

Queer Eye for K-Pop Fandom: *Popular Culture, Cross-gender Performance, and Queer Desire in South Korean Cosplay of K-pop Stars*

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Abstract

This paper challenges previous K-pop studies on fandom in South Korea to broaden their focus beyond straight-identified fans to include queer fans. Although previous studies have focused on male K-pop stars as the object of heterosexual desire, the phenomenon of “fan cosplay,” or “fancos” for short, demonstrates that these male stars also serve as a means for cross-gender identification for female fans. This paper explores K-pop’s role as a space for its young female fans to explore gender and sexual identity, as well as its influence on local queer subculture in terms of gendered styling, gendered pairing, and queer terminology. Furthermore, an examination of the historical changes in the popularity of fancos reveals the transformation in the recognition of homosexuality and its backlash in Korea as well as the strategies of the queer subculture to focus on invisibility and in-group differentiation. Therefore, a queer perspective on K-pop studies includes domestic queer fans in the study of K-pop, complicates the heteronormative assumptions of fandom studies, and the relationship between commercial media and desire and sheds light on sexual politics in South Korea.

Keywords: Queer youth, K-pop, cosplay, fancos, cover dance, female masculinity, androgyny, cross-dressing, performance and performativity

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Introduction

One of the most popular K-pop cover dance groups on YouTube is the Pogtan Boys, a Japanese female group that exclusively performs cover dances of the Korean male idol group, BTS. The group has around 55,000 subscribers and an average of 100,000 views per video, with its most popular cover music video having over a million views as of December 2017.

What distinguishes Pogtan Boys from other cover dance groups, however, is that this group imitates BTS not only in its choreography but also in the members' appearance and costumes, including their hairstyles, clothing, and accessories. While performing like BTS, imitating and resembling the original singers in appearance, the young women wear short hair and men's clothing and dance to masculine choreography. Therefore, this cover dance by young women is a kind of performance of masculinity, cross-play, or drag king show. This type of gender-crossing performance of K-pop can have been found in other Asian countries as well, especially in Thailand (Käng 2014; Sinnott 2012) and the Philippines (Guevarra 2014).

These performances are comparable to "*fancos*" (*paenkoseu* in Korean), a portmanteau of "fan costume-play" or "*fan cosplay*," in South Korea (hereafter Korea).¹ This phenomenon began from the end of the 1990s, when some girls in Korea began imitating the fashion and hairstyles of boy-band singers, such as H.O.T. This led to the emergence of *fancos* communities, which are comprised of fan cosplayers (those who perform cosplay) and staff (who help cosplayers by creating costumes and dressing them up). As will be elaborated later, *fancos* was a popular subculture

1. During 2002 and 2003, I met with 29 queer-identified young women between the ages of 15 and 20 who were involved in *fancos*, and in 2012–2013, I met with another 88 queer-identified young women between the ages of 16 and 32, almost half of whom participated in *fancos* subculture. Many of these informants come from underprivileged groups in terms of class, family background, education, and employment, and all of the informants discussed in this paper are included in this category. These young queer women create their own subculture and subcommunities outside the mainstream queer scenes. Since my informants at the time used the term *fancos* to refer to their activities, I will use the term *fancos* in this paper.

among young women starting in the late 1990s, which peaked in the early 2000s but continued on until the early 2010s.

These cases of cross-dressing performance of K-pop across several regions and time periods raise a compelling question: how have such cases of cross-gender performance of K-pop influenced young women in exploring their gender and sexual identity? Furthermore, why have Korean *fancos* not garnered such popularity compared to those of Japan or Thailand, even with a much longer history and correspondingly high quality?² While K-pop and its fandom have expanded and grown in international popularity in recent years, Korean *fancos* has become less visible and marginalized over this period. This invisibility applies not only to Korean *fancos* activity, but also to academic research. As will be further discussed in the following section, K-pop studies on the relationship between K-pop consumption and queer subjects have been more often conducted outside Korea than inside. Many studies on the androgyny of Korean male stars, the prevalence of same-sex sexuality in K-pop fan fiction, and queer women modeling themselves after Korean male idol stars, have barely been discussed with regard to queer Korean fans of K-pop. While many foreign fans outside Korea have received K-pop as "queer text" and "queer resources," and researchers have taken note of such phenomena (Käng 2014; Guevarra 2014; Sinnott 2012), queer Korean fans have been invisible in such discussions. Considering that K-pop's popularity started in Korea, as did cross-gender cover dance, it is questionable why K-pop's effects on queer subjects in Korea have rarely been discussed there.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to highlight the existence of queer fans and the queer fandom of K-pop in South Korea and to discuss the effects of K-pop on queer, rather than straight-identified, audiences. By doing so, this paper will contribute to discussions on the relationship between commercial media and queer subjectivity/culture by showing how the consumption of K-pop provides the ground upon which young women

2. A few of my main informants were in their late twenties and early thirties in the early 2010s, and they had started their *fancos* activities in the early 2000s when they were teenagers.

can construct queer desire, identity, and community, and by detailing how the consumption of K-pop influences the creation of unique forms of queer subculture, identity terms, styles of masculinity, and gendered coupling. In the remainder of this paper, I will first introduce existing K-pop and *Hallyu* ('Korean Wave') studies, particularly those in relation to queerness and queering effects. Next, I will introduce *fancos* in South Korea, focusing on how K-pop provided models of masculinity as well as grounds for queer community and subculture for the young women participants. Lastly, I will discuss how *fancos* has declined in popularity, in relation to shifts in K-pop and fandom in Korea as well as in the subculture of young queer women.

K-pop and Queer Sexuality Studies

Some K-pop and Korean Wave studies have focused on those movements' elements of non-normative genders and sexualities and their relationship with queer-identified fans. A number of studies have discussed the queer elements in K-pop, noting the presence of gender ambiguity such as androgynous male stars, so-called *kkonminam* ("flower boys") or "soft masculinity" (Jung 2010), and tomboy-style female stars, such as Amber of the girl group f(x) (Laurie 2016; Laforgia and Howard 2017). While questioning whether the introduction of new models of masculinity and femininity has positive effects on queer politics, many scholars agree on both the potential of such ambiguity to overcome binary notions of gender and sexuality and the limitations of the Korean commercial music and entertainment industry. Although such textual analysis is meaningful in distinguishing queer elements from the supposed heteronormative K-pop cultural products, it is also important to investigate how K-pop audiences interpret their meaning. My research thus investigates how *fancos* participants, as fans of K-pop, interpret and recreate their own cultural products while consuming the gender ambiguity in K-pop.

In terms of studies of the audience, a second group of researchers have focused their research on the "queering effects" of K-pop (Oh 2015) to show how its fans interpret stars and their cultural products in other than

heteronormative ways. Oh (2015), for instance, discusses the ways in which Western female audiences read K-pop male idol stars' androgynous gender fluidity, what she calls "liminal masculinity" (71) or "male femininity" (70) and argues, it "open[s] room for queering female desire and spectatorship" (64). Though this analysis reveals the potential of K-pop to be subversive to gender dichotomy, so that the desire is analyzed as *queering*, this desire remains heterosexual. However, if we open the female spectatorship to include queer subjects, then we can expand the desire for the male stars, not only from the heterosexual *female gaze* perspective, but also from a cross-gendered *female identification* perspective. The case study of *fancos* will show the latter perspective—female audiences' non-heterosexual desire towards male stars.

Third, in discussions of the queering effects, *fanfic* (or "fan fiction") about K-pop stars has probably attracted the most scholarly attention (M. Kim 2002; Y. Kim 2004; S. Bak 2006). *Fanfic* is fiction written and shared among fans of pop cultural products such as TV shows, films, and idol group stars. In South Korea, as well as among international fans, writing fan fiction imagining romantic same-sex relationships between two members of an idol group has been popular since the 1990s. To date, Korean researchers have conducted textual interpretations of *fanfic* and have discussed whether the texts challenge or re-inforce dominant gender relations and homophobia (M. Kim 2002), commonly assuming that Korean society is strongly patriarchal and subject to strict gender role division. Such discussions, however, assume that all readers and writers are heterosexual women (C. Yi 2005; S. Bak 2006). This assumption cannot explain the desires of lesbians, gay men, or trans people who also enjoy same-sex sexuality in *fanfic*. By criticizing the scholars of *fanfic* who tend to "assume heteronormative female readers," Welker (2008, 46) seeks to identify "intersections between the sphere of 'boys' love' and the gender and sexual identities and practices of women who resist heteronormativity." Fan fiction, likewise, was also influential among young queer women, including cosplayers in South Korea, working as an alternative text of homosexuality.

Last, in line with the critique of research focused on straight audiences of K-pop and queerness, anthropologists have studied the effects of K-pop

localized in queer-identified individuals and culture, especially in Thailand (Käng 2014; Sinnott 2012). Not only have they studied queer-identified K-pop audiences but also the embodiment and performance of K-pop; therefore, the Thai cases are comparable with the research subjects in *fancos*. Sinnott and Käng have noted the influence of K-pop among Thai queer people in recent years, and how K-pop has transformed gender styling, gendered relationships, as well as the terms Thai queer people use to refer to themselves. Käng (2014), for instance, shows how K-pop provides a new model of femininity for “sissies,” young feminine gay men in Thailand, and a new model of masculinity for both young gay men and “tom gays” (masculine women who have relationships with women) (2017). Similar to Käng, Sinnott (2012) found increasing modeling after the masculinity of K-pop male stars among Thai queer women. Sinnott argues that Korean male stars’ “soft masculinity” made it possible for queer women to more flexibly identify with it, as opposed to previous generations’ “tom” identity, which was more strictly associated with typical masculinity. This change in modeling after K-pop male idol stars has also been found among *fancos* participants in this research, though the meaning and reception of this activity differs from the Thai case.

Yi (2005), who conducted her research on teenage queer women in the early 2000s in South Korea, is presumably the only researcher to also have identified the inter-relationship between popular culture and queer identity among young women in Korea. She argues that popular culture has opened spaces to “experiment” with sexualities that are not included in the “normal.” Though it may be necessary to be more careful than Yi in using the term “experiment,” since it can re-inforce the stereotype that teenager queer identification is thoughtless, temporary, and insincere, the research in this paper also finds that K-pop and fandom, especially *fancos*, became the space for exploring gender and sexual identity among its young female fans. Drawing on these scholarly contributions, I will discuss the unexpected influence of K-pop in transgressing normative boundaries of gender and sexuality through *fancos* by focusing on the perspective of fans, especially queer fans in Korea.

K-pop Male Stars as Identification Models, Rather than Objects of Desire

As mentioned above, *fancos* started from enthusiastic fandoms during the late 1990s with the emergence of idol group stars. Because it became popular for young women to show up dressed like those male stars at fan events, the event organizers—young women fans in their teens and early twenties—decided to hold separate *fancos* events. This was the beginning of *fancos*. By the early 2000s, concerts and festivals featuring *fancos* were a regular phenomenon in and around Seoul. In total, in 2003 there were about 1,500 *fancos* teams, which means the *fancos* subculture in South Korea numbered approximately 15,000–20,000 people, assuming each team had five to six members and a corresponding number of staff.

Furthermore, popular cosplayers attracted their own fans.³ As Robertson (1998, 185) points out with the case of the all-female revue Takarazuka in Japan, “the importance and centrality of sexual desire in young women’s lives and the erotic appeal of the all-female revue” was also found among the fans of cosplayers. Namu,⁴ for instance, fell for one cosplayer at first glance, and after that, she could not resist following that cosplayer. The fans’ enthusiasm was similar with that of fans of real pop singers; they made their own community of cosplayer fans, bought gifts for and wrote letters to them, and prepared materials and signs for cheering. Never missing a show of their favorite cosplayers, they sat together at the events and competed to shout more loudly than the fans of other cosplay teams.

Fancos, in this sense, as a performance of female masculinity and demonstration of sexual desire between women, falls within the history of female-only theaters in Korea—female *gukgeuk*. Female *gukgeuk* in Korea, partly influenced by Japanese all-female troupes, was a popular drama, a sort of *changgeuk* (traditional Korean opera) performed entirely by

3. I interviewed three such fans in 2002.

4. Namu, a 17-year-old fan of a *fancos* team, interview by author, October 2002. Unless otherwise noted, pseudonyms are used for the names of all interviewees to protect anonymity. All interviews were conducted in Korean and translated by the author.

women. It gained wide popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, though interest rapidly declined during the modernization process and the correspondent devaluation of both tradition and women since the 1960s (J. Kim 2010; H. Kim 2012; Baek 2007). As Robertson (1998) showed with the case of Japanese all-female Takarazuka troupes, the Korean female *gukgeuk* also functioned as “an inclusive social club that cultivated and bolstered intimate bonds between women” (J. Kim 2010, 125). Although *fancos* began from the fandom of male idol stars, were constructed entirely by women who perform both men’s and women’s roles, and attracted enthusiastic female fans, *fancos* increased intimacy between women, and it quite closely resembles the culture of female *gukgeuk*.

In terms of the performance of masculinity, *fancos* in South Korea highlighted the female performance of masculinity, since about 80 percent of *fancos* teams performed as boy groups. In imitating popular boy-band singers on stage, young women embodied male singers’ public images through makeup, hairstyles, and clothing. Cutting one’s hair short, in the so-called *kalmeori* (blade hair), was the first step to performing as a male singer. Cosplayers also borrowed male singers’ hip-hop style, including oversized t-shirts and pants, a popular style among boy groups during *fancos*’s heyday. However, the young women imitated not only the appearance, but also the male stars’ gestures, speaking styles, and appellations, such as *hyeong* (elder brother) or *nuna* (older sister), which in Korean are often assigned according to gender. They further took on fictive masculine names to match their appearance. Many used “Hyeok” and “Min,” which are frequently used in men’s names: for example, Jeong-hyeok and Si-hyeok, and Jong-min and Gyu-min.

This identification with male stars shows how such stars are not always the object of heterosexual desire but can also be the object of cross-gender identification for female fans. Feminist film theorist Jackie Stacey (1994, 28) encouraged theorists to move beyond psychoanalytic dichotomies of “male desire or female identification” in their consumption of female stars, claiming that “one element of cinematic pleasure for female spectators might be a kind of homoeroticism evoked within such fascinations.” That is, moving beyond the boundary of gender, the identification between stars and fans can happen

between the opposite sexes, while the erotic desire of spectatorship can be created between those of the same sex. Further, by showing that the drag king show is not always about heteronormative masculinity, Halberstam introduced “fag drags,” who instead imitate gay male masculinity; these are lesbians who have “positively fetishized gay male sex culture, and some women based their masculinity and their sex play on gay male models” (1998, 253). In *fancos* in South Korea, the male star cosplayers reveal this dimension of identification with the stars beyond binary gender by modeling their performance of masculinity after androgynous male masculinity in K-pop or gay male masculinity in K-pop fan fiction. Therefore, Korean cosplay challenges the idea that the reception of K-pop among young women is always based on heterosexual desire for male stars but rather suggests it could be about the desire for cross-gender identification.

Fancos as a Female-Only Queer World

In terms of gender and sexual identity, most participants in this cross-dressing fan cosplay did not specifically identify as transgender but identified as *iban* or queer in their sexual identity.⁵ This does not mean all *fancos* participants are queer identified; there are straight-identified participants.⁶ This is not to equate *fancos* with queer space *per se*; the K-pop industry and fandom *unexpectedly* led to the opening up of queer space in the early 2000s. *Fancos* are quite different from other types of cosplay, such as animation, cartoon, and game (ACG) cosplay. Many studies on

5. *Iban* refers to queer subjects. The term was coined by Korean queers as a positive self-referent in the 1990s and was popularly used, especially among young queer women, until the early-mid 2000s. My interviewees did not want to use the term lesbian or *rejeu* (a shortened form of lesbian), since they were used in cases of discrimination and in hateful ways. Therefore, in this paper, I will use the term *iban* in most cases, respecting the preference of my interviewees, but in other general engagements with theory and depending on the context of interviews, the terms lesbian, gay men, and queer may be used as well.

6. However, straight-identified participants make up only a small part of this population, so I did not interview straight-identified *fancos* participants in the early 2000s. In the early 2010s, I interviewed three straight-identified participants.

ACG cosplay have shown the potential for queer identity and politics in the cosplay zone, while acknowledging its limits (Gn 2011; Galbraith 2013; King 2013; Loke 2016). For instance, Jacobs (2013) portrays a small number of ACG cosplayers in Mainland China and Hong Kong engaging in cross-dressing and pursuing queer sexual identities. However, this cosplay zone is severely regulated through homophobic attitudes within the community. Within this environment, these “outcast” cosplayers, who take on an appearance of female masculinity and visibly display same-sex relations, do not necessarily identify as *tongzhi*, or queer. Jacobs thus concludes, “Many ACG fans favor a pursuit of pleasure and lightness through fantasy-characters. But at the same time, they envision a smooth return to normality when required and would dismiss those individuals who are unable to do so” (2013, 43).

By comparison, *fancos* are not just a space for the potential or possibility of challenging the binary gender dichotomy and embracing queer identity; in *fancos*, these challenges were happening already, as many participants already identified as *iban*. There might be several reasons for such differences between the two types of cosplay zones. First, while commercial companies, or sometimes governments, promote many ACG cosplay conventions, *fancos* events during the early 2000s were mostly organized by the young women participants themselves.⁷ Therefore, any regulation or censorship on the part of mainstream companies or governments was relatively lacking in the *fancos* arena.⁸ Second, while ACG cosplay includes both male and female participants, the *fancos* zone was a female-only space. In 2002–2003, only

7. Though there were two events organized by male adults, they were insignificant with regard to the overall number of events. In most cases, young women *fancos* participants rented places like youth centers in the Seoul area, which were relatively affordable or free, and paid the required costs with the participants’ entrance fees, usually about 3,000 won (about 2.7 dollars).

8. This is not to say they were totally free from regulation. There were regulations made in negotiations between youth centers and the organizers of the events, such as no smoking in the center, cleaning up after the event, using only designated areas for dressing up and so on. However, such regulations were not about restricting cross-gender performance or prohibiting sexual representations, as was the case in Mainland China as depicted in Jacobs’ (2013) study.

one male *fancos* team existed online, but they never participated in any *fancos* festivals that I am aware of. In this quite independent female-only theater, as in the case of female *gukgeuk*, perhaps it was natural that same-sex desire between women was constructed and displayed. Many *fancos* participants dated their teammates, and some relationships formed between members from different teams, not to mention enthusiastic love and desire for cosplayers that arose from female fans.

This was, therefore, female queer space in the early 2000s. In this space, dating other women was not only natural, but something to brag about. Thus, among young women, the *fancos* community was recognized as the most influential gateway to becoming *iban*. It was even unusual if a cosplayer was not *iban*. Gyu-min, at that time a 16-year-old *fancos* team staff member, said,

There is an assumption among cosplayers that they are all undoubtedly *iban*. Actually it’s true. . . . Everyone thinks she may be *iban*, she may like women, if someone does *fancos*. That’s the circumstance here.⁹

As this space was accepting of queer subjectivity, it became one of liberation for young queer-identified women in the context of the relative rarity of queer communities. Of course, female same-sex sexuality and cross-dressing is not new in Korea, as seen in the case of *gukgeuk* and as scholars have revealed through their research on queer Korea (Berry and Martin 2003; Cho and Kwon Kim 2010; Han 2004; Henry, forthcoming; H. Yi 1999). However, societal recognition of homosexuality or queer identity was not yet well formed in the early 2000s; thus, most of my interviewees at that time were not familiar with LGBT human rights movements or discourse. Rather, they received their information by interacting within fan communities like *fanfic* and *fancos*. Considering the first queer youth shelter, Ttingdong, was not constructed until late 2014, back in the early 2000s queer youth had little access to information, resources, or organizations on which they could depend for support and assistance.

9. Gyu-min, interview by author, Seoul, January 2003.

It is within this context that *fancos* became the alternative space for young queer-identified women to meet, freely share desire and identity, and find support. For instance, my informant Jeong-hyeok was 18 and one of the most popular *fan-cosplayers* at that time (2002–2003), but in real life, she had dropped out of high school and was living with her single mother and brother in an economically difficult situation. She had given up her dream of studying art and was working part-time in a coffee shop. She insisted on the liberating role of the *fancos* community. She said,

Here I can confidently say that I am dating a girl. “This is my girlfriend. We are dating.” We can post pictures of us kissing on our website without hesitation.¹⁰ For us, alienated from the outside world, *fancos* is the only place where we can openly speak out that we are *iban*.¹¹

Tae-min, a 26-year-old at the time of her interview in 2013, shared a similar experience of liberation in *fancos*. Now a queer activist, she used to be a fan of an idol group and participated in *fancos* as a teenager. Before *fancos*, she had always felt different from her classmates because she was more comfortable with short hair and men’s clothing, but she did not know how to identify herself. When she went to a *fancos* event for the first time, she told me it opened her eyes to a totally different world, and she finally felt relief. She said,

My school was in the countryside and there was no one with short hair like me. I didn’t hang out with school friends. After joining a fan club, I found there were some like me, so I became close with them. Then later, we went to *fancos*. There were so many of them who were like me. “Wow! this is a new world.” It was amazing. And then I came to realize that I was not wrong. There were many people like me. I am not wrong.¹²

10. This website is an exclusive, members-only site.

11. Jeong-hyeok, interview by author, Seoul, November 2002.

12. Tae-min, interview by author, Seoul, April 4, 2013.

Likewise, *fancos* served as a queer space for young women, who did not know how to understand or define their unusual gender expression and sexual attraction towards other women in a heteronormative society, to discover that they were “not wrong” or abnormal. Consequently, *fancos* provided opportunities for young women who were excluded from *normative* categories of gender and sexuality and concerned about it, to physically meet each other.¹³ In terms of Berlant and Warner, this was like a “queer world (or public)-making project,” since it “include[s] more people, more spaces, more modes of feeling that can be learned” (1998, 558). Because in *fancos* being *iban* was totally accepted and even admired according to some of my informants, potentially queer women who were confused about their feelings and identities became intrigued about it and joined. Consequently, by appropriating the elements of K-pop in their own subculture, the cosplayers trespassed the boundary of gender, explored their desire and sexuality, identified as *iban*, and created a queer world. This shows that K-pop provided the space for queer-identified women to embrace positive self-identity, although this was not an expected outcome.

However, similar queer subcultures influenced by K-pop have been received differently in different times and different locations, especially depending on the relevant social-cultural acceptance of queer subjects and gender norms. For instance, the national popularity of *sissies* and tom gays in Thailand shows a certain level of visibility and acceptance of non-normative gendered subjects. On the other hand, in Korean society, the *fancos* scene was mostly hidden from the general public, or depicted negatively when, on rare occasions, it was shown at all.¹⁴

13. It was an off-line activity, which also distinguishes *fancos* from other online-based queer communities.

14. For instance, an SBS news program, *Geugeot-i algosipda* (I Want to Know That) aired an episode in 2003 on the “Two Faces of Teenage Homosexuality,” which depicted the spread of homosexuality among young teenage women as the result of their thoughtless imitation of *fanfic* and *yaoi*. The program then showed images of fan cosplayers as evidence for their assertion.

K-pop, Fan Fiction, and Gendered Relationships between Women

Another effect of K-pop on queer women in South Korea is the changes it affected in gendered pairing and identity terminology among female-female relationships. Many feminist anthropologists have noted how the rigid gender binary in Asia has produced clear masculine/feminine gender distinctions in female relationships in several Asian societies. For instance, Blackwood (1998, 200) shows how *Tombois*, masculine females who have female same-sex relations, in West Sumatra see themselves as men, due to the rigid gender and sex distinction there. As she writes, “some masculine females produce a masculine gender because it is the most persuasive model available.” Then this “already established masculine identity” leads *tombois* to *naturally* have sexual desire for women. In Thailand, Sinnott also found the *tom* and *dee* relation between women, which is divided into masculine and feminine, was based on gender binary as “toms were/are largely understood to have an inborn essence of masculinity” (2004, 462). She finds the reason in Buddhist paradigms, which lead toms’ identification as men to seem “inevitable and unchangeable” (93), the result of karmic retribution. Their inborn masculinity naturalizes *toms* to be attracted to other women. Gender binary relationships between women were also found until the 1980s in South Korea. Many historical studies (Han 2011; Henry, forthcoming; I. Kim 2008) have found dichotomous roles in women’s relationships between “male-dressed husbands” (*bajissi*; literally, “Mrs. Pants” in colloquial parlance) and “female-dressed wives” (*chimassi*; literally, “Mrs. Skirt” in colloquial parlance) (Henry, forthcoming) in Korean society as well.

However, such a gendered relationship between women is not fixed and open to change in interrelation with larger society and culture. Among other factors that can influence such change, pop culture—in this case, K-pop—should not be disregarded. For instance, Sinnott shows how the strict tom/dee binary in Thailand has transformed in recent years due to the influence of K-pop. As modeling after K-pop male stars became popular among Thai queer women, instead of a strict *tom/dee* binary,

ambiguity has been introduced to gender styling and identity.¹⁵ Thereafter, same-gender pairing, such as between a tom gay king and a tom gay queen, both of whom style themselves based on K-pop male stars’ masculinity, came to be common. This is a quite surprising transformation since, as Sinnott found, in the 1990s and early 2000s, masculine-feminine pairing was considered the only possible way two women could be together. In same-gender relationships, tom and tom or dee and dee pairings were not even imaginable among Thai queer women at the time.

Similar changes occurred in South Korea as well with the emergence of *fancos* in the early 2000s. Different from the relationship between “husband” and “wife”—or *bajissi* and *chimassi*—based on strict masculine/feminine gendered pairing, same-gender pairing was quite common among cosplayers since most of them imitated male stars. Like the case of tom gay king and tom gay queen in Thailand, the relationship between two masculine females was a kind of norm in early 2000s South Korea. They used *fanfic* terms such as *gong* and *su* to identify their relationship roles. Although the origin of these terms is not clear, *gong* and *su* derive from the words *gonggyeok* and *subi*, meaning “offense” and “defense,” respectively. Like such roles as butch/femme or top/bottom in lesbian and gay male couples, the cosplayers used the terms *gong* and *su* to indicate active and receptive roles in their same-sex and same-gendered coupling.¹⁶ Likewise, K-pop and K-pop fan fiction culture has affected queer women’s gendered coupling and queer terminology, totally altering them from the previous generation.

No More Imitating Stars, Keeping Distance

Fancos continued to be popular into the late 2000s. However, its popularity had significantly waned in 2012. While *fancos* had boasted more than

15. Rather than the previous dualistic categorization between tom and dee among Thai women, identity categories have recently become more diversified. For more, see Sinnott (2012, 463).

16. Thus, *gong* can be compared with tom gay king and *su* can be compared with tom gay queen in Thailand.

15,000 participants during the early 2000s, in 2012 only about 300 remained. The events, which had previously been held every weekend, both Saturdays and Sundays year-round, sometimes with more than one event per day, now occurred only during summer and winter breaks. This change in *fancos* is the result of a combination of different factors, but this paper focuses on the transformation of the K-pop industry and fandom and its influence on the queer subculture, *fancos*.¹⁷

First, one of the factors contributing to the popularity of *fancos* in the early 2000s was that cosplayers served as demi idols, alternatives to the real idol stars. Ten years later, however, changes in the entertainment industry had reduced the necessity for alternatives. For example, while first-generation idol groups used mystery as marketing, avoiding appearances in public settings and hiding their private lives, the new generation of idol stars strategically promote images of accessibility, appearing on television programs more than ever; idol members are now everywhere in entertainment shows, dramas, and commercials, as well as music programs. Further, Mnet and other cable channels began creating reality programming focusing on idol groups, following these idol groups' everyday lives and creating a more familiar image for their fans (Kim and Kim 2013). In addition, through the advent of social media, fans came to be able to communicate directly with their stars, beyond one-way admiration, making fans feel closer to their idols. Further, the increased number of idol groups that came with the development of the K-pop industry, which means an increased number of alternative stars available for consumption,

17. A variety of factors influenced this transformation, such as elevated youth unemployment and the ir-regularization of the job market, especially for less-educated young women. This shift made it difficult for young women to secure reliable incomes and participate in subcultural activity at the same time. There were also more alternatives for queer communities outside *fancos*, online and on college campuses with the development of queer activism. Since the focus of this paper is K-pop's influence on queer communities, I will discuss only the external factors, which come from K-pop industry and fandom culture. The K-pop star system has been transformed since the mid 2000s, when the music industry went through structural transformation due to a "crisis of profitability." For more information, see Jung and Yi (2009).

contributed to a decreased need for *fancos* stars as alternatives.¹⁸ Together, as those idol groups became more friendly and available than ever to their fans, the position of *fancos* as demi idol decreased.

Second, the meaning of fandom has changed with the second generation of idol groups, and I think this had a direct effect on *fancos*. According to Jung and Yi (2009), for the first generation of fandom, stars were idols, as the word itself means. Fans focused exclusively on one idol group and passionately followed them. Jung and Yi further note how one's personal identity as a fan was significant in the everyday lives of fans. This sense of identity was shown in forms of embodiment. As Jung and Yi noted, "there was active identification with stars, such as having 'dyed blade-cut hair' and wearing the stars' costumes in their daily lives as an expression of self" (2009, 203). Though these authors do not mention it by name, this type of active fan activity and identification with stars was *fancos*.

The second generation of idol stars under the transformed K-pop system, however, created a new type of fandom. First, rather than fans or "followers," they call themselves "customers" who can choose and enjoy stars according to their needs and thus ask the stars to provide "satisfaction to their customers" (Jung and Yi 2009, 216). On the other hand, in this new fandom, fans have even been seen as *managers*, who *support* the self-development of the stars, so that they might successfully and continuously satisfy their fans.¹⁹ Further, this shift of signification in the positionality of fans in relation to stars means that fans are not supposed to follow or imitate the stars, but to provide them "material and practical support" (Jung and Yi 2009, 220).²⁰

Thus, identification with stars and the demonstration of fan identity

18. The number of idol groups that debuted in 1996, for instance, was 7, but in 2012, this number was 43 (only counting idol groups, not solo debuts).

19. The identity of fans as managers and the discourse of self-development reveal the growing embrace of the neoliberal ethics of self-help among fans, as in the cases of *manager mothers* (S. Park 2011; H. Bak 2010). For more on the emerging self-help discourse as neoliberal ethics in South Korea, see Song (2009, 2011).

20. For example, fans help stars win awards and achieve high record sales and viewer ratings, and so forth (Jung and Yi 2009, 221).

in everyday life, or creating a subculture of star impersonation such as *fancos*, came to be frowned upon. Keeping some distance from the stars was a requirement of this new fan culture. Further, *fan-fic* and depictions of coupling between idol group members began to be regulated by fans as well, since “it does not help the stars’ image making” (Jung and Yi 2009, 223). Therefore, since the mid-to-late 2000s, with the new generation of fandom predicated on the *management* of stars, cross-gender identification with stars and the same-sex sexuality of *fancos* was no longer welcome, causing discrimination and the exclusion of *fancos* from fan communities. Thus, as the development of K-pop reduced the necessity for alternative stars in *fancos*, K-pop Korean *managerial fandom* contributed to the decline in *fancos* popularity among young women.

Excluding Queers in Fandom and Excluding Otaku in Queerness

The belief by second-generation K-pop fans in Korea that *fan-fic* depicting same-sex coupling between idol group members and female imitation of male stars is a hindrance to the stars’ positive-image making displays an inherently negative sentiment towards LGBTQs. Not only because cosplayers impersonate the stars, but also because that imitation consists of cross-gender performance and that *fancos* has been considered *iban* culture, the new fan managers began excluding *fancos* from their fan activities. This reveals that mainstream fandom is in line with Korean society’s antiquated, anti-homosexuality sentiments, which have become more prevalent since the mid-to-late 2000s. Of course, I do not generalize all fandom as having become more homophobic, nor do I suggest that *fan-fic* writing has been controlled or stopped. I am referring here to a general shift in mainstream fan communities. This change in fandom actually reflects the transformed sexual politics of South Korea since the mid-to-late 2000s.

First, homosexuality became more visible and recognizable in South Korea through pop culture, not only K-pop but also K-drama like SBS’s *Insaeng-un areumdaweo* (Life Is Beautiful, 2010), the first mainstream television drama about a gay male couple in South Korea, and films like

Wang-ui namja (King and the Clown, 2005), which depict male same-sex sexuality. But homosexuality also became an increasingly hot issue in South Korea because it emerged as a political topic. For instance, since 2007 debates on the legislation of the Anti-discrimination Bill, the Ordinance of Students’ Human Rights, and the revision of the Military Punishment Law focused on whether or not to allow homosexuality.²¹ During the mid-to-late 2000s, I also observed discrimination against lesbian students in schools—the so-called *iban inspection*.²² When I returned in 2012, therefore, Korean society had moved further towards the recognition of homosexuality as identity and female masculinity as lesbianism and also experienced a resulting homophobic backlash.

In an environment of increasing backlash and lacking any legal and institutional protection, young queer women have shifted to choosing to remain invisible to straight society and one way of doing so is through the disapproval of female masculinity and a preference for *straight-looking* queer women. By this time, therefore, masculine queer women were experiencing a new form of discrimination and stereotypes, such as being called *tibu* (portmanteau of “*tina-neun* (obvious)” and butch), which denotes an easily recognizable butch woman with short hair and a masculine style, or *geolkeo* (portmanteau of “*georeodani-neun* (walking around)” and coming out), which may literally be translated as “walking around while coming out.” These trends resulted in a decrease in offline queer subcultures and communities including *fancos*. That is, within the transformation of sexual politics in Korea, and the young queer woman’s choice to stay invisible, *fancos* as a representative practice of female masculinity has become less visible as well.²³

21. Also, the Korean political arena has seen unprecedented discussions of homosexuality in recent years, such as during the National Assembly and the presidential elections in 2016 and 2017, and in 2017 public hearings.

22. For more on the “*iban* inspection,” see my chapter in *Queer Korea* (Henry, forthcoming), HyeonYi (2006), and the documentary films produced by the organization of feminist filmmakers, Wom, *Iban geomyeol* (Lesbian Censorship in School, 2005) and *Aut: Iban geomyeol dubeonjjae iyagi* (Out: Smashing Homophobia Project, 2007).

23. I discuss in more detail the increased recognition of homosexuality, the equation of female masculinity and lesbian identity, and homophobic backlash, especially at school, as well as the strategic choice of invisibility as a survival mechanism among young queer women, in

Even as *fancos* became marginalized by mainstream K-pop fans due to its association with queerness, young queer women began avoiding *fancos* for a different reason. In the early 2010s, I met young queer women who did not participate in *fancos*, though they enjoyed K-pop. These young queer women, however, also displayed negative reactions towards *fancos*, in sharp contrast to ten years previous. This does not mean that ten years previous all queer women had welcomed *fancos*. However, among *iban*-identified young women at least, though not among the adult LGBT communities, *fancos* was well known and even admired in the early 2000s. However, *fancos* had now come to be not only less popular among young queer women, but even disparaged with negative terms like *otaku*.²⁴ For instance, one 18-year-old, Yu-jin related how it was once suggested she join a *fancos* group, since she was a good dancer, but she refused immediately. In her words,

Eww... (shaking her head as if she would do with something disgusting). It (*fancos*) looks like *otaku*. It's weird. I hate it.²⁵

From this observation, considering the word choice of *otaku* and how she used the term in an abhorrent way, *fancos* was now considered a *deviant* activity, even among young queer women. It reveals how general disapproval of star-identifying fans in Korean society has come to be shared by young queer women's subculture as well. This further shows how young queer women have also come to distinguish a hierarchy amongst themselves based on existing society's standard of the norm. Just as Warner (1999) shows how mainstream gays and lesbians in the 1990s United States wanted to appear *normal* in straight society, thus desexualizing

my contributing chapter to *Queer Korea* (Henry, forthcoming). While publicly invisible, these young women now tend to gather online, rather than creating subcultures or stable physical subcommunities.

24. *Otaku* is a Japanese term, which literally means fans of subculture. In the early 2010s, *otaku* (alternatively, *odeokhu*, *odeok*, or *deokhu*), which has a very similar pronunciation in Korean, came to be more widely adopted in Korea as a disparaging reference to those who lack social skills and are less confident in their appearance. Though sometimes it is used self-referentially in a humorous way, in most cases *otaku* carries a negative meaning.

25. Yu-jin, interview by author, Seoul, December 2, 2012.

their movement to appear as *good gays* as opposed to *bad queers*, the avoidance of the *otaku* label shows a similar desire among young Korean queer women to appear as *normal* as possible, when they were already marginalized as *deviant* subjects. And just as Warner goes on to criticize the apolitical effects of such a strategy to appear normal, with its exclusion of *bad queers* in the process, the transformation of young queer women's subculture, where avoidance of the additional *abnormal* title *otaku* became common, resulted in a group of *bad queers*, fan cosplayers, and their further exclusion even within the queer community.

The decreased popularity of *fancos* in the early 2010s influenced a change in gendered pairing among young queer women. As mentioned, while the strictly gendered masculine and feminine female couples, that is *bajissi* and *chimassi* couples, were the norm until the 1980s in Korea with the emergence of *fancos* in the late 1990s, young queer women tended to form couples resembling gay male couples, that is both masculine, *gong* and *su*, as well as the typical butch-femme couples. Ye-rim and Seung-ho, a butch-but couple in *fancos*, told me about recent coupling trends among young queer women.

There were butch and femme, or b-to-b (butch and butch), but there were no femme-femme relationships at all. I have never seen that case in *fancos*.²⁶

Then in the early 2010s, with the decreased popularity of *fancos* and increased avoidance of masculinity among young women, straight-looking cisgender female coupledness, which is termed *ilban seuteu* ("straight style"),²⁷ came to emerge as ideal. Of course, this change does not mean the complete replacement of one with the other. Different forms of coupling coexist during all these periods. However, these trends were clearly discerned from the different time periods of my research. Therefore,

26. Seung-ho, interview by author, Seoul, March 28, 2013.

27. *Ilban seuteu* is a shortened form of "ilban style," with *ilban* meaning straight, the opposite of *iban*. Thus, *ilban seuteu* refers to cisgender lesbians who can pass as *ilban*, or heterosexual, in heteronormative society.

the change in K-pop and domestic K-pop fandom, combined with the increasing homophobia and choice of invisibility among young queer women, further contributed to changes in young queer women's subculture, namely, the emergence of the cisgender female couple as a newly popular way of coupling in the early 2010s.

Conclusion

Queer scholarship has discussed the relationship between commercial media and queer culture, whether media, which embraces queerness as another capitalist market, is affecting queer politics positively or negatively. In this case study of K-pop consumed and re-represented in *fancos*, I argue that the relationship does not remain abstract; in *fancos*, young women's sexuality is constructed and reconstructed through media consumption and performing like celebrities on the margins of Korean society. Actually, rather than K-pop itself, fandom, a non-heteronormative way of consuming K-pop, made it possible for young women to have those opportunities. Young women in *fancos*, thus, constitute their gender subjectivities and same-sex desires through engagements with multiple media forms—popular representations of pop stars, fan fiction that imagines those pop stars in same-sex relationships, and *fancos* itself—by practicing gender-crossing and acknowledging and acting on their attraction to other female participants and fans. Therefore, by exploring, consuming, and re-constituting the texts of popular culture, the young queer-identified women could start constructing their gender and sexual identity alternatively out of the heteronormative scripts that mainstream society provided.

Not only providing a ground to explore their sexuality and create a *queer world*, K-pop and fandom also transformed its subculture. The gendered pairing between women based on strict gendered roles in Korea changed to include female relationships between *gong* and *su*, both masculine in an androgynous way, when masculinity performance by women was made popular through *fancos*. Then, with the changes in both K-pop and fandom, as *fancos*'s masculinity performance became

discouraged, the *ilban seuteu* couple, both feminine female couples, emerged as ideal. Therefore, this paper shows how K-pop has had queering effects not only on straight-identified women, but also on queer-identified subjects, while revealing the more complicated dimensions in the relationship between K-pop, fandom, performativity, gender, sexuality, and the process of identification.

Further, study of *fancos* reveals the conditions of K-pop, its domestic fandom (and especially its domestic queer fandom), and the sexual politics of current Korean society. *Fancos*'s rising and then falling popularity and its participant numbers reflect K-pop's transformation as a commercial media industry. That is, studying *fancos* reveals that while the K-pop business has grown, fans have also internalized the *manager* identity, which has resulted in labeling non-normative (i.e., non-heteronormative) ways of identifying with stars as harmful to those stars. Further, it reveals social changes with regard to sexual politics, the increasing recognition of homosexuality as identity, female masculinity as lesbianism, and the resultant homophobic backlash in Korean society in general. In addition, the exclusion of *fancos* by the young queer women's subculture in recent years reveals an unanticipated form of discrimination and hierarchization, in their effort to avoid additional deviant identity labels like *otaku* as well as female masculinity, or *tibu*, which causes them to be visible as sexual subjects. Therefore, K-pop studies should acknowledge and carefully include the existence of queer subjects among K-pop audiences in order to grasp the queering effects more inclusively and to better understand changes in Korean sexual politics.

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