



“They were having so much fun, so genuinely . . .”: K-pop fan online affect and corroborated authenticity

new media & society
2021, Vol. 23(9) 2820–2838
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DOI: 10.1177/1461444820941194
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms



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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between K-pop boybands and their fandoms in the West as mediated by digital streaming performances. It investigates the socio-emotional organization of online interaction orders in K-pop fan communities, the emotional forms of expression, and the social assessment of their authenticity. The article asks two questions. First, how is the loyalty of fans elicited through the emotional experiences of fandom online? Second, how are these emotions validated by fans as “authentic”? The article argues that the experience of “liveness” is central to the process through which fans feel emotionally close to their K-pop idols and this facilitates investment by fans in emotional interactions “in real life” with other fans. Fans also rely on “corroborated authenticity.” This corroboration of internal interactions comes from two sources: (1) the presence of related/similar content on the other digital platforms and (2) the connection of the apparently “placeless” digital platforms to a particular ethnic place, Korea.

Keywords

Affect, authenticity, emotion, fans, fandom, interactive audience, K-pop, liveness, *V Live*

Introduction

Central to the self-image and reputation of K-pop fans across the world is their apparent “intense passion,” (Sanchez, 2019) often expressed by intensive emotional engagement through digital media. But where does this “intense passion” come from? This

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article examines the relationship between K-pop (Korean Popular Music) boybands and their fandoms in the United States and Europe as mediated by digital streaming performances. The article investigates the socio-emotional organization of online interaction orders in K-pop fan communities, including an analysis of the emotional forms of expression and the social assessment of their authenticity. This is explored through an analysis of the interaction of K-pop fans on and around digital platforms, through the case of the *V Live* platform—a South Korean app which allows Korea-based celebrities, including K-pop idols, to broadcast live videos online and to chat with their fans in real-time.

Korean popular music, known colloquially as K-pop, is a musical genre consisting of electronic, hip hop, pop, rock, and R&B music, which comes from South Korea and is sung primarily in Korean. K-pop has grown enormously in the United States and Europe since 2012 when Psy's "Gangnam Style" galloped across the globe via *YouTube*. Although live performances increased in 2019 as K-pop gained a larger presence on the global music scene, for the most part, American and European fans have not had frequent chances to see their K-pop "idols" (the common term used by fans and within the K-pop industry to describe K-pop artists/musicians/stars) live and in person. Instead, fans reported that their primary access to K-pop was through accessing videos live and on replay on digital apps like *V Live* every day.

The interaction order of *V Live* is distinguished, in part, by the "liveness" of its online interactions between idol broadcasters and fan viewers. *V Live* elevates fan comments to "real time" on-screen comments during the stream (much like Facebook Live). K-pop idols on *V Live* read and respond as viewers are watching, sometimes with subtitles in English. Viewers can also see other fan comments and build on the comments being streamed, (as well as see the level of engagement with a particular band through their Chemi level) as well as the K-pop idol speaking and talking to fans directly in real time. Through daily streaming of (sometimes) live content from Korea on a Korean developed app like *V Live*, they say that they "feel emotionally closer" to their K-pop boyband idols than they do to Western artists, who appear to be "closer" geographically and culturally. This emotional closeness motivates fans to engage more frequently with digital media and has been the basis of K-pop bands winning "social media" awards, setting new viewing records on YouTube and world records for the most Twitter engagements. This article investigates the key features of the emergent interaction order (Goffman, 1983) on these digital apps, including how the technology can shape fan actions and emotions and how fan agency and the social worlds of fandom, in turn, shape the emotionally close relationship between "fans" and "idols" through an assessment of the authenticity of the emotions on display.

The article asks two key research questions. First, how is the loyalty of fans elicited through the emotional experiences of fandom online? Second, how are these emotions validated by fans as "authentic"? The article argues that the experience of "liveness" is central to the process through which fans feel emotionally closer to their K-pop idols, and that the "online" interaction orders facilitate investment by fans in emotional interactions "in real life" with other fans as well. In addition to the internal validation of authenticity within the live interaction order, fans also rely on "corroborated authenticity." This corroboration of internal interactions in a particular platform comes from two sources:

(1) the presence of related and similar material on the other technological platforms and (2) the connection of the apparently “placeless” digital platforms to a particular ethnic place, Korea.

Mediated emotional interaction in a transnational social world

K-pop has been popularized in the West almost solely through the emergence of a transnational digital social world of emotionally invested fans. This is enabled through a variety of socio-technical forms including YouTube, Twitter, Amino, and TikTok as well as *V Live*. When Goffman (1983) wrote in 1982 of technology’s ability to explode interaction orders to include “vast distal audiences and a widened array of materials that can be platformed,” he, in fact, predicted what digital apps have become with their ability to involve, “a . . . large number of individuals in a single focus of visual and cognitive attention, something that is possible only if the watchers are content to enter merely vicariously into what is staged” (p. 7). This interaction order, organized through digital engagement, is changing not only the structure of the K-pop industry but also the fan relations which power its increasing popularity.

To answer these questions, the analysis focuses on two key aspects of fan social relations. First, the negotiation of these interactions occurs in a variety of socio-technical spaces, which afford different sets of possible relations within varying interaction orders. I analyze the technological affordances in just one of the main interaction orders—*V Live*—to see how it structures viewer access to emotional action. Second, the article examines how fans negotiate interpretations of emotional and cultural authenticity (Reade, 2021) in these digitally mediated interaction orders.

Turning first to the technological affordances of emotional action, Reade (2021), studying fitness vlog fans, argues that emotional action is often accomplished through “cultivating digital intimacy” (p. 2). For Reade’s fans, it was the everyday contact and the consistency provided over time for fans that was a central element in sustaining the ongoing interaction order among “digital intimates.” Often garnering upward of hundreds of thousands of viewers at a time, this has meant that K-pop idols must learn to create a sense of intimate connection while still addressing a mass crowd via *V Live* (for similar work in games, see Guarriella, 2019).

This is heightened further in the interaction order of *V Live* by the sense of “liveness” in the interaction on the platform (even if watched on delay). For Kim (2018), “The complexity of liveness . . . is at once a commercial commodity, a mode of ongoing lifestyle consumption, a teleological destination of technological advancement, a means of social connection and even the affective evidence of life itself” (p. 205). Or in more simple language, “liveness can make, fake and break sociality and community” (Kim, 2018: 205). This liveness, rather than being fleeting, can facilitate a consistent community (of fans and idols), which structures affect and emotional investment and always presents the possibility of seeing the “real idols” in a less scripted setting. This article examines the organization of emotional action in these “live” online interaction orders and examines the difference, degree, and form that this interaction makes to the emotional experience of fans.

This liveness becomes a key element in how fan emotions are organized and mobilized in the process of forging connections via live streaming. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) argues that within fan “affective sensibility,” cultural texts illustrate emotional investment (p. 57) by fans, which is an attempt to, “make it mean something that connects to their lives, experiences, needs and desires” (p. 52). Often stigmatized for their interest in K-pop, fans in this study often felt their particular interest in a K-pop band was more passionate than “other fans” of both Western artists and of other K-pop groups. This is similar to the fan affect seen in vlogs as the “connected economy” striving to achieve “emotional catharsis through the generation of communities in which they can be heard” (Reade, 2021: 15). Through interactive and not passive audiences (Jenkins, 2006) and consistent engagement with live K-pop, fans can potentially

. . . construct coherent identities for themselves. In the process, they enter a domain of cultural activity of their own making which is, potentially, a source of empowerment in struggles against oppressive ideologies and the unsatisfactory circumstance of everyday life. (Lewis, 1992: 12)

The affordance of emotional investment through the fan community is central to the success of both K-pop and *V Live*. Fans take their transcultural knowledge and their emotional investment (Han, 2017) and apply it to their local, everyday lives, sometimes challenging the status quo.

However, emotional action in communities is often subject to judgments about its authenticity, the second question addressed in this article. Reade’s (2021) analysis of the importance of consistent interaction and “storytelling the everyday” as ways of performing authenticity is central to digital fan worlds where authenticity often “has become understood not as an inherent quality, but rather part of a ‘performative ecology’” (Abidin, 2018: 91 as cited by Reade, 2021: 3). This performance of authenticity on *V Live* involves a performed, calibrated, and carefully gauged “spontaneous self” to accomplish authenticity. Interestingly, one of the tactics for reassuring fans that the performance by idols is “authentic” is when fans look to cross-corroborate behavior, personality traits, and actions by comparing *V Live* performances with other digital media and real-life performances through a form of cross-platform corroboration. This gives rise to what I call “corroborated authenticity” in a world of consistent and repeated emotional streaming. While *V Live* is typically one of our fans’ most important “home” platforms, it exists as part of an ecology of platforms within which fans act and interact.

Digitally mediated access to Korean culture may be a further source of corroboration. As Kyong Yoon (2017) reminds us, this transnational digital social world can also be a form of cultural hybridity, which functions to facilitate global imagination and represents Western fans’ negotiation with globalization.

There is a significant debate regarding how these transcultural hybridities affect transnational hierarchies (Han, 2017; Jung, 2010; Otmazgin and Lyan, 2019). However, in this article, I examine a different aspect of how these transnational hybridities interact with digital platforms to provide fans with a sense of direct access to the “home culture” of their idols. Studying the reception of K-pop by fans in Latin America, Benjamin Han (2017) argues that the fans form a transcultural fandom where K-pop is a “digitally mediated intermedial and intertextual fandom” which does not “travel across national and

geographical boundaries as transnational fandom, but more so as a distinctive form of transcultural fandom . . .” (pp. 2265–2266). David Oh (2017) argues the fandom has “hybrid potentiality” to de-center White racial and predominantly Western-focused popular culture, rooted in emotional action. He writes,

affective investments formed in transnational interest and fandom are counterhegemonic in expression and identification . . . Koreanness is valorized, constructions of Asia as a racial monolith are complicated, Asian/Korean masculinity is desired, nationalism is ambivalently displaced, the West is decentered, Korean stars are admired, and Western/White subjectivities are humbled. (Oh, 2017: 2282)

But if emotional action can reinforce transnational relations, it may also be the case that transnational relations can reinforce perceptions of emotional authenticity. If fans can use platforms like *V Live* to construct digital intimacy with stars “at home” and interpret performances within digital interaction orders to be culturally and emotionally authentic, this may serve as a form of interactional corroboration of the authenticity of the emotional relations with the idols.

Methods

The data for this article come from a larger study of Korean popular culture and its increasingly rapid spread to the United States and Europe (as well as other non-Asian countries), as evidenced by the setting of new world records in terms of ticket sales and numbers of views and retweets in the last 2 years (Jin, 2017). The focus of the larger project has been on European and American fans (not all of whom were English speaking) and their relation to a transnationalized Korean pop culture.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 fans, primarily in Europe and the United States, on all aspects of their fandom including consumption, digital technology, gender, race, sexuality, globalization, and culture. This was complemented with participant-observation in fan worlds including in person (at concerts, disco nights, film screenings, fan gatherings, conventions) and online (observing on social media sites—*V Live*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and *Amino*). A participant-observer approach was taken to the observations on social media. I observed the apps above every 2–3 days from July 2018–July 2019 following the accounts and discussion surrounding three K-pop boybands (Seventeen, Monsta X, and BTS). These bands were selected because they were training around the same time and Seventeen and Monsta X debuted in 2015 and BTS in 2013 and all three were with smaller production companies (at the time): Pledis, Starship, and BigHit, respectively.¹ Furthermore, each of their production companies took slightly different strategies with Western audiences via social media. I tracked conversations on and use of the above apps by themes such as: masculinity, popularity, comments about physical appearance, fan activity (coordinated social media and in real-life activities), fan institutions (help organizations), fan collective action (fundraising, birthday celebration campaigns, and sign/merchandise organization), fandom and being a fan, emotional connections to the band, cultural and linguistic knowledge about Korea/n, and so on. This article draws on the interviews and observational data from social media and in-person interactions.

“Liveness” and affect

The data from above is used now to turn to an examination of the article's first topic, the construction of fan engagement through the emotional organization of the interaction order. I examine, in turn, the technological affordances of *V Live*, the particular features of the “au naturel” style of interaction, and the emotional actions and investments this makes possible.

The interaction orders of V Live

V Live is a Korean video streaming application owned by parent company NAVER. Started in 2015, *V Live* has become one of the dominant platforms within the K-pop industry in terms of its success, reversing trends of social media apps flowing from the United States to Asia, they now flow from Korea to the United States and Europe (Jin, 2017). In January 2019, *V Live* reported having 29 million monthly active users, up 40% from 2018. The majority of their users are not Korean and are under the age of 25. A young and international clientele, viewers are mostly Asian, with a strong presence in Vietnam, Japan, China, Taiwan, and Indonesia, but also, more recently, in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the United States (Jun, 2019). According to *V Live*, they “emphasize real-time communication with stars, where you can chat with your star and send hearts with added special effects as the hearts add up” (<https://www.VLive.tv/about>).

V Live is available in Korean, English, Thai, Spanish, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Indonesian, Chinese (Simplified), Chinese (Traditional), and Japanese. Fans know that *V Live* is based in Korea and uses its tight corporate connections to coordinate with the K-pop production companies to ensure that there is a steady stream of content on the app for fans to view. The *V Live* app is dynamic in that the idols can see the comments of fans from around the world, live, on-screen, as they broadcast and can and often do respond, to some comments in real-time. In socio-technical terms, there are different interaction orders of K-pop *V Live* performances, which are accomplished and well-scripted, but in unique ways. Many performances on *V Live* are “TV Like Performances”—where the stars are seated on a stage and the interaction is much like you would see on terrestrial television. The K-pop idols interact on these shows (see Figure 1 as an example) as a studio production with professional quality apparent and there is very little interaction with fans live through the app, but a more passive audience response. This format and performance strategy replicates the production values of studio TV as the prevailing aesthetic. In contrast, the more “au naturel” approach frames the performance as closely shot near the face and similar to Skype/Facetime headshot use in personal relationships. This is framed as an intimate “chat” with an individual, usually in a hotel room, while on tour. Usually the star has removed some of their stage make-up, and there are few props. Often there are shots of them eating a meal² as if taking the meal with the audience, but still with professional lighting, a steady camera, and a fast Internet connection. This second type of performance is semi-professional with authenticity as the prevailing aesthetic and replicates production values that are closer to online content posted by vloggers or micro-celebrities (Khamis et al., 2016). Some micro-celebrities try to appear like celebrities on social media including consumption of

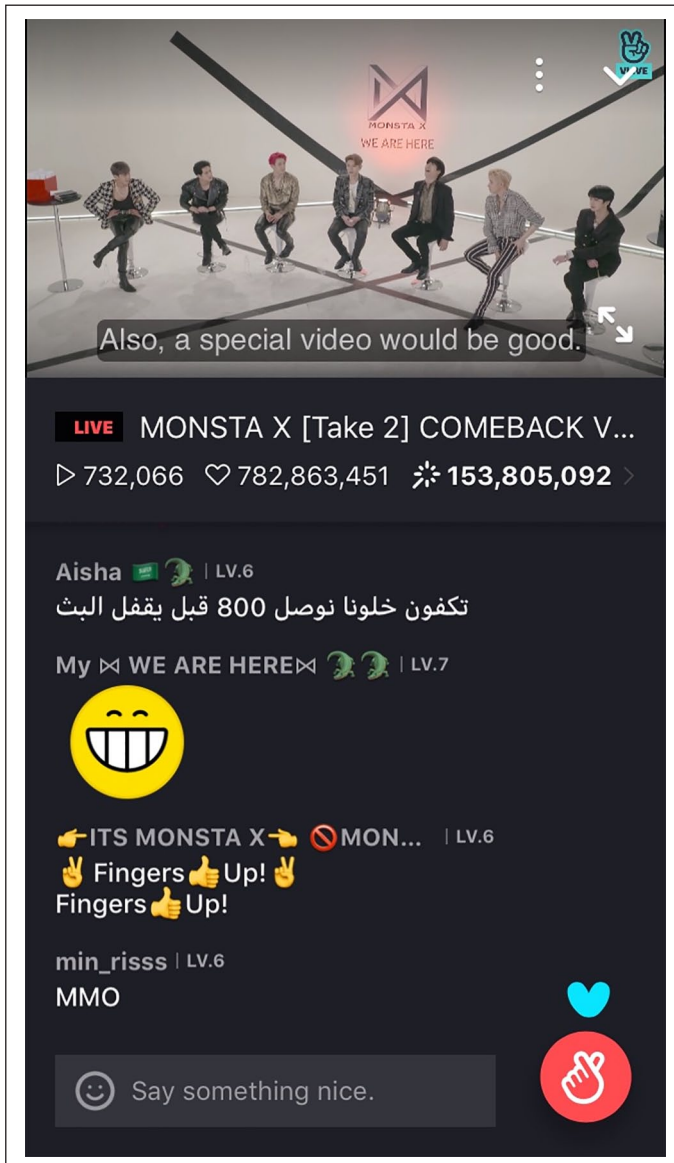


Figure 1. Monsta X comeback live launch on V Live.

Source: Screenshot taken on 18 February 2019.

luxury items, which Marwick (2015) finds, actually makes them into celebrities in their own right (p. 156). Interestingly K-pop idols are moving in the opposite direction from celebrity to micro-celebrity on social media and live streaming, blurring the lines of the more pronounced celebrity/micro-celebrity split in the US mediasphere. K-pop idols

are often polished, “professional” celebrities, but they also have the strong content of authentic streaming “micro-celebrities” as well.³

“Au naturel” interaction

While the respondents in the interviews enjoyed staged studio performances as mentioned, most said that the “au naturel” type performances had a more significant emotional impact on them. They said that they felt emotionally the “closest” to their K-pop stars when they watched the second type of performance. These “au naturel” interaction orders were characterized by appearing (often staged) in the format of an individual and personal chat, located in the intimacy of a room (usually a hotel room with a bed in the shot creating a “slumber party” type feel), which most closely approximates the types of intimate personal communication that our respondents had in their intimate relationships.

The screenshots (Figures 2 and 3) are just one of many examples from a *V Live* performance from Jimin, of BTS fame, on 19 January 2019 from a hotel room on tour in Asia. He casually lies on the bed in a generic hotel room (which could be anywhere in the world), propped up on the fluffy white pillows. He appears to have no or little make-up on his face, and he apologizes in the broadcast that he has removed his eye make-up already, but that he wanted to talk to the fans. The framing of the “chat” as personal, not showing the staff member helping him to broadcast, the intimacy of the bed and private space, and his lack of make-up are all carefully staged to make it seem like it is casual and stripped down to the natural. Fans told us that viewing it made them feel that he was talking just to them and not to an audience of hundreds of thousands (which it was).

Jimin acts as if he is unconscious of the camera (which is always at a relatively flattering angle just above his face—see Figure 3) and can be seen squinting at the camera/lens/phone to read the comments scrolling along the left-hand side of the screen, which flow in from all over the world. He also preens while looking at himself in the camera, fixing or playing with his hair, licking his lips, and turning his head to make sure he looks well. It is an unusual angle to see anyone at, as they examine and fix themselves in the mirror/camera—often an action that you would only see with people you share a bathroom or close living space. Yet, here is this megastar, loved by millions, and you can see him, preening himself and stripped down (little hair product/makeup) after a performance in the hotel de-briefing on the concert. Every bodily movement, smile, smirk, and embarrassment, is scrutinized and discussed on social media by fans, often leading to memes of favorite actions/words/encounters. Jimin mimics a “normal” conversation by reading and answering questions about what he ate for dinner, whether he is getting enough sleep/rest, and what his “condition” is, that is, how he is feeling. All of these questions are culturally quite common in Korea and would often be asked by family members of each other as a form of care. Often mothers would ask and make sure their children are getting enough to eat, enough rest, and that they are in good condition as a way of showing that they care about them.

However natural the performance may feel, it is clearly not all that natural as the script of the monologue, the questions Jimin chooses to answer, and their answers are all very safe. It is clear that K-pop idols have been extensively trained about what to talk about and what not to address. The presentation of the broadcast is also fairly professional, often



Figure 2. Screenshot of Jimin of BTS broadcasting on *V Live*, 19 January 2019.

with specific lighting, a non-shaking, high-quality camera often on a tripod or held by another staff member. It is clear that the angles of the face have been measured and positioned to give a more favorable angle of the star.

On this particular day, there is simultaneous translation of the broadcast, but many times there is not and the English speaking fans, in particular, send in comments



Figure 3. Screenshot of Jimin of BTS relaxing on a live broadcast on *V Live*, 19 January 2019.

expressing their frustration that they cannot understand everything that he is saying. Many of our interviewees talked about how they are learning the Korean language so that they do not have to wait for subtitles to translate and subtitle the *V Lives*, but that they will be able to understand them as they are live and happening in real-time. They also say that learning Korean makes them feel emotionally closer to their favorite K-pop stars, and BTS recently capitalized on this by offering “‘Learn Korean With BTS,’ a new video-focused content initiative to help fans pick up and learn the Korean language” (Benjamin, 2020: 1).

Interviewees also said that they find these intimate chats on *V Live* more realistic because there are, at times, what feel like long delays (often only 10 seconds or so) in the conversation while Jimin scrolls and reads or waits for more people to come into the *V Live* chat or when he leaves to go to the bathroom. Because of this dead air and also his unrehearsed sounding comments, interviewees considered this to be his real personality and to be more real and authentic than more formal staged talk show appearances or concerts. In this sense, the interaction mimicked in-person “live” interaction.

However, in contrast to in-person interaction, one of the things that the interviewees also liked best about *V Live* was the historicity of the interaction order. They felt that it was key to the experience, feeling safe in the knowledge that they had a recording that they could go back to over and over again to watch and rewatch. They also liked to be able to compare old *V Lives* with new ones, to see the “growth and development” of their stars. Fans also screenshotted certain parts of the *V Live* to make memes for Twitter or to use as inspiration for fan art that they created.⁴ Fans experienced emotional action in this interaction order as a two-way communication, with the possibility of Jimin reading their comment “live” as one of the emotion producing tactics. Many of the comments during the broadcast were pleas for Jimin to answer their question or to respond to their comment as well as expressions of fan emotion such as “Jimin, I love you!” The fans were less like a traditional audience of passive viewers and interacted with each other via comments much more than during “TV” like performances with fans declaring “Did you all see that? Isn’t he SO cute?” and so on. The sense of access to the authentic (behind the stage) emotions is generated by this sense of “liveness,” but it has the added bonus of being recorded and thus accessible in the future to emotionally relive or replay the experience and to fix the fleetingness of “real” interaction.

Consistency and emotionality in V Live

In the fan interviews in both the United States and the United Kingdom/Europe, one of the most interesting findings was that the fans felt that the *frequency* and the *quality* of idol interactions with fans was better and more authentic in K-pop than in Western popular music. Reade (2021) argues that fans of fitness vloggers like the “real talk” as it offers a sense of comfort to viewers. For K-pop fans, the discussion of self-love and mental health (although notably avoiding topics such as dating, money, or poor working conditions) was comforting in part because of the content but also because they were consistently available through saved and regular new content.

Lisa, a 20-year-old mixed (Black/White) female avid fan in Chicago, explained to me as we were standing in a line of over 1000 fans to go into the Monsta X concert;

You are closer to your idols in K-pop. You know much more about them than mainstream (American) musicians. I think because it (*K-pop*) is so different to Western music and they are so talented, they are writing, producing, dancing. And particularly (*MonstaX*) . . . they interact quite a lot with fans. They post pictures, they post videos, they have fan meetings, so I think the interaction with the fans is very different to the Western idols. It is daily basically they are posting pictures and videos, so yeah . . . (*italics added by author for clarity*).

Being able to watch these videos of their favorite K-pop stars eating, playing games, exercising (her favorite video was of Shownu water-boarding on the Han River in Seoul and then eating a hamburger), or just chatting almost every day makes fans feel emotionally closer to them. They feel the everyday contact makes it more difficult for the idols to “fake it” and the live presentation allows for lapses in the professionalism, which fans interpreted as glimpses into the “real” selves of the idols. Building up these runs of experiences viewed on digital media is how fans explained that they “know” the personalities of the idols and often discuss their “biases” (which band member they like the most) and how that choice was often based on the personality type of the idols themselves. They explained to me that they know the personalities of the young men in the band, and feel that certain personalities are similar to their own, that is why they chose particular members to be their “bias” (favorite). Lisa, above explains that she knows everything about Shownu (from *Monsta X*)—increasing her “fan cultural capital” (Fiske, 1992) and this is also expressed in her collection of Chemi beat levels on *V Live*, which she felt might make *Monsta X* more likely to respond to her comments live during their next broadcast. She also liked the fact that on *V Live* (as opposed to Facebook) she could keep clicking on the heart icon (similar to the thumbs-up likes in Facebook) but that she could click multiple times and even increase her impact in expressing her approval by using her virtual light stick. *V Live*, in this instance, afforded her greater opportunity for consistent emotional expression while she often went to YouTube to watch their music videos and Twitter for up to the minute concert ticket information.

Denora is in her 40s and has been a K-pop fan for a few years now, but has a particular interest in BTS. She is originally from the Caribbean, but has lived in Europe, speaks a few European languages, and works for an Internet-based company now in Dublin, Ireland. She is vivacious and explains that she likes the old school beat and hip-hop feel of K-pop and explains her bias to me. She says,

I like Suga of BTS. I am like him, he can be moody and doesn't like to move. I am like that too. He speaks his mind—in his rap, but also about his life. I think we would have a lot in common if we ever spoke together.

She has gleaned much of Suga's personality by watching him through digital videos. And it is no wonder since there is almost daily content of BTS (of which Suga is a member) on *V Live*. *V Live* became part of the daily cycle of digital apps that fans would check at the beginning of every day to see and check-in in with their idols. For many fans, like Lily below, it was the fact that the content felt authentic and was always positive, happy, and upbeat, which kept them coming back every day to check *V Live*.

Another *Monsta X* fan in Chicago, Lily, a White woman in her mid-20s from a small town in northern Wisconsin, explained to me why she drove 8 hours one way to see *Monsta X* in Chicago. She is heavily tattooed and pregnant and I worried about her getting dehydrated as we chat waiting in line (for almost 3 hours) for the doors to open at the sold-out show at the Rosemont Theatre near O'Hare airport in July of 2018. She tells me that the first thing she does each day when she wakes up is to check her K-pop apps, including *V Live*, to see what new videos have been put up while she was sleeping—given the time difference between the United States and Korea. She explained to me that

she has suffered from depression in the past, but that K-pop has given her a new lease on life as she pops out of bed now each day to see what new video gift K-pop has left for her. K-pop literally motivates her to get out of the bed each day and it is clear that the constant video streaming engagement is a way to fill what she described as an “emotional void” and “whiter than white” cultural scene in northern Wisconsin. Her affective sensibility (Grossberg, 1992) allows her to make K-pop meaningful in her own life, in terms of her hopes (for her baby) and her desires for her future in Wisconsin. It also gives her “a certain measure of enjoyment and pleasure” (Grossberg, 1992) and a cultural sense of diversity, which keeps her coming back for more (p. 55).

Jessica, a 21-year-old White Irish fan, from the midlands, explains why she feels closer to her K-pop idols:

I feel like they engage with their fans more than idols in the West and there are more variety shows that they can appear on to carry out different activities that are usually highly entertaining for the viewer. In the West, it seems there are mostly only talk shows with little or no activities involved . . . They (*K-pop idols*) always make an effort to connect with them (*their fans*) (Italics added by author for clarification).

The fans describe a strong emotional attachment to their idols, which they themselves connect both to the intimacy of the views of their idols, the interactivity of their “performances” on *V Live*, and the “liveness” of the interaction order.

Corroborating authenticity on *V Live*

However, fans are also aware that K-pop is a product that is produced and marketed and, therefore, the question arose as to the authenticity of these “high energy” emotional relations in a digital interaction order (Collins, R. in van der Zeeuw et al., 2018). Like Twitter micro-celebrities, or the Instafamous (Marwick, 2015), for K-pop idols, there are techniques for maintaining authenticity such as presenting a strategic self-commodification (Khamis et al., 2016) to a networked audience which is simultaneously both public and pseudo-private (or feels that way) (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 129). Idols and artists must be trained or develop the skill to be “on” at all times and ready to be filmed, and they must not show the less attractive sides of themselves (being tired, cranky, not wanting to be filmed) to the audience. And yet, they must also appear to be sincere or authentic in their streaming interactions with fans, even if it is only limited to text through comments on *V Live*. Production companies know this, and it is clear in bodily interactions with fans streamed live, that the idols have had significant training in how to handle fans. They do not, for the most part, move to touch fans first, but wait for fans to touch them first. In one instance, a K-pop idol group banned all “skinship” (or physical contact) at their fan meeting, including high fives, most likely to protect the idols from the ongoing sex tape scandal that was engulfing the K-pop world at the time in April 2019.

This authenticity management means that idols are constantly managing the spheres of the public/private, insider/outsider, celebrity/micro-celebrity, and frontstage/backstage performances to maintain audience interest and seem authentic simultaneously

(Goffman, 1983). However, there are clear scripts/rules about oversharing, being emotionally sad/down, or being cranky on screen. As Reade (2021) reminds us,

On social media, the performative nature of authenticity may be reflected in choices users make to appear “real” to others. These choices may include disclosing informational and intimate details about one’s life, such as their name, location, likes, dislikes and personal photographs. (p. 3)

This creates a tension between the desire to have as many fans as possible watching you at all times by creating a personal branding and the desire for pure self-expression and intimate connections with others (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 130). Fans too remain aware of the possibility that these “performances” are simply that, without authentic emotional underpinnings. However, in practice, the “internal” validation of these interactions is often strengthened by “external validation” of various kinds.

This skill of “mediated authenticity” is an emotional skill that idols, much like actors, must cultivate—and perhaps why there is a strong overlap in terms of K-pop idols who also star in television and films in Korea. As Tolson (2010, p. 277) describes, in digital apps, mediated authenticity means that fans make judgments about the quality of mediated performances and judge them to be sincere or genuine. All of our interviewees said that they were convinced they knew the K-pop artists well and their “true” personalities, because of watching hours of live streaming. They argue that the idols must be authentically like they are on the stream because they are on so long (often over an hour), that they would not be able to maintain a false personality for that long. So I asked, them, “Is what you see authentic? Real?”

Leah, 23 from Northern Ireland, said,

I feel like that is one of the main reasons why I would actually be a fan of BTS, because I feel like they are more authentic than the rest. There are other (*K-pop*) groups who are very robotic, would be the word. They are manufactured. They have to watch everything they say and do. Whereas BTS feel a bit different. Even when they win the likes of awards and stuff, or after the American Music Awards, they came on *V Live* immediately after winning it to say thank you to their fans. They feel more involved with their fan base I guess and less like they are being controlled. Even their manager, the owner of Big Hit, he seems even more down to earth than the rest of the owners of the bigger companies. He seems nice as well. (*Italics added by author for clarity*)

The question is: how did Leah know that BTS are more authentic than the rest? She recalls examples for me of how she has seen the same personality traits and emotional behaviors from BTS in person (at their concert), on taped/scripted performances in Korea, which she watched on digital media and on *V Live*. The consistency between staged and more “improvisational” moments on *V Live* are what Crystal Abidin (2018 cited in Reade, 2021: 4) calls, “‘calibrated amateurism’ which gives the impression of a less filtered and more spontaneous self” (cited in Reade 2021: 4), which is built upon “tacit labor” or unseen training in how to appear this way. How do fans read this stream of authentic performance claims?

I asked Denora, in her 40s, “is it real”? She replied,

Yes and no. I think because if you watch a different episode you do see a consistency. But, of course, they are still on camera so you have to act a little, so I think it is a mixture of both.

For Denora, there is a performance of authenticity and their “real self” coming out in the video streams. Unexpected things do happen, of course, while live streaming. It was how the idols handled those unexpected moments that Denora thinks is interesting and revealing of their real selves. In reality, there are ruptures that happen live such as when BTS were on the red carpet at the Billboard Awards (2019) posing for a photo when they were suddenly photobombed by a random young woman. When the young woman sashayed up to J Hope and stood close to him to be included in the photo, J Hope very clearly saw her but did not react. He did not smile or put his arm around her but instead just stood stock still until she moved away. His training and “always on” personality is usually quite smiley and upbeat, but in this instance, it was clear that he controlled himself not to touch first and not to interact or react to the interloper. K-pop idols are proficient at both professional and more calibrated authenticity and often are seen as both celebrities and micro-celebrities using both TV (staged) and online content modes of interaction simultaneously. However, it also means that there is little room/time for off-screen behavior:

When discussing the idols’ schedules, Alana, an 18-year-old college student in the midlands in Ireland, recalled,

Yeah, the idols’ personalities are so entertaining that it kind of entices you to want to watch them on these shows and they do so much, they are so busy all the time that it is kind of hard to keep up with them all.

Interviewer: There is one of them just playing monopoly for 20 minutes. So what is interesting about that?

Interviewee: I think their interactions with each other. I remember when I was quite new, I just stumbled on the video of them playing a Korean game, and I had absolutely no idea what was going on, but they were laughing with each other and joking with each other. I found myself smiling just because they were having so much fun, so genuinely, it was just so nice to see. Because our reality shows would be quite scripted, but they were just being themselves.

Interviewer: That is a question, do you think that is really being themselves?

Interviewee: I do. Like I would watch [unclear 00:06:04] their award ceremonies, their blogs on *V Live* and they have to be genuine because if someone was to keep up an act for five years, you know, that would take its toll. They are definitely genuine.

It is not only the consistency over time, but also from platform to platform or from one performance of authenticity (being genuine) to another that Alana feels creates this genuineness. Authenticity is pieced together by fans through the use of digital media to form

streams of authenticity created by seeing what they deem as authentic personality traits and performances. Cross-media promotion is not a new concept—many Instagrammers encourage fans to move to “Only Fans” in order to get paid for content (Ryan, 2019) and TikTokers with clout who encourage fans to move to their Instagram accounts for longer content. However, this is a somewhat different phenomenon, as fans themselves, in K-pop, move from app to app in order to paint a fuller picture of what they deem to be the authentic personalities, and performances of their K-pop idols. They seek to assess and construct a “corroborated authenticity” through these observations and interactions across multiple platforms and settings. K-pop production companies know this, and, at times, seem to script certain roles for each member of the K-pop groups assigning “makne” (youngest), leader, smartest, goofiest, quiet one, sensitive one, lazy one, roles to the members which they are expected to enact when together. But this means that stars have to develop this mediated emotional authenticity as a skill—and feel comfortable in everyday life being filmed all the time in everyday life. This itself is made possible by the total immersion of the idols in their K-pop careers.

Further validation as to the authenticity of the idols comes from the participation and legitimation by other fans of the K-pop idols and their understanding of Korean culture. Fans talked about how the *V Live* affordances of multiple hearting or Chemi beat levels allowed them to express emotion but also gave them access to the community of other fans that gathers on *V Live*. Many fans talked about *V Live* as a safe space that gave them a sense of “belonging” and “comfort.” Fans said things like:

I feel that I am not alone, that others can relate to me, that I feel positive energy and emotion when I am on from the other fans (in the chat on screen). People are liking the same things I like, they are respecting my knowledge of K-pop or my take on it (they liked my memes), and someone is paying attention to me.

The interactions of fans and idols on the platform also provide fans with relatively direct access to what they often experience as “Korean culture.” Fans refer to various aspects of this. For example, one of the elements that attract fans to K-pop is the presentation of different masculinities than Western stars (Oh, 2015). Idols are seen to be extremely caring, kind, and polite, but these are judgments that reinforce fans’ sense that they are gaining access to the “real” personalities and cultural characteristics of their idols. Some fans come to idolize Korean society, through this highly mediated experience of what society is like often giving rise to the “Koreaboo” stereotype, which is typically a K-pop fan who loves everything about Korean culture, language, and Korean people without really knowing much about Korea.⁵ Fans also buttress this validation of the authenticity of the idols’ personalities and emotions with their own attempts to learn more about Korea and to build a closer relationship to it. This included learning the Korean language and visiting Korea.

Conclusion

The relationship between K-pop boybands and their fandoms in the United States and Europe is mediated by live streaming performances. This “digital intimacy” and

emotional investment is one of the primary reasons why K-pop has become increasingly popular with American and UK/European fans. K-pop fans' high "emotional energy" (from an interview with R. Collins in van der et al. (2018)) and "emotional investment" (Fiske, 1992) were produced by the intense, almost daily, contact between these K-pop idols and their fan communities as well as by the "liveness" of the socio-technical affordances. The key connection for fans in this study was the authenticity or genuineness of the interactions they viewed online, which were not only corroborated by cross-platform viewing and in-person experiences (primarily at concerts) but also by the legitimization of the broader fan community and the perception of direct access to Korean culture through these digital platforms.

The claim to an authentic tie between artist and fans is presented as part of the appeal and one of the driving forces of the success behind K-pop. Emotional action and investment is central to the success of these platforms. The consistency of the presentation of K-pop idols across platforms, combined with the "live" experience of them on *V Live*, generated ever closer emotional ties between fans and idols and among fans themselves. This also generated a strong belief by fans in the authenticity of the emotional action of the idols. This, in turn, was reinforced by access to multiple platforms, participation in fan communities, and perceived direct access to Korean culture—together generating a form of "corroborated authenticity"

Future studies of K-pop might endeavor to analyze how liveness, authenticity, and fan emotional investment shape the way Western dwelling Koreans (such as Korean-Americans), Korean culture, and Korea itself are negotiated in terms of changing notions of gender, race, and culture in the West. It also might help us understand the growing popularity of K-pop in such a diverse fan base; with many gender-fluid, age, and ethnically/racially diverse fans drawn to K-pop. This study provides new, empirical data on how emotional investment of K-pop fans, who are far removed from Korea itself, are learning, supporting, and connecting to Korean culture. While digital apps like *V Live* may appear as "placeless" technological platforms, they are interpreted by fans as connected to a particular ethnic place—Korea. This provides a powerful form of validation of cultural authenticity in a transnational fan community outside of Korea, and future research could explore how these deeply held views are themselves transforming transnational cultural relations.

Acknowledgements

Thanks and gratitude to all the interviewees who took the time to speak with me—with a special shout-out to @BangtanIRE and the Chicago-based Monbebe. Thanks also to my fearless K-pop research assistant, Róisín Mahon. Many thanks to Aphra Kerr, Seán Ó Riain, and the two anonymous reviewers at *New Media and Society* for detailed and valuable comments, and to the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University, and the MU Eochair Grant for general research support. An earlier draft of this article was presented at the Korean Screen Cultures Conference in UCLAN, United Kingdom, in 2019. Many thanks to colleagues there for their comments and support, including Shin Dong Kim, Ji-yoon An, Jimmyn Parc, Ming Curran, and Jenna Gibson. Finally, with thanks to Julie Meyers and all at Hopsotch, my adulting children and of course, my partner in all things family, for childcare beyond compare.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The K-pop industry is dominated by three large production companies—SM, JYP, and YG.
2. “Mukbang” is another Korean streaming genre in itself. It combines the words muk-ja for “eating” and bang-song for “broadcast” to mean “eating broadcast.”
3. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer 2 of this article who clarified this point excellently.
4. Fan art is a huge field within the studies of K-pop and often has been integrated by the production companies and the stars themselves within marketing material, museum displays, and so on, but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss either fan art or fan fiction.
5. There is a long-running meme #Koreaboo on TikTok, which uses the sound of Western women badly mispronouncing “oppa”—the Korean term used to call an older brother or boyfriend, followed by the sound of the Korean person vomiting.

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