive Fan Practices (2017)

Attacking or defending positive idol/fandom image				
EXO-Ls Petition End MAMA Awards	Good v. bad fan 31 of 100 31%	Criteria for success 10 of 100 10%	Fandom wars unnecessary 8 of 100 8%	Insulting commenter 7 of 100 7%
K-Pop Fans V. Singaporean Blogger	Fandom effort not worth it 28 of 100 28%	Blogger in wrong 18 of 100 18%	Insulting Blogger 17 of 100 17%	Deserves K-Pop fan attack 8 of 100 8%
K-Pop Fans Defend Tzuyu’s Weight “Gain”	Healthy gain 67 of 100 67%	Harmful comments 18 of 100 18%	Netizens should focus elsewhere 3 of 100 3%	Most comments supportive 3 of 100 3%
ARMYs V.	ARMYs/K-Pop fans	Shady industry	Good BTS	All idols work hard

Reporter's Cheating Accusations	will fight defamation 35 of 100 35%	9 of 100 9%	characteristics 8 of 100 8%	7 of 100 7%
Starlights V. The Voice Contestant	Contestant in the wrong 19 of 100 19%	Starlight will defend VIXX 14 of 100 14%	Insulting contestant 11 of 100 11%	Call-to-action 11 of 100 11%
LOVEs Post-Event Behavior	Positive fandom recognition 31 of 90 34.4%	Good v. bad fan 16 of 90 17.8%	Other fandoms take note 15 of 90 16.7%	Insulting commenter 4 of 90 4.4%
EXO-L Voted Worst Fandom	Bad EXO-L characteristics 35 of 100 35%	Other fandom worse 9 of 100 9%	Media incites fanwars 7 of 100 7%	Bad fans in all fandoms 6 of 100 6%
Music company/industry avenues of fan competitiveness				
ARMYs Tweet for TCAs	Defending Idols/Fandom 13 of 100 13%	Don't need award 10 of 100 10%	Support BTS 9 of 100 9%	Insulting Idols/Fandom 9 of 100 9%
Impressive Wanna One Pre-orders	Sig. of pre-orders 19 of 100 19%	Clarify amount sold 8 of 100 8%	Insulting commenter 7 of 100 7%	Fandom wars unnecessary 5 of 100 5%
MNET Voter Fraud	Alter fan-based votes 56 of 100 56%	Fandom wars unnecessary 9 of 100 9%	Bad fans in all fandoms 7 of 100 7%	Need more than fan vote alteration 4 of 100 4%
Mass-demonstrate non-support				
ARMYs Chant During NCT Performance	Good v. bad fan 20 of 100 20%	Bad idol/fandom characteristics 12 of 100 12%	Misconstrued situation 12 of 100 12%	Fandom wars unnecessary 9 of 100 9%
Debilitating fandom/company avenues of comm.				

BTS Site Hacked	It was a fanwar troll	Fandom wars unnecessary	Don't take seriously	Good v. bad fan
	17 of 100 17%	12 of 100 12%	8 of 100 8%	7 of 100 7%

Source: Allkpop 2017.

Table 4. Themes Among International K-Pop Fan Comments Surrounding Competitive Fan Practices (2018)

Attacking or defending positive idol/fandom image				
Males Fans V. Red Velvet's Irene	Debate over nature of feminism	Diff. cultural worldviews	Good v. bad fan	Antia/trolls responsible
	26 of 100 26%	16 of 100 16%	8 of 100 8%	8 of 100 8%
EXO & CL Perform Olympics	Fandom wars unnecessary	EXO/CL deserving	Taunting fandoms	Respect predecessors
	19 of 100 19%	12 of 100 12%	7 of 100 7%	7 of 100 7%
ReVeluv's V. Drama Cast	Good v. bad fan/fan wars unnecessary	Defending Joy	Taunting Joy/fandom	Debate about idol actors
	44 of 100 44%	24 of 100 24%	6 of 100 6%	6 of 100 6%
ARMYs V. Producer	Defend BTS/fandom image	Good v. bad fan/fan wars unnecessary	Bad fans in all fandoms	Defend producer
	34 of 100 34%	24 of 100 24%	11 of 100 11%	7 of 100 7%
K-Pop Fans V. Producer/Rapper for Plagiarizing	Plagiarized/Insult	Don't generalize Vietnam	Bad Mino photo	Countries copy Korea
	38 of 100 38%	18 of 100 18%	15 of 100 15%	7 of 100 7%
K-Pop Fans V. EXP	Stay out of K-Pop	K-Pop borrows/global exchange	Hypocritical fans	Allowed to pursue
	25 of 100 25%	17 of 100 17%	15 of 100 15%	9 of 100 9%

Music company/industry avenues of fan competitiveness				
Girl Group Brand Value	Group/member/fandom better 25 of 100 25%	Support member/group 16 of 100 16%	Defending group/member 13 of 100 13%	Fandom wars unnecessary 12 of 100 12%
Top Rookie Boy Groups	Support group 23 of 80 28.8%	Missing a group 7 of 80 8.8%	Inaccurate report 7 of 80 8.8%	Can't replace other groups 6 of 80 7.5%
BTS GAON Album Sales	Proud of BTS/ARMYs 30 of 100 30%	Taunting anti-fans 12 of 100 12%	Support BTS 10 of 100 10%	Taunting other fandoms 6 of 100 6%
BTS Best Fan Army	Good v. bad fan 30 of 100 30%	Flexing fandom 13 of 100 13%	Recognition 13 of 100 13%	Good idol characteristics 6 of 100 6%
Wannables Fan Sign Lottery	Bad fan practice 49 of 100 49%	Status quo 26 of 100 26%	Defend fans' right to purchase 9 of 100 9%	Manipulates fans 6 of 100 6%
Threats to fan experience				
ARMY Conduct at Fanmeeting	Disassociate with fandom 30 of 100 30%	Other fandom worse 16 of 100 16%	Bad fans in all fandoms 10 of 100 10%	Antis responsible 9 of 100 9%

Source: Allkpop 2018.

Appendix B

Table 5. Competitive Practices Among Survey Respondents

Inter-fandom	Fandom-fandom	Fandom-outer
No participation 304 of 364 83.5%	No participation 229 of 370 61.9%	No participation 229 of 364 62.9%
Good vs. bad fan ideals 24 of 364 6.6%	Industry/Company avenues 85 of 370 23%	Protect pos. Idol or fandom image 62 of 364 17%
Protect pos. Idol image 12 of 364 3.3%	Protect/Attack Idol or fandom image 34 of 370 9.2%	Industry/Company avenues 58 of 364 15.9%
Unspecified participation 15 of 364 4.1%	Unspecified participation 22 of 370 5.9%	Unspecified participation 15 of 364 4.1%

Table 6. Reflexivity Among Fans Surrounding Toxic Competitiveness

Values & beliefs at core of toxic competitiveness	Point of toxic competitive escalation
Tunnel-vision idol support 229 of 364 62.9%	Non-constructive, irrational comments 150 of 364 41.2%
Idol recognition 56 of 364 15.4%	Malicious sabotage 110 of 364 30.2%
Self-identity & bond with idol 48 of 364 13.2%	No difference between competitiveness & toxic fan conduct 35 of 364 9.6%

Industry/cultural influence	Unsure
18 of 364 4.9%	51 of 364 14%