

**“How do I Make Oppa Sarang Me?”: Resemiotisation
and Reconstruction of Meaning in the Global
Anglophone K-pop Fandom**



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Abstract

The intelligibility of a mixed Korean-English phrase such as “how do I make oppa sarang me?” to a member of the global anglophone K-pop fandom is the result of dynamic and interactive processes of resemiotisation that are articulated on multiple levels. Traditional understandings of language mixing and language borrowing are no longer adequate to contextualise and understand the creative and ideological linguistic practices occurring in diverse online communities. Beyond word-for-word linguistic transfer of words frequently encountered in K-pop lyrics and Korean language media, the indexicality of certain Korean words is enhanced through the addition and subtraction of meanings as they are negotiated within a globalised fandom context.

This process of resemiotisation is a complex one, as transcultural K-pop fans operate within a cultural and linguistic convergence point in the K-pop fandom. This thesis uses three case studies of Korean cultural terms: *oppa* ‘older brother’, *unni* ‘older sister’, and *skinship*, to examine and evaluate how fans create meaning and ideology around the use of Korean words that carry cultural significance in Korean-speaking contexts. Much like the fans themselves, Korean cultural words now exist simultaneously in multiple semiotic contexts and using a corpus-based critical discourse analysis methodology, this thesis pays specific attention to how these words are interpreted and re-coded by English speaking fans. It will be argued that use of Korean cultural terms is read on a binary scale of ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’, mirroring intra-fandom discourse of the ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ fan. This thesis points to the idea that notions of

authenticity, indexicality, and context inform the construction of ideology and discourse around the use of Korean cultural terms.

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Note on Korean Romanisation

From a phonetical standpoint, Korean and English are very different languages, and owing to these differences, there have been numerous attempts to devise an effective romanisation system. According to Sohn (2006), there are more than 20 different romanisation systems. Of these, three are generally accepted as the dominant systems: McCune-Reischauer (MR), Revised Romanisation (RR), and Yale. Each of the systems have distinct applications, with Yale predominantly used in linguistic contexts, MR in academic contexts, and RR as the official standard romanisation system used in South Korea for street signs and government documents. The global anglophone fandom tend to use forms that are derivative of RR, for example, the RR *hubae* is romanised as *hoobae*, and *seonbae* as *sunbae*. As this thesis is discussing the linguistic practices of the global anglophone fandom, popular online romanisations will be used, to be referred to as Online Romanisation (OR). To view the RR variant for the words used in the thesis, please see the glossary section, where the RR is provided alongside the OR. When a word is first introduced, the RR will be placed alongside the OR in brackets.

Introduction

“All the Oppadeul and Unnies”

In 2016, girl group TWICE¹ exploded onto the domestic K-pop scene with “CHEER UP”, the lead single from their second extended play (EP) *Page Two*. The single won them the Song of the Year award in 2016’s edition of the MelOn Music Awards (Jeong, 2016), and “sold by the bucketload” as an English lyric from the song, “shy shy shy” (mispronounced as ‘sha sha sha’), became enshrined as a viral meme (Glasby, 2016). This section, however, is not about the success of “CHEER UP”, it’s about a bonus track on the physical EP, called “I’m Gonna Be a Star”. The single was never released, but it was performed on music shows such as *M Countdown*, *Music Core*, and *Music Bank*. The song is described on a Reddit thread as “objectively bad” (moonlightscone, 2021), and “unironically lit if you just love twice” (ftccandle, 2021). The consensus amongst TWICE fans is that “I’m Gonna Be a Star” is a ‘bad song’, yet it exists as a semiotically rich resource from which several multimodal interpretations have sprouted.

The semiotic interpretations that have shaped fan readings of “I’m Gonna Be a Star” are articulated on multiple levels. In a performance of “I’m Gonna Be a Star” on music show *M Countdown* on the 9th of June 2016, fans surmised that lead vocalist Nayeon was displeased with her part in the song, which consists of repetition of the lyrics “I’m gonna be a star” a total of 16 times throughout the song (Color Coded Lyrics, 2016). Comments on the video on YouTube articulate this using alternating caps, a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) feature to index mockery:

¹ This thesis makes frequent named mention of K-pop groups. For ease of reference, a glossary with further information about each group is presented at the end of the thesis.

“Nayeon on stage: “iM gOnNa bE A sTaR” Nayeon inside: “IM GONNA KILL JYP”” (kummybear, 2020). They also use sarcasm “guys i think she’s going to be a star” (h, 2022). Outside of the performance of Nayeon, read as one of displeasure, fans further joked that member Jeongyeon had avoided the performance due to not wanting to perform the song, rather than due to a leg injury she had sustained whilst shooting “Law of the Jungle” (Aspera, 2016). The basis of this joke was the fact that Jeongyeon’s line in the song was the widely mocked: “all the 오빠들 and 언니’s” ‘all the *oppadeul* and *unnis*’ (Color Coded Lyrics, 2016). In K-pop fan communities and in the YouTube comments, these readings of “I’m Gonna Be a Star” are shaped and negotiated through the shared interactional practices of the fandom.

Whether intentional or not, the lyric encapsulates some core elements of the communicative practices of the global anglophone K-pop fandom. First, the lyric employs common elements of Korean-English language mixing: using Korean words in a sentence that otherwise follows the grammatical conventions of the English language. Where *oppadeul* is made plural using the Korean pluralisation suffix *-deul*, *unni* is made plural according to English conventions, using ‘s’. Both *oppa* ‘older brother’ and *unni* ‘older sister’ are hallmarks of global anglophone K-pop fandom lexicon and are likely to be familiar to listeners of the song. Besides finding relatable humour in “all the *oppadeul* and *unnis*”, the delivery of the line by Jeongyeon and the elongation of *unnis* was further picked up on by fans. Even though “I’m Gonna Be a Star” was only released as an album track on the physical CD of *Page Two*, fans were able to construct rich semiotic interpretations and readings articulated on multiple levels: Nayeon’s perceived ‘hatred’ of the song (facial expression, gesture), the convenience of Jeongyeon’s injury (absence from performance), the hilarity of

“all the *oppadeul* and *unnis*” (vocal delivery, lexical markers). Most of these interpretations are expressed through humour, sarcasm, and mockery. This example thus serves as an introductory illustration of the semiotic potential of K-pop for global anglophone fans.

This layered semiotic interpretation of “I’m Gonna Be a Star” is invoked and unpacked to illustrate how K-pop is understood and negotiated on multiple levels. The phrase ‘anglophone’ is used here not to restrict the concept of ‘English-speaking’ to fans who are from the United States or United Kingdom, rather, it is used to acknowledge the diversity of the term anglophone when applied to global contexts. The lyrics “all the *oppadeul* and *unnis*” can be read as a humorous stylistic touch, but in other readings, this style is underpinned by ideologies around the use of Korean words by global anglophone fans, often articulated on the binary dichotomy of ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’. As will be explored in later chapters, Korean address terms have an additional function as lexical markers of a certain type of ‘obsessive’ and ‘culturally ignorant’ K-pop fan, leveraging “all the *oppadeul* and *unnis*”, with its English-language conventions, as a tool for evoking this image.

This balance between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ Korean language usage patterns forms the basis of the interdisciplinary argument of this thesis, which seeks to investigate the extent by which usage patterns in Korean-speaking contexts inform and influence meaning in fandom contexts, as well as how perceptions of Korean culture and society by non-Korean fans afford Korean cultural words new indexicalities. This is achieved through a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of linguistic data taken from K-pop community sites related to the following Korean cultural words: *oppa* ‘older brother’, *unni* ‘older sister’, and *skinship*, exploring in-

depth how these words are resemioticised and reconstructed through the lens of global anglophone fans. More specific research questions are as follows: what can the use of Korean cultural words tell us about how cultural knowledge is attained through popular culture and the internet? How does the ‘community’ nature of fandom culture and wider anglophone popular culture enhance the creation of ideological interpretations? And finally, does the reference of Korean-speaking usage as the ‘authentic’ indexical form dictate anglophone usage patterns? Through an investigation of the words mentioned above, it will be argued that where this usage of Korean cultural words is largely a playful stylistic choice, beneath it lies ideological underpinnings and a complex network of discourse.

Subculture to Mainstream: Contextualising K-pop in Global Popular Culture

One decade ago in 2012, Korean girl group Girls’ Generation made their US debut on the *Late Show With David Letterman* with the English-language version of their single “The Boys”, becoming the first K-pop group to perform on US network TV in the process (Benjamin, 2012). Where some hailed the moment as a historic victory for the oft-marginalised K-pop, that same year, an article published in *The New Yorker* with the unambiguous title “Factory Girls”, described Girls’ Generation member Sooyoung as “distant and frosty, like a figurine in a glass case” (Seabrook, 2012), encapsulating the ‘manufactured’ rhetoric that has dogged K-pop’s global image. One writer on K-pop blog *Seoulbeats* very honestly noted that although Girls’ Generation were their favourite group, “without the context of K-pop, there is really no way anyone should, or reasonably could, call this an awesome performance” (Dana, 2012). Comments on the same article echoed concerns of K-pop being broadcast to a wider audience in the United States: “the major lip-synching seriously

didn't help" (thekors, 2012), "out of the kpop context, it was lack luster" (ilovessantokki, 2012), and "the performance was good... now take your asses back to Asia and stay there" (Chyrita Bonita, 2012).

Despite this very mixed reception to Girls' Generation's debut into the US, the girl group Wonder Girls remain the most cited example of the perils and pitfalls of K-pop's earlier attempts to branch out into the lucrative US music market. Just four years earlier in 2008, JYP Entertainment girl group Wonder Girls had made history when the English-language version of their single "Nobody" became the first K-pop song to appear on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart (Herman, 2018). Their 2007 single "Tell Me" was a viral global hit on the newly founded YouTube, and by the time "Nobody" was released, the group had attained immense popularity both domestically and internationally. With "Nobody" breaking the Hot 100, Park Jin-young, the man behind JYP Entertainment, sniffed an opportunity to be seized in globalising K-pop. Wonder Girls spent several years in the United States, during which they toured with the Jonas Brothers, and collaborated on the single "Like Money" with singer Akon (Lee, 2011). The group even released the self-titled English-language movie *Wonder Girls*, where they enter themselves into a talent contest in New York under the name "The Asian Invasion" (Harris, 2012). Their efforts did not come to fruition, however, and upon return to South Korea, the girl group market had boomed, and they found themselves replaced by groups such as Girls' Generation and 2NE1.

Girls' Generation and Wonder Girls are cited here to exemplify the drastic changes in the global popularity of K-pop in the past decade. Throughout the past decade in the 2010s, scepticism about the longevity of *hallyu* 'The Korean Wave' had

been brewing. This scepticism was brought to a head when China, one of the major consumers of Korean popular culture content, soured diplomatic relations with South Korea due to a highly controversial joint decision with the United States to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Defense (THAAD) battery in the country (Doo, 2017). In response to this act, viewed as a provocation in Beijing, the government enacted an unofficial ban on Korean popular culture in 2016, leading to a drastic reduction in tourist numbers, whilst also reportedly refusing entry to South Korean celebrities. Against this pessimistic backdrop for the global potential for K-pop rose BLACKPINK and BTS, two groups who have now become representatives of the global popularity of K-pop.

Now, in 2022, you would be hard pressed to not have heard of K-pop in some form or another as K-pop has firmly established itself on the global stage. On Twitter, BTS have a total of 46.5 million followers (방탄소년단, n.d.) and on Instagram, the four members of BLACKPINK have a combined total of 237 million followers (Kim, n.d.; Kim, n.d.; Park, n.d.; Manobal, n.d.). By contrast, the most popular member of Girls' Generation, soloist Taeyeon, only has 18 million followers on Instagram (Kim, n.d.), a seemingly humble number when compared to BLACKPINK. These numbers speak for the changing face of the K-pop industry, as it now goes to greater lengths to appeal to and please global fans. Historically prevented from engaging in in-person K-pop events due to geographical distance, fandom spaces have flourished online, and fans outside of Korea are now consuming, discussing, and engaging with K-pop media on an unprecedented level. Formerly a subcultural niche, K-pop idols are now global superstars with global fanbases to match.

Although it may have been their first performance on US television, Girls' Generation were by no means strangers to the international public when they debuted "The Boys" on *Letterman* in 2012. Prior to the arrival of K-pop in the mainstream media in the West from around 2016 onwards, K-pop had already amassed firm and steady followings in East and Southeast Asia (Shim, 2016; Jeong, Lee, & Lee, 2016) Latin America (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019; Madrid-Morales & Lovric, 2015), and the Middle East (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013). K-pop's earlier, more enthusiastic adoption in regions outside of the United States and Europe can be read as a greater reluctance to accept a form of popular culture that disrupts the hegemonic dominance of Western, English-language popular culture (Lee, Lee, & Park, 2020). One definition for 'kpop' on *Urban Dictionary* states "the worst kind of music in existence" (Urban Dictionary, 2018), with another defining as "much overhated music from South Korea. A complete package with visuals, vocals, rapping, and perfect choreography" (Urban Dictionary, 2020). Both definitions, when read as part and parcel of the same fandom culture, articulate the binarism of K-pop fandom culture, and to quote the famous Marmite slogan: "You Either Love it or Hate it" (Flintham & McLeod, 1996). Evidenced by the frenzied media response to PSY's 2012 viral hit "Gangnam Style", exposure to K-pop outside of the fandom led to numerous English-language characterisations of K-pop along the lines of "synthesized bubble-gum pop sound, flashy outfits, and video art" (Naidu-Ghelani, 2012), with K-pop style described as "a fusion of synthesized music, video art, fashionable outfits and teasing sexuality mixed with doe-eyed innocence" (Choe & Russell, 2012).

Before delving deeper into the linguistic impact of K-pop on global anglophone fans, it is necessary to first contextualise the flow of K-pop from Korea to the world. There is a wealth of scholarship (Oh, 2015; Fuhr, 2017, to name a few) on

the origins of K-pop, with general agreement that K-pop in its current globalised iteration began to form in the late 1990s, as the SM Entertainment boy group H.O.T. began to amass widespread popularity in China. For sake of the current thesis, which explores contemporary, globalised K-pop, a brief history of K-pop from 2008 onwards will be provided. Scholarly works generally prefer to categorise the popularity of Korean popular culture into ‘eras’ (Jin, 2016; Song, 2020) as follows: Hallyu 1.0 (analog, broadcast era), Hallyu 2.0 (early social media and YouTube), and the current era, Hallyu 3.0 (live streaming, global concerts). However, these categorisations tend to apply to the wider Korean Wave, and as such, this thesis will use the terminology adopted for specific application in the K-pop fandom, which divides groups into ‘generations’ (often written shorthand as ‘gen’): first generation (H.O.T., Seo Taiji and Boys, S.E.S.), second generation (Girls’ Generation, 2NE1, Super Junior), third generation (BTS, EXO, BLACKPINK, TWICE) and the speculative fourth generation (ITZY, Stray Kids, IVE).

The focal point of this thesis will be the second generation (generally accepted to be groups that debuted between the years of 2005-2011) onwards. The year 2012, with Girls’ Generation’s *Letterman* performance, “Gangnam Style” going viral, and BIGBANG selling out two shows at the 12,500 capacity Wembley Arena in London, marked the end of the second generation, and the beginning of a new generation characterised by a more present global fandom. This was further reflected in the changing digital landscape. Fans, previously operating in smaller community pockets on sites such as LiveJournal and Tumblr, could now be found forming communities on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. By 2013, SM Entertainment boy group Super Junior performed in four countries in Latin America – Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Peru – as part of their 2013 Super Show 5 Tour, and in

Southeast Asia, K-pop has remained consistently popular since the early 2000s due to early exposure through broadcast media.

In the contemporary global K-pop fandom, fans are not merely consumers of Korean-language content. Fandom operates as what Jenkins (2006) has termed a 'participatory culture' in that fandom spaces are characterised by shared activities and practices that go beyond mere consumption. As social media technologies continued to develop and entertainment companies moved to reach wider audiences, K-pop content became easily accessible. The process of getting into K-pop is often referred to as fans as 'going down a rabbit hole', beginning with watching one music video, and ending with recognising each member of a group and their specific role within a group (Go, 2022). Previously geographically isolated from the objects of their affection, the internet and social media offered global fans a convergent space from which to engage in K-pop. Just as 2008-2009 was an important year domestically for the K-pop industry, 2016 was a watershed year internationally.

2016 saw the debut of BLACKPINK, a four-member girl group from YG Entertainment touted as the successors to 2NE1, who had unceremoniously disbanded. Known as 'monster rookies' in their trainee days, they quickly became the fastest girl group to take the #1 spot on a music show, achieving the feat with their single "Whistle" in just 13 days (Koreaboo, 2016). One of the members, Lalisa 'Lisa' Manoban, is Thai, and is currently the most followed K-pop idol on Instagram, with a total of 79.5 million followers (Manobal, n.d.), a number that is reflective of her global appeal, especially as an idol from Southeast Asia. In 2019, BLACKPINK became the first K-pop girl group to perform at music festival Coachella (Rowley, 2020). When it comes to groups recognised internationally, none can top boy group

BTS, who debuted in 2013 but experienced an unprecedented level of international success a few years into their career, particularly in the United States. BTS have even given speeches at the United Nations (UNICEF, 2018), which serves as evidence of their global recognition and influence beyond the K-pop fandom alone. Both groups have held global tours that now reach far beyond the traditional domain of Asia and the American continent, including stops in Europe and the Middle East. According to analysis of YouTube viewing data collected from BTS music and lyric videos from 2021-2022, just 5% of the views came from Korea, with the remaining 95% from countries outside of Korea. The top 10 consisted of: Japan, India, Indonesia, Mexico, United States, Korea, Philippines, Brazil, Thailand and Vietnam, representative of the diversity of the fanbase (Jeon & Yang, 2020).

It would, however, be reductive to chalk this current global popularity of K-pop down to BTS and BLACKPINK. Yet, they are certainly the two groups that have established the strongest foothold on global popular culture. According to 2018 estimates from The Korea Foundation, there are approximately 89 million K-pop fans in 113 different countries (Elfvig-Hwang, 2019), and the imagined distance between K-pop idols and their fans has now been reduced through live streams on platforms such as V-Live and Instagram. Global popularity has afforded K-pop greater visibility, and in tandem, greater visibility to the practices of the fandom. At a time where K-pop fans on Twitter were being praised by politicians, celebrities, and the media for their disruptive intervention in mass purchases of tickets for a Trump rally in 2020 and for flooding racist hashtags on Twitter with K-pop fancams, another group of fans were pointing out the hypocrisy of the fandom's seemingly sudden embrace of political activism, in spite of systematic anti-blackness and mistreatment of Black K-pop fans within the fandom (Stitch, 2020).

Racism is just one of the toxic behaviours that have become associated with the K-pop fandom in recent years, with one writer describing the global K-pop fandom as “toxicity incarnate” (McGay, 2021). Where toxic behaviour has also been identified in the domestic fandom in the form of the ‘*sasaeng* fan’ (a portmanteau of *sa* ‘private’ and *saeng* ‘life’), whose behaviours include stalking, placing cameras in hotel rooms, and even poisoning (Koreaboo, 2018), the toxicity of the global anglophone fandom is mostly played out on social media, with behaviours including death threats and the practice of ‘doxxing’: revealing the personal information of a user online. It seems obvious to state that not all fans engage in such behaviours, yet, for critics of K-pop’s global popularity, there are numerous examples of toxic fan behaviours that can be latched onto to legitimise criticism. Another part of toxic fan behaviour more acutely realised within the fandom is the practice of defending idols against any type of perceived ‘criticism’. Criticism is used as a scare quote in this case, as journalists often find themselves subject to intense harassment simply for asking questions (Romero, 2022).

Polarised attitudes towards K-pop are articulated both internally and externally, and stigmatisation of K-pop occurs on multiple levels. The global spread of the fandom makes obtaining comprehensive demographic data virtually impossible, but it is generally accepted that the average K-pop fan is a female between the ages of 15-30 (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013). This is supported by recent statistics from music streaming platform Spotify, finding that 73% of K-pop listeners were female, with a further 53% aged between 15-24 (Spotify, 2020). Given that this forms the basis of the target demographic of K-pop, we can assume that fans outside of this demographic do certainly exist but may be more hesitant to identify themselves as K-pop fans. In the mainstream media and in conjunction with toxic

fan behaviours, K-pop ‘fangirls’ have been portrayed as ‘obsessive’ and ‘hysterical’ teenage girls (Choi, 2019), despite the recognition that K-pop has a universal, global appeal seeming to exist in opposition to this idea. In Western contexts, the demographic assumptions of the K-pop fandom have played perfectly into the pre-existing negative construction of the ‘fangirl’, an abnormal and obsessive female fan who congregates in large groups. The K-pop fandom is often treated as a monolithic entity, yet, the structure of the fandom is complex, and beyond universal fandom practices (the writing of ‘fanfic’, creation of memes, use of certain lexicon, etc.), fandoms of specific groups may have their own practices.

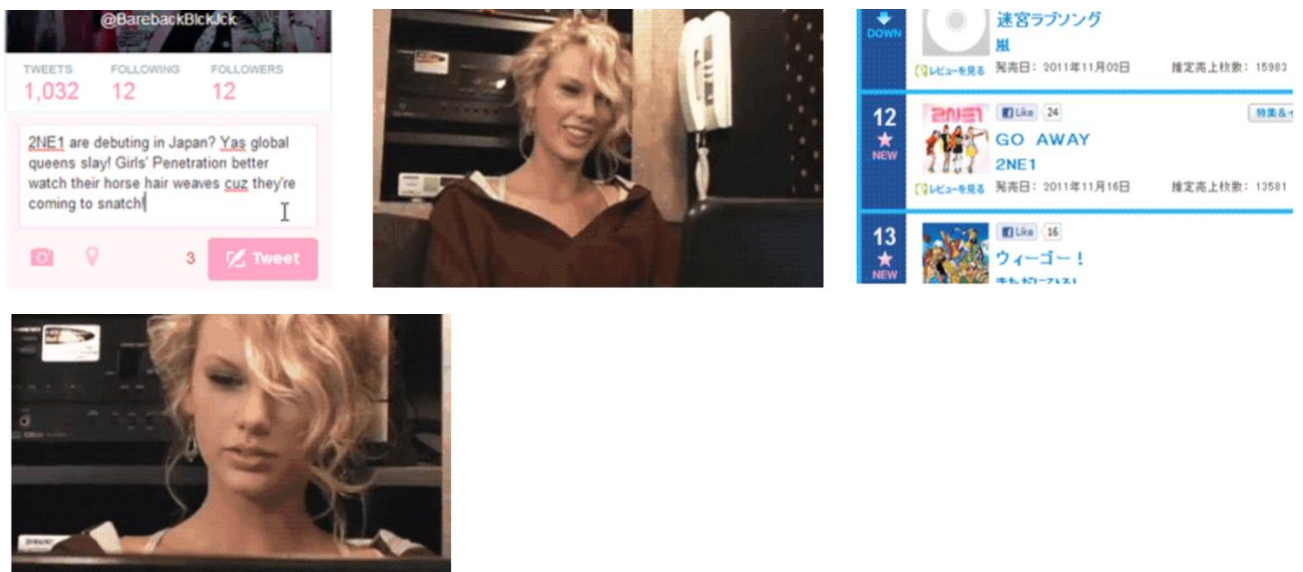
Portraying the K-pop fandom as a harmonious monolith would also ignore the complexity of the inter-fandom dynamic. Groups are seen as competing, with popularity, video views, music streams, and media recognition all seen as markers of a group’s overall success. Tinalinga (2018) terms this phenomenon ‘competitive performativity’, stating that “when their idols succeed, fans feel as if they have succeeded and when their idols are the best, fans feel as if they are the best”. Perhaps the most common articulation of tension between fandoms is the ‘fanwar’, defined rather succinctly on *Urban Dictionary* as “when two fandoms get into a fight over which fandom is better” (Urban Dictionary, 2016). Fanwars often do not need a solid reason to begin, and the combination of reactivity and competitiveness in K-pop fandom culture ensures that fandoms will willingly turn on each other when they identify any behaviour that they feel ‘threatens’ either their fandom or their favourite idols.

In 2014, fans of Girls’ Generation (SONEs) and 2NE1 (Blackjacks) became embroiled in an online feud when both groups were pitted against each other with

their comeback singles “Mr. Mr.” and “Come Back Home” on music show *Inkigayo*. Predating the popularity of Twitter as a congregation for K-pop fans, SONEs and Blackjacks produced memes and gifs to post on online forums, Tumblr, and LiveJournal, as well as creating targeted wordplay insults including: “Girls’ Penetration”, “Scones”, “Blowjobs”, and “Flapjacks”. In the end, neither group took the #1 spot on *Inkigayo*, with girl group 4MINUTE winning with their single “Whatcha Doin’ Today?” (Koreaboo, 2018). This is just one relatively benign example of a fanwar, and in a further example of the volatility of K-pop fandom culture, fans from the same fandom may also get into spats over the popularity of certain members over others. It is also an example of the seemingly limitless potential of semiotic productivity as fans seamlessly traverse multiple popular culture contexts. One edited gif produced by SONEs features singer Taylor Swift typing out “2NE1 are debuting in Japan? Yas global queens slay! Girls’ Penetration better watch their horse hair weaves cuz they’re coming to snatch!” on a Twitter account (@BarebackBlckJck) with 12 followers and 1,032 Tweets, before seeing the sales figures for 2NE1 in Japan and looking disappointed.

Figure 1

Screenshots from a gif produced during the SONE vs Blackjacks fanwar



The gif itself carries multiple semiotic cues. First, the imagined (or real) Twitter account of @BarebackBlckJck has a disproportionate number of Tweets (1,032) relative to the number of followers (12), indexing an individual who spends a lot of time posting their own opinions on Twitter. Additionally, many of the lexical items used in the Tweet, ‘yas’, ‘queens’, ‘slay’ are characteristic of the queer community, specifically gay men (Carter, 2018; Bauxam, 2021). This can also be inferred from the username @BarebackBlckJck, with ‘bareback’ a term originating in the community to refer to anal sex without the use of a condom. As was mentioned previously, for fans, having high sales figures is seen as a marker of success, and the low sales of 2NE1’s “Go Away” are used to position 2NE1 as inferior to Girls’ Generation, referred to in the gif as ‘Girls’ Penetration’.

Thus, the K-pop fandom is complex, enhanced by its transculturality (Chin & Morimoto, 2013) as a convergence point for a diverse group of global fans. Stigmatisation towards the K-pop fan is articulated on both internal and external

levels, and fan identities can be strongly aligned with the object of fan affection (Tinalinga, 2018). This introduction has thus served a dual function, first, to offer examples of the levels of semiotic productivity and intertextuality deployed by the global anglophone K-pop fandom (as referenced in “I’m Gonna Be a Star” and SONEs v Blackjacks), and second, to locate the global anglophone K-pop fandom within the wider context of contemporary K-pop. The overview of the history of K-pop and the structure of the global anglophone K-pop fandom presented here is brief, and the next section will pay more specialised attention to the linguistic impact of Korean language media on global anglophone K-pop fans, as well as introducing some popular items of the fandom vernacular.

“How Do I Make Oppa Sarang Me?": Forming Fandom Lexicon

In 2014, a question titled “How do I make Oppa sarang me?” on the now defunct *Yahoo Answers* from a user named ‘Barbie’ quickly went viral in the global K-pop fandom. Written in a contentious mix of Korean and English, with sentences such as “but Oppa sarang another unni” and “I really want you to help me if you are my sunbae in sarang”, the post was mocked due to the excessive and ‘cringy’ overuse of Korean (and Japanese) words and phrases. Despite having circulated for almost a decade, the intention behind the post and the identity of ‘Barbie’ remains unknown.

Figure 2

“How do I make Oppa sarang me?” Posted by user ‘Barbie’ on Yahoo Answers, reportedly in 2014



The question features multiple Korean words from different word classes: *annyeong*² ‘hello’, *sarang* ‘love’, *oppa* ‘older brother’, *unni* ‘older sister’, *dongseing*³ ‘younger sibling’, *sunbae*⁴ ‘senior’, *hoobae*⁵ ‘junior’, *kamnashiminda*⁶ ‘thank you’, and *aegyo*. Additionally, the Japanese word *kawaii* is also featured, as well as multiple emojis (^_^, ><) that Lee (2018) has identified as East Asian CMC features. The use of the tilde ~ to elongate vowels is commonplace in Japan and Korean CMC and is also used in the text. ‘Barbie’ introduces themselves with “I am a Korean kawaii! ^~^”, yet the scattered and inconsistent use of words and phrases of Korean origin appears to suggest otherwise. Although it seems plausible to suggest that the intention of the original post was precisely to mock the ways in which global anglophone K-pop fans use Korean words, it is an apt and illustrative example to present these practices. Reading the text as a mockery of fan behaviour, we can also

² Ordinarily written as *annyeong* in RR

³ *Dongsaeng*

⁴ *Seonbae*

⁵ *Hubae*

⁶ *Kamsahamnida*

observe the use of childlike or infantile language: “because me is only a hoobae because this is my first sarang and I need lessons”.

Korean-English bilingual constructions following English subject-object-verb (SVO) sentence order with the inclusion of Korean vocabulary are commonplace. The sentence “I really Sarang Oppa” uses the English adverb ‘really’ with the Korean nouns *sarang* and *oppa*: “I really love *oppa*”. A further characteristic of fandom language evident in the text is the use of English pluralisation conventions for Korean nouns. The word *dongsaeng* is rendered in the plural as “dongsengs”, a practice that is repeated with “oppas” and “unnis”. The diversity of the word classes of Korean words known to global anglophone fans is further on display, featuring verbs *saranghae*, greetings *annyeong*, kinship and address terms *oppa*, *unni*, *dongsaeng*, *hoobae*, *sunbae*, and interjections *kamsahamnida*. The words used by ‘Barbie’ constitute some of the most well-known used (and abused) words in the global anglophone K-pop fandom lexicon.

Evident to a Korean speaker is the lack of pragmatic awareness in the use of Korean words in the text. As Lee (2018) concluded in a study of multilingual comments by global K-pop fans, intermixing of Korean was “not based on linguistic accuracy but on linguistic fellowship, which relies on perceived shared interest and mutual support”. The verb *sarang* is used in noun form, before switching to the formal verb style in the sentence “Oppa Saranghae”. The kinship and address terms used in the text – *oppa*, *unni*, *sunbae*, *hoobae* – are confused in their application, as ‘Barbie’ addresses both intimately (*oppa*, *unni*) and with formality (*sunbae*, *hoobae*). This is not to mention the fact that Korean is an example of a subject-object-verb (SOV) language, rendering a construction of “Oppa sarang another unni” impossible.

The linguistic impact of this global consumption of popular media in the Korean language has not gone unnoticed. In 2021, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) added 26 new Korean words to the dictionary that were reflective of the changing tides of language contact – *aegyo*, *noona*, *oppa*, *unni*, and *skinship* – all are words that have been popularised in usage through Korean popular culture (Salazar, 2021). Of further note is the fact that the OED opted to retain online romanised forms for these words, using *unni* instead of *eonni* (RR) or *onni* (MR). As popular culture becomes increasingly globalised, matters of linguistic competency and the language barrier become less important. Forms and meanings of ‘foreign’ words are up for negotiation and interpretation as they become further abstracted from the original contexts in which they are born into. It is precisely through negotiation in multiple cultural and semiotic contexts that *oppa* can denote either of the following: an attractive male Korean celebrity, a female celebrity who embodies ‘masculine’ traits and behaviours, a sexualised ‘daddy’ figure, or even just a close older male of a younger female.

The linguistic exposure to Korean through the avenue of Korean popular culture and the internet has globalised Korean words and expressions on a rapid scale. Not just occurring on the linguistic level, this also instigates a process of ‘cultural translation’ for non-Korean fans. Yoon (2017) notes that “due to the geocultural distance between K-pop produced in South Korea (Korea, hereafter) and its globally dispersed audiences, the global consumption of K-pop inevitably requires the process of active translation – not only literal translation from above (e.g., by gatekeepers) but also translation and emotional elements of K-pop from below (e.g., by fan audiences)”. Although often remaining understated in the literature,

recognition for participation in this process of ‘cultural translation’ must include for the role played by Korean diasporic communities, who were ‘early adopters’ of K-pop in the West (Yoon, 2022). Fan translators are particularly essential in global anglophone K-pop fandom discourse, as the ‘fan-to-fan’ emotional labour involved in fan translation practices appeals to fans more than the emotional detachment and cultural adaptation of professional translation (Dwyer, 2012, van Rossum, 2015).

The case studies in this thesis are all words with cultural histories in Korean society, yet, to better contextualise them within the wider communicative practices of the global anglophone fandom, the following section will introduce a categorisation system for K-pop fandom lexicon based on point of origin, developing on the work of Touhami and Al-Haq (2017). The different subsections of this categorisation system are as follows: (1) Korean words that are part of common speech (address/kinship terms, verbs, interjections, nouns), (2) words with significance in the domestic K-pop fandom (certain address terms, fandom culture terms, Korean entertainment industry terms), (3) words from anglophone fandom/internet subcultures, and (4) words coined in the global anglophone K-pop fandom.

Table 1*Common Lexical Items from Category 1*

Korean Words in Common Speech		
<i>Hangeul</i>	<i>Romanisation (RR)</i> ⁷	<i>Part of Speech/Definition</i>
오빠	<i>oppa</i>	Address term: “older brother”, used by a younger female towards an older male
언니	<i>eonni/unni/unnie</i>	Address term: “older sister”, used by a younger female towards an older female
형	<i>hyeong/hyung</i>	Address term: “older brother”, used by a younger male towards an older male
누나	<i>nuna/noona</i>	Address term: “older sister”, used by a younger male towards an older female
사랑해	<i>saranghae</i>	Verb (informal): “to love”, may also be used as a noun 사랑 <i>sarang</i>
애교	<i>aegyo</i>	Noun: a type of performative cuteness, embodying verbal, and non-verbal behaviours
안녕	<i>annyeong</i>	Interjection (informal): “hello”, may also be used in polite style <i>annyeonghasaeyo</i>
스킨쉽	<i>seukinswip</i>	Noun: used to define intimate acts of physical contact, including hugging or caressing

Table 2*Common Lexical Items from Category 2*

Domestic Fandom		
<i>Hangeul</i>	<i>Romanisation (RR)</i>	<i>Part of Speech/Definition</i>
선배	<i>seonbae/sunbae</i>	Address term: “senior”, used towards an individual who is senior than the speaker, usually in institutional settings
후배	<i>hubae/hoobae</i>	Address term: “junior”, used for an individual who is junior, usually in institutional settings
사생	<i>sasaeng</i>	Noun: portmanteau of 私 (사 <i>sa</i>) ‘private’ and 生 (생 <i>saeng</i>) ‘life’
컴백	<i>keombaek/comeback</i>	Noun: Korean-English word from “comeback”, used when a K-pop group or idol are releasing new music
비주얼	<i>bijueol/visual</i>	Noun: Korean-English word from “visual”, used to refer to the most physically attractive member in a K-pop group
막내	<i>mangnae/maknae</i>	Address term: “youngest sibling”, used to refer to the youngest member of a group

⁷ Popular fandom romanisations are featured beside the RR

리더	<i>rideo</i>	Noun: Korean-English word from “leader”, used for the member who is most responsible for group activities, traditionally assigned to the eldest
올킬	<i>olkil/all kill</i>	Noun: Korean-English word from “all kill”, used for when a song achieves the #1 spot on all the Korean music charts

Of the words featured in categories 1 and 2, usage of Korean words in the latter category is generally more accepted than those in the first. This is in part since they have become standardised within the K-pop industry and Korean media, thus legitimising them as an authentic part of Korean popular culture and by association, Korean culture. In contrast to this, a sizeable number of the words in the former, particularly address terms and verbs/nouns with direct English equivalents, have some level of contextual association with negative fan stereotypes. These stereotypes are elaborated upon further on in the thesis. Where words such as *skinship* and *aegyo* have indeed been popularised through Korean entertainment contexts, they have been placed into the first category because they do not have specific additional meanings when used in the context of the K-pop industry/fandom. Where address terms such as *sunbae*, *hoobae* and *maknae* can also be included in the first category, they do carry specific meanings in the Korean entertainment industry, hence their inclusion in the second category.

Table 3*Common Lexical Items from Category 3*

Fandom/Internet Culture	
<i>Word</i>	<i>Part of Speech/Definition</i>
<i>Ship</i>	Noun/Adjective ('shipping'): in fandom culture, shipping is a support or desire for two characters/individuals to be in a romantic relationship. Fans who ship are called 'shippers'
<i>OTP</i>	Noun: "one true pairing", used in shipping culture to denote an individual's favourite 'ship', or fictional romantic relationship
<i>Stan</i>	Noun/Verb ('I stan'): in fandom culture, a stan is an overzealous or obsessive fan of a celebrity. Note: usually derogatory, but may not be on stan twitter 'stan twt'
<i>Fanservice</i>	Noun: originating from Japanese ファンサービス <i>fan s̄abisu</i> and popularised in the anime/manga fandom, fan service in K-pop typically refers to the performance of acts by idols to please their fans
<i>Crack</i>	Adjective: in K-pop fandom culture, 'crack' is a term that can be applied to something that is weird, funny, absurd, or addictive. 'Crack fic' and 'crack pairings' refer to fanfiction/pairings that are implausible in reality
<i>Fangirl</i>	Noun/Verb ('fangirling'): in fandom culture, fangirl is used to refer to a female fan. Can be used as a verb as in 'fangirling'
<i>Fansubbing</i>	Verb/Noun ('fansub/fansubber'): in fandom culture, 'fansubbing' refers to subtitles that are made by fans, in the K-pop fandom, many groups have a dedicated team of fansubbers/fan translators
<i>Anti-fan</i>	Noun: An anti-fan is an individual who expresses hatred towards or mocks a particular group/idol, usually alongside their fandom

As Crow (2019) has identified, 'fluency' in the linguistic repertoire of the K-pop fandom involves not only knowledge of certain Korean words, but also lexicon that is popular in wider fandom subculture, and to a lesser extent, words that have been adopted from the global anglophone fandom of Japanese anime/manga (recall the use of *kawaii* by 'Barbie'). Shipping culture is highly present in the K-pop fandom, with investment ranging from "those who merely think that bromance between their preferred OTP is just cute", to those who "genuinely believe that their OTP is real and fervently argue against anyone who thinks otherwise" (Patricia, 2011). Words such as *skinship*, OTP, and fanservice all have connections with shipping culture in the global anglophone K-pop fandom. As mentioned prior,

besides the use of the word fanservice, there are traces of lexical influences from the global anglophone fandom of Japanese anime/manga.

Table 4

Common Lexical Items from Category 4

<i>International Fandom</i>	
<i>Word</i>	<i>Part of Speech/Definition</i>
<i>Bias</i>	Noun/Adjective: unlike in standard usage, bias in K-pop fandom culture does not have a negative connotation, and is used to refer to one's favourite idol/group ('bias group')
<i>Delulu</i>	Adjective/Noun ('a delulu'): derived from English "delusional", used to mock fans who may believe they will one day be with their favourite idol, or fans that genuinely believe their OTP is real. Derogatory, but may be used jokingly
<i>Koreaboo</i>	Noun: derived from "Weeaboo", from the Japanese anime/manga fandom. Used to refer to an overzealous fan who desires to 'become Korean'
<i>Nugu</i>	Noun: from Korean "누구" meaning "who", <i>nugu</i> is used to refer to a group who are not well-known, usually those from smaller entertainment companies
<i>Oppar</i>	Noun: from Korean "오빠" <i>oppa</i> . Ironic form used to mock fans who use/overuse the word <i>oppa</i> in their everyday speech. Can be pluralised as 'oppar'. The 'r' a supposed mockery of US English
<i>Oppapologist</i>	Noun: combination of <i>oppa</i> with English "apologist". Used to refer to a female K-pop fans who defends and excuses bad behaviour of male K-pop idols
<i>Unnir</i>	Noun: from Korean "언니" <i>unnie</i> . Used the same as <i>oppar</i> , yet directed towards female fans of female idols
<i>Ult</i>	Noun: shortened form of "ultimate bias", a term used to refer one's absolute favourite idol

The fourth and final category includes words that have been created within the K-pop fandom to refer to unique phenomena and aspects that may not be shared with other fandom subcultures. This set of words are very illustrative of K-pop fandom culture and are reflective of behaviours and characteristics of global anglophone K-pop fans. The concept of the 'bias' (pluralised as biases) is ingrained in K-pop fandom culture, and has sprouted several related terms, such as 'bias

wrecker/ruiner’, ‘bias list’, and ‘ultimate bias’. A ‘bias’ is a fan’s favourite member in a specific group, and a ‘bias wrecker/ruiner’ is another member who at times a fan may admire more than their bias, hence the use of destructive adjectives’ such as ‘wrecker’ and ‘ruiner’. An individual idol can be ‘bias’, as well as a group. Fan’s biases can and are subject to change, and multifandom (fans who are fans of several groups) fans may have a ‘bias list’, where they rank their favourite idols across the groups they follow.

The words ‘delulu’, ‘Koreaboo’, ‘oppar/unnir’, and ‘oppapologist’ all carry derogatory connotations, and speak for the scrutinization of a certain type of K-pop fan – obsessive, culturally ignorant, and delusional – usually conceptualised as a female fan of boy groups but may also refer to K-pop fans in a more monolithic sense. This is evidenced through the prevalence of terms derivative of *oppa*: ‘oppar’, ‘oppapologist’, ‘oppa didn’t mean it’, ‘oppa!!1!’ and ‘oppaaaaa~’. The equivalent term ‘unnir’ is far less used, although female fans of girl groups are not spared criticism when perceived to be overly invested in their favourite idols. The word *nugu* means ‘who’ in Korean and is used by global anglophone K-pop fans to refer to relatively unknown groups or idols. In these cases, *nugu* functions in both plural (*nugus*) and the singular, whether referring to a group or individual idol. Given the prevalence of fanwars, *nugu* can also be used to imply that the group supported by a certain fandom are not known by anybody, and therefore not as relevant as their own group.

Tables 1-4 are by no means an exhaustive compendium of lexicon used by the global anglophone K-pop fandom, and new words and phrases are constantly being added to the ever-growing repertoire. The examples that have been given seek to illustrate the diverse resources that have formed the shared repertoire of the K-pop

fandom, and to better contextualise the linguistic practices of the fandom before presenting the detailed case studies. As this thesis uses multiple words that are specific to fandom/K-pop fandom contexts that may not be in the English language, a glossary has been included for reference. Rather than provide a generalised overview of how the global anglophone K-pop fandom deploy the shared repertoire, the specific focus of this thesis is on how terms with cultural significance in Korean-speaking contexts are decontextualised and recontextualised in line with fandom norms and ideologies.

Note on Korean Address Terms

Given the relevance of Korean address terms in this study, the following section will give a brief overview of the social functions of Korean address terms in Korean-speaking contexts. It is however, noted that the present thesis is focused solely on how Korean words are used in *English*, and thus this section serves merely as a brief overview. In the Korean language, adherence to a system of honorifics and politeness is a central concept, and Korean utilises a robust system of address terms that are used to index certain relationships between interlocuters. With their basis in traditional hierarchical relationships as influenced by patriarchal Neo-Confucian societal values, Brown (2013) notes that address terms in the Korean language make marked distinctions between gender, age, and paternal or maternal relationships.

Unlike in English, there are relatively few appropriate circumstances for addressing an individual solely with their first name, and the use of the second person pronoun ‘you’ is uncommon in conversations with a hearer of equal or senior status to the speaker. Subsequently, the use of address terms allows Korean speakers to index relationships, either intimate or distant, between interlocuters in accordance with factors such as age, gender, social status, and intimacy (Son, 2001). The two address terms featured in this thesis, *oppa* and *unni*, are grouped with two other address terms, *hyung* and *noona*, used traditionally to refer to one’s siblings. All four are gendered, and appropriate usage is dependent on the age and gender of the speaker and hearer.

Table 5*Gendered kinship terms*

		Speaker	
		Male	Female
Hearer	Male	<i>hyung</i>	<i>noona</i>
	Female	<i>oppa</i>	<i>unni</i>

Note. This table has been adapted from Jeong & Yu (2021)

In contemporary usage, sibling address terms can be used fictively to refer to a close, intimate older friend. Should the age difference between the hearer and the speaker be greater than about 10 years, then there is a need to switch to more deferential terms (Byon, 2007). In circumstances where the speaker is addressing a hearer of lower age, including close friends or siblings, it is possible to address using only the first name of the hearer. Address terms can be used in isolation, following an individual's first name, or as a means of calling attention. With their roots in traditional culture and society and the contemporary flexibility to be used fictively, gendered terms of address have become ubiquitous in Korean speech. Jeong and Yu (2021) attribute this to two factors: the importance of age-dependent seniority in Korean society and culture necessitating the use of a lexical marker to maintain deference, and to mark the level of intimacy and familiarity between the hearer and the speaker.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

As an interdisciplinary study on the complex interweaving of contemporary popular culture and language on the internet, this thesis draws upon multiple theories and concepts from which to interpret the resemiotisation practices of the global anglophone fandom. The chapter will begin with a brief overview of fandom, contextualising the global anglophone K-pop fandom within the fandom sphere. This will elaborate upon online fan communities, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and transcultural fandom. This will be followed by the theoretical foundation of the study, which presents the notion of the K-pop fandom as a Community of Practice with a shared semiotic repertoire. This will be supplemented by the concepts and theories of translanguaging, indexicality, myth, and resemiotisation.

Defining Fandom

Jenkins (2006) presents a simple definition for fandom as a term used to define “those who claim a common identity and a shared culture with other fans”. The difference between simply being a fan, and belonging to a fandom, lies in the emphasis on shared, collective fan activity. The definition on fan website Fanlore defines fandom as “a community of fans, participating in fanac⁸ and interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works” (Fanlore, n.d.). Jenkins (1992) has identified five core tenets of fandom: (1) as a particular mode of reception; (2) as a particular set of critical and interpretative practices; (3) as a base for consumer activism; (4) as an art world which supports forms of cultural production; and (5) as an alternative social community.

⁸ Shorthand for ‘fan activity’

As fandom encompasses forms of production, interpretation, discussion, creation, and community, Hills (2002) and Duffett (2013) have highlighted the difficulty behind defining something so complex as fandom in simple terms. However, as the present study is focusing on a specific fandom, the global anglophone K-pop fandom, rather than discourse around fandom in general, the definition from Fanlore will form the basis for how fandom will be used and understood in this study. Jenkins (2018) argues that this participation in activities or practices around the object of fan interest posits fandom as a form of participatory culture, “as fans formed alternative interpretations that were often expressed through unauthorized cultural productions (fanfiction, remix videos, songs, artworks, costumes) – this mode of engagement contrasting with pervasive stereotypes about spectator culture”. Fandom, therefore, in the simplest terms, refers to a collective body of individuals with a shared interest, in which they participate in fan activities in relation to.

Characterising the Global Anglophone K-pop Fandom

Elfving-Hwang (2018) and others (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008) have highlighted the global nature of the non-Korean K-pop fandom. Studies on the global K-pop fandom have explored communities in East and Southeast Asia (Shim, 2016; Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Jeong, Lee & Lee, 2016), Latin America (Min, Jin, & Han, 2018; Marid-Morales & Lovric, 2015), Europe (Sung, 2013, Trzcińska, 2018), the Middle East (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013), and the United States (Lee, Lee, & Park, 2020). This global spread of the K-pop fandom has been facilitated by advancements in new digital technologies such as smart phones and the internet, with online communities easily discoverable and accessible with an internet connection (Jin, 2016). In non-

Korean contexts, organisational and communicative practices of the international fandom (the term used within the fandom community), are firmly concentrated in the online sphere. Thus, the fan practices of the global K-pop fandom are reflective of wider shifts in fandom practices to online community spaces, making the international fandom what Hellekson and Busse (2014) and Chin and Morimoto (2017) have described as an online fandom, engaging in behaviours and practices that differ from those of an offline fandom. Studies on the global spread of the K-pop fandom have highlighted how the fandom challenges the dominant view of the West as consumer, as K-pop has experienced a much longer history of popularity of consumption outside of the West in regions such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Where offline fandom spaces may be limited in their interactional potential, the ease of communication and interaction in online spaces eliminates this and offers individual users the potential to seamlessly communicate across geographical borders within multiple popular culture contexts. The global K-pop fandom is therefore what Chin and Morimoto (2013) have termed a transcultural fandom, with shared interest cultivated on a “moment of affinity between the fan and transcultural object”, rather than through geographical or cultural similarities and differences. The popularity of K-pop is further disruptive of the dominant ‘West-to-rest’ flows of global popular culture, as Korean popular culture moves from marginal subcultural interest to the mainstream in global popular culture. K-pop, as a Korean language media product, is therefore negotiated simultaneously in multiple different popular culture contexts (Chin & Morimoto, 2017). Of further importance to the way fans perceive K-pop media is the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality, defined simply as the relationship between texts, is regarded by Jenkins (1992) to be a constant

process: “all reading is essentially rereading as we draw upon cultural codes and social assumptions acquired through our previous encounters with other texts”. Thus, as global anglophone K-pop fans exist in a transcultural convergence point, K-pop texts may be re-read in accordance with local ideologies and cultural codes to make greater sense of them.

Where this transcultural flow of popular culture facilitates diversified consumption of popular culture from outside of the dominant channels, Chin and Morimoto (2017) argue for the potential of anglophone online fandoms to become “sites of often-irreverent play, where meanings may be inverted, and texts parodied and transformed even past the point of recognition”. This process of parody and in the global anglophone K-pop fandom often has links to the stigma attached to K-pop fans. Jensen (1992) writes that the stigmatisation and acceptability of certain fandoms over others is dependent on two factors: the object of desire, and the form by which this desire is expressed. Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) take this a step further by including the demographics of the fans themselves, noting that young, female, queer, ethnically diverse fanbases are more likely to be subject to increased scrutiny and criticism.

There is general agreement (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013; Touhami & Al-Abed, 2017; Elfving-Hwang, 2018) that the K-pop fanbase is predominantly female, young, and diverse, exposing the K-pop fandom to external stigmatisation. Although the spread and online nature of the fandom makes it difficult to obtain accurate statistics, Otmazgin and Lyan (2013) estimate the average age of K-pop fans to be between 14-30 years old. As a predominantly young female fanbase, the K-pop fandom has been characterised as ‘fangirls’, a loaded discourse that is often used to

devalue and deride young, feminine fans and their fandom (Hills, 2002; Gerrard, 2021). Van der Graaf (2014) notes that fangirls are frequently characterised as ‘obsessive’ and ‘hysterical’, further stating that the characterisation of fangirls is grounded in heteronormativity, resulting in all fangirls being universally assumed to be interested in male celebrities. Where derisions of fangirls are often leveraged from outside the fandom, Busse (2013) and others (Dare-Edwards, 2015; Gerrard, 2021; Hills, 2002) have noted that this derision and anti-fangirl rhetoric is additionally played out in inter-fandom discourses. The dismissal and discreditation of female fans are often extended to the objects of their affection – K-pop idols – themselves. K-pop falls under the genre umbrella of pop music, a genre that is frequently denigrated as ‘inauthentic’ and ‘artificial’ (Coulter, 2017; Moore, 2002). Pop music is framed as a ‘lowbrow’, feminized form of music, and Thornton (1997) suggests that “even among youth cultures, there is a double articulation of the lowly and the feminine: disparaged other cultures are characterized as feminine, and girls’ cultures are devalued as imitative and passive”.

These pre-existing attitudes towards the mostly female fandom of ‘idols’ (a term used in the Korean entertainment industry for K-pop performers) have largely dictated and informed negative stereotypes and attitudes towards both K-pop itself, and the fans that are interested in it. K-pop is regarded by some to be ‘inferior’ to Western pop (or superior, by some K-pop fans), and in some cases, the very existence and popularity of K-pop may be seen as a threat to local forms of popular culture (Han, 2017). Stigma towards K-pop is exacerbated by the fact that it is a non-English, non-Western form of popular culture that is interpreted through the framework as the ‘other’, as the transnational flow of popular culture is shifted from periphery to centre, rather than the other way around (Lee, Lee, & Park, 2020). Oh (2015) and

Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) have also argued for the racial element of the consumption of Korean popular culture, as the feminised physical appearances of male idols find them labelled as 'gay' or 'girly', as they embody what Jung (2010) has termed a 'soft masculinity'. Although studies (Jung, 2010; Oh, 2015) have argued for the subversive potential of K-pop's 'female gaze' viewership, Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) conclude that "although described as attractive, the feminine aspect of K-pop male idols' masculinity continues to be the aesthetic domain of Korean men whose culture enables and encourages it. The logic of "their culture versus ours" fixes soft masculinity to a racial and cultural characteristic, accentuating the difference between Asian masculinity and White hegemonic masculinity". As such, fan perceptions of Korean culture and society run the risk of falling into racialised stereotypes of 'Asianness'.

Though less explored in the literature, further stigma surrounds fans who are interested in K-pop girl groups. Studies such as those by Oh (2015) and Kim (2018) have outlined the ways in which female idols are treated as sexualised commodities who can only perform either sexualised performances or acts of chaste innocence for a presumably older male audience, with Oh (2015) tying this to the ubiquity of the word *oppa* in the lyrics of songs by girl groups. Laurie (2016) argues that this celebration of the subversive potential of the soft masculinity of male idols is not afforded to female idols, and K-pop girl groups are subsequently left placed in an impossible position between sexuality and chastity. Thus, being a fan of a girl group can bring about 'embarrassment' or discomfort through operating in the impossibly rigid binary between sexualisation and infantilisation of female idols, without recognising the role of the female idol as a role model or aspirational figure. As noted by Zhao (2021) and Laurie (2016), K-pop has been able to thrive in an industry that

operates through homosocial interactions within a larger heteronormative framework, and as such, studies on K-pop fans have largely been restricted to studies on female fans of boy groups. Interest in girl groups, whether by female or male fans, goes against heteronormative expectations – female fans are expected to be attracted to male idols – and for male fans, their interest in a popular culture that is feminized and associated with sexualisation may also bring about further stigma.

Stigma and negative associations about K-pop and K-pop fans is therefore articulated on numerous different levels, and this in turn may have influenced attitudes towards K-pop fans within the fandom itself. K-pop fans are often aware of this stigma (Lee, Lee, and Park, 2020; Oh, 2015; Han, 2017), and the impact of this awareness has served to enhance ideologies that maintain K-pop as a subculture that exists counter to the mainstream. The stigma faced by female fans is compacted by assumptions that K-pop fangirls are all ‘obsessive’ teenage girls, which is in turn compacted by their interest in ‘lowbrow’ pop music. K-pop is ‘othered’ by its racialised position as a peripheral, non-English, and non-Western form of popular culture. The theme of stigma is therefore one that permeates the K-pop fandom, and this is echoed in the semiotic productivity of the fandom.

The Global Anglophone K-pop Fandom as Community of Practice

In the field of sociolinguistics, contemporary research has migrated away from rigid notions of treating language as a static, structural entity that is defined by boundaries between different speech communities. According to Gumperz (1968), shared communicative practice is essential to the concept of the speech community, which in turn is what distinguishes each speech community from another. For

Gumperz (1968), the speech used within a speech community is further related to shared social norms, encompassing values, attitudes, and ideologies. Hymes (1972) corroborated the definition of the speech community as reinvented by Gumperz (1972) as grounded in shared communicative practices, whilst further noting the importance of communicative competency, evaluated by the knowledge an individual must have to participate in communication with other members of the speech community. Hymes (1972) development of the concept of the speech community thus amplified the interactional element. Where the speech community occupies a key place in linguistic theory and research, it is slightly limited in its application for an online community who are joined in a fan-based interest in a specific popular culture product. This is for two reasons: first, the communicative practices of the online K-pop fan community are multimodal and move beyond the realm of the linguistic into the semiotic, as Korean words take on highly indexical forms dependent on context. Second, with this multimodality, communicative practices take on forms that are not limited to speech acts, and may include images, videos, or other forms of communication.

For these two reasons, this thesis will interpret the online anglophone K-pop fandom within the theoretical framework of the Community of Practice. This does not involve outright rejection of the concept of the speech community, rather, it recognises the theoretical limitations of applying the concept to the subject of the present study. Developing on the initial iteration of the community of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) define a community of practice as:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power

relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992)

This emphasis on ‘mutual engagement’ and shared practice is where the community of practice diverges from more traditional notions of ‘community’, achieved by “articulating place and practice”, and presenting an approach to communities that does not define them based on generalised sociological variables such as race, gender, and class (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) note that in the community of practice, the learning process is social, rather than a by-product of the acquisition of community norms as in the case of the speech community. This emphasis on a socialised learning process thus mirrors observations made by Jenkins (2006) in the practices and habits of fandom as an interactional form of participatory culture.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) have identified three criteria for the community of practice: domain, community, and practice. In contrast to a more traditional community, the identity of the community of practice lies in a shared domain, or interest. Membership is contingent on a commitment to the domain, and this is also a distinguishing factor from other communities. Next, the community element is articulated through joint and shared discussion or engagement around the domain. Through this shared engagement, the community of practice develops what Wenger (1998) has defined as the ‘shared repertoire’ of actions, concepts, stories, and jargon. The shared repertoire is negotiated through the interactional habits of the community of practice and is shared amongst the members of the community. As such, the global anglophone K-pop fandom meet Wenger’s (1998) criteria to be treated as a community of practice. The domain, the shared interest amongst members, is K-pop. K-pop fulfils the role of the umbrella domain, from which spring

additional subdomains. K-pop fans are not bound solely by their interest in K-pop, and on online discussion boards and sites, subdomains dependent on the umbrella domain of K-pop may include discussions about wider Korean culture and society, Korean entertainment, or gossip about Korean celebrities. K-pop fans, as transcultural fans, are not limited in their membership to the K-pop fandom, and are likely to participate in other communities, though, K-pop remains the shared thread of interest amongst global fans.

As a fandom, online K-pop communities and spaces on social media sites embody many of the characteristics required to be labelled as a community. This is especially evident in the fan efforts to circumnavigate the language and cultural barriers in the consumption of Korean language media. Fans who have working proficiency in the Korean language help other fans through translation and explanation of the language, as well as offering definitions and ‘glossaries’ for words commonplace in the Korean entertainment industry. This work is not solely performed by non-Korean fans, and members of the Korean diaspora community also play an integral role in this process of linguistic and cultural translation. The process of translation in the K-pop fandom is community led, and deviates from the cultural adaptation methods adopted by professional translation companies and corporations (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). Looking at the translation of K-dramas, van Rossum (2015) found that fans tended to prefer fan translation efforts rather than those of professionals, since they retained cultural elements, such as address terms, and were therefore perceived to be more ‘authentic’. This mirrors similar attitudes identified by Dwyer (2014) in the global anglophone Japanese anime and manga fandom, where professional translations were scrutinised for over localisation of Japanese cultural concepts. Cruz, Seo, and Binay (2019) argue that this process of

translation does not end with word-for-word translations of Korean language content, as there is a further necessity to decode Korean sociocultural concepts and industry lexicon to contextualise K-pop media texts.

For Meyerhoff and Strycharz (2013), the lack of face-to-face interaction in online communities is one of the core barriers in applying the community of practice to online settings. Their argument hinges on two factors, first, the nature of online communication offers users greater flexibility in frequency of communication, and second, there is almost no way of verifying any viable demographic information about participants involved in online communities. Leuckert and Leuckert (2020) counter this argument, suggesting that online communities meet interactional and communicative criteria regardless, and the fact that they often constitute a diverse range of individuals ensures a certain level of spontaneity in online communicative practices. Reflective of the changes in communicative practices to online settings, studies in recent years, such as that of Carter (2018), Malik and Haidar (2020) and Leuckert and Leuckert (2020) have successfully applied the concept of the community of practice to fan-based online communities. In each of the studies, members of the community developed strong bonds with each other, as well as engaging in communication practices that employed a unique, exclusive community lexicon, and the use of humour. This suggests that where online communities can present certain difficulties for sociolinguistic study, the flexibility and multimodality of communication in online spaces posits online communities as a rich convergence point for interactive and creative communicative practices.

Unpacking the Shared Repertoire

Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) and Lee (2018) have identified the global anglophone K-pop fandom as a bilingual Korean-English fandom, who predominantly communicate in English. Although the online K-pop fandom communicate in local languages and are decidedly multilingual, Lee (2018) notes that English remains an important linguistic tool in connecting with other K-pop fans, as well as with K-pop idols who may not be well-versed in local languages but may understand English. In a study of Arabic speaking K-pop fans in Algeria, Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) found that a large percentage (94%) of participants indicated that there were English words they only used when talking about K-pop, many of which were ‘Konglish’ (Korean-born English: *all-kill*, *comeback*, *selca*), or English words that have underwent processes of semantic change in the global anglophone fandom (*stan*, *trash*, *bias*). Thus, English forms a key component of the shared repertoire of K-pop fans, whether they are first language speakers or speakers of global varieties of English.

Whether communicating in English or Korean, communication in the global anglophone K-pop fandom is not bound by notions of linguistic competency or proficiency. Rather than a need to display competency, navigation and participation in the fandom space is aided by knowledge of the well-developed lexicon. This is not restricted to words of Korean origin, but also includes English words that have been imported by wider fandom slang (*OTP*, *shipping*, *stan*). Reflective of a transcultural, global fandom, the shared repertoire of the K-pop fandom takes influences from multiple popular culture avenues and reducing linguistic habits to anglophone fans using Korean words in their speech simplifies these complicated semiotic realities. Sociolinguists such as Blommaert (2010) and Eckert (2018) have departed from the

concept of the speech community as grounded in temporal and spatial contexts of usage, and instead moved towards a focus on the repertoire of individual speakers', as influenced by the multiple contexts in which an individual operates in.

Eckert (2018) likens this process to 'bricolage', whereby individual speakers engage and abstract diverse resources to construct their own individual repertoire. Blommaert (2010) further argues that language is a mobile resource that travels across different localities, bringing about changes in function, form, and meaning, and as such, members of the K-pop fandom assemble these diverse influences to form their own interpretations and usage patterns of fandom lexicon. As the fanbase constitutes such a diverse range of individuals, traditional notions of borrowing are insufficient for understanding and conceptualising the processes of linguistic transfer in the online global anglophone fandom. As discussed by Kiaer (2020), there has been significantly less historical language contact and word borrowing between Korean and English when compared to East Asian counterparts, Chinese and Japanese. Most Korean words that have entered the English lexicon include food words (*kimchi*, *bibimbap*) and those related to traditional culture (*hanbok*, *taekwondo*). In contrast to these more traditional borrowing patterns, even a newer K-pop fan may have knowledge of a range of Korean words, reflective of changes in the processes of linguistic transfer in the 21st century.

In such a way, members of the global anglophone fandom engage in translanguaging practices. García and Li (2013) and Li (2018) introduce translanguaging as a framework for reinterpreting the processes by which an individual engages their semiotic repertoire. The concept of translanguaging departs from the existing convention of code-switching, by arguing that speakers do not treat

individual languages as two structural entities bound by their defined and named boundaries, instead positing it as a creative and dynamic process of deploying diverse semiotic resources. Using a translanguaging framework renders a sentence such as ‘this comeback from my *oppas* is *daebak, saranghaeyo!*’ intelligible to a member of the global anglophone K-pop fandom. As fans engage in translanguaging practices, lexical items undergo a process of resemiotisation, described by Iedema (2003) as a process by which words are transformed and meanings renegotiated simultaneously in multiple different contexts.

Despite this element of individual interpretation of fandom lexicon, the nature of the fandom hierarchy ensures that there are certain language ideologies and norms that are adhered to. This assembling of multiple semiotic and linguistic resources can also bring trouble, as some lexical items in certain K-pop fandom communities have been appropriated from the lexicon of marginalised groups. A subset of the K-pop fandom borrows heavily from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and within the fandom, the use of AAVE lexical items such as ‘slay’, ‘wig’ and ‘lit’ is often incorrectly identified as ‘stan language’ or ‘internet’ slang. Smokoski (2016) argues that this use (and often misuse) of AAVE in online communities reduces it to a type of ‘youth slang’, rather than a genuine mode of communication. This contextless adoption of AAVE within the global anglophone K-pop community is reflective of how the rapid sharing of information online has accelerated the spread of terms outside of their original contexts, bringing them into the mainstream removed from their histories (Zhang, Zhao, & Ke, 2016).

Although the commonality is an interest in K-pop, the shared repertoire of the global anglophone K-pop fandom takes influence from multiple semiotic contexts.

Where the process of translanguaging and resemiotisation can bring about dynamic, creative, and interactive processes of meaning making, the abstraction of words from their original contexts can lead to allegations of cultural appropriation. In the following section, this will be explored in greater detail in relation to the use of words of Korean origin in the global anglophone K-pop fandom.

Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) have classified the global anglophone K-pop fandom as a bilingual Korean-English fandom. The fandom predominantly communicates in English, with many fans also demonstrating awareness of Korean words and phrases. In an exploration of multilingual microblogging practices of the K-pop fandom, Lee (2018) states that “despite the fact that many of these global fans do not speak Korean, they tend to demonstrate linguistic convergence strategies utilizing certain Korean expressions”. Linguistic competency is not a prerequisite to be a member of the K-pop fandom, yet the use of the Korean language by global anglophone fans has multiple purposes, ranging from ‘authentic’ usage mirroring Korean-speaking contexts to mockery of fan stereotypes. Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) and Lee (2018) have found in separate studies that the use of Korean words may serve to enhance the emotional bonds and solidarity between fans and idols, as well as to pay ‘respect’ to the Korean language (Touhami & Al-Haq, 2017; Lee, 2018). Other scholars have explored how use of Korean words in certain contexts may index a core behavioural trait of a type of fan known as a ‘Koreaboo’, defined by Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) as a term used to “describe non-Korean K-pop fans who are allegedly pathologically obsessed with Korean culture”. Crow (2019) describes a common characteristic of Koreaboo behaviour of “the peppering in of Korean words along-side English ones, the functionality of which as a whole can be considered indexical of either Koreaboo behaviour, or the perception of authentic Korean use

that imitates Korean fans”. Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) have noted that the satirical form ‘oppar’ has developed as a perceived mockery of the perceived mispronunciation of *oppa* by fans from the United States.

As such, the Korean language functions as a form of authentic cultural currency within the context of the global anglophone K-pop fandom. Bourdieu (1986) posits the acquisition of knowledge as essential in attaining cultural capital. Fiske (1992) has applied this to fandom communities, suggesting that knowledge endowed the individual with cultural capital thus enhancing their mobility within the fandom. With the fandom being Korean-English bilingual, linguistic fluency in the global anglophone fandom requires knowledge not only of words of Korean origin (*oppa, unni, sunbae*) but also words from wider fandom lexicon (OTP, shipper) (Crow, 2019). This linguistic flow of Korean words into English as facilitated by the consumption of Korean language music by global anglophone fans has produced a diverse lexicon with a range of Korean words from different word classes, including address terms (*oppa* ‘older brother’), verbs (*saranghae* ‘I love you’), adjectives (*yeppeo* ‘beautiful’), and interjections (*ya*).

This is reflected in the role of cultural intermediaries and fan translators in navigating the language barrier between fans and Korean language content. Within the global anglophone K-pop fandom, these fan translators may be second language (L2) English speakers (Lee, 2018), as well as from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds (Aisyah et al., 2019). This process of translation does not just happen on the literal linguistic level, as K-pop community sites and news articles playing a further role in the semiotic ‘demystification’ of K-pop culture (Cruz, Seo, & Binay, 2021). The Korean language, whether used authentically or satirically, becomes a

form of linguistic currency to index a certain ideological viewpoint, or to demonstrate knowledge of Korean language and culture.

Computer Mediated Communication

As the online global anglophone K-pop fandom are communicating through social media and the internet, the communicative style employs many features of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). One well-known definition is that of Herring (1996), defining CMC as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers”. In line with the technological changes brought about by communication on the internet, Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic (2004) note that “in practice CMC is usually concerned more specifically with human interpersonal communication on, through and about the internet and web”. As an online community, the communicative practices of the global anglophone K-pop fandom involves several of the CMC features mentioned by Shaw (2008), including: expressive respelling, regularisation of irregular spelling and clipping, as well as CMC features identified by Hancock (2004) to indicate irony, such as irregular use of exclamation marks (!!!) and the use of caps lock for exaggeration. Fans also have awareness of CMC features popularised on social media, such as the use of alternating caps to code mockery. As noted by Lee (2018), members of the global anglophone fandom further demonstrated awareness of East Asian CMC features, notably the use of certain emojis (^^). Additionally, fans made use of the tilde (~), used in Korean to elongate a vowel (oppa~), or to show friendliness or appear cute.

Style, Indexicality and Identity

According to Eckert (2008) “stylistic practice is a process of bricolage [...] in which individual resources (in this case, variables) can be interpreted and combined with other resources to construct a more complex meaningful entity”. Eckert’s (2008) definition of stylistic practice is reflective of the shift in sociolinguistic study of variation away from defining social meaning in language in terms of demographic categorisations such as gender, ethnicity, and class, and towards recognition of individuals as ‘stylistic agents’, with the social meaning of certain lexical markers occurring contextually in interactional circumstances. In such cases, language therefore functions as a repertoire, defined by Blommaert (2007) as “a culturally sensitive ordered complex of genres, styles, registers, with lots of hybrid forms, and occurring in a wide variety of ways big and small”. Eckert (2000), in explaining this process of linguistic bricolage to construct stylised identity, likened the process to material style, as choosing to wear certain types of clothes can index group membership. Bucholtz (2009) further notes that “styles are the product of ideology, insofar as they are posited by speakers (as well as by analysts) as more or less clearly defined and socially specifiable collections of coinciding symbolic forms bound to particular social groups via metapragmatic stereotypes”.

Agha (2008) notes that the convergence of topic, place, style, and people are the core tenets behind the indexicality of certain communicative forms, as different topics require the engagement of a specific aspect of an individual’s semiotic repertoire. As recognised previously, the shared repertoire of the global anglophone K-pop fandom is multilingual, as well as occurring on multiple different semiotic levels. Lee (2018) and Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) found that the use of Korean words by global fans served as a method of aligning with perceived Korean societal

and cultural norms, especially the use of address and kinship terms. As such, when Korean linguistic features are used by fans, fans seek to mirror usage patterns experienced in Korean-speaking contexts. However, as noted by Lee (2018), the demonstration of this knowledge may occur with little or no awareness of Korean pragmatics, in which case, the use of Korean words may function stylistically. In studies (Touhami and Al-Haq, 2017; Lee, 2018, Kiaer, 2020) that have explored the linguistic habits of the global anglophone K-pop fandom, some level of awareness of Korean words and phrases is beneficial to successful navigation of the fandom space, thus making the use of Korean origin words a normative practice.

Crow (2019) and Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) however, found that the negative fan stereotype of the ‘Koreaboo’ directly mirrored usage of Korean words and phrases in Korean-speaking contexts. The dominant ideology that pervades the use of Korean words is the issue of cultural appropriation, specifically the use of Korean cultural words in a way that abstracts and removes them from their original cultural contexts. Use of Korean words is then either criticised or accepted, depending on the indexical trajectory of an utterance, with Blommaert (2007) stating that “every environment in which humans convene and communicate is almost by definition polycentric, in the sense that more than one possible centre can be distinguished: one can follow norms or violate them at any step of the process”. Using Korean words from the entertainment industry – *maknae*, *seonbae*, *hubae* – follows language norms by retaining the ‘authenticity’ of the Korean-speaking context in which they occur. Address terms and verbs – *oppa*, *unni*, *saranghae* – by contrast, have the potential to violate ideological norms, by virtue of being culture specific terms used outside of the Korean-speaking context in which they occur.

Whether the use of Korean words is appropriate or not is largely a question of indexicality, and the multiple social meanings attached to these words as they are resemiotised are now influenced by a mixture of Korean-speaking, English-speaking, and local language contexts. Looking at the indexicality of *oppa* amongst L2 Korean speakers as an example, Brown (2013) discovered that beyond the clear denotational meaning of the word ‘older brother of a younger woman’, *oppa* had additionally attained layers of social meaning that are triggered when *oppa* co-occurred with non-linguistic signs, or in specific contexts. Korean words, therefore, can be treated as what Silverstein (2003) has termed indexical forms, inasmuch that their use further reveals underlying ideological standpoints about the individuals who are using them. This is especially pertinent in the practice of using Korean address terms since they are gendered. As Brown (2017) notes, discourses attached to the address terms that index a normative relationship with men in the position of seniority (*hyeong*, *oppa*) differ considerably from those that place women in the position of seniority (*nuna*, *unni*).

Of further importance to note is the fact that semiotic understandings of Korean words are influenced by their occurrence in popular culture contexts. As outlined in the second OED definition for *oppa* the term refers to “an attractive Korean man, esp. a famous popular actor or singer” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The secondary meaning is representative of the semiotic influence of media portrayals of the *oppa* figure in Korean language media. For some fans, exposure to the word *oppa* may be isolated from ‘organic’ naturally occurring Korean speech contexts and may instead be understood in relation to male celebrities or idols that represent a visual aesthetic associated with how *oppa* is semiotised in fictive, popular culture contexts. Existing indexicalities of stigma in Korean-speaking contexts can be

transferred to the use of address terms in English-speaking contexts, with “Korean girls” (Brown, 2013) also criticised for their perceived willingness to engage in the use of address terms that index unequal relationships.

Language Ideology and the ‘Myth’ of Korean Culture

According to Woolard (2020) “as most commonly understood now, ideologies of language are morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world”. Language ideologies are not restricted to the level of articulation of mental constructs or verbal utterances but can also occur through visual representations. Language ideologies exist in what Bourdieu (1977) has termed the *habitus*: “a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class”. The *habitus* functions by assigning a cultural value upon material or immaterial things (for example, ‘good’ or ‘bad’) that is learnt through the repetition of certain social experiences. Recalling Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital, these valorisations within the *habitus* can inform how dominant language ideologies are formed and adhered to.

Woolard (2020) writes that “assumptions about the character of specific speakers or communities underpin evaluations of specific linguistic forms as, e.g. simple or complex, logical or illogical, rough, authentic, refined, or precise”. In the characteristic circular logic of ideology, the linguistic forms construed in these ways are then taken as evidence of just such traits in the speakers”. As such, language ideologies do not stop at the linguistic utterance, and go further in defining how the language use of individual speakers is understood and perceived. As Korean words

are described as an ‘essential’ (Kang, 2016) part of K-pop fan knowledge, use (or abuse) of the Korean language by global anglophone fans, the Korean language thus becomes an ideological battleground. The language barrier between Korean-speaking idols and global Anglophone fans has played into strong language ideology, linked to ideas of authenticity, gatekeeping, and language policing. Even for the fan translators that perform literal and cultural translation on behalf of other fans, dominant ideologies within the fandom can inform how these translations are interpreted and, in some cases, scrutinised. As Miley (2020) writes, the necessity for translational procedures and preference for fan translation in the K-pop fandom can spring up unscrupulous translations that are created and disseminate to suit ideological purposes.

Cruz, Seo, and Binay (2019) acknowledge the important role of K-pop fan translators as “productive intercultural translators of interpretative frames for globalizing culture products” yet also recognise that “while translation practices enable cross-cultural understandings which compensate for cultural discounting, these practices also reconstitute ideological conflicts”. In such a way, the transcultural convergence of the K-pop fandom does not only disrupt ideas of the dominant centre and the peripheral other, but also throws diverse individuals into competitions of cultural prestige. As a diverse group of fans who have different levels of geocultural proximity to Korea and the authentic ‘Koreanness’, Cruz, Seo, and Binay (2019) suggest that “tribal ideologies and histories collide as fans collectively negotiate and contest issues of cultural appreciation, appropriation, and ownership which permeate the consumption of K-pop”.

As such, the Korean language is the predominant ideological battleground within the global anglophone K-pop fandom. As with the *habitus* described by Bourdieu (1977), certain Korean words are often perceived on binary ideological scales of ‘appreciative/ignorant’, ‘authentic/fake’, and ‘genuine/sarcastic’. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the stigmatisation framing of the word *oppa*. Lee, Lee, and Park (2020), Jeong and Yu (2021), Moon (2008), and Brown (2013, 2017) have explored the indexicality of stigmatisation behind the use of the word *oppa* in both Korean-speaking and English-speaking contexts. Brown (2013), in exploring L2 attitudes towards *oppa* amongst Korean language students in the United States found that attitudes fell exactly on this ideological scale: using *oppa* was either conceptualised as an ‘authentic’ way of engaging with Korean culture and society, or, was treated as uncomfortable due to the dense connotations of gender inequality and patriarchally informed hierarchy. In leveraging stigmatised attitudes towards the use of *oppa*, the ideological standpoint of *oppa* as a socially uncomfortable term was also articulated towards the “Korean girls” who use the term and are therefore perceived as ‘submissive’ and willingly deferential to patriarchal hierarchical norms in Korean culture and society, articulating an idea of superior ‘cultural prestige’ for being able to choose when to use the term.

Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) associate this application of racial stereotyping to perceptions of *skinship* by K-pop fans in the United States. In a study of K-pop masculinities, most respondents found that the ‘soft masculinity’ of male K-pop idols was read as too feminized to occur outside of Korean contexts and was only normalised when restricted to these contexts. When performed in the context of hegemonic masculinities in the United States by White men, it would be “awkward” and “not natural”. This highlights the complex intersections produced by

transculturality, and some of the difficulties that can arise as patterns of consumption switch away from the Anglocentric dominance of the ‘West’ and towards the peripheral ‘other’. Stigma, and subsequent mockery of K-pop is articulated on multiple different semiotic levels. The initial stigma occurs in the moment that Korean culture and society is perceived as something ‘unusual’ and ‘abnormal’. The “cultural prestige competitions” mentioned by Cruz, Seo, and Binay (2019) can go both ways, with a core tenet of the ‘Koreaboo’ fan and ‘oppapologists’ involving blind defence of Korean culture and society, thus positing Korean culture and society as ‘superior’, based on representations in highly mediated popular culture.

As Gaya (2012) states “this adoration [for Korean popular culture] also leads to koreaboos praising South Korea as a superior nation to others. We’ve all seen the various statements of how K-pop is much better than “trashy” American pop due to its preservation of virtuosity”. The ‘cultural superiority’ argument, perhaps unsurprisingly, is also the favoured choice of those outside of the fandom who are critical of the consumption of K-pop, where the argument lies in the fact that as K-pop is a ‘hybridised’ form of music which abstracts elements of Western pop music, it therefore cannot be superior to that which it takes inspiration from. Although previous literature has cited the ‘cultural hybridity’ of K-pop as the main driver for its international success, Kim (2017) makes the valid counterargument, especially in the light of K-pop’s increased relevance because of popularity in ‘The West’, that “K-pop should be understood as part of the hegemony of American pop and neoliberalism”.

If we use Kim’s (2017) interpretation of this framing of K-pop, then again, we can ask the question: what is ‘Korean’ about K-pop? The obvious answer is the

language, which in turn reflects cultural elements of Korean society. The Korean language is the 'other' in that it is not English, yet retaining the Korean language legitimises the K-pop fandom as fans of a popular culture from *Korea* specifically. As one article on Korean newspaper *Korea JoongAng Daily* asks about the recent proliferation of K-pop songs performed entirely in English "while some welcome the move, believing it appeals to a wider audience around the world, some ask the question: is a song still K-pop with no Korean lyrics?" (Yang, 2021). The ideology around the Korean language thus forms in relation to this 'otherness', which can simultaneously elevate differences and reinforce the authentic identity of K-pop, and by virtue of association, authenticate global anglophone K-pop fans. Elaborating upon Saussure's (1916) theory of the 'signifier' and the 'signified', Barthes (1972) added the concept of the 'myth'. For Barthes (1972), myths permeate contemporary society, and consist of socially constructed concepts that people create for other people. Barthes (1972) diverges from Saussure's arbitrary 'signifier' and 'signified' by stating that "the mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated". Therefore, "myth is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system" (Barthes, 1972).

As a form of audio-visual culture, K-pop is rich with mythic semiotic elements, exemplified in the 'concept'. Yoon (2017) notes that "In K-pop, the "concept" sets the entire framework for an idol group's musical release: the music, the choreography, the costumes, the lyrics, the music video, the album jacket photos, and the bodies of the idols themselves". The 'concept' is an essential facet in the production and marketing of K-pop groups. The concept, as used in the K-pop industry, is therefore posited to be understood semiotically. For girl groups, certain choreography or outfits can index either an 'innocent' or 'sexy' concept. This emphasis on the concept

forms part of the myth of Korean culture and society that is transmitted to global anglophone fans. This myth of Korean culture and society has been negotiated through consumer-based, highly mediated contexts.

Discomfort around the indexicalities of certain Korean address terms (Brown, 2013, 2017; Moon, 2008) and the perception of cultural features of Korean society as ‘abnormal’ all form part of this mythology. Language ideologies have formed in part at least due to stereotypes of Korean society and people, and where the transculturality of the fandom has been an eminent example of the disruptive potential of popular culture that challenges the dominant hegemony, this abstraction from mediated Korean popular culture contexts has removed contextuality. This process of resemiotisation, therefore, does not take one singular trajectory. As Cruz, Seo, and Binay (2019) note, meanings are constantly renegotiated, and cultural translation moves in tandem with these shifts. Rather, resemiotisation processes take several trajectories, dependent on indexicalities and contextuality. The Korean language, as the grounding for what separates K-pop from pop, is a form of linguistic and cultural currency, and deploying the Korean language as a linguistic resource, whilst also functioning stylistically, can further demonstrate alignment with ideologies of the ‘good’ culturally sensitive fan, or the ‘bad’ culturally ignorant fan.

Where the recent global popularity of K-pop in the West has accelerated studies on K-pop and the fans that consume it, relatively few studies (Crow, 2019, Lee, 2018, Touhami and Al-Haq, 2017) have explored this phenomenon in relation to the linguistic practices of the anglophone fandom. This study intends to develop on these contributions to the growing body of literature on global anglophone K-pop fans by presenting an interdisciplinary corpus-based critical discourse analysis of the

resemiotisation processes of three Korean cultural words (*oppa*, *unni*, *skinship*), to examine how fans reimagine and reconstruct the meaning of Korean words in online fandom spaces. Where these linguistic practices can be seen as a positive shift in the perception of ‘foreign’ words in English lexicon, exposure through the highly mediated environment of popular culture and fandom has contributed to polarisation and stigmatisation of Korean language use. It is however, recognised that this process of resemiotisation has enhanced the indexical fields of Korean words in playful and humorous ways, reflecting global anglophone K-pop fans as ‘stylistic agents’. These words have been selected as they all have culture specific applications in Korean-speaking contexts, as well as varied indexical fields in these contexts. As such, they were seen as appropriate examples from where to explore how global anglophone fans negotiate meaning and facilitate (whether intentionally or not) the deployment of Korean as a linguistic currency or as a linguistic resource to index ideological alignment. Furthermore, as this global interest in K-pop is relatively recent, it was necessary to choose words that have been stalwarts of global anglophone K-pop language to ensure that there was enough relevant linguistic data to utilise in the study.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will introduce and outline the methodological process for collecting and analysing social media data, as well as the process for building the individual corpora involved in the study. The methodology has been selected as the most appropriate means to achieve the research objective of this thesis, which is to investigate the extent by which usage patterns in Korean-speaking contexts inform and influence meaning in global anglophone fandom contexts, as well as how perceptions of Korean culture and society by non-Korean fans offer Korean cultural words new indexical forms. The sources that were employed to build the corpora will be contextualised within the specific research aims of the study, as well as the rationale behind the selection of each source. Following on from this, the technical details behind the choice to use the corpus building software Sketch Engine will be provided, along with details of how the data was cleaned and processed for analysis. For each case study, a separate corpus was created, and different sources and methodological approaches behind the creation of each corpus will be outlined. A detailed table of individual sources used to build the corpora can be found in the Appendix.

Online Data as a Linguistic Resource

As a rich semiotic resource, scholarly interest in the internet from a communication perspective is a diverse field that has continued to evolve alongside the rapid pace of development of new technologies and social media in the past couple of decades. Digital forms of communication have become integral to everyday communicative activities between individuals with access to the appropriate

technologies to do so. Communication that is facilitated using digital technologies is generally referred to as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and where it traditionally refers to communication facilitated through a computer, the term has now been expanded to encompass new forms of communication, such as those made through smartphones (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013).

Although CMC is predominantly a text-based medium, it further includes audio-visual elements such as video, images, and audio (Zappavigna, 2012), as new technologies have afforded internet users more opportunities than ever before to embellish and embed audio-visual content in text-based posts, creating forms of communication that are firmly multimodal and interactive. Dressman (2019) states that “multimodality refers to the combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes, such as sight, sound, print, images, video, music, and so on, that produce meaning in any given message”. On platforms that blend audio-visual elements such as Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, meaning is increasingly enhanced and transmitted through the multimodality of text and imagery, such as in animated GIFs and ‘memes’ (Bourlai & Herring, 2014). Where images are used, text-based captions can enhance and enrich the meaning of the image, and vice versa. Social media, as a multimodal communicative landscape, offers a rich, yet complex convergence point from where to collect linguistic data. Each platform provides users with different communicative tools – be it ‘stories’ on Instagram, or 280 characters ‘Tweets’ on Twitter – as such, providing users with certain restrictions or affordances to expression. Leppänen et al., (2014) suggest that social media resources may be employed differently dependent on membership in a specific community.

This is especially important when it comes to studying linguistic data that occurs within a fandom-based space. Fandom is understood to be a ‘participatory culture’, as fans do not only consume media, but they also participate in the production of fan created material, varying from the creation of memes to fan art and fan videos. As such, fandom spaces are highly interactive, and as Jenkins (1992) notes, media fans are “active producers and manipulators of meaning”, as they navigate a process of decontextualization and recontextualization of media texts and products (Kytölä, 2012). Besides being participatory in nature, fandom is further regarded to be subcultural, existing counter to what is mainstream, offering further challenges and considerations to be considered when sourcing linguistic data from online fandom communities (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). As has been discussed, the global anglophone K-pop fandom have a wealth of social media spaces and online communities at their disposal – Tumblr, LiveJournal, Twitter, Instagram, forums – and as such, an important consideration when sourcing linguistic data from online fandom sources is to contextualise the sources, including standardised communicative practices. This is where the data collection process intersects with methods refined in the field of digital ethnography, as the accessibility of social media data facilitates inversions and ethical questions on the relationship between the researcher and the subject (Pink, 2007; Murthy, 2008).

Being a fandom, global anglophone fans of K-pop form part of the ‘insider’ group. Although in the present study the global anglophone K-pop fandom are being treated as a community of practice regarding their shared linguistic behaviours, it is recognised that communicative practices can differ across platforms, thus necessitating an ethnographic awareness of the functions and communicative norms of the sites from which data was sourced. Various factors were taken into

consideration in the process of selecting the websites from which linguistic data was sourced to build the corpora. Though Twitter may be an obvious choice due to the popularity of the platform in the fandom and the hashtag feature making it very easy to search for Tweets using specific keywords, the 280 characters limit per Tweet made it difficult to follow conversational threads. Likewise, Instagram was ruled out for inclusion as it does not offer fertile ground for the observation of interactional communication, as Korean words are mostly used in a unilateral direction from fan-idol. To keep in line with the characterisation of the global anglophone K-pop fandom as a community of practice, websites selected for inclusion were primarily selected based on quantity and quality of data, for example, having a large userbase, and interactional features. This will be elaborated upon further in the following section.

As the internet is such a vast semiotic and linguistic resource for observation, CMC has long been associated with the empirical methodology of corpus linguistics. Both fields have simultaneously evolved and adapted considerably in the past few decades due to advancements in technologies equipping researchers with the tools to collect and analyse large datasets (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). The two often complement each other for two reasons, first, the internet and social media offers a large set of 'natural language' data, and second, employing a corpus methodology makes it possible to analyse a large set of data. Corpus-based approaches to language on the web are becoming increasingly more prevalent in the literature, Zappavigna (2012) has presented the concept of the 'web of corpus'. Thus, corpus linguistics as a methodology lends itself particularly well to the collection of large sets of online data.

Contextualising the Sources

To suit the specific research aims of the present study, it was necessary to collect data from a variety of different online sources. First, two of the terms selected for inclusion are gendered (*oppa*, *unni*), thus necessitating the collection of data from sites that were not too male-centric. Second, all the three terms are parts of everyday speech in Korean-speaking contexts, and therefore the decision was made to include data from more ‘general interest’ sources (*Quora*, search engine data, *Urban Dictionary*) alongside the K-pop fandom focused sources. This data was treated as supplementary, to better represent the differing levels of investment in fandom. With the K-pop news site and forum *allkpop* described by one *Reddit* user as “the kpop community at its worse” (JinnManx, 2020), more ‘casual’ and occasional may not align as strongly with the K-pop fan identity (and all that comes with it), and instead choose not to participate in K-pop specific communities. The inclusion of data from outside of strictly fandom sources was therefore seen as being able to ‘offset’ some of the more polarised opinions and usage patterns experienced in fandom communities.

Of particular importance to the data collection process was this collection of data that was representative of the range of K-pop fan demographics. To quote Bourdieu (1989) once more “nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies”. The K-pop fandom is a broad group, and fans tend to categorise themselves further by correlating their fan identity with their level of ‘investment’ in K-pop. Each fan categorisation comes attached with a series of behaviours, and in the case of ‘stans’, a distinct lexicon. Investment in K-pop can range from the benign – a ‘casual’ fan who just listens to K-pop – to the extreme: Koreaboos, *sasaengs*, and stans. Where the concept of the *sasaeng* is less relevant to the present study due to

occurring almost exclusively in the domestic fandom context, the terms Koreaboo and stans have been introduced here as they are both relevant to subsequent analysis. This is because both are inextricably connected and associated with certain linguistic features, and both are fan identities that align with the ‘deviant’ or ‘abnormal’ aspect of K-pop fandom. These features will be elaborated upon in later chapters. Beyond identification as a K-pop fan, fans also identify themselves in accordance with the behaviours and engagement that they have with K-pop, thus resulting in further identities of shippers, fanfiction writers, and translators, to name a few.

In a study of *sasaeng* fans in Singapore, Williams and Ho (2015) found that “respondents specifically positioned themselves somewhere between the two opposite ends of the fan spectrum such that, while they were significantly more proactive than a mainstream fan in maximizing their experiences in K-pop consumption, they also claimed to be less deviant or extreme than *sasaeng* fans”. The ‘fan spectrum’, they argue, is part of the construction of authentic identities that posit one’s own pleasures as less perverse than the fandom extreme (Koreaboos, *sasaengs*, stans), but still more involved and energised than the mainstream. With this tendency for deviant identities, and the varying ideological functions of the Korean language as a linguistic currency, using a range of linguistic sources was adopted to circumnavigate the issue of selectivity in the corpus data. Furthermore, different fan identities can impact the use of Korean words, as well as the surrounding discourse. For example, the use (or misuse) of Korean words is characteristic of Koreaboo fans, whereas other fans may use Korean words ironically to deride Koreaboo fans or distance themselves from them.

The websites that formed the primary bulk of the data were *OneHallyu*, *allkpop* and *The L Chat*. All are online discussion forums, and present examples of asynchronous communication, which does not require users to be communicating ‘real time’ (Herring, 2007), making it easier to follow how a conversation using Korean words develops. Pink et al., (2015) have termed online discussion forums as an example of ‘threaded sociality’, a form of asynchronous online communication wherein users reply to each other and communicate through a single discussion thread. Online forums are usually structured hierarchically, with individual ‘forums’ named in accordance with a specific topic. In this digital hierarchy, forums can therefore be seen as the equivalent of a folder. Within the forum, there are a collection of ‘threads’, which are discussion topics created by a user. Dialogues on forums are polylogical – neither a monologue nor a dialogue – inviting users the opportunity to reply to the ‘original poster’ (OP: the user who initiated the thread), or other individual posters on the same thread. Running a discussion forum with hundreds of thousands of unique users can be complicated, and many have a dedicated ‘team’ of users who facilitate the running of the site.

OneHallyu and *allkpop* are two of the largest anglophone K-pop forums, with both having sections of ‘official’ threads dedicated to the discussion of individual groups and a substantial global userbase. *The L Chat* is an online forum for women who identify as lesbian, and whilst having a smaller userbase than *OneHallyu* and *allkpop*, has several K-pop related threads. Due to the stereotypes and media attention focused on female fans of boy groups, the inclusion of data from *The L Chat* served to give an insight into female fans of girl groups, specifically, those who identify outside of heteronormativity. A further reason for selecting these forums specifically was their propensity for a mixture of genuine discussion and ‘toxicity’.

This ensured that a spectrum of attitudes and behaviour was obtained. Secondary data (including information used in the chapters) was provided from *Reddit*, *Quora*, *Urban Dictionary*, and search engine data. In the following section, greater contextual information about each source will be provided to better situate them in the present study. All the linguistic data was in the English language.

OneHallyu Forums

OneHallyu (OH) is a well-known (yet slightly controversial) forum for global anglophone K-pop fans, described in one definition on *Urban Dictionary* as a “kpop forum filled with delusional stans that hate American pop cause they’re koreaboos” (Urban Dictionary, 2018). Another user on *OneHallyu* notes that “at times it’s a full on wank site rather than actually discussing stuff” (silicon soul, 2018). ‘Wank’, when used in internet subcultures, is defined on *Fanlore* (n.d.) as “a loud and public online argument, often involving many participants outside of the initiating members, and often devolving into side-taking, hyperbole, and personal attacks”. *OneHallyu* is routinely characterised by others as a site where ‘toxicity’ flourishes, with users described as ‘immature’ and ‘delusional’ (often written in the fan vernacular ‘delulu’). This doesn’t, however, seem to have deterred many users, who find that it offers a discussion space for all topics K-pop. The site lacks a dedicated ‘about’ page, but we can assume the date to be 2013, due to that being the year the two site admins joined. The ‘members’ tab on the homepage lists a total of 123,513 (at the time of writing). The website traffic tracking estimator *similarweb* estimates that the site receives close to 1 million visits a month, with the majority coming from the United States, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Besides negative perceptions of the userbase, the site has been subject to multiple server issues. In 2015, *Reddit* K-

pop subreddit *r/kpop* banned links to the site due to reports from both *Reddit* and *OneHallyu* users that the site was infected with a type of malware that flooded users with pornographic images when they clicked links to the site. Ultimately, this led to the crash of the site in 2016, with some feeling that the site had ‘peaked’ by that point.

OneHallyu as a dedicated ‘staff’ team, who take care of various aspects of running and maintaining the functionality of the site. Users who are members of staff are indicated by a coloured username correlated to their role (admin, moderator, tech, graphics). Although the focus is squarely on Korean entertainment (hence, *hallyu*), the site also has separate forums for ‘Japanese Entertainment’, ‘Chinese Entertainment’, ‘Other Asian Entertainment’, ‘Hollywood’, ‘Fanfiction’, and even ‘Love & Relationships’. A particularly contentious feature of the site is the inclusion of ‘The Bar’, an 18+ section of the site which is dedicated to adult discussion (usually of a sexual nature and not limited to K-pop). The tagline reads: “a bit of perversion won’t hurt!” (OneHallyu, n.d.). The site has a dedicated userbase that may or may not participate on other discussion sites (such as *allkpop* – more on that to follow, *Reddit*, or Twitter). Highly controversial was ‘The Official Bashing Thread’, an open space for users to post negative and often offensive opinions about K-pop idols, which operated from 2013-2017 before being closed.

Unsurprisingly, the ‘Korean Entertainment’ forum is the largest, and within it contains the subforums of ‘Music’, ‘Celebrity News & Gossip’, ‘Celebrity Photos & Videos’, ‘Movies & Television’, and ‘Charts and Sales’. In contrast with the more stringent rules of the *r/kpop* subreddit that forbid gossip, speculation, and fan created material, the different subsections of *OneHallyu* allow for any kind of

content to be posted, discussion may, even in seemingly unrelated threads, circle back to K-pop or Korean popular culture. In the ‘Korean Entertainment’ forum, the ‘Music’ subforum has the largest number of posts, with a total of 8.1 million (at the time of writing). The ‘Music’ subforum is divided as follows: ‘Groups’, ‘Soloists’, and ‘Individual Artists’. Most K-pop groups and soloists have a dedicated ‘official thread’, which can span thousands of pages and millions of views.

Figure 3

An example of some ‘official’ artist threads on the OneHallyu forum.

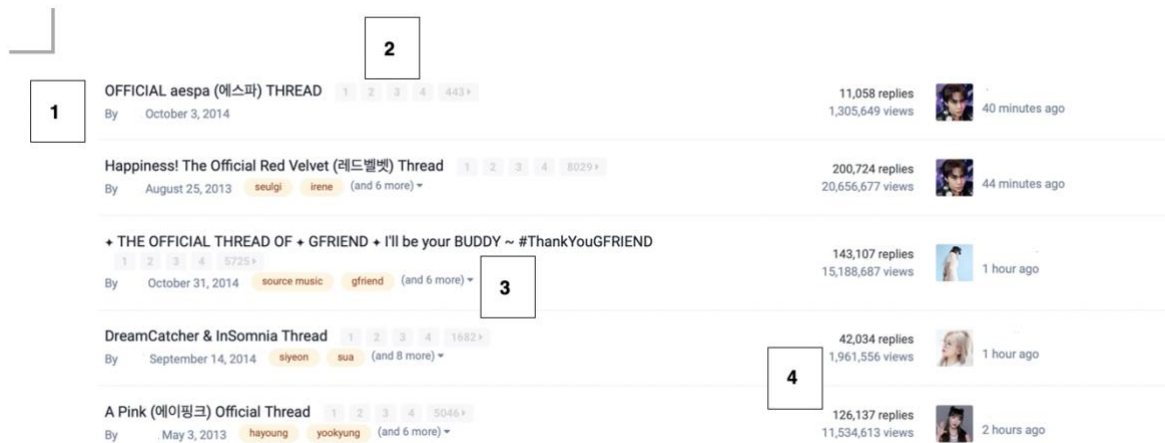


Figure 3 (above) is a screenshot of the threads under the ‘Groups’ subforum on the *OneHallyu* forum. Threads are organised chronologically, and threads with the most recent interactions are displayed at the top of the list [1]. The thread title is displayed at the top, along with the number of ‘pages’ the thread has [2]. As can be seen in the example above, the number of pages in a single thread (Red Velvet: 8,029, A Pink: 5,046) can reach thousands. To facilitate useability, individual idols have tags on the forum, and these are displayed in yellow beneath the title and page count, along with the username of the OP and when the thread was started [3]. On the right hand, the total number of replies and views are displayed [4], along with the

username and profile of the most recent poster. Threads on *OneHallyu* tend to feature a lot of images, as well as embedded videos. Some threads are more discussion centric, though the ‘official’ artists are more geared towards posting image and video-based content of K-pop idols, including promotional material and content posted on idol social media accounts.

With a large and diverse userbase (according only to traffic estimates), as well as a sort of ‘anything goes’ attitude to the range of K-pop related discussion on the site, *OneHallyu* was an ideal source of linguistic data for the present study. Each individual corpus (*oppa*, *unni*, *skinship*) made use of a sizable amount of data from *OneHallyu*. As a large anglophone forum with many discussion boards and high levels of interactivity, data from *OneHallyu* was seen as representative of a wide demographic of different K-pop fans. Furthermore, despite the toxicity, propensity for ‘wank’ and ‘trolling’, there are genuine discussions about K-pop throughout the site. As such, it made it a suitable point from which to collect a range of differing viewpoints and discourses.

allkpop Forums

allkpop (AKP) is one of the largest English language K-pop news sites and was founded in 2007 in the United States. The website is known for being one of the fastest English language sites to break K-pop news, receiving over a million unique users daily. In June 2022 alone, the site reportedly received a total of 82 million visitors from across the globe including Guatemala, the United States, Malaysia, and Canada (Semrush, 2022). Despite being a well-established media entity in the global anglophone K-pop fandom, *allkpop* has routinely found itself the subject of criticism

for sensationalism, clickbait, as well as having a toxic userbase. In 2013, the website came under fire from K-pop fans and the wider Korean entertainment industry for leaking nudes of the soloist Ailee. The incident was a wide-reaching scandal, and several K-pop idols who had maintained friendly relationships with the site prior to the scandal revoked their relationship (Seoulbeats, 2013).

Besides the news site, *allkpop* has a forum, with 210,004 members, 113,972 threads, and a total of 3,491,032 posts (all at the time of writing). Like the news arm of the site, the forum has been criticised for promoting the mistreatment and bullying of idols, including ‘bashing threads’. The bashing thread contained oftentimes extremely hateful content about idols, and users were unable to reply to other posts in the thread. Further criticism has rallied around the tendency for the site to ‘cherrypick’ news articles, translating and posting offensive and right-wing Netizen comments from predominantly male dominated community and discussion boards in Korea. As such, the site has been dogged by allegations of toxicity, with the forum described by one user on *Reddit* as “The allkpop forums are complete garbage. It’s a toxic cesspool you should never ever consider looking at” (silicon soul, 2020).

Under the main ‘*allkpop*’ forum, the subforum ‘K-Lounge’ has the largest number of posts, with a total of 1.7 million posts spread across 86,000 threads. Within the ‘K-Lounge’ there is a ‘K-Lounge Anons’ subsection, where users (with the approval of a moderator) can post threads anonymously. The ‘K-Pop Artists Threads’ subforum functions in a similar way to the ‘official’ artist threads. Compared to *OneHallyu*, *allkpop* has a much larger number of moderators. Rules forbid users from the sexualisation of minors, as well as posting harmful, disrespectful, discriminatory, or derogatory content. Despite this, in 2020, the *allkpop* forums

became a hotbed for anti-black discrimination that was largely ignored by the moderators. Despite making one of the single largest numerical contributions to the *oppa* corpus, smaller amounts of data from the *allkpop* forums were used in the *unni* and *skinship* corpora.

The L Chat

K-pop has a large queer fanbase worldwide, and despite almost universal agreement that most K-pop fans globally and young women roughly between the ages of 14-30, the queer portion of this fanbase is often overlooked. As stated by Belinky (2019) “the K-pop fandom is huge, complex, and means loads to many people of all ages and genders worldwide – it can’t, and shouldn’t be boiled down to something as lazy as “ook these young women, who want to marry these pretty boys!””. The female fandom of K-pop is undoubtedly overrepresented in media representations of ‘K-pop fangirls’, but this is often limited to heterosexual female fans of boy groups. Female fans of girl groups are only recently beginning to gain attention, yet there has still been little attention paid to queer female fans of K-pop girl groups and their practices.

With the focus on female fans throughout this thesis, the *unni* and *skinship* chapters aim to shift the focus away from female fans of boy groups and towards queer female fans of girl groups. Given *Reddit* has traditionally been associated with a predominantly male userbase, the primary corpus data for the *unni* and *skinship* chapters was collected from two English language forums for lesbians. The first is *The L Chat* (a play on the name of the popular lesbian TV drama *The L Word*), an anonymous English language forum in which, according to Guerrero-Pio, Establés,

and Ventura, (2018) features “issues relating to current affairs and popular culture and discussed and speculated upon from a lesbian perspective, especially the threads about media products with lesbian or bisexual characters, or gossip about the sexual orientation of celebrities”. *The L Chat* is described in one *Urban Dictionary* definition as “home to the trainwreck lesbians” with “hilarious threads created from time to time”, even though it “hates anyone and everyone” (Urban Dictionary, 2013). ‘Het shit’ (short for heterosexual), including discussion about men, is frowned upon and is often associated with the practice of trolling. The community makes routine use of two unique lexical items: ‘Bertha’, “a fat party pooper, most likely butch” and ‘Elizabeth’, “a pretty but extremely nervous and prude person” (Urban Dictionary, 2009). The tagline of the site reads “lezzie gossip and drama for the Elizabeth and Bertha in all of us”.

Speculation on the sexualities of celebrities is a popular pastime on the site, and there is a ‘Korean Entertainment’ thread where users can discuss anything related to idols or other Korean celebrities. Shipping practices are solely leveraged towards same-sex female idol pairings, and some popular groups (MAMAMOO, Girls’ Generation) and pairings (MoonSun) have their own specific threads. *The L Chat* is anonymous, and although there are a few registered users (known as ‘regs’), users are instead marked as ‘Guest’. With so many anonymous users interacting the phrases ‘different anon’ (DA) and ‘same anon’ (SA) are used to indicate with whom a poster is engaging in discussion with. Threads can be hundreds of pages long, and are often divided into ‘parts’ when they have reached a certain number of pages and replies (or, become untenable due to arguments and trolling).

Figure 4

A screenshot of the post and reply structure of *The L Chat*.



As an online discussion forum, *The L Chat* shares many similar features with the *OneHallyu* and *allkpop* forums. Without usernames or any other profile information, the poster [1] is displayed on the left. The name of the thread, number of the post, and the timestamp are displayed above the content of the post [2]. When users are replying to another post in the thread, the original post is displayed in a box, and the reply is displayed below [3]. As *The L Chat* has a relatively small userbase (10,277 at the time of writing) with relatively few images and other metadata (usernames, profile pictures, badges etc.) that could complicate the data collection process, it was easy to follow how conversations and discourses developed and were engaged with. Unlike *OneHallyu* or *allkpop*, where most of the forum is dedicated to discussion of Korean popular culture, the ‘Korean Entertainment’ thread and shipping thread have more focused discussion between a smaller pool of individuals. To supplement the data from *The L Chat*, data was also collected from a (now defunct) offshoot forum dedicated to Girls’ Generation. The forum is almost identical in structure to *The L Chat*, with the predominant difference being the sole focus on Girls’ Generation.

Reddit

Reddit is described on the company website as the “home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection” (Reddit, n.d.).

Founded in 2005, *Reddit* consists of ‘subreddits’, individual thread-based communities where users can post, as well as comment on posts, or ‘upvote’ and ‘downvote’ them. According to *Reddit*’s own estimates, there are over 10,000 active communities, with over 50 million daily unique users, and over 13 billion posts and comments across the site (Reddit, n.d.). In terms of user demographics, most *Reddit* users are male (61%), and between the ages of 18-29 (64%). Users from the United States make up just under half of the total userbase (48%) (Todorov, 2022). *Reddit* occupies an important place in internet subculture, most notably for its contributions to meme culture.

There are numerous subreddits dedicated to K-pop on *Reddit*: *r/kpop*, *r/kpophelp*, *r/kpophoughts*, *r/kpoppers*, *r/unpopulararkpopopinions*, *r/kpopvids*, and *r/kpoprants*. Due to the predominantly male demographic of *Reddit*, and the fact that discussion threads on the site tend to be shorter than those on discussion forums, the data collected from *Reddit* was treated as supplementary to the forum data. Most of the data was collected from the subreddit *r/unpopulararkpopopinions* (UKO), a subreddit with a total of around 66,000 posts and described as “the subreddit for sharing your unpopular opinions about Kpop!” (Reddit, n.d.). A prerequisite for posting on the subreddit is having an ‘unpopular’ opinion, with the rules stating that “your post must have a subjective stance on some topic”, with an unpopular opinion described as “an opinion that is rare”. It thus offers users the opportunity to engage in discussion that is counter to what is ‘popular’ in the global anglophone K-pop fan community. To decide whether an opinion is ‘unpopular’ or not, users visiting the thread are able to vote on whether they ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, or are ‘unsure’. Using *r/unpopulararkpopopinions* in the data made it possible to simultaneously identify ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ viewpoints.

Quora

Following in the footsteps of the now defunct *Yahoo! Answers*, *Quora* is a question-and-answer site that as of 2019, receives around 300 million unique users per month (Schleifer, 2019). The main page describes the site as “a place to share knowledge and better understand the world” (Quora, n.d.). The primary function of the site is for users to post questions, which are then answered by other users. Each question can be answered by multiple users, and then be ‘upvoted’ or ‘downvoted’. There is no limit to the type of questions that can be answered on *Quora* – healthcare concerns, relationship advice, general curiosity – with the ‘rules’ page stating that “Quora aims for each question page to become the best possible resource for someone with the same question” (Quora, n.d.). Questions on *Quora* are posted anonymously, however, when a user replies, their profile information, number of answers they have provided, and number of views their answer has received are displayed. The feature to track ‘related questions’ streamlined the process of collecting data from *Quora*, and the sheer scope of the questions on *Quora* ensured the collection of content from a diverse range of individuals. Rather than just being K-pop fans, users posting answers on Korean language related questions on *Quora* may also be Korean, have lived or worked there, or otherwise have working knowledge of the language and culture.

Urban Dictionary

Urban Dictionary is a crowdsourced online dictionary that was founded in 1999 under the tagline “define your world” (Urban Dictionary, 2022). Initially, the intention was to offer a reference for slang and cultural words/phrases that may not be included in a standardised, more traditional dictionary. Aaron Peckham, the

founder, noted that the site began as a ‘joke’, to mock the popular online dictionary website *Dictionary.com* (Parham, 2019). The site has been heralded as a counter-culture youth-driven alternative to prescriptivist dictionaries, however, in recent years the lack of regulation over definitions has come under scrutiny for the publication of hate speech. The top definition for *Urban Dictionary* on the site reads “supposed to be a user-inputted dictionary for words. However, has become a mindless forum of jokes, view-points, sex, and basically anything but the real definition of a word” (Urban Dictionary, 2006). A second definition echoes this sentiment “website where Stupid people decide to write definitions that make no damn sense” (Urban Dictionary, 2010).

The greatest strength of *Urban Dictionary* – allowing any user with an internet connection to provide a definition – also happens to be its greatest weakness, as definitions are often highly subjective. Definitions can be ‘upvoted’ or ‘downvoted’, and users can also post examples of the word in use, which are featured below the definition in italics. When a term is searched on the site, the definitions are ordered by those with the most ‘upvotes’ in relation to ‘downvotes’. As a dictionary with many slang words and internet culture terms, as well as with multiple definitions for a single term, *Urban Dictionary* was an ideal reference point to explore definitions for the terms used in this study (*oppa, unni, skinship*), as well as other related terms ‘kpop fans’, ‘kpop’, ‘koreaboo’. Due to the high level of subjectivity and lack of textual data (most definitions are short), *Urban Dictionary* definitions were mostly used in a supplementary fashion.

Search Engine Data

The corpus building software used in this thesis, *Sketch Engine* (to be discussed in the following section) allows users to create and manage several corpora using data collected from the web. As such, it has an inbuilt feature to input a minimum of three keywords that are subsequently searched using the search engine *Bing*. *Sketch Engine* then returns a list of websites that feature the combination of the inputted keywords, allowing the user to select which websites to upload to the corpus data. The search engine data was added to the corpus data last, and the keywords to be searched were identified from a search in the pre-existing data for common collocates of *oppa*, *unni*, and *skinship*. The intention of including search engine data was to identify more individualised usage patterns that did not form part of a wider discussion, to diversify the dataset.

Data Collection and Corpus Building

As has been discussed at several points thus far, the global anglophone K-pop fandom has been dogged with allegations of toxicity and has a history of problematic behaviour. With the potential difficulty of obtaining a range of different fan views in person (as fans may be reluctant to express more polarising views), it was deemed necessary and appropriate to adopt a corpus-based methodology. The decision to include Korean entertainment focused sites (*OneHallyu*, *allkpop*) and more general interest sites (*Reddit*, *The L Chat*, *Quora*) was to ensure the dataset reflected a diverse set of attitudes and usage patterns not limited to one specific demographic or discourse. Although the users of each site may also frequent other sites, there is no official affiliation between any of the sites mentioned. Due to the relative lack of data prior to 2012, and the overwhelming growth of the global anglophone fandom in the

past decade, all the data collected was from 2012 onwards. As the study is adopting a corpus-based approach and is exploring generalised usage of these words rather than how usage might have changed throughout time, the decision was taken to not use a more specific time frame. This was also owing to the inclusion of multiple different sources and the collection of large datasets, ensuring that the collection of timestamp data would have complicated the data collection process without having any significant bearing on the analysis conducted in the present study.

The corpora were built and compiled using the corpus software *Sketch Engine*, a popular tool for lexicographers (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). *Sketch Engine* allows a user to easily create a corpus using web data, as it features a sophisticated built-in web crawler that can be adjusted to streamline the data collection process. Using this feature, it is possible to either crawl an entire website, or multiple individual URLs. Parameters such as searching for specific keywords, removal of ‘stop words’, and exclusion criteria can also be applied when conducting a web search. Besides being able to pull data from online sources, *Sketch Engine* also allows users to upload text files manually in plain text format (.txt), with all documents then organised in a folder. Although the bulk of the linguistic data was sourced using the web crawling feature, the manual upload feature was especially helpful for collecting linguistic data from sources that may restrict web crawling software for security purposes.

As all three of the words explored in this study – *oppa*, *unni*, *skinship* – are non-English words, the use of large English language web-based corpora such as the iWeb or TenTenTen was ruled out. *Oppa*, for example, could be read by automated corpus software as an abbreviation for a type of chemotherapy, or a type of protein.

Likewise, *skinship* could be misread as *kinship*, and *unni* could be read as a first name or a type of food. As such, the decision was taken to build three separate corpora for each individual word. With the high demands of creating three separate word corpora, the total number of words for each corpus was relatively small, yet large enough to draw conclusions, with the word count for each corpus totalling around ~300,000.

During the data collection process, a semi-automatic methodology was employed, using a mixture of manual and automatic methods. Where *Sketch Engine's* built-in web crawler was highly efficient for the collection of data from the forum sites (*OneHallyu, The L Chat, allkpop*), features on *Quora* and *Reddit* that block the use of automated web-crawlers necessitated the manual collection of data. Despite the sophistication of *Sketch Engine's* automated web crawler, on many occasions, irrelevant textual data (forum thread rules, FAQs, etc.) were collected. To mitigate this, the entire corpus was downloaded into a plain text file (.txt.), and then manually cleaned using find and replace, as many of these phrases were repeated throughout the data. *Sketch Engine* only processes textual data, and visual material, emojis, and videos were removed from the posts. Copies of the forum data (including reply structures, audio-visual elements) were saved separately to preserve multimodal elements of usage patterns, though this is not the predominant focus of the present study, and was used as supplement when deemed necessary, for example, in the *skinship* chapter.

The size and composition of each corpus is detailed in the tables below:

Table 6⁹*Oppa Corpus Composition.*

	Number of Threads	Number of Words
Quora	25	53,104
Allkpop	4	94,655
OneHallyu	48	70,849
Soompi	4	55,150
Search Engine Data 'oppa/fangirl/cringe' 'oppar/fangirl/oppas' 'delulu/oppa/stan'	N/A	62,667
Manual Upload	N/A	9,440
		345,865

Table 7*Unni Corpus Composition.*

	Number of Threads	Number of Words
The L Chat	11	142,066
OneHallyu	15	83,916
Reddit	12	3,700
Search Engine Data 'unnie/kpop/idol' 'unnie/skinship/girls' 'unnie/kpop/unnir'	N/A	59,747
Manual Upload	N/A	18,017

⁹ See Appendix for a more detailed table of the online sources used.

307,446**Table 8***Skinship Corpus Composition.*

	Number of Threads	Number of Words
The L Chat	3	105,925
OneHallyu	12	93,843
Reddit	33	36,435
Soompi	1	6,892
Search Engine Data 'skinship/fanservice' 'skinship/moonsun/intimate' 'skinship/kpop/idol'	N/A	54,259
Manual Upload	N/A	8,362
		305,716

Analytical Framework

One of the primary benefits of using a corpus-driven approach is the reduction in possibility that data could be 'cherry picked' to prove a specific hypothesis (Widdowson, 2000). Prior to the collection of data, an exploration of *Urban Dictionary* definitions for each term revealed that different meanings may be triggered by context. For example, *oppa*, when used to refer to an idol, occurs in a different context to the mocking 'oppar', used to deride both male idols and their fans. As a result of the high indexicality of each word when used in different contexts, and the ideological constructions underpinning the use of Korean words in global anglophone contexts, the analytical framework was Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CBDA). Stemming from critical linguistics, Fairclough (2010) notes that

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a form of analysis that does not just involve the analysis of texts (discourse), but further explores how these discourses are related to wider elements of social process, thus considering ‘discourse as social practice’. CDA can therefore serve to deconstruct ideologies embedded in texts, as well as reveal how discourse is shaped by social structures, ideologies, and power structures.

According to Nartey and Mwinlaaru (2019), the “synergy between CL [corpus linguistics] and CDA responds to limitations of both fields, even though it appears that the limitations of CDA are often highlighted the more in the literature”. Concerns around CDA involve ‘cherry picking’ (Widdowson, 2000), and the main concern of corpus linguistics is that it “neglects the socio-cultural context of discourse owing to the large size of data” (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). Adopting a corpus-driven critical discourse analysis approach mitigates the weaknesses of both approaches, and for Nartey and Mwinlaaru (2019) is especially appropriate for “descriptive corpus linguists who are interested in language as a semiotic action”. Bednarek (2009) recommends a three-pronged framework for corpus-driven discourse analysis, including mixed analytical methods that triangulate: (a) large-scale corpus analysis, (b) small-scale corpus analysis, and (c) individual text analysis. As the corpus size is too large to meet Bednarek’s (2009) definition of a small-scale corpus (80,000) words, the analytical procedure in this thesis will integrate elements of large-scale corpus analysis (generalisation) and individual text analysis (language use in microcontexts), to reduce the possibility of bias.

To ensure that the constructions explored in the chapters were representative of general attitudes and not ‘cherry picked’, the thesis adopted a method outlined by Baker and Levon (2015) whereby the most common collocates were used to identify

well-constructed discourses. In *Sketch Engine*, the ‘Word Sketch’ feature was used to identify collocates, which were then grouped semantically. These collocates were then corroborated with definitions on *Urban Dictionary* and other K-pop glossaries and dictionaries (such as Kang, 2013), to form the analysis sections in each chapter. Additional words identified in the corpus data that fell into these broad semantic categories (for example, the adjective ‘sexy’ could fit into the first and second semantic category for *oppa*) then stipulated whether a specific text example was appropriate for inclusion or not.

Oppa: (boyfriend, love), (handsome, lovely), (cringe, strange)

Unni: (tough, ssen), (hot, crush), (responsible, mature)

Skinship: (hate, love, dislike), (real, natural, normal, weird), (excessive, much, more)

Due to concerns that the polarised nature of the global anglophone K-pop fandom would make it difficult to collect a range of opinions on how Korean cultural terms are used (or abused) within the context of non-Korean fandom culture, a corpus-driven methodology was selected to utilise a large dataset of naturally occurring online data. In comparison to an interview methodology, the anonymisation and use of usernames in online communities enables users to express dissident and deviant opinions and attitudes without fear of being ostracised or criticised. Additionally, due to the stigmatisation attached to the K-pop fan identity, fans were more likely to express their full range of fan desires in K-pop community spaces, in the knowledge that other individuals are also fans of K-Pop.

A range of different sites were selected for inclusion in the study to ensure that the dataset was reflective of a range of attitudes, and not ‘cherry picked’ to suit the research questions, and to reduce the possibility of selectivity bias. This was achieved by the additional inclusion of more ‘general interest’ sites, where users posting may have more personal and real-life experiences of Korean culture and society. The corpora were large enough to be subject to generalised analysis, yet small enough to ensure that the data was representative. As the goal of the thesis is to explore how Korean cultural words are decontextualised and resemioticised by the transcultural, global anglophone K-pop fandom, the complementary analytical framework of CDA was chosen, to explore in greater detail how discourse was formed and upheld through certain ideologies and fan stereotypes.

It is of further importance to stipulate and specify here that the present study is corpus *driven* critical discourse analysis, and therefore the approach differs from a more traditional corpus linguistics study. Corpus linguistics is typically regarded as a quantitative method that relies on statistical factors such as word frequency and sentiment analysis, however, as the analytical framework for this study is CDA, it will adopt a more qualitative approach when dealing with the data and will depart from traditional corpus linguistic methods. The analysis is firmly rooted in discourse analysis, and this is reflected in the way the data will be presented and explored, adopting close-reading of relevant examples selected from the corpus data.

Genuine Intent, Mockery and Sexual Attraction: Constructing the ‘Oppa’ in Fandom Lexicon

This chapter aims to take a critical approach to the use of the kinship term *oppa* in the anglophone K-Pop fandom on social media. Using a specialist corpus consisting of data taken from forum data, discussion sites (*Quora, OneHallyu, Reddit, allkpop*), and search engine data, it will explore how transmission of Korean kinship terms and sociocultural concepts through the exaggerated and performative medium of online popular culture has contributed to multiple constructions of *oppa* that are context and user dependent, rather than fixed. This process of adoption by the global anglophone fandom has occurred in multiple contexts and is largely negotiated in online fandom communities, yet, despite this facilitating the development of highly individualised meanings, there is a paradoxical, binary attitude towards the Neo-Confucian origins of the word, which appear to hinder the word from being adopted by global fans, yet simultaneously underpin the ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ understanding of how it is used.

This chapter will begin by briefly situating *oppa* within the system of linguistic politeness and familial kinship terms in the Korean language, exploring both the traditional construction of the *oppa* as the caring, protective older brother, and the more contemporary construction of *oppa* as an older lover, or love interest. It will be argued that the latter understanding of *oppa* has had a greater influence on the global anglophone fandom, due to being well-represented and constructed in the Korean entertainment industry. Using collocates of *oppa* in the corpus data that were then corroborated with crowdsourced definitions on *Urban Dictionary*, four main anglophone constructions of *oppa* were identified: (1) the ‘dictionary definition’ *oppa* as an ‘older brother’, (2) the handsome *oppa*, (3) the sexualised and infantilised

oppa, and (4) the pejorative *oppa*. These constructions will then be explored using specific examples taken from the corpus.

It will be argued that the divisive nature of *oppa* is integral to the adoption and popularity of the word in anglophone usage, as it has been afforded an additional function as a discursive tool to invoke the binary fandom discourse of ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ usage of the term. This is triggered by the user, rather than the word itself. The adoption and use of *oppa* by global anglophone fans is unarguably a fascinating by-product of the changing nature of linguistic contact, negotiated not through the media or linguistic authorities, but through the cohabitation of popular culture and global consumers on social media. Yet, the significance of the word in Korean culture and society, as well as stigmatisation of those who use it (perceived as ‘obsessive’ teenage girls) have contributed to the term becoming most associated with ideological standpoints of derogation, either of the speaker, hearer, or Korean culture itself.

The ‘Chivalrous Older Brother’: Neo-Confucian Norms and Contextualising *Oppa* in Korean-Speaking Usage

Korean address terms index what Brown (2017) has described as an “uncontestably hierarchical relationship”, wherein speaker/hearer relations are defined by age and gender, both of which have historically been considered as the prominent markers of social status in Korean society. The usage of Korean kinship terms is thus subject to both morphological and cultural factors that depend on the relationship between the interlocutors (Hong, 2009). As such, the hierarchical relationships indexed by gendered address terms in the Korean language have developed because of well-established gender and family norms in Korean society.

Confucian philosophy, placing an emphasis on patrilineal relations and deference to elders, has had a substantial influence on the Korean language, culture, and society, and this is reflected in gendered address terms, especially those that are used to mark a relationship between male and female interlocutors (Park & Cho, 1995). Although taking direct influence from Confucian philosophy, this cultural influence has been realised in a Korean context as ‘Neo-Confucianism’. As men have traditionally occupied a higher position in the social hierarchy than women, address terms that are used by women towards men have markedly different indexical connotations than those that may be used between the same gender, or by men towards women, due to indexing idealised relationships in which women are in the inferior position (Brown, 2013).

Translated literally as ‘older brother’, *oppa* belongs to a group of gendered kinship terms that were traditionally used to index sibling relationships. *Oppa* can be used by a younger female towards an older male relative, close male friend, or even boyfriend, with the latter usage largely associated with the younger generation in Korea. In accordance with traditional Neo-Confucian family values, sibling relationships are hierarchical, with younger siblings expected to defer to those who are elder, and thus higher in the hierarchy. As such, the sibling relationship, whether real or imagined, is defined by a set of pre-determined roles, expectations, values, and behaviours dating back to the 17th century (Kim, Park & Hong, 2005).

Sung & Lee (2013) have identified the three Neo-Confucian family norms that contextualise Korean sibling dynamics: (1) 長幼有序 *jang-yu-yu-seo*, (2) 出家人 *chul-ga-oein*, and (3) 長子相續 *jang-ja-u-dae-sang-*

sok. *Jang-yu-yu-seo* is a Neo-Confucian norm that determines a bilateral, age-based hierarchy in sibling relationships, with older siblings expected to care for younger siblings, and in return be treated with respect. Given the emphasis of patrilineage and age-based seniority in Neo-Confucian social norms, the eldest son would be second only to the parents in the family hierarchy. *Chul-ga-oein* is a Neo-Confucian gender norm that stipulates that once a woman has married, she is seen as an outsider of her own family, instead becoming a member of her husband's family, reflective of the different expectations for men and women in Korean society.

Finally, *jang-ja-u-dae-sang-sok* is defined by the Encyclopaedia of Korean Culture as “a system wherein the eldest descendants of the family inherit preferentially” (Park & Cho, 1995). Sung & Lee (2013) argue that *jang-ja-u-dae-sang-sok* is the norm that effectively interweaves “both the age and gender hierarchy”, as, combined with the emphasis on patrilineage, ensures that the eldest son will be the member of the family who will receive the greatest level of privilege. This privilege is accompanied with responsibilities within the family, including caring for elderly relatives, parents, and younger siblings. As *oppa* is a kinship term that is used by a younger female towards an older male, it thus indexes an idealised and normative relationship in accordance with Neo-Confucian familial and gender norms (Brown, 2011).

Sibling dynamics have changed considerably in contemporary times, but Neo-Confucian norms form the basis of contextualisation not only for sibling relationships, but also for the use of sibling kinship terms. Being an older brother comes with certain expectations and responsibilities, along with an unmatched level of privilege within the family structure. By indexing a relationship between a

younger, more dependent woman, and an older, protective, and responsible older man, the *oppa-dongsaeng* relationship carries a heavy sociocultural weight. The unequal relationship indexed by *oppa* has not been without controversy, due to associations with patriarchal beliefs supported by a value system that affords sons inherently more privilege than daughters, and discomfort with the romantic connotations underpinning *oppa* has contributed to some women opting to address older male friends using *hyeong* instead (Brown, 2013). Neo-Confucian family and sibling values thus form the foundational layer of meaning for *oppa*. It is a term that not only reflects the elevated status of elder sons in the family hierarchy, but also the lowered status of younger women.

‘Oppa Aegyo’: Contemporary Usage and ‘Handsome’ Male Idols

By virtue of indexing a normative relationship expectation of dating and marriage between a dependent, younger woman, or ‘little sister’, and a caring, older man, or ‘older brother’, *oppa* has become heavily associated with dating culture in contemporary usage. The phrase “if you’re handsome, anyone can be *oppa*” is a testament to the contemporary figure of *oppa* as an ageless, handsome man. This usage of *oppa* has been labelled as the ‘fictive’ by Brown (2013) and has shifted away from the rigidity of Neo-Confucian family dynamics towards being a term used to affectionately refer to an older male with whom the speaker shares an intimate relationship, such as one’s romantic partner, or a male friend. In Korean entertainment and media, *oppa* is also routinely used as a linguistic strategy to force intimacy, and several scholars (Moon, under review; Brown, 2017; Oh, 2015), have cited it as a major force behind the development of flirtatious and dating-related usages of *oppa*.

The normative relationship outlined in the *oppa-dongsaeng* relationship is routinely played upon in the K-Pop industry, by both male and female idols. Male idols are often presented as ideal *oppa* figures – attractive and romantically available – to appeal to female fans. This can be exemplified looking at K-Pop song lyrics. Boy group lyrics tend to make regular use of the second-person pronoun, whereas girl group lyrics are often addressing or trying to get the attention of an unnamed *oppa*. In such a way, male idols fill the role of *oppa*, and female idols fill the role of the *dongsaeng*, with fans able to imagine themselves in either role. See as an example of the latter, the lyrics from soloist Rain’s (featuring Hyuna) 2014 song “Where Are You Going Oppa?”: “oppa, oppa, where are you going? Oppa, come here and play with me oppa [...] Ah why? I’m busy. Just play by yourselves, oppa is too busy” (Color Coded Lyrics, 2014). In the lyrics, the *oppa* (Rain), is too busy to ‘play’ with the *dongsaeng* (Hyuna), who is seeking for his attention. It is further implied that there is not only one woman seeking for his attention, but several, as the plural ‘yourselves’ is used.

Using Girls’ Generation’s¹⁰ 2010 single “Oh!” as an example, Oh (2015) elaborates upon this representation of the *oppa-dongsaeng* relationship, arguing that the repetition of *oppa* throughout the song (a total of 14 times) paints an image of the nine members of the group as “submissive to the oppa” yet at the same time “active in their pursuit of oppa”. Oh (2015) further suggests that this submission to the *oppa* is enhanced by the visuals in the music video (MV), where the girls wear cheerleader outfits and thigh-high boots in what appears to be a college setting, with their midriffs and legs on display. They appear to fill the role of the ‘innocent little sister’ in the MV, representing a chaste and forbidden sexuality that is at odds with

¹⁰ Girls’ Generation (also known as SNSD) are a nine member SM Entertainment girl group.

the implications of “sexual attractiveness” (Brown, 2017). This duality between the little sister role and the romantically interested older woman is epitomised in the lyric “don’t just think of me as a little sister, you’ll regret it after a year” (Color Coded Lyrics, 2010). The lyric suggests that whilst the *oppa-dongsaeng* dynamic does involve elements of being considered a ‘little sister’, the ideal progression should be to that of mutual romantic interest, or “you’ll regret it”.

The almost excessive use of *oppa* throughout the song is certainly not a coincidence, as *oppa* has been identified as a lexical marker of an *aegyo* performance, described by Puzar & Hong (2018) as a “layered articulation of behaviours, gestures, vocal and linguistic adjustments, narratives and fashions that serve to enact child-like charm and infantilised cuteness”. Rather than being defined by one single act or behaviour, *aegyo* is a multi-layered performative act, constituting of both verbal and non-verbal forms of expression (Brown, 2017). *Aegyo* is a part of Korean culture and society, and in recent decades, exaggerated forms of *aegyo* have become popularised in Korean media and entertainment. Due to the ubiquity of *aegyo* in Korean popular culture, with idols often asked to do *aegyo* performances on variety shows, the word has become well-known globally, and was recently added to the OED, defined as follows: “cuteness or charm, esp. of a sort considered characteristic of Korean popular culture” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021).

As has been discussed by both Brown (2013) and Moon (2008), *oppa* is considered a lexical marker of an *aegyo* performance when repeated excessively, uttered in certain contexts, or when accompanied by prosodic features such as elongation or rising-falling intonation. The association between *oppa* and *aegyo* is

one that can be explained by the fact that *aegyo* is predominantly performed by women for men, described by Moon (2008) as “the epitome of gender ideology discursively constructed in the realm of patriarchal Korea”. *Aegyo* is an act in which feminised, childlike cuteness is used to incite or draw a certain kind of reaction, further described by Moon (2008) as “cuteness as the result of some art or manipulation”. As such, *oppa*, and the normative relationship that it invokes, lends itself perfectly to the infantilised femininity on display in an *aegyo* performance.

Brown (2013) and Moon (2008) agree on prosodic cues that indicate *oppa* is being used as part of an *aegyo* performance, including: nasality, elongation (especially on the final syllable ‘oppaaaa’), rising-falling intonation, and repetition. *Oppa*, therefore, occupies a significant space in the *aegyo* repertoire. Prosodic features aside, usage of *oppa* in certain contexts can identify it as a linguistic strategy in an *aegyo* performance. It is generally assumed that when *oppa* is used, or use is encouraged between two interlocutors who lack a close, intimate relationship, it is more likely to be a way to bring about intimacy (wanted or not), as well as indicate romantic interest and intent to flirt. *Oppa*, as used in an *aegyo* performance, draws upon an idealised romantic relationship between the two interlocutors, whether real or imagined. Moon (2008) suggests that given the relationship is one between a man and a woman, the interlocutors thus play into gender normative social dynamics, wherein the man yields to the feminine cuteness, thus affirming he is a “perfectly normal” man who is attracted and charmed by the femininity of women.

Despite the existence of what Moon (2008) has termed as a “male fascination” with being addressed as *oppa*, the responsibility for using the term as part of an *aegyo* performance often lies with women. This desire to be addressed as *oppa* stems

from the fact that the term reassures the dominant social order between men and women in society, women are expected to be appealing and persistent in their pursuit of men to be able to receive their attention. *Oppa* can thus serve both male and female interlocuters. For the male interlocuter, it can reassure him of his elevated position and normative desires, as well as carry the implication that he is handsome. For the female interlocuter, *oppa* can serve as a linguistic strategy to bring intimacy, indicate romantic interest, or achieve a desired result.

In Korean entertainment and media contexts, exaggerated and more performative *aegyo* acts have flourished. In 2012, Korean entertainment was gripped by the *gwiyomi* craze, a type of *aegyo* involving cute hand gestures and popularised by BtoB member Ilhoon after an appearance on K-Pop centric variety show *Weekly Idol*. *Gwiyomi* can be roughly translated as ‘cute person’, and it involves using a series of cute hand gestures to count, with each addition ending in *gwiyomi* (1+1 = *gwiyomi*). After *Weekly Idol* popularised *gwiyomi*, the show introduced a segment entitled “Aegyo Battle”, where idols on the show would have to perform variations of ‘*Gwiyomi* Player’ against each other. Numerous other idols performed *gwiyomi* during the height of the craze, encouraging fans to upload their videos, with *gwiyomi* so popular that fans in Thailand and The Philippines were participating. This is just one example of the influence of Korean popular culture and entertainment on the normalisation of *aegyo* performances. In the K-Pop industry, being able to perform *aegyo* is regarded as a positive trait of female idols, and on the spot performances of *aegyo* are often encouraged on variety shows. Although not as encouraged for male idols, *aegyo* performances are expected from both male and female idols, and those that are particularly adept may be labelled as ‘*aegyo* queen’ or ‘*aegyo* king’. Expectations that idols should be able to perform *aegyo* ‘on demand’ is not always

well received by consumers of Korean entertainment, however, and fans and idols alike have responded negatively to what is commonly termed as ‘forced *aegyo*’ (Omona They Didn’t, 2016).

These associations between *oppa* and *aegyo* are one of the reasons *oppa* predominantly features in romantic usage patterns in Korean media and entertainment. By virtue of further associations between *oppa* and handsome male idols or actors, the prototypical *oppa* has been constructed as ‘handsome’ and romantically desirable. In the Korean entertainment industry, saying that visuals are everything could be an understatement. Visuals play a huge role in both K-dramas and K-pop, and high beauty standards are maintained by both male and female celebrities. The emphasis on visuals is of such importance in the K-pop industry that one idol role within a group is that of the ‘visual’, synonymous with being the ‘face of the group’ and delegated to the member who is the most physically attractive (Kong, 2016). The derogatory term ‘visual hole’ is used to “describe a member that lets down the rest of the group based on their looks. They are considered the least attractive” (Urban Dictionary, 2019), and is indicative of the vitriolic response to idols that do not meet the beauty standards expected by fans and consumers. Being well-groomed and upholding high beauty standards is part and parcel of being a K-pop idol, with the marketing of idols to fans heavily geared towards physical attractiveness.

As a result of the high beauty standards in the Korean entertainment industry, the idealised *oppa* has become inextricably linked to a certain type of Korean male celebrity – one that is tall, fair, and handsome – a popular by-product of Korean entertainment’s embrace of ‘soft masculinity’ visual aesthetics and high beauty standards (Oh, 2015; Lee, Lee & Park, 2020). Jung (2010) claims that the initial

popularity of male South Korean celebrities in East Asian countries such as Japan was related to their embrace of more stereotypically feminine visual aesthetics, such as longer hair or the use of make-up. This offered a contrast to the ‘macho’ aesthetic popularised in the West, and the switch to more hybridised and androgynous aesthetics began to appear during the late 1990s, around the same time *aegyo* started to gain traction in the entertainment industry. These ‘softer’ visual appearances do not necessarily equate to being ‘feminine’, and male Korean celebrities still adhere to normative masculine expectations, such as ‘protecting’ women, and having muscular bodies.

On top of this, much like how the performance of ‘*oppa aegyo*’ infantilises female idols subsequently “appealing to the fantasies of men” (Brown, 2013) through straddling the boundary between childlike innocence and adult sexuality, an ideal *oppa* figure is expected to simultaneously be soft and caring, yet sexually appealing through suggestive and sensual choreography. Oh (2015) writes that this contrast between soft aesthetics and sexualised, masculine dance moves creates “a seemingly incompatible juxtaposition between brawny masculinity and boyish innocence”. Male idols often remove or lift their shirts during performances, revealing perfectly chiselled abs and muscular bodies, with hip thrusting a common dance move in boy group choreography. Male idols need to be simultaneously ‘cute’, ‘sexy’, and ‘handsome’ to have the maximum scope of appeal for their fans.

Physical appearances aside, male idols and celebrities are further expected to embrace what Jung (2010) has labelled as “tender charisma”, personifying the Confucian ideal of a man who possesses “a tender exterior and a strong inner will”. The Confucian importance of the family dynamic in South Korean society is one that

is echoed in the K-pop industry, and popular discourses maintain that K-pop group dynamics are like that of a hard-working ‘family’, with the fans seen as an extension of said family. According to Trzcińska (2018) “fans repeatedly stress that idol groups’ members cooperation and closeness, being like family to each other, and their mutual interactions all were a substantial factor that attracts them to K-Pop”. Being the youngest member in a K-pop group qualifies an idol for the role of *maknae*, a term used for the youngest sibling in a family. Older members of the group are expected to care for younger members, and younger members are expected to respect older members. This ‘taking care’ extends to fans, notably in physical fan-idol events such as fan signs and meet and greets. The prerequisite for being an *oppa* in the K-pop industry is not necessarily limited to being handsome, and idols must also embody elements of the Neo-Confucian ideal of the protective and chivalrous older brother, who is kind and caring to those younger than him (Brown, 2013).

This section has explored the traditional and contemporary usage patterns of *oppa* in South Korean culture and society, discussing the transformation from origins in Neo-Confucian family dynamics to an address term for handsome male celebrities, and a lexical marker of an *aegyo* performance. *Oppa* is a product of a patrilineal society that firmly places women below men in the social hierarchy, and thus it upholds the normative and ‘ideal’ relationship dynamic as one that is between an older man and a younger woman. As such, *oppa* can serve as a linguistic tool to both men and women for invoking this dynamic. Through strong associations with *aegyo* and dating culture, *oppa* may carry connotations of romantic attraction and physical attractiveness, in which case age-related restrictions become less rigidly adhered to, as any man can be *oppa* if he is good-looking enough. Blending these two

constructions together, the idealised *oppa* is regarded to be an attractive man who embodies certain behavioural traits of an older brother figure.

Constructing Oppa in Global Anglophone Contexts

Despite having groundings in traditional South Korean family structures, contemporary usages of *oppa* began to surge in the 1990s, and members of the older generation are less likely to use the term in romantic and ‘fictive’ contexts than those of the younger generation. Given this is around the same time Korean popular culture started to experience initial international popularity, it is these fictive usages that have become widespread in global anglophone fan usage. The following section will explore in greater detail the indexicality of *oppa* in the anglophone K-pop fandom, first identifying four main constructions of *oppa* using definitions from *Urban Dictionary*. Usage patterns observed in the social media postings of anglophone fans have undeniably been influenced by usage patterns in Korean popular culture, and beyond this, negative attitudes towards the behaviour of female fans have spurred on the creation of derogatory derivatives such as ‘oppaologist’ and ‘oppar’.

‘Caring Older Brother’ to ‘Senpai’ and ‘Oppaologist’: Renegotiating the Indexical Field

The point of exposure to Korean cultural terms for global anglophone fans is through highly mediated popular culture contexts. As such, their exposure is often restricted to fictive contexts. Without an established linguistic authority to dictate ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ usage patterns and meanings, usage patterns of *oppa* have become highly individualised, broadening the indexical field when the word is used in English-language contexts. *Oppa* has now become a translingual word, described

by Kiaer (2020) as “words that live across the borders of languages. As part of their adaptation process, they gain local forms and meanings”. To expand upon this attainment of form and meaning, it can further be argued that Korean words also obtain ideological discourses and indexicalities that are reflective of their highly mediated resemiotisation processes. The following is the definition for *oppa* from the Oxford English Dictionary:

1. In Korean-speaking contexts: a girl’s or woman’s elder brother. Also as a respectful form of address or term of endearment, and in extended use with reference to an older male friend or boyfriend.
2. An attractive South Korean man, esp. a famous or popular actor or singer.
(Oxford English Dictionary, 2021).

The inclusion is not only reflective of the sustained popularity of Korean popular culture worldwide, but also indicative of how mediation through popular culture contexts has influenced the definition, as seen in the second entry. The first definition more closely resembles those that you would find should you search for a standard Korean dictionary definition. However, if you are to search for definitions for *oppa* online, you are more likely to encounter definitions that are more like the second entry. As has been discussed in this chapter, *oppa* has multiple social and indexical meanings that go beyond the literal definition of ‘older brother of a younger female’. In a study of Korean L2 learners in the United States, Brown (2013) found that “even without explicit instruction, students at lower proficiency levels are able to identify at least some of the social meanings of *oppa* for themselves, typically through interactions with native speakers and through accessing Korean popular culture in online environments”. Anglophone speaker usage is thus characterised by an awareness of additional social meanings behind the use of *oppa*.

Given this negotiation through social media, *oppa* has gained a range of other meanings that are not present in Korean-speaking contexts. At the time of writing,

Urban Dictionary had a total of twenty different user-submitted definitions for *oppa*, ranging from the more pragmatic “female’s use this title for their older brother” to the more niche “something you do not say to jeon jungkook”, and even the derogatory “usually used in the annoying way by crazy kpop or jpop fangirls” (Urban Dictionary, 2008, 2018). *Oppa*, as a translingual word, does not just plug a lexical gap in the English-language, but also carries with it ideologies and discourses mediated in fandom and internet subculture, attaining levels of community meaning that are negotiated and dispersed in online communication.

Both the reference to BTS member Jungkook, who expressed a desire to not be addressed as *oppa* by younger fans (Soriano, 2017), and the implication that *oppa* is a term used by ‘crazy kpop fangirls’ reveal the indexicalities of *oppa* when used in certain English-speaking contexts. The English-language definitions found on *Urban Dictionary* can be roughly divided into several separate categories based on where they were negotiated: (1) standard definitions (negotiated in Korean-speaking contexts), (2) fandom or ‘meme’ definitions (attributing *oppa* to certain idols or moments), (3) romanticised definitions (e.g., noting *oppa* is used for flirting), and (4) derogatory or satirical definitions (linking *oppa* use to ‘crazy fangirls’ or defining it ironically). This is reflective of the negotiation of *oppa* through social media. Cultural underpinnings such as *oppa aegyo* and the Neo-Confucian origins of *oppa* are decontextualised through social media, and then recontextualised by global anglophone fans. On social media, this process goes beyond the linguistic, transcending into the semiotic, through the inclusion of imagery, discourse, and culture from local contexts (Leppänen et al., 2014).

As we know, *oppa* is a gendered term, and this has had ramifications on how ‘acceptable’ a context is for *oppa* to be used. Although there is now greater visibility afforded to older female and male fans in the West, the stereotype of a K-Pop fan remains to be that of a teenage girl. This stereotype has been particularly pervasive, despite many girl groups having greater visibility of male fans than female. Male fans of K-Pop exist, yet they are underrepresented in online communities and are not regarded to be the target demographic, with girl groups now even attracting more female than male fans. This explains the dominance of *oppa* in K-Pop fan discourse, as well as why negative constructions of *oppa* are leveraged exclusively at female fans. Of course, given that The Korea Foundation estimates there to be around 89 million K-Pop fans spread worldwide in 113 different countries (Elfving-Hwang, 2019), we can only assume that speakers using *oppa* are female based on demographic estimates, and the term itself being gendered.

Discussions of toxicity and negative fan behaviour have long followed the K-Pop fandom, manifesting in the Korea-based fandom as *sasaeng* fans (a portmanteau of ‘private’ and ‘life’), and in online anglophone communities as ‘stans’. Where the behaviours and expression of extreme behaviours differ, both terms are used to indicate K-Pop fans that take their interest to harmful or toxic levels, including stalking, cyberbullying, and even poisoning. Infighting within the K-Pop fandom is commonplace, linked to the competitiveness of the industry and fan beliefs that their favourite groups/idols are the ‘best’. According to a study of K-Pop fans by Tinaliga (2018), they expressed no interest in participating in toxic fan behaviour, feeling that “this more extreme form of competitiveness seems to be especially present among fans with a strong “only one-group is best” mindset”. Having an overall favourite K-Pop idol and or favourite member within a group is encouraged,

and the term 'bias' has been semantically rearranged to indicate "a personal favorite group or member of a group" (Tumblr, 2012).

The toxic elements of K-Pop fandom culture have had direct influence on the English-language definitions of *oppa*, and how the term is understood in a wider context. Looking at the definition for 'fangirl' on *Urban Dictionary*, we can clearly see how existing negative stereotypes of fangirl behaviour have become embedded in certain English-language definitions of *oppa*:

A rabid breed of human female who is obsessed with either a fictional character or an actor. Similar to the breed of fanboy. Fangirls congregate at anime conventions and livejournal. Have been known to glomp, grope, and tackle when encountering said obsessions.

(Urban Dictionary, 2003)

There is no questioning that there are toxic fan behaviours that are rife within the global K-Pop fandom, including 'doxxing' (sharing the personal information of another individual without consent), sending death threats, and cyberbullying. Besides allegations of toxic behaviour, the K-Pop fandom have also been criticised for contradictory attitudes towards homosexuality, racism, and aggressively 'defending' their favourite idols when faced with serious criminal allegations (Tantra, 2020). These negative behaviours are compounded by the fact that they are often performed by female fans. As such, *oppa* has become a firm lexical marker of negative K-Pop fan behaviour, spawning derivative forms such as 'oppar' (perceived to be a mockery of *oppa* as said in a US American accent) 'oppaologist' (an individual who apologises for bad idol behaviour), and 'oppa didn't mean it' (an individual who tends to argue that their *oppa* 'didn't know any better'). The emphasis on *oppa* in forming these derivative words and phrases is indicative of how most of the negative sentiment has been leveraged towards female K-Pop fans, and their relationships with male idols.

Identification plays an important role in K-Pop fan discourse, and fan hierarchies in the K-Pop fandom are complex, despite the seemingly polarised binary between ‘normal’ K-Pop fans and *sasaeng* fans/stans. K-Pop fans are often stigmatised and infantilised in the mainstream media, treated as a monolithic body of teenage female fans. In *Urban Dictionary* definitions for ‘kpop fan’ and ‘kpop’, it is possible to observe this process of reframing K-Pop fans as individuals with a ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ interest in K-Pop, as well as reinforcing ideas of the K-Pop fandom as toxic and ‘obsessive’.

A K-pop fan is someone who likes Korean Pop music. For example, someone who likes Ateez, Twice, and BlackPink could be called a K-pop fan. K-pop fans are different from K-pop Stans. K-pop fans are actually chill people who just like music, and there’s nothing wrong with that. (:
(Urban Dictionary, 2020)

An online cult of sassy and overprotective girls who constantly indulge in their own hypocrisy and selfishness. Lacks any knowledge of real musical talent and instead watches dancing music videos. Known for being nice people until you criticize the genre of music
(Urban Dictionary, 2019)

Gay shit that stupid teenage white girls listen to.
(Urban Dictionary, 2019)

An overrated genre of music. Uses a fucking amount of autotone and has very generic, repetitive and overused lyrics and mostly focuses on beats like if it was an edm song.
Usually followed by 15 year old snowflake girls
(Urban Dictionary, 2021)

Stigmatisation of K-Pop does not necessarily stem solely from the music itself, nor the content, but rather, additionally from the body of fans that enjoy it: perceived to be stupid, teenage girls who are ‘obsessed’ with their favourite idols and groups. With stigmatisation occurring both outside and within the K-Pop fandom, dynamics are thus complicated, and there are certain fan behaviours that are deemed to be appropriate, and others that are not. By virtue of their place in Korean fandom and Korean entertainment discourse, terms such as *maknae* and *sunbae* are considerably

less stigmatised than *oppa*, despite using Korean words out of context being regarded a hallmark of ‘Koreaboo behaviour’. Koreaboo is a term used to denote a fan who is obsessed with Korean culture to the point that they wish to denounce their own heritage and ‘become Korean’. Other behaviours and traits of ‘Koreaboo behaviour’ will be discussed in greater detail further on in the chapter.

Obsessive behaviours aside, K-Pop fans have additionally found themselves at the receiving end of criticism for sexualising and infantilising male K-Pop idols. Now compared to terms such as ‘daddy’ and ‘baby’, use of *oppa* in certain contexts has become decidedly sexualised, as seen in the popularity of ‘oppa kink’ stories, which contrary to what may be expected, are usually focused on sex acts between two male idols. Analysing fan-created video compilations of ‘sexy’ male idol performances, Oh (2015) suggested that “female fans fully enjoy what they refer to as “perverted” or guilty pleasures in the fictional spaces they create [...] given the negative connotations of the term, it signifies that the fans are aware that they are not supposed to find these “pervy” performances – done by young looking dancers – appealing”. For those fans that actively embrace their sexualisation of male idols, there are equally others who feel that male idols are being objectified and reconstructed in fan narratives to be contextualised for imagined sexual fantasies. Criticisms of this behaviour are particularly firm when it comes to younger male idols. For all the sexualisation of *oppa*, however, there is a simultaneous infantilisation that occurs through beliefs that the fan must ‘defend’ and ‘protect’ *oppa* from negative criticisms, as well as minimising a male idol’s potential for sexual experience.

This points to *oppa* as a somewhat contradictory term in English-language fandom usage. As much as its usage lines up with semiotic principles that have been constructed in Korean-speaking contexts (e.g., *oppa* as ‘handsome’, using *oppa* to flirt or for *aegyo*, *oppa* as a caring, family figure), its contextualisation in fandom and internet subcultural contexts has led to the addition of other layers of meaning that take on a more derogatory or sexualised tone. When used in such contexts, terms such as ‘oppar’ “appears to have obtained a derogatory level of meaning, where the target of derogation is not just the referent, but also the hearer who would function as the speaker of the said GTA¹¹ in other situations” (Jeong & Yu, 2021). These derogatory meanings and usages appear to be linked to both existing semiotic constructions of fangirls as ‘immature’ and ‘obsessive’ teenage girls, as well as a general discomfort from anglophone fans (notably those in the United States) around the gender dynamics that *oppa* maintains and perpetuates.

Besides this, the consumption of Korean language media by non-Korean fans and subsequent adoption of Korean words has been framed as ‘accessorising’ the Korean language, without real awareness for the sociocultural significance of words in their Korean-speaking contexts, and simply using them to sound cute. These criticisms are most potent when addressed towards anglophone speakers from the United States, as it is pointed out by a Tumblr user (2016) that “Asian ethnicities in general (and many others) have been historically and contemporarily mocked and ridiculed for their pronunciation, while English speakers are praised for speaking one sentence improperly and with poor pronunciation”. Where ‘accessorising’ applies to many other frequently used Korean words (*saranghae*, *annyeong*, *yeppeo*), it is

¹¹ Abbreviation used by the authors for ‘gendered address term’

especially pertinent with the use of *oppa*, due to a combination of the ubiquity of the word, the flexibility of indexical meanings that may be deemed problematic (e.g., highly sexualised meanings and fetishization), as well as the fact that it is used by young women. Fan ignorance has been linked to cultural appropriation and fetishization of Korean idols and culture, sharing some parallels with attitudes towards fans of Japanese anime and manga.

The following section will use a combination of collocates identified in the corpus data and definitions from *Urban Dictionary* to explore how the global anglophone fandom have constructed the multiple meanings behind *oppa*. As this chapter is looking at *oppa* specifically, much of the discussion will centre around female fans of boy groups, though it is acknowledged that there is no way to verify the demographic information of the commentators using *oppa* in the corpus data. The analysis of *oppa* will be divided into three sections: (1) exploration of the ‘older brother’ construction in fandom usage, (2) ‘romanticised/sexualised’ *oppa aegyo* usage, and (3) ‘pejorative’ and satirical usage. Each of the different semiotic constructions of *oppa* will be discussed and analysed using specific examples taken from the corpus data.

Standard Definitions

As has been outlined prior, *oppa* is used in Korean-speaking contexts to index intimacy between two interlocuters, akin to a sibling relationship. Looking at *oppa* in the most literal sense then, leaves us understanding *oppa* as “the older brother of a younger woman” (Brown, 2013). In the following section, any definition that explicitly mentions either ‘older brother’ or the age/gender-dependency will be

categorised as a standard definition, irrespective of whether it has additional layers or meaning. Although they may not possess linguistic competency in the Korean language, many anglophone fans are aware that *oppa* is used to either defer or show respect to another individual who is older, though as we will see further into the chapter, this is not necessarily adhered to.

On *Urban Dictionary*, the earliest definition for *oppa* dates to 2005, defined as follows:

a name for your beloved korean boy, or for not-too-much older brother/male (from a female perspective).

(Urban Dictionary, 2005)

The definition presents information reflective of usage in Korean-speaking contexts, notably: (1) that *oppa* is used for an older brother/male of similar age to the speaker, (2) that it is from a “female perspective”. Before this, however, the definition notes that *oppa* is “a name for your beloved korean boy”. Where this framing of *oppa* as a “not-too-much older brother/male”, along with the suggestion that it is “from a female perspective” put the definition in line with standard definitions, it does not explicitly state that *oppa* is literally translated as ‘older brother’. It is unclear whether this omission was intentional, or due to lack of awareness. However, the omission was repeated across the six definitions on *Urban Dictionary* that met the criteria for being classified as standard definitions. Only one of the definitions explicitly articulated that *oppa* “literally means older brother” (Urban Dictionary, 2010). The remaining standard definitions for *oppa* on Urban Dictionary are presented below.

(1) Oppa is used in Korean culture by a female to a male, who is older than her by the boundary of 10 years. Female's use this title for their older brother, older male friend, or even in a flirtatious way.

(Urban Dictionary, 2018)

(2) Oppa is a Korean term usually meaning an older male such as an older brother, male friend, and can also be used while Flirting

(Urban Dictionary, 2018)

(3) Oppa is a term that is used in Korean by a girl to call a man who is older than her, but by less than about 10 years. It is a term used traditionally in respect to ones elders

An oppa can be an:

Real biological older brother

A male friend who is older than the woman

An older male a girl is trying to flirt with

(Urban Dictionary, 2013)

Where the definitions in (1~3) all make mention of ‘older brother’ as a meaning of *oppa*, it is often framed as one of multiple possible meanings, and not usually presented as the sole, primary definition. Each of the definitions above demonstrate awareness that *oppa* carries the meaning of ‘older brother’, yet the link between *oppa* and ‘older brother’ is not made literal. A potential reason for this could be the discomfort of using a familial term in romantic or non-familial contexts. According to Brown (2013), non-Korean speakers, particularly those from the United States, feel “uncomfortable” using a familial term to address a non-family member. This has further been observed in a study by Seo (2011, as cited in Brown, 2013), where Chinese students at Korean universities found the use of *oppa* to be “embarrassing and strange”. This may not be a universal phenomenon for all anglophone speakers, however, as some languages use similar address terms, thus making the use of them in non-familial contexts more normalised. For example, in the Philippines, the Tagalog term *kuya* ‘older brother’ can be used similarly to *oppa*, perhaps a contributing linguistic factor to why *oppa* (sometimes in the plural form ‘oppas’) has embraced by both fans and media outlets in the Philippines.

In a study exploring multilingual microblogging of non-Korean K-Pop fans, Lee (2018) suggests that “it is quite possible that global fans may not necessarily fully understand this rather complicated address term system in Korean”. Lee (2018)

notes that fan mixing of speech styles and kinship terms is often “paradoxical” at times, reflecting how fans are exposed to the Korean language through non-traditional avenues. In Korean-speaking contexts, using *oppa* to address a male friend typically denotes an intimate and familiar bond between the two interlocutors (Lee & Yu Cho, 2013). Despite this, in definitions (1~3), *oppa* appears to be appropriate to address any older male friend, with no specification on the level of intimacy between the two interlocutors. In the second entry for the National Institute of Korean Language Learner’s Dictionary’s English-language definition of *oppa*, it is defined as “a word used only by a girl to refer to or address endearingly another male who is older than she” (NIKL, n.d.).

Usage of *oppa* in English-speaking contexts therefore appears to occur independently from Korean-speaking contexts. This does not mean to suggest that fans lack any level of awareness of the use of sibling address terms, as the definitions in (1) and (3) identify the generally accepted age difference of around 10 years. Should the age difference between the interlocutors be greater, then alternative address terms would be more appropriate (Jeong & Yu, 2021), reflecting the importance of age-based hierarchical distinctions in Korean language, culture, and society. Seemingly lost in most of the definitions found on Urban Dictionary is that *oppa* is a term that is used to defer to an older individual, in line with Korean cultural values. From looking at the *Urban Dictionary* definitions, certain aspects of Korean-speaking usage appear to have either been eroded or removed entirely from English usage of *oppa*.

Oppa as the Sensitive and Caring Older Brother

As has already been discussed looking at *oppa* in a Korean-speaking context, the familial origins of the term have played a role in the construction of certain expectations within the social hierarchy, linked to the importance of the eldest son in Neo-Confucian values. As an older brother, an *oppa* would be expected to exercise a duty of care to those who are junior, carrying an additional level of responsibility. This aspect of *oppa* was not well expressed in the *Urban Dictionary* definitions, however, the image of *oppa* as a ‘protective’ older brother was well constructed in the corpus data. Structures that resemble that of the family are maintained in the K-Pop industry, and individual members of idol groups are often assigned roles in line with their position in the social hierarchy. The most fixed of these roles are those of the *maknae* ‘youngest sibling’ (used to refer to the youngest member), and the ‘leader’. Where many contemporary groups do not have a leader, traditionally the role of ‘leader’ was automatically assigned to the eldest member of a K-Pop group (Yim, 2019).

Prior to debut in a group, K-Pop ‘trainees’ go through an extensive and rigorous training process, with no guarantee that they will succeed and debut. The process of being a ‘trainee’ can last years, with some idols training for up to 10 years (SBS, 2018). As such, during this period of close-contact with other trainees, many idols form close interpersonal relationships with each other, in some cases resembling sibling-like relationships. Like they would a younger sibling, older members of a group will be expected to take care of younger members, as well as other *hoobae* ‘junior’ groups and idols. The *maknae* role is one that is maintained in a group whether the age difference between the leader (or eldest member) and the

maknae is just 14 months (Girls' Generation's Taeyeon and Seohyun) or 8 years (Red Velvet's Irene and Yeri).

The leader-*maknae* dynamic is thus accompanied with a pre-existing set of behavioural expectations that are based on family roles in Korean culture and society. Where ordinarily you would not expect the *maknae* of a group to be addressed as *oppa* (due to being the youngest member), the duty of care between a *maknae* and an older member of a group is bidirectional rather than unilateral, and the *maknae* may be seen in moments to take on the responsibilities of the older sibling and vice versa. There is a seemingly binary understanding of what traits are associated with being senior – responsibility, maturity, and charisma – and those that are associated with being junior – immaturity, cuteness, and softness – when these traits are expressed in ways that are contrary to what is expected, address terms may be adjusted to reflect this.

In the corpus data, there were several examples of *oppa* being portrayed as a caring, protective, and reliable older brother figure who exhibited a duty of care towards those around him.

(1) yea I liked how protective henry oppa was of yewon despite all the fans hoopla. he seemed like a sweetie!

(2) Jongkook being a protective Oppa [...] i feel bad for Somin that she had to play the balloon popping game with a total stranger, and they had a hard time popping it. You can see Jongkook come up to check on them

(3) At the event, he was extremely caring to a young fan, and made sure she felt comfortable by taking care of her

Given that *oppa* is a term used by a younger woman towards an elder male, the caring and 'protective' behaviour described in the examples above is directed predominantly towards women. In all the examples, there is a reference to male idols

exhibiting emotionally aware and sensitive behaviour towards women, whether they are fans or other celebrities. Being protective and caring for younger siblings is a responsibility that traditionally falls onto male members of the Korean family, enhanced in the *oppa-dongsaeng* relationship by the lowered social status of women.

The examples indicate the influence of Korean gender dynamics in underpinnings of *oppa* when used in certain contexts by global anglophone fans, wherein the relationship between the male and female interlocuters is defined by the ‘active’ male protecting the ‘passive’ female. This appears to be removed from age-dependent factors and is most evident in examples (1) and (2), where the female parties are put in positions of needing protection of the male party. In both cases, this ‘protection’ appears to be triggered by the existence of a generic third party who is outside of the *oppa-dongsaeng* dynamic: “the fans”, and “a total stranger”. In (2), it is implied that So-min (age 35) had to play the ‘balloon popping game’ with a total stranger, warranting Jungkook (age 24) to go “and check up on them”. Given the two have a significant age gap and that So-min is in fact the older party, labelling Jungkook as a “protective Oppa” appears to be more associated with his behaviour towards So-min, rather than his actual age. Without his intervention, So-min’s competence in the game is diminished “they had a hard time popping it”.

(5) There will be great if one of them being your oppa..your own oppa ! The angrlic¹² handsome brother who also talented idol are going to take care of you..

Example (5) takes an idealistic, dreamlike tone, noting that *oppa* is an “angelic handsome brother” who is “going to take care of you”. It is further implied that the unnamed *oppa* in question will be “your own oppa”, rather than anybody

¹² A misspelling of “angelic”

else's. In some cases, desires for *oppa* are therefore not only grounded in physical attractiveness but are also accompanied with a desire to be 'taken care of' by a male figure. Rather than being linked to the actual age of the male interlocuter, the construction of the caring and protective *oppa* figure appears to be more linked to behaviours, particularly those that relate to looking after women. In such contexts, *oppa* takes on an idealised figure of a male who cares for women and 'protects' them, especially those who are younger or more vulnerable.

"Oppa Notice Me": The Senpai Effect

There is a lack of research corroborating potential overlap between the global anglophone Japanese anime/manga fandom and the global anglophone K-Pop fandom, though semantic links in English-language usage between the Japanese address term *senpai* 'senior' and *oppa* speak for parallels about how address terms are conceptualised in fandom contexts. Although both words have markedly different applications in each of their respective sociocultural contexts, *oppa* is frequently likened and compared to *senpai* by some K-Pop fans. Like *oppa*, *senpai* indexes a bidirectional hierarchical kinship relationship, wherein the hearer is more senior than the speaker. Unlike *oppa*, however, *senpai* is not a familial term, nor is it dependent on age or gender-related seniority and can also be used for somebody of the same age or even younger, should they be in a senior position to the hearer (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002).

In both Korean and Japanese, the word senior (*sunbae* and *senpai*) is classified as a Sino-Xenic lexicon doublet, sharing origin in the Middle Chinese 先輩 ('first' and 'generation'). The opposite term 'junior', is *hoobae* and *kouhai*

respectively, though, given they refer to individuals in a lower position in the social hierarchy, both are only used as referent terms. Neither word has an adequate English equivalent term, as the English language lacks such systematic use of seniority-based address terms, and additionally, both terms refer to a culturally engrained, vertical hierarchical relationship, with its roots in Confucian ideology and the idea that those lower in the social hierarchy must defer to the seniority of those above them. The verticality of the relationship can be quite strict and irreversible, described in an article from *The Korea Herald* as “once a seonbae, forever a seonbae” (Bae, 2014). Both terms are most frequently encountered in organisational/institutional contexts, including at school, in the workplace, and in the domain of sports/martial arts.

The senior-junior relationship dynamic is more commonly associated with Japanese culture and society, possibly due to the additional lexical flexibility in the fictive application of familial address terms in the Korean language. Sugihara and Katsurada (2002) argue that understanding of the *senpai-kouhai* dynamic is first introduced in a school setting, laying the foundations for the understanding of interpersonal relationships, as well as understanding of masculine and feminine dynamics within the social hierarchy. Due to women occupying a lower status in the social hierarchy and being historically excluded from senior positions in society, they note that men are more likely to be conscious of *senpai-kouhai* dynamics than women. *Senpai* is not a gendered term, however, it is grounded in patrilineal Confucian dynamics, and consequently is likely to be internalised as a male figure.

Although *sunbae* and *senpai* share linguistic and societal origins, they diverge considerably in the popular culture contexts through which they are introduced to

global anglophone fans. In the Korean entertainment industry, *sunbae*, or the honorific form *sunbae-nim*, is a relatively formal way to address more senior idols or groups. The seniority, rather than being age-based, is often calculated according to year of debut. Looking at SM Entertainment artists as an example, BoA (debuted 2000) is the *sunbae* of Girls' Generation (debuted 2007), with Red Velvet (debuted 2014) as the *hoobae* of both. Red Velvet's eldest member, Irene, is the same age (both are born in 1991) as Girls' Generation *maknae* Seohyun but would still be expected to refer to her as *sunbae*.

Much like the *maknae* dynamic in K-Pop groups, the *sunbae-hubae* dynamic is one that is strictly adhered to, especially in professional settings. In the second series of MNET Entertainment's girl group survival show *Queendom*, there are two groups that debuted in 2022: VIVIZ, and Kep1er. Even though VIVIZ debuted in 2022, the three members of the group were previously in a group called GFRIEND, who debuted in 2015. This leads to members of WJSN (debuted in 2015) to jokingly suggest that the members of VIVIZ are not their seniors. This sparked a response from SinB of VIVIZ, who asks Yeorum of WJSN to pass on the message to the rest of the group that they should be addressed as *sunbaenim*. As the groups only debuted a year apart, the example gives an idea of how the *sunbae-hoobae* dynamic is articulated in the K-Pop industry (Lucas, 2022).

On the other hand, in Japanese popular culture, exposure to *senpai* is often through in the fictionalised world of anime/manga, often set in high-school environments. The prototypical *senpai* is usually an older student who is cool, appealing, and popular. *Senpai* are likely to have multiple admirers, hence the trope in anime/manga "for a Kouhai to desperately seek their Senpai's attention but fails as

because their *senpai* ignores them continuously” (Urban Dictionary, 2019). The recurrence of the *senpai-kouhai* dynamic in high-school focused anime eventually became a meme amongst anglophone fans: ‘I Hope Senpai Will Notice Me’. Know Your Meme (2012) describes it as “a catchphrase commonly associated with anime shows and manga books that can often be found on the microblogging site Tumblr to express a quest to resolve unrequited admiration”.

In certain contexts, this desire to be ‘noticed’ by *senpai* may have sexual undertones, as it may indicate that “a *senpai* has more experience (read: sexual experience) than the protagonist who is completely innocent” (Kincaid, 2017). Where romantic relationships do happen in Japan in the *senpai-kouhai* dynamics, the use in Japanese-speaking contexts is understood to be neutral, with the romantic connotations and applications of *senpai* attributed to linguistic negotiation by anglophone fans in the anime/manga fandom (Wilson, 2021). Unlike *oppa*, that is used to index intimate relations, *senpai* is a more formal term, interpreted in romantic contexts due to exposure in popular culture. The words index different relationships in Japanese-speaking and Korean-speaking contexts, yet anglophone fans who are familiar with both Japanese and Korean popular culture contexts have suggested they are “virtually the same thing” (MyAnimeList, 2011).

Where these romanticised and idealised understandings of *senpai* draw parallels with *oppa*, the connection between the two is particularly evident in the desire to be ‘noticed’. The perceived similarity in the cool, distant figure of seniority of *senpai* has been adapted into a Korean popular culture context, with ‘senpai notice me’ becoming ‘oppa notice me’. The evocation of a potential sexual relationship shares some similarities with *oppa aegyo* performances, with the *kouhai* figure

frequently referred to as the *kawaii kouhai* ‘cute junior’. According to Brown (2013), “the concept [of *aegyo*] is somewhat analogous to the Japanese *kawaii* ‘cute’ craze”. Puzar and Hong (2018) and Moon (2008) both argue that this desire for ‘feminized cuteness’ is particularly well-articulated in East Asian contexts, described by Moon (under review) as a “crucial cultural element”. Although much less connected to *kawaii* culture than *oppa* is to *aegyo* culture, anime characters will likewise repeatedly address certain characters to index the *senpai-kouhai* relationship, whether the hearer desires it or not.

In the manga and anime series *My Senpai is Annoying*, the plot revolves an office romance between Igarashi Futaba and her ‘annoying’ *senpai* Harumi Takeda. Futaba is the *kouhai* of the office, yet she addresses most of her co-workers with the honorific ending *-san*, referring only to Takeda as *senpai*. Futaba is short, and described as having a childlike appearance, whereas Takeda is tall and boisterous (Kemner, 2022). The dynamic between the two characters and Futaba’s insistence on addressing Takeda as *senpai* rather than *-san* thus appears to be deliberate. As the *senpai-kouhai* dynamic is also linked to the more senior party taking care of or looking after the more junior party, it can likewise represent idealised sibling-like relationships in similar ways that *oppa* does.

Where the two words are understandably similar due to their shared Confucian origin, in Korean-speaking contexts, *sunbae* functions in the same way as *senpai*. Certain connotations of both terms have been negotiated in anglophone fandom contexts, and the introduction of sexualised connotations may be carried over from the implication that a more senior individual may have more sexual experience. Additionally, behind the use of both *oppa* and *senpai* is a desire to be

‘noticed’, and using the terms in certain ways, either as part of a *kawaii* or *aegyo* performance, may enhance the possibility of being noticed. Neither of the terms have equivalents in the English language, and this lack of literal equivalent may have also contributed to the ways in which the words are understood and used by anglophone fans. When they are removed from the sociocultural contexts which dictate their usage in Korean and Japanese-speaking contexts, they become opened to alternative interpretations and ‘memeification’. Like how *oppa* has been likened to the sexualised term ‘daddy’, *senpai* has also been used in similar ways in English-speaking contexts, most commonly in the fanfiction community.

Like definitions for *oppa*, the definitions for *senpai* on Urban Dictionary make mention to the word taking on different meanings in the context of the anime/manga fandom that are at odds with the use in Japanese-speaking contexts.

A word many people who are just becoming weeps think means you are crushing hard on the target person, when in actuality means upperclassman or one who is older than you.

(Urban Dictionary, 2018)

Something that all anime weeps, nerds, and "otaku's", call every freakin person they know. Usually said in a unusual annoying high pitched voice. Can cause brain damage from hearing it too much.

(Urban Dictionary, 2015)

The Japanese word 'senpai' means someone that is older than you or has more experience than you. The word 'senpai' has nothing to do with love.

(Urban Dictionary, 2020)

Similar patterns emerge, wherein it is understood that attaching romantic connotations to *senpai* does not align with the ‘authentic’ use of the word in Japanese-speaking contexts. Much like *oppa* has become associated with K-Pop fangirls and is used in ‘annoying’ ways by them, *senpai* is attributed to ‘weeps’, a shortened form of the word ‘Weeaboo’, coined on the image-board 4chan and is used “in reference to a stereotype of a fan of Japanese pop culture who is obsessed with

Japan to the point of possibly wishing themselves to be Japanese” (Arbuthnott Gardiner, 2019). The “unusual annoying high pitched voice” mentioned in the second definition for *senpai* sounds similar to the prosodic cues to index use of *oppa* as part of an *aegyo* performance. Frustration appears to be directed towards the overuse of the term by fans to address “every freakin person they know”.

The links between *senpai* and *oppa* were further articulated in examples from the corpus data. Comparisons between the two words often occurred without the identification of any semantic or contextual links. Like with *oppa*, definitions for *senpai* varied, including: “senior”, “crush or celebrity crush”. Despite this lack of articulation of the semantic links between *oppa* and *senpai*, it was assumed that using *senpai* to explain *oppa* and vice versa, would be understood from a semiotic perspective.

- (1) Senpai is a Japanese phrase that can be used to refer to someone you look up to or someone you like. In many animes girls use the word 'senpai' when talking about someone who is older than them or just someone who you like/love. Oppa is a Korean phrase that is used by girls to refer to an older male that you look up to or an older male that you like.
- (2) If you watch Japanese drama or anime, senpai sometimes got mistaken as call-out our crush or love interested "notice me senpai"
- (3) oppa~! " " I'm not your oppa! Stop it! " A Korean slang word, typically used to describe either your crush (like Japanese Senpai or Sempai), or your celebrity crush. In informal cases, a girl would address her male best friend like this.
- (4) It's similar to kpop fans use 'oppa', it's similar to anime fans that use, 'senpai'. (I think it's like 'senior' for schoolgirls to use? Haha, I'm trying to make a comparison)
- (5) Both words have a different meaning, however, both were figuratively similar in fans point of view especially to international fans (otaku and Kpopers).

In examples (1) and (3), *senpai* is coded as a word that can be used for your “crush” or “someone you like/love”. Example (2) rebuts this interpretation, suggesting that the influence of Japanese dramas and anime has led to the misconception that the term is used to “call-out” a crush or love interest. *Senpai* and *oppa* are not constructed as directly equivalent or interchangeable in the examples, and they are compared using more ambiguous terms such as “like”, “similar to”, and “I think”. This suggests that where their similarity is recognised, they are not entirely the same. The commentor in example (5) acknowledges that the words have a “different meaning” but were seen as “figuratively similar” to international fans of anime “otakus”, and K-Pop “kpopers”. Given both words lack English-language equivalents due to linguistic and cultural differences, using other East Asian words as a referent can present fans with a shortcut of understanding.

The similarities between the two words are representative of their linguistic journeys from words of sociocultural importance in their native words, to being negotiated and semiotically rearranged and recontextualised in online communities by global anglophone fans. The understanding that the words are similar does not appear to originate from their use in Japanese or Korean-speaking contexts, but rather, from their use in English-speaking contexts. Though not nearly as popular as ‘senpai notice me’, a meme that even received recognition from the online dictionary Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the phrase ‘oppa notice me’ has been used by some K-Pop fans to allegorise a relationship between an individual and the object of their affection (an idol) who doesn’t notice them. The ‘admiration from afar’ and use of *senpai* to gain attention in the *senpai-kouhai* dynamic in anime and manga is related to the distanced relationship between fans and K-Pop idols, positing the speaker in a position of self-determined inferiority. Accordingly, *oppa* and *senpai*

are both understood to be desirable – yet unattainable – individuals who can only be admired from afar and can only have their attention actively drawn from them.

Constructing Oppa: From Object of Affection to Object of Hatred “Oppa Please Fuck Me Hard!” to “Oppa Doesn’t Give a Fuck About You”: Idealising, Sexualising, and Hating Oppa in the Anglophone K-Pop Fandom

The previous section used examples from the corpus and a comparison with the Japanese word *senpai* to explore how the Neo-Confucian underpinnings of *oppa* have influenced anglophone fan usage and understanding. Being labelled as *oppa* in the examples was linked to behavioural traits such as being ‘protective’ or ‘caring’, rather than being triggered by physical attractiveness. In the comparisons with *senpai*, it further appeared that part of romanticised intentions behind using both terms is the implication that the more senior party (*oppa* or *senpai*) may have more ‘sexual experience’ than the junior party. The following section will depart from these more traditional cultural underpinnings and explore more ‘contemporary’ conceptualisations of *oppa* as ‘handsome’ or ‘sexy’, or as a tool to ‘flirt’, as influenced by the Korean entertainment industry and fandom culture. Following on from this, the pejorative *oppa* will be explored, looking at how *oppa* has become a distinct lexical marker of ‘Koreaboo’ behaviour.

“Or the Girl Hitting on the Guy”: Aegyo and the Flirtatious Oppa

Perhaps striking about the *Urban Dictionary* definitions presented earlier in the chapter is that there is more consistency in labelling *oppa* as a term that can be used to flirt, rather than an individual’s older brother. Multiple definitions presented earlier make mention to *oppa* being “sometimes used in a slightly flirtatious way”, “[a term] often used in a romantic relationship”, “[a term] for a girl to call an older

male, in a flirtatious way” (Urban Dictionary, 2010, 2015, 2018). Connecting *oppa* use to the act of flirting appeared to be a necessity in the *Urban Dictionary* definitions, marking the ‘flirtatious’ usage as the most common non-referential application for *oppa* in the definitions. Although acknowledgement that *oppa* could be used to flirt was widespread in the definitions, this intention was detached from using *oppa* for other purposes, such as addressing an older brother or older male friend, and ‘flirting’ was often presented as a secondary definition.

The language used around this ‘flirtatious’ use of *oppa* – “slightly flirtatious way”, “used while flirting” and “trying to flirt with” – give the impression that *oppa* functions as a linguistic strategy to achieve a specific outcome, in this case, successful flirtation with *oppa*. Interestingly, the phrase “trying to flirt with” implies that the *oppa* may not be wholeheartedly receptive. In such a way, like ‘being noticed’ by *senpai*, using *oppa* is portrayed as a tactic used by the female interlocuter to attract ‘attention’ from a male interlocuter. In all the definitions, the social burden of using *oppa* falls onto the female interlocuter. These definitions align with the use of *oppa* as part of an *aegyo* performance, again suggesting that anglophone fans are aware of social meanings of *oppa* that are removed from its primary definition of indexing an intimate, familiar relationship between a male and female interlocuter.

(1) Korean men do not have any issue with pretty girls calling them oppa and hitting on us. If anything, we love it.

(2) The term "oppa" also has this connotation that if a woman uses it when she doesn't know the person or isn't close with them¹³, it may seem that she's flirting with them.

(3) if said with the right tone of voice, it indicates that you like a guy as more than just a friend. And who doesn't like being liked? It's flirtatious, and flirting is usually exciting.

¹³ A misspelling of “them”

(5) Oppa is a Korean honorific for older brother, but fangirls use it to flirt with their favorite celebrity lol.

Links between *oppa* and flirting were well-articulated in the corpus data and using *oppa* was regarded to be a lexical marker of flirtatious intent. Again, there appear to be conflicted ideas of how social meanings of *oppa* are triggered. Example (1) specifically mentions that Korean men have no problems with “pretty girls” calling them *oppa* and “hitting on us”, which appears to suggest that being addressed as *oppa* by a foreigner is only desirable when they are “pretty”. Examples (2) and (3) present two additional components that identify use of *oppa* as flirting: using it with a non-intimate and using “the right tone of voice”. This “right tone of voice” is most likely the *aegyo* voice, characterised by rising-falling intonation, elongation, and childlike pitch changes. Example (5) is the only one that equates the use of *oppa* with fangirls, noting that they “use it to flirt with their favorite celebrity”. The examples illustrate an implied understanding that when *oppa* is accompanied by certain features, the interpretation can shift to believing it is a linguistic strategy to flirt, however, this did not appear to be viewed problematically.

Conducting a search for *aegyo* in the corpus revealed a very different set of attitudes that viewed *aegyo*, and specifically *oppa aegyo*, as ‘annoying’, ‘uncomfortable’, ‘whiney’, and ‘painful’. The normativity of *aegyo* in Korean entertainment, as well as the exaggerated portrayals presented in the media have not always been met with wholly positive appraisals from global fans. Criticisms of *oppa aegyo* vary. Some female fans dislike using the term due to the social connotations and romantic underpinnings afforded to the term through its connection with dating culture. This discomfort is not exclusive to anglophone K-Pop fans, with K-Pop idol Kim Sejong (born 1996) addressing EXO member Sehun (born 1994) as *hyeong*

instead of *oppa*. When asked to clarify, she suggested that she only addressed her older brother as *oppa* (Channel Korea, 2021). Of additional scrutiny was the manipulative ‘forced intimacy’ element of *oppa aegyo*, associated with fans that are attempting to force intimacy upon men they are romantically or sexually interested in.

(6) but I love being called Oppa. It gives me a tingle down my spine when I hear it. The only time I find it remotely annoying is when the girl wants something from me... [...] **She'll put on that cute Aegyo voice, "Oppppaaa!",** and enter my personal space.

(7) and if he is older than me, i would call them oppa (if we're close enough and with **non aegyo voice** for sure).

(8) i think they will be uncomfortable **if the girls are using the aegyo voice**. especially if we are foreign, we could mispronounce the word and will be sound like aegyo went wrong hahahahahaha..... I heard that some Korean guys don't like foreigners call them oppa. Because they think it's weird and awkward when a foreigner does that

(9) I doubt OP would care so much if this girl just simply called her boyfriend Oppa. It's obviously the attempt at aegyo (in public) that makes it annoying. If you've lived in Korea **you know just how painful that whiney, elongated "OPPPAAAAAAAAAAAAA" can be**

(10) I really love watching girl group members do aegyo and be cute in general, but if one of my 20- to 25-year-old female friends started acting cute in real life all of a sudden, I would probably find it weird and annoying and think to my self, “why the hell is this grown up woman acting like a baby.

(11) A well placed, **perfectly pitched "Oppaaa..."** can bring down the defences of most Korean men. It gives them a feeling of power, perhaps. The way girls use the term, it sounds very submissive, and can definitely inflate a guy's ego. But at the same time, it can definitely be used as a weapon. Guys seem to become putty in a girl's hands at the first uttering of "Oppa~~"

(12) If a foreign girl is going around **squealing oppa** at every guy she barely knows I can see how that can be a turnoff.

Looking at the examples, it was again evident that an *aegyo* performance was most frequently indexed using “aegyo voice”, characterised as being ‘squealing’, ‘whiney’, ‘elongated’, and ‘perfectly pitched’. When *oppa* was accompanied by certain prosodic features, especially elongation, it was identified as part of an *aegyo*

performance. However, positive reception of an *oppa aegyo* performance appeared to be restricted to a South Korean context. In (8), (10) and (12), *aegyo* becomes ‘weird’, ‘annoying’, and ‘awkward’ when performed by non-Koreans. In this way, much like the word *oppa* itself, *aegyo* is less acceptable or enjoyable when performed in non-Korean contexts. The enjoyability of *aegyo* performances thus also appears to be context dependent, and most of the examples pointed to oscillation between enjoying *aegyo* but finding it ‘annoying’ or ‘awkward’ at the same time.

The commentor in example (6) has a very visceral response to being addressed as *oppa*, noting that it gives them “a tingle down my spine”, but if *oppa* is used to manipulate the hearer, in this case, into providing “a free drink or food”, then it becomes “annoying”. In all the examples, those that are using *oppa* are framed as ‘girls’, rather than ‘women’. On the other hand, male idols or individuals are instead referred to as ‘men’, implying that the relationship between male and female interlocuters is a relationship between girls and men, rather than women and men. Generally, Korean men are portrayed as enjoying being addressed as *oppa*, with example (11) even suggesting that it “gives them a feeling of power [...] the way girls use the term, it sounds very submissive, and can definitely inflate a guy’s ego”. A ‘perfectly pitched’ utterance of *oppa* is compared to a weapon, able to “bring down the defences of most Korean men”. Again, the *oppa* is seen as a figure who is resistant to affection until an *aegyo* performance is triggered, occupying a higher position in the power structure than the female interlocuter, who must perform *aegyo* to get attention.

Of the prosodic features that accompany an *aegyo* performance, the most marked in the data was the use of elongation, particularly when added to the final

syllable of *oppa* (oppaaaaaa). The specific mention in two examples of use of *oppa* and *aegyo* in “public” or “real life” gives the impression that the reality of South Korean culture and society exists separately from media performances. The non-acceptance of *aegyo* performances in ‘real life’ by non-Koreans again indicates the importance of context. As expressed in example (10), *aegyo* is enjoyable and cute when performed by Korean idols, yet should it be performed by female friends who are not Korean idols, it is equated with “acting like a baby”. Responses to *aegyo* therefore mirror other attitudes towards Korean culture and society explored in this chapter. There is a borderline hypocrisy between enjoying *aegyo* performances or being addressed as *oppa* when performed by a certain demographic, usually attractive Korean women, or specifically, K-Pop idols. Critical attitudes towards *oppa aegyo* performances appear to be triggered when manipulative or ‘inauthentic’ elements are laid bare, otherwise, the gender dynamics behind *aegyo* appear to be ignored. These negative perceptions are almost exclusively directed towards the female interlocuter, and little scrutiny is afforded to male interlocuters who desire the *oppa aegyo* performance.

If You’re Handsome You’re Oppa, if Not, You’re Ajussi

As evidenced by the OED definition, *oppa* in English-language media (beyond “Gangnam Style” lyric explainers) has already become associated with a man who is “tall, fair, and oh, so handsome” (Chang, 2020). *Oppa* usually occurs without a specific referent in online articles but doing a simple Google search for ‘top oppas’ or even ‘oppa’ in isolation brings up a selection of recurring names of hugely successful K-Drama actors, such as Kim Soo-hyun, Lee Dong-wook, and Gong Yoo. The influence of Korean celebrities on the understanding and usage of *oppa* is significant,

and the semiotic construction of an *oppa* is subsequently expected to be a tall, handsome, older man, usually a Korean celebrity. With the idealised *oppa* a handsome man, it was not surprising to find several references in the corpus to the quote mentioned earlier in the chapter: “if you’re handsome, then you’re my oppa”. When used in this way to index physical attractiveness, factors such as age, gender, and speaker/hearer relations are less likely to factor into the usage of *oppa*.

(1) there's a saying in Korea that anyone handsome is “oppa” no matter what age it is lol.

(2) If you look young enough and are good-looking, you will always be oppa . If you look young enough, but are not good-looking, you're ahjussi. End of story.

(3) In Korea, there is a saying called “잘생기면 다 오빠래” which means “if you are handsome , you are Oppa no matter what age.”

Rather than hearer/speaker relations, it appears that the primary requirement for being addressed as *oppa* is being ‘handsome’ or ‘good-looking’. This is the case regardless of the age of the addressee, as even if they are old enough to qualify as *ajussi*, not being good-looking negates the potential to be addressed as *oppa*. The address term *ajussi* lacks a literal English translation but can be roughly defined as a non-familiar address term used to refer to a ‘middle aged married man’. *Ajussi* can be used for addressees known or unknown to the speaker and being seen as *ajussi* rather than *oppa* is portrayed as undesirable. The issue with being addressed as *ajussi* appears to be the implication that the individual is not attractive enough to be considered as *oppa*, rather than the implication that they are an older individual.

(4) When a girl has no idea who the guy in front of her is or doesn't even want to have any idea (in short, she is extremely uninterested in knowing the guy), he is an ahjussi. [if she] wants to have an idea personally, he is an oppa. End of story. Age is almost never a deciding factor.

(5) Ahjussi means that the girl is maintaining a gap. Oppa means that the girl is interested in either a romantic way or a platonic way.

(6) It's not rude in Korea to call your celebrity "oppa" even if they are younger because it implies that your idol is handsome and has different connotations

Examples (4) and (5) imply that the use of *ajussi* may also function as a strategy to indicate lack of romantic or platonic interest, with the female interlocuter using it for 'maintaining a gap', or if she is 'extremely uninterested in knowing the guy'. Age is presented as 'almost never a deciding factor', again, implying that the decision to label an individual as *oppa* or *ajussi* was more dependent on physical attractiveness than age. Using *oppa* for a younger idol is also portrayed as acceptable, as the term 'implies that your idol is handsome'. Lee, Lee, and Park (2020) have found that for Western K-Pop fans, K-Pop idols offer a more "well-groomed", "pretty", and "stylish" visual aesthetic when compared with celebrities in the United States. Being handsome can automatically qualify an individual for being *oppa*, and likewise, being 'ugly' or 'not good-looking' can subsequently disqualify an individual from being *oppa* and could lead to being labelled as *ajussi* instead.

"Daddy" and the Sexually Dominant Oppa

In fandom usage, mostly in fanfiction, *oppa* can carry much more overtly sexualised connotations. A controversial, yet accepted comparison is with the word 'daddy' (not the familial kind). Non-familial use of daddy to refer to a woman's male lover or husband has origins in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), with the earliest usage in the OED dating back to 1900. The term migrated to a prison context and was used to index the more 'active' and 'dominant' partner in a same-sex relationship. Since then, the term has been adopted by the wider queer community, often used to refer to an attractive older man, and taking on overtly sexual connotations.

Among gay men: a masculine older man; spec. one who is romantically or sexually interested in younger partners, sometimes with the implication that such a man will play a more (sexually) active or dominant role.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 'daddy')

The 'daddy kink' is being turned on by being addressed as daddy, and according to Butcher (2021), shares similarities with the Dominant and Submissive dynamic in BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) sex culture, "except age becomes one of the main turn-ons in the role play". She further notes that the 'daddy kink' is often experienced through two main avenues: as a power-play dynamic, or as a forbidden love roleplay. In the former, "the desire to play the role of someone younger often comes from a place of wanting the other to take authority, not just via dominance, but through caregiving too". Having a 'daddy kink' is thus less to do with having sexual desire for your actual father, but for a figure who is in some way similar.

In recent years, the term has become well-established on social media platforms, becoming a part of internet 'slanguage', especially on the social media platform Twitter. The term appears in multiple different contexts, ranging from endearment to sexual desire, and even used jokingly (Kirkland, 2018). On Twitter, the phrase "fuck me daddy" is frequently used towards celebrities, even The Pope (Heisey, 2015). As we have already explored with *senpai* and *oppa*, words that become popularised on the internet and amongst online communities often take on additional meanings that may depart significantly from their dictionary definitions. As such "[daddy] can be anyone, regardless of gender, age or parental status" (Levinson, 2016). As *oppa* similarly has familial origins, and reflects a hierarchical relationship that, at least on the surface, appears to be based on age, some K-Pop fans have likened *oppa* to 'daddy'.

Oppa is a word that is used for any hot older man like all the members of bts or any other Kpop male group

(Urban Dictionary, 2019)

The definition above, taken from *Urban Dictionary*, does not explicitly mention daddy as an equivalent or interchangeable term for *oppa*, but it does outline some of the markers for similarity, as *oppa*, like daddy, can be used ‘for any hot older man’. In more sexualised interpretations of *oppa*, the age difference and protectiveness involved in the construction of *oppa* translates into traits of sexual dominance and possessiveness. These more explicit interpretations are most well-represented in into ‘oppa kink’. On popular fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), there are a total of 765 works tagged with ‘oppa kink’ (Archive of Our Own, 2021).

(1) hmm, first of all, i read slash fics¹⁴ only (not much oppa happening there unless it's oppa kink story lmao)

‘Oppa kink’ fanfiction subverts the age and gender restrictions applied to *oppa* in Korean-speaking contexts, often focusing on same-sex relationships between two male idols. As expressed in the example, *oppa* is understandably absent from same-sex fanfiction, since it traditionally denotes a heteronormative relationship dynamic between a man and a woman. Yet should the story involve a character having an ‘oppa kink’, this is not the case, exemplifying the ‘kink’ connotations of *oppa* in certain contexts, mirroring usage of ‘daddy’ in online communities. The existence of ‘oppa kink’ and comparisons with ‘daddy’ illustrate subversive layers of meaning added to the word as the word is negotiated simultaneously through K-Pop fandom culture and internet subculture. This subversion, however, is hindered by the heteronormative origins of *oppa*, and the fact that it indexes stereotypes of queer

¹⁴ ‘slash’ is a term used in fandom communities to refer to fanfiction featuring same-sex partners

relationship dynamics between two men where one is expected to be sexually dominant, and the other sexually submissive.

(2) What bothers me the most is the whole "oppa" fetish. I once had this Chinese dude ask me to call him an oppa and I was literally like "why??? We're not in a society where such hierarchy and titles are necessary??" Turns out he just liked Korean girls and had that oppa fetish

As has been mentioned previously, the *oppa-dongsaeng* dynamic in the data has been more focused on the female interlocuter, with *oppa* firmly associated with *oppa aegyo* and manipulation of men who do not appear to be interested. The romantic and sexualised underpinnings of *oppa* are not solely constructed by women, and as stated by Moon (2008), there is additionally a “male fascination” with being addressed by *oppa*. As is evident in example (2) above, this ‘oppa fetish’ has been adopted and is used outside of Korean-speaking contexts, as the commentor notes that they were “not in a society where hierarchy and titles are necessary”, before clarifying that “he just liked Korean girls and had that oppa fetish”. Earlier examples taken from the corpus have supported the existence of the “male fascination” with *oppa*, with being addressed as *oppa* portrayed as desirable, even capable of ‘sending tingles down the spine’.

Likening *oppa* to ‘daddy’ in anglophone contexts has been controversial, as some believe that it isolates the term from its cultural and familial significance in Korean-speaking contexts. This is not too dissimilar to anglophone responses to the sexualised ‘daddy’, as individuals may feel that others are assuming a sexual relationship between two familial interlocuters.

(3) I think "honey" would be much better, if the oppa is a higher-aged boyfriend. "Baby" and "daddy" is far from Oppa.

(4) But the word "oppa" should never be used as "baby" or "daddy" it just means older brother and is used by girls when talking to boys who are older than them, related or not.

(5) Daddy in its rather 'emphasised' tone doesn't really translate well into Korean

(6) Would the Korean "Oppa" be best translated to "Baby" or "Daddy" to those with no knowledge or understanding of the language or Korean honorifics? Where many fans embrace interchanging *oppa* and daddy, the distancing

between *oppa* and affectionate terms such as 'baby' and 'daddy' is often presented as an issue of translation, or lack of pragmatic awareness of Korean address terms. It is therefore implied that trying to equate *oppa* with terms that may be used in English indicates unfamiliarity of Korean language and culture. In (5), the commentor asks if 'baby' or 'daddy' are appropriate translations for *oppa* "to those with no knowledge or understanding of the language or Korean honorifics". 'Older brother' is not mentioned, adding further weight to the idea that anglophone K-Pop fans may be more familiar with the use of *oppa* in romantic, non-familial contexts, than in familial ones.

Both *oppa* and 'daddy' are terms that have taken on decidedly more fluid applications in the realm of online communication. Both terms share origins in familial contexts, and for some users of each word, this can mean that sexualisation usage of either word becomes uncomfortable. Taking social meanings of each word into account frames them both as terms that are used to refer to an older male with whom the speaker is romantically involved with or attracted to, and there may be a caring element involved. The commentor in example (4) implies that the "emphasised tone" of daddy does not translate well to Korean, however, the prevalence of *oppa aegyo* and its expression of desires grounded in a historically patriarchal society is not too far removed from how daddy may be used in certain contexts.

Straddling the Boundary Between Infantilisation and Sexualisation: Fans, Koreaboos, and Their ‘Oppars’

Oppa- FREAKING OPPIA IS MY BABY BOY JUNGKOOK EVEN THO HE DOESNT LIKE ARMIES CALLING HIM OPPIA HE IS THE SEXIEST OPPIA ALIVE PERIOD.

(Urban Dictionary, 2021)

Jungkook, the *maknae* (youngest member) of boy group BTS, was aged 15 at the time of his debut (Herman, 2017). He has become famously associated with the word *oppa*, due to expressing his dislike at being addressed as such by fans who appear to be older than him. The above definition, taken from *Urban Dictionary*, acknowledges his discomfort, yet proceeds to note that “he is the sexiest oppa alive period” despite the fact. The definition highlights a seemingly incompatible contrast between male K-Pop idols being sexualised and infantilised simultaneously – Jungkook is referred to as “my baby boy” and “the sexiest oppa alive” – in a single sentence. As the *maknae* of the group, it is less expected that Jungkook would be addressed as *oppa* when compared to other members of the group who are older than him. Critiques against ‘babying’ or ‘infantilising’ male idols ring loudest when they involve idols who are younger, or underage (the age of consent in South Korea is 20 years old).

Infantilisation and sexualisation tend to be two sides of the same coin in the K-Pop fandom, and the term ‘hard stan’ is sometimes used to denominate a fan who is interested in explicit content or material relating to their favourite idols. The sexualisation of idols in the K-Pop industry is controversial, and has been explored thoroughly in existing research, especially regarding the treatment of female idols. The performance of *aegyo*, whilst associated with ‘feminine cuteness’, is also a requirement for male idols.

(1) Maknae - Youngins that aren't legal yet but we'd like to bang the shit out of them regardless, who the fuck cares about jail?

The K-Pop industry has been under increased scrutiny for the young ages at which K-Pop idols debut, with some critics concerned that 14-year-old K-Pop idols are beginning to become the norm rather than the exception in the ever-changing industry (Yang, 2021). Take for example (1), which notes that a *maknae* is “youngins that aren’t legal yet but we’d still like to bang the shit out of them regardless”. The commentor displays pragmatic awareness of what *maknae* means and how it is used in a Korean entertainment context yet adds the additional gloss of explicit sexual desire. The addition of “who the fuck cares about jail?” suggests that the comment may be tongue in cheek, however, this does not detract from the fact that it exemplifies the sexualisation of K-Pop idols by the fandom.

(2) OPPA LEMME LICK YOUR ABS PLEASE?

(3) THEY ARE THE ONE WHO TURNED US INTO PERVS [...] BEFORE BECOMING AN EXOL I DIDNT EVEN KNOW HOW TWO PEOPLE HAVE SEX

(4) Usually idols think their female fans are sexually interested in them rather than respect them as an artist and love them but not in a sexual way. That's why you sometimes see male idols blushing or being embarrassed when they hear the word oppa

Of course, not all K-Pop fans experience feelings of sexual or romantic desire for their favourite idols, as expressed in example (4). However, it is not difficult to find sexual comments made about K-Pop idols in anglophone communities dedicated to K-Pop idols. The focus of this chapter is *oppa*, and thus, most of the comments are presumed to be from female fans towards male K-Pop idols. Again, the word ‘pervs’ appears in relation to viewing the bodies of male K-Pop idols, lending a voyeuristic element to how the commentors perceive themselves. Despite the layers of sexualisation and romantic marketing of K-Pop idols, explicit references to sexual

acts or behaviour is not widespread in the lyrics of K-Pop songs, with idols historically banned from dating, and at JYP Entertainment, idols are only allowed to date publicly three years after debut (Jeong, 2020).

Part of the sexualisation of idols and appeal to fans lies in the way the K-Pop industry operates and markets idols. According to Han and Tizzard (2020) “people inside the industry also speak openly of the “services” their entertainment company provides – a form of surrogate dating. A virtual boyfriend or girlfriend experience created for fans”. Idols are therefore constructed and presented for the benefit of their fans, with lyrics often addressing a love interest in the second person, allowing the fans to imagine that they could be the subject of their favourite idol’s affections. Example (3) somewhat jokingly suggests that the members of EXO “are the one who turned us into pervs”, going on to say that prior to becoming an EXO-L (the fandom name for EXO) “I didn’t even know how two people have sex”.

Along with sexualisation, K-Pop fans have been criticised for infantilising K-Pop idols, by treating them as children who cannot take responsibility for themselves or be held accountable for their actions. Allegations of ‘babying’ idols are most frequently triggered when fans ‘defend’ or are ‘protective’ of their favourite idols against wrongdoings. Like the sexualisation of idols, these behaviours towards idols and responses to their behaviours have been cultivated within K-pop fandom culture. According to Tantra (2018) “the way the K-pop fandom has been structured has led to a toxic environment online where K-pop fans continue to excuse and ignore the wrongdoings of idols”.

(5) When ARMYs call Jungkook "Kookie" >edit: he's a grown man not a toddler

(6) Oppa is a grown man not a child. Stop babying him. He should take responsibility for his actions like the rest of us.

Where it is understandable that older K-pop fans may feel ‘protective’ of younger idols, especially given the way they are marketed as ‘products’ towards fans, the ‘protective fan’ stereotype is not well received in the K-pop fandom. When fans assume that they need to ‘defend’ or ‘protect’ their favourite idols, they reduce K-pop idols to individuals who are not capable of taking responsibility for their own behaviour and actions, like how a child would be treated. When idols are infantilised in such a way, their behaviour is also treated as a product of childlike innocence, with the assumption that they couldn’t possibly know better. This is particularly amplified if the said idol is the *maknae* of the group, where protective attitudes and ‘babying’ of the youngest member can continue until they are into their mid-20s, or even older.

This defence of idols is particularly amplified in the fandom of male idols, who often tend to be involved in more serious scandals, such as criminal behaviour, including rape and drunk driving. The defence of idols is often one that betrays and ignorance or genuine belief that the idol in question did nothing wrong, despite evidence that proves otherwise. Opinions that allege wrongdoing on the part of idols is often rebutted and refuted, regardless of the existence of victims or witnesses. Those who point out wrongdoings, ranging from homophobia, to racism, or sexual assault, are instead labelled as ‘antis’, fans who are actively involved in trying to ruin the reputation of an idol. Where this type of behaviour is endemic within the domestic and global K-Pop fandom, certain fandoms have become more associated with negative and toxic fan behaviours than others.

(7) But I love being a fan of JYJ. they're giving me LIFE. protect our oppars from antis I think the JYJ family has that mastered

(8) i spend so much time on the internet to keep up with them and love them and defend them and be part of the fandom!

(9) This is where I put 90% of my energy on defending my beloved oppas and unnirs cause they obviously don't deserve all the hate because they work so hard and barely get paid much or get any sleep poor little things and oh bitch pleaseeeeeeeeeeeee

(10) The fandom's foot soldier who has made it their life mission to defend their idols from any threat.

Example (9) is an ironic post that is mocking fans who put disproportionate amounts of energy into defending their favourite “oppas and unnirs cause they don’t deserve all the hate”. The defence of idols is portrayed as being a “life mission”, and very time consuming. In a study of fans who feel ‘at war for oppa’, Tinaliga (2018) writes that this is influenced by the tendency for fans to feel that “the connection idols actively create with their fandoms is such that for some fans, their K-pop fan identity aligns strongly with their personal identity”. As a result of this deep, personal bond with certain groups and idols, fans may resort to possessive and aggressive behaviour to ‘shield’ and ‘defend’ their favourite idols from any form of criticism, even if warranted. In more extreme cases of this behaviour, fans may even become aggressive or dismissive of any personal opinions that they perceive to be negative or that of a ‘hater’, perceiving any comment from an outside or third party as an attack.

When fans who engage in such behaviour are mocked, this is often written in the first person, as can be seen in examples (8) and (9). This speaks to how well-established the ‘protective’ fan stereotype is within the K-Pop fandom. Example (7) illustrates the normalisation of fans protecting their *oppas* from “antis”, which is treated as a part of being in the “JYJ family”. For some fans, defending idols from hate comments or other fans or individuals is part and parcel of being a member of

the fandom. As Herbrink (2020) writes, fans that feel a deep connection with their idols, or as part of a 'family', may resort to "engaging in cultural apologism as defence or simply outright defence of their character" when their idols engage in potentially problematic or offensive behaviour, believing that the behaviour is forgivable based on knowing their idol is a 'good person' deep down.

This acceptance and acknowledgement of the stereotype and fan behaviour has led to the creation of numerous derivative terms such as 'oppa didn't mean it', 'oppar', and 'oppalogist'. 'Oppa didn't mean it' is a term that is often used towards an apologist fan, referencing the tendency for K-pop fans to engage in apologism as a defence against perceived attacks on their favourite idols. In an 'oppa didn't mean it' defence, problematic behaviour or remarks are regarded as 'innocent mistakes', again, related to the infantilisation involved in the blind defence of K-pop idols. 'Oppalogist' functions in a similar way, derived from the term 'apologist'. Negative and toxic behaviour in the K-pop fandom is particularly reactionary, and terms such as 'oppar', 'oppalogist', and 'oppa didn't mean it' point to internal strife between 'normal' and 'abnormal' K-pop fangirls.

(11) And if you commit the mistake of expressing a dissenting view [...] you'd suddenly find yourself transported to grade school and experience the wrath of The Bully and their gang of bully friends. The Oppalogist (also The Unnielogist) Oppa can do no wrong and anyone who says otherwise is evil. Why does the world wrong oppa so much? He's innocent, he's an angel, a saint! He does not know anything!!!

(12) Fan who thinks their bias are infallible and turn against them when they do one tiny mistakes. or worse, goes OPPA DIDN'T MEAN IT

(13) I've noticed certain behaviour of "oppar didn't mean it" condition for a while [...] I told her a few hours back and she was like "NOBODY IS PERFECT NOT EVEN YOU HE PROBABLY REGRETS IT POOR HIM BRINGING HIS HURTFUL PAST BACK"

The so-called ‘oppa fans’ are treated as a monolithic group, characterised by delusion and the belief that their favourite idols “can do no wrong”. Their behaviour is regarded as childish and infantile, and it is suggested that “expressing a dissenting view” will result in being confronted. The examples speak for the well-established negative stereotype of a K-Pop fan. First, they are assumed to be young females, by virtue of the prevalence of *oppa* in the discourse. Second, we can assume that these problematic fans are also presumed to be non-Korean.

Building further on this semiotic construction, the prevalence of the derivative form ‘oppar’ in mocking corpus data supplements the idea that problematic fans are likely to be foreign, specifically from the United States. The ironic term *oppar* originated on a well-known K-Pop *LiveJournal* community ‘kpsm2’ (K-Pop secret meme 2), before moving into wider circulation after being picked up by the *LiveJournal* Korean entertainment news site ‘Omona they didn’t!’. The term was originally conceived to mock overly enthusiastic fans who overused *oppa* and engaged in behaviours such as blind defence of their favourite idols. It is understood that the addition of the ‘r’ is intended to mock anglophone pronunciation of the word, with Jeong and Yu (2021) writing that “in Korean, rhotic r is phonetically ill-formed in the coda position, and ‘oppar’ is thus perceived as an infelicitous, anglicized pronunciation”. When using ‘oppar’ or *oppa* in a derogatory manner, the target of depreciation is not restricted to the speaker, but also extends to the hearer.

(14) Oh look, her beloved oppars are still releasing songs.

(15) I also get mad when people mock us and use the ever-so-insulting term ‘oppar’ instead of ‘oppa’, like get it right pfft. Oh hold on a sec I use that myself kekekekekekeke.

(16) aigoo!!! wae you treat me like this? i just want to express my sarang for my oppars and unnirs! leave me alone, araso? kamsahabnida... aigoo aigoo...

With the statement “her beloved oppas are still releasing songs” in example (14), the ire of the commentor is not solely directed towards the unnamed female fan, rather, there is the implication of disdain that the “beloved oppas” are still releasing music. Often in the K-Pop fandom, the fandom of specific groups is seen as a by-product of the group themselves, and thus fandom and idol become inextricably linked. By virtue of the behaviour of their fandom, the use of oppas can thus also function to criticise both the speaker and the hearer. The imagined headspace of ‘oppa fans’ is one of hypocrisy, characterised by a lack of self-awareness. Examples (15) and (16) both use first-person mockery, including the seemingly random addition of Korean words mixed with English. The English word “why” is substituted for the Korean word “wae”, with the use of Korean in this context serving no pragmatic function. Using certain Korean words out of context, especially *oppa*, is emblematic of a certain type of fan, usually one who is assumed to be “culturally ignorant” (Lee, Lee & Park, 2020). These fans are often referred to as ‘Koreaboos’ or ‘k-boos/kboos’ for short. Koreaboo is a term for an “overly obsessed” K-Pop fan, and the ubiquity and criticism surrounding the use of *oppa* has contributed to use of the word becoming a lexical marker of being a Koreaboo.

On a basic level, Koreaboo fans typically “start adding Korean words to their sentences, eat Korean food often, imitate Korea’s sense in fashion, watch Korean dramas, and even want to live in Korea” (Touhami and Al-Haq, 2017). The main behavioural traits that distinguish Koreaboo behaviour from that of fans with a ‘genuine interest’ include holding an overly obsessive interest in Korean popular culture, being “culturally ignorant” (Lee, Lee & Park, 2020), and ‘delulu’ (a fandom-coined word for ‘delusional’). In online definitions, a Koreaboo is frequently defined

as an individual who wishes to “denounce their culture and call themselves Korean”
(Urban Dictionary, ‘Koreaboo’, 2017)

noun; a non-Korean person who is overly obsessed with Korean (pop) culture, generally to the point of vocalizing their desires to be re-born as Korean or make themselves seem more Korean (either physically or by adopting mannerisms and speaking habits). Koreaboos are often easily spotted by their (oft incorrect) use of Korean words or phrases in everyday conversation and their staunch insistence that anything Korean is automatically better or more right than anything else.

(Tumblr, 2012)

Although the definition above suggests that a Koreaboo is generally a “non-Korean person”, the prototypical Koreaboo is racially coded and typically constructed as a White American female, with Koreaboo behaviour often linked to cultural appropriation. These links to cultural appropriation are exemplified when fans substitute English words for Korean words despite the existence of direct equivalents. Words such as ‘sarang’ love, ‘gomawoyo’ sorry, and ‘yeppo’ pretty, are some examples of Korean words that are routinely used by fans yet have perfectly interchangeable English equivalents. Koreaboos are accused of being ignorant of Korean culture, as well as of certain subtleties and nuance behind the meaning of Korean words, leading to criticisms of “using the Korean language in the wrong way” (Urban Dictionary, 2019).

The association between White, American female fans and culturally appropriative and obsessive fan behaviour in the Japanese anime/manga fandom has likely been a contributor to the derogatory undertones inherent in certain usages of *oppa*. The term Koreaboo itself was derived from the term ‘Weeaboo’, created in the anglophone anime/manga fandom to similarly refer to obsessive foreign fans of Japanese popular culture. According to Arbuthnott Gardiner (2019), mispronunciation, ‘gratuitous Japanese’, crossing personal boundaries, and

obnoxiousness are all traits that are associated with the stereotypical Weeaboo. These are all traits that are subsequently shared with the stereotypical Koreaboo, thus further highlighting the influence the global anglophone Japanese anime/manga fandom has had on the K-Pop fandom.

Where the two terms tend to diverge is in the gender demographic of the two fandoms. The Japanese anime/manga fandom has typically been associated with older male fans. In contrast to this and evidenced by the widespread use of the word *oppa*, the K-Pop fandom is generally understood to consist of younger female fans.

(17) I'm not Korean but I must guarantee that Koreans get annoyed with Koreaboos. They take Kpop and any sort of Korean entertainment way too seriously and want to become Korean. That's just not acceptable. Especially if the Koreaboo is American. Koreaboos are creepy, cringy, awkward to talk to, and are just disgusting.

(18) She used google translate to write random words in Korean on school property, and would walk into class and say "Annyeonghaseo!" In the WORST American accent I've heard. It sounded like "Onion Ha Say Oh!"

(19) "Jackie is such a Koreaboo, she's American she shouts 'OPPA' at random Asian men and tries to look Korean by glueing her eyelids down."

(20) Calling slightly older boys oppa. It just sound weird coming from a white English speaking girl two years younger than her bias.

(21) Thats not just in dramas fyi And everybody says they cringe when they hear a white girl saying oppa, but every fucking guy I've met that was older than me was like "hurhurhurhur call me oppa!" I can't be arsed to care about white girls saying "oppa" knowing that for every white chick who wishes she was a protagonist in a high-budget K-drama, there are a hundred thirsty Korean men who wish they were in a California porno.

The data from the corpus supports the idea that the archetypal Koreaboo is a white, American female. In (17), negative sentiment towards Koreaboo behaviour is enhanced "especially if the Koreaboo is American". This sentiment is repeated in examples (18), (19) and (20), where the use of *oppa* or other Korean phrases such as *annyeonghaseo* by American or 'white English speaking' girls is scrutinised.

Koreaboo behaviour is described as ‘cringe’, ‘weird’, ‘awkward’, ‘disgusting’, and ‘creepy’. All the fan perceptions of Koreaboo behaviour identified in the examples taken from the corpus align with the Weeaboo traits identified by Arbuthnott Gardiner (2019): (1) mispronunciation (“Onion Ha Say Oh!”), (2) gratuitous language use (“she used google translate to write random words in Korean on school property”), (3) being obnoxious (“Koreaboos are creepy, cringy, awkward to talk to, and are just disgusting”), and (4) crossing personal boundaries (“she shouts ‘OPPA’ at random Asian men”).

Where most of the examples firmly identify Koreaboos as the perpetrators of this behaviour, (21) deviates from the other examples by suggesting that the use of *oppa* by white girls is further enabled by Korean men who desire to be addressed as *oppa* by white girls. The sexualisation is thus argued by the commentor to be bilateral: the white girls addressing Korean men believe that they are the “protagonist in a high-budget K-drama”, and the Korean men who wish to be addressed as *oppa* “wish they were in a California porno”. As we have already discussed, the sexualised connotations behind certain use of *oppa* have been heavily influenced by Korean-language media and entertainment, particularly K-Dramas. The influence of the media on Western perception of South Korea and South Koreans is cited as one of the reasons for the visceral response to Koreaboos. Rather than experiencing South Korean culture first-hand or immersing in the language, Koreaboos are instead understood to build a perception of South Korea based on what they have seen in dramatized, scripted media representations, thinking that they then ‘know’ South Korea.

Koreaboo was used almost entirely negatively in the corpus data and being addressed as a Koreaboo was regarded as offensive. Despite this, there were some examples of individuals feeling that there was a double standard in the derogative use of the word Koreaboo. Although definitions of Koreaboo imply it is a word that should be used to refer to specific sets of extreme behaviour, some commentators noted that they had been called a Koreaboo when engaging in relatively harmless behaviour.

(22) However... There are some that use the word Koreaboo/Weeaboo/etc for people who just show an interest in that culture.

(23) People nowadays just throw the word koreaboo to anyone that is interested & like Korean culture but Actual koreaboos: - They fetishize a entire race, which is gross

(24) Koreaboos are NOT just any girl who calls older guys "oppa"

(25) People who call people koreaboos are the disgusting ones

(26) You can't call out koreaboos and not call out your favs who use broken English

Despite the strong associations between the use of *oppa* and Koreaboo behaviour, what exactly constitutes Koreaboo behaviour in the global anglophone K-Pop fandom appeared to differ. Thus, the boundaries of what constitutes a 'normal' fan and what constitutes an 'abnormal' Koreaboo fan appeared to be subjective, rather than objective. The characteristic of Koreaboos that was most frequently disputed was the use of 'gratuitous' Korean. Those that defended the use of Korean by non-Korean K-Pop fans felt that they should not be criticised for their attempt to learn the language, citing the 'broken English' of K-Pop idols as an example.

Additionally, many felt that Koreaboo was being unfairly used as a term for any individual who had an interest in Korean popular culture, even if they were not 'obsessed'. In either case, it is evident that the use of *oppa* by non-Korean (usually

white American ‘girls’) has a clear link to the derogatory fan stereotype of the Koreaboo. Where there is often a distinction made between fans who take a ‘genuine’ interest in the Korean language or popular culture and those who are ‘obsessed’ or ‘cringe’, Koreaboo is a highly divisive term that carries almost entirely derogatory meanings.

As has been clarified in the corpus data, the use of *oppa* functions as the most distinct lexical marker of Koreaboo behaviour, and use of the word is likely to elicit being labelled as a Koreaboo. By virtue of *oppa* being a gendered term and an easily identifiable lexical marker of Koreaboo behaviour, it is generally assumed that a Koreaboo will be a young female. Regardless of their actual age, K-Pop fans are often referred to as ‘girls’ in the corpus data, reinforcing the idea of the Koreaboo as a product of female fandom. Interestingly, when other females were mentioned in the data (such as actresses or idols), they were instead referred to as ‘women’. K-Pop fans are thus infantilised, with their behaviour likened to that of ‘girls’ rather than ‘women’.

Conclusion

Oppa is undoubtedly one of the most well-known and controversial terms used by anglophone K-pop fans in online discourse. As a translingual word that has been negotiated through internet and fandom subculture, *oppa* has been subject to ‘memeification’, as well as been afforded an additional discursive function of derogation towards a certain type of K-pop fan. Ironic and satirical usages of *oppa* appear to have eclipsed the genuine, and by virtue of strong associations with ‘oppa fangirls’, the term has for the most part been abstracted and removed from any

sociocultural significance it may have in Korean-speaking contexts. Sexualised connotations and comparisons to ‘daddy’ have been spurred on by interpretations of *oppa aegyo* and the use of the term in Korean dating culture. As is evident from usage of *oppa* online, anglophone fans are not paying significant attention to the Korean pragmatics when using the term, reflected in the fact that most fans are exposed to Korean kinship terms through fictionalised or staged media.

Oppa becomes most problematic when it is used by non-Korean female fans, who are often characterised as being ignorant or unaware of the ‘real’ meanings and usage patterns of *oppa* in Korean-speaking contexts. As a lexical marker of *aegyo*, *oppa* is associated with a female interlocuter vying to get the attention of an older man with who she is interested with, but who may not be as interested in her. Where there was awareness of the manipulative elements behind an *oppa aegyo* performance, it was mostly attributed to the female interlocuter, and little attention was paid to the desire of the male interlocuter to be addressed as *oppa*. The subversive potential of terms such as ‘oppa kink’, predominantly used in same-sex fanfiction, is thus undermined by the fact that the term originated in patriarchal, heteronormative relationship dynamics.

Exposure to *oppa* through Korean entertainment and media has led to the assumption amongst anglophone fans that the ideal figure of an *oppa* is a handsome male celebrity, with some fans having “an idealized and romanticized image of Korea and Korean men taken from Korean celebrity culture” (Brown, 2013). The visceral response to fans who use Korean words or overuse *oppa* appears to have in part been developed by earlier negative fan stereotypes constructed in the global anglophone fandom of Japanese anime and manga, with the archetypal Koreaboo drawing

parallels with that of the Weeaboo. Forms such as ‘oppa didn’t mean it’, ‘oppalogist’ and ‘oppar’ speak for a strong reluctance for separation between the ‘obsessive’ *oppa* fangirls, and the ‘normal’ fans who simply wish to enjoy Korean entertainment and culture.

The Tough but Tender Unni

The previous chapter explored how global anglophone fans have semiotically rearranged the Korean kinship term *oppa* to give it new layers of meaning, ranging from genuine application to satire and mockery, and even to indicate romantic interest and sexual attraction. *Unni* falls into the same category of sibling address terms as *oppa* and is likewise used by a younger female towards an older female. Despite the generalised assumption that K-pop fans are young women, female fans of K-pop girl groups have largely remained in the shadow of female fans of boy groups, and *unni* carries a distinct discourse and set of relationship dynamics that are removed from that of its counterpart, *oppa*. Although both terms are gendered, there does exist a trend of addressing certain female idols as *oppa* when they exhibit certain aesthetics or personality traits.

This chapter will likewise use a specialist corpus of data taken from social media to explore how female fans have constructed *unni* as a caring older sister, a ‘tough’, dependable, and mature older woman, or as an object of desire. Reflective of discourses around gender and ideological differences, the interpretation and construction of *unni* differs considerably from that of *oppa*. Special emphasis will be placed on how *unni* is used by members of the queer female fandom of girl groups, with justifications provided for this choice. The chapter will begin by contextualising *unni* in the system of Korean sibling address terms, discussing how address terms used to address women differ considerably from those used towards men due to the influence of Neo-Confucian gender dynamics. As such, discourses around the treatment of women in the system of linguistic politeness will be elaborated upon.

Unlike *oppa*, which has predominantly been transmitted through song lyrics and K-dramas, *unni* is more likely to be encountered in interactions between girl group members. As such, interpretations of *unni* in the K-pop fandom have been arguably shaped by more ‘real life’ contexts, with romanticised and sexualised inferences less prominent. That does not mean to say, however, that romanticised and sexualised usages don’t exist, and the concept of the ‘*unni* kink’ and the ‘*unni* chaser’ posit *unni* as a desirable romantic partner. Additionally, in K-pop idol shipping contexts, the perception that use of *unni* indicates intimacy has been interpreted to indicate the closeness (and potential romantic connotations) of interpersonal relations between female idols. As girl group interactions offer an insight into *unni-dongsaeng* dynamics, the ‘role’ of the *unni* in a K-pop group was frequently understood in relation to the role of the *dongsaeng*, each coming with a well-defined set of behaviours and personality traits.

Female fans of girl groups are critically underrepresented in the existing literature (Zhao, 2021; Laurie, 2016), especially when it comes to their subversive interpretation of female idols who disassociate themselves (or at least are perceived to) from the heteronormative expectations of femininity in the K-pop industry. Thus, this chapter intends to offer an insight into the aspirational desire female fans experience for female idols. The influence of girl groups in the global popularity of K-pop has largely been downplayed, although the recent surge in the ‘girl crush’ concept has broadened the field of appeal of girl groups away from older men and towards younger women. Through this marginalisation and erasure, use of *unni* can also exemplify sisterhood and camaraderie between female fans. This chapter therefore intends to explore in greater depth an under investigated aspect of K-Pop fan language.

Derogation to ‘Cool Sisters’: Contextualising Unni in Korean-Speaking Contexts

The gendered kinship term *unni* falls into the same group of sibling groups as *oppa* and is translated literally as ‘older sister’. Like *oppa*, *unni* is used by a younger speaker towards an older female hearer and can also be used in fictive contexts towards a close older female friend. As how *oppa* is used to indicate flirtation or endearingly in heterosexual relationships, *unni* can serve similar functions when used in a same-sex relationship between two women. Yet, this does not mean to imply that *oppa* and *unni* are contextualised in the same way. The differences between the two words are largely attributed to their gender, and the application of both has been influenced by dominant gender ideologies that place older men in a higher position than younger women in the social hierarchy.

The relationship indexed by *oppa* is the ideal normative relationship: one between a younger woman and an older male. On the other hand, *unni* exists in opposition to this normativity, indexing a relationship between an older woman and a younger woman. As has already been discussed to some extent, women have historically been afforded a lower status in the gender hierarchy in Korean society, and unlike sibling address terms that involve a male interlocuter (오빠 becomes 오라버니 *orabeoni*, 누나 becomes 누님 *nunim*) *unni* cannot be made honorific (Yeon & Brown, 2013). For likely similar reasons, documentation on the etymological origin of *unni* is scarce, and is largely speculative in nature. There are two dominant theories that seek to rectify this. As an address term, *unni* did not exist until the 20th century, with no written documentation prior, making it plausible to suggest it did not exist (National Institute of Korean Language, 2014).

The first etymological theory presented by the National Institute of Korean Language (2014) suggests that *unni* developed from the *Hanja* 妹 ‘younger sister’, undergoing a phonological change from 옷누의 to 언니 *unni*. A perhaps slightly more plausible theory is presented by Ito (2020), who suggests that 언니 *unni* may have been introduced as a caretaker word for 형님 *hyungnim*, resulting from a childlike pronunciation. This is supported by the fact that *hyungnim* was previously a gender-neutral way of referring to elder men and women for both sexes (Namu Wiki, n.d.)

In contemporary usage, Jeong and Yu (2021) and Kim (2008) have argued that the lower status afforded to women in the social hierarchy has imbued *unni* with the potential to convey derogation in a way that is less common with the sibling address terms used towards men, *noona* and *hyung*. Although *unni* forms a part of hierarchical terms that allow speakers to defer to more senior individuals in the social hierarchy, Kim (2008) notes that in the mid-1990s, *unni* started to be used by both male and speakers to not only address close older women, but also those who were younger. Kim (2008) attributes this shift to Korean workplace dynamics. In professional workplace dynamics, individuals are typically referred to using professional titles in the form ‘name + title’, for example, 임 사장님 *im sajangnim* ‘manager Im’ or 김 선생님 *kim seonsaegnim* ‘teacher Kim’. Yet, the use of professional titles is not extended to non-professional fields such as the service or hospitality industries, where there are more female workers than male. As a result of this, female workers in these industries started to use *unni* amongst each other as a way of referring to each other respectfully, and for lack of better terms.

A secondary factor she cites is the declining popularity of using the word 아가씨 *agassi* ‘miss’, due to its association with sex work. The referential meaning of *agassi* to indicate a woman who is a bar hostess or in sex work is strong, and in 2022 a misunderstanding led to murder. A Chinese man was out drinking with a Korean colleague and her husband when he used a translation app to say, “let’s hang out with sister (his female coworker) again some other time”. The Chinese word 姐姐 *jiějie* ‘older sister’ was translated as *agassi* rather than *noona* ‘older sister’, prompting a physical altercation between the two men (Choi, 2022). Albeit extreme, this is one example of the connotations associated with using *agassi* to address a woman in contemporary society, despite the term having been previously normalised (Kim, 2008).

Due to these connotations, *unni* experienced a rise in popularity as a way of referring to women, often regardless of the gender and age of the interlocutors. This has been seen as a positive way to avoid the derogation present in *agassi*, yet Kim (2008) argues that it has instead contributed to the erosion of value of *unni*, as using it for women of equal or lower status strips from it “its original authority and respect, compared to the time where it was used solely for senior women”. This sentiment is echoed in a 2007 article in *The Korea Times*, where the writer describes a recent visit to the dentist where an older woman who was receiving treatment addressed the dentist as *unni* instead of the more polite and accepted term *seonsaengnim*. The writer of the article goes on to note “then again, it is widely stereotyped that most dentists, like doctors, are male. I was very curious about how the female dentist would react to the older lady’s use of “eonni”. She just responded by telling her “I’m

not your eonni”. I wonder if the older woman cared about what the dentist said” (Yang, 2007).

Layers of derogation in the referential meanings of address terms for women is not limited to *agassi* and *unni*. Another article from *The Korea Times* suggests that the address term for a non-familiar middle-aged to older women, *ajumma*, has also been subject to stigmatisation. Being addressed as an *ajumma* implies that you are no longer young enough to appear as a young woman, and the term is also strongly associated with “the stereotypical image and behaviour patterns that is widely mocked are Korean society” of an “aggressive and self-centred woman” with a “perceived lack of femininity” (Yoon, 2022). Women’s studies scholars in Korea have attributed the stigmatisation of the *ajumma* to women’s exclusion from the workplace and labour force, as well as a lack of respect for the labour involved in housework and childcare. A popular Korean joke labels *ajumma* as the ‘third gender’, as they are seen as neither male nor female. The *ajumma* stereotype is pushed by the Korean media and is further problematised by certain visual and behavioural signifiers of being an *ajumma* that have contributed to the stigmatisation – short, permed hair, colourful clothing, sun visors, loud talking, conservative views – all of which, are largely viewed as negative (Kim, 2015).

Agassi, *unni* and *ajumma* are all indicative of the unequal status that is afforded to address terms for men and women in Korean society. In all the cases, original meanings and usage patterns have been altered to reflect the lower status of women: *agassi* became a sexualised, derogatory term, *unni* became stripped of symbolic value, and *ajumma* has gained pejorative connotations through well-established negative stereotypes. Both Kim (2008) and Yang (2007) express

concerns that *unni* has been reduced to an intimate and casual term, rather than a term that conveys respect and authority. However, more recent studies (Jeong & Yu, 2021), have explored the reconstruction of *unni* as a more positive term with associations to female solidarity and empowerment. Looking at identity construction through gendered address terms in Korean, Jeong and Yu (2021) noticed a recent trend in the use of *unni* to “signal positive, empowered traits, and relationships predicated on solidarity”. They note that this is reflective of wider trends in challenging the heteronormative, patriarchal underpinnings of gendered address terms in Korean, as speakers mismatched gender and address terms deliberately to enhance feelings of solidarity and closeness (Jeong & Yu, 2021).

The mission statement of the Korean feminist NGO ‘unninetwork’ elaborates on the connections between *unni* and feminine solidarity: “Korean women use the term “unni (언니)” to refer to their elder sister or another woman who is on friendly terms with them; in other words, “unni” symbolizes the intimacy and sisterhood between women. We named ourselves Unninetwerk (unni + network) to show that we value mutual support, empathy, and solidarity among women” (Kim, 2008). Thus, in recent years, *unni* is undergoing a transformation into a word that enhances feelings of feminine solidarity and mutual support, as well as respect and intimacy between women. This imbues *unni* with additional layers of meaning that form the foundations of how the word is used and understood in a Korean entertainment context.

Locating Female Fans of Girl Groups in the K-pop Narrative

Along with *oppa*, the word *unni* was added to the OED's 2021 Korean word update, and is defined as follows:

In Korean-speaking contexts: a girl's or woman's elder sister. Also as a respectful form of address or term of endearment, and in extended use with reference to an older female friend or an admired actress or singer.
(Oxford English Dictionary, 2021)

The extended use as reference to an “admired actress or singer” is particularly noteworthy, as it focuses on a relatively under discussed aspect of K-pop fandom: the female fans of female celebrities. If you were relatively uninitiated, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the K-pop industry was dominated by fans of handsome boy groups such as BTS. Media reporting on K-pop fans in the West has largely focused on female fans of boy groups, based on outdated but still dominant assumptions that K-pop's sole appeal is heteronormative: with a fanbase young girls admiring attractive male idols (Belinky, 2019). K-pop girl groups themselves are frequently subject to stigmatism, with female idols described as ‘distant and frosty’ ‘factory girls’ (Seabrook, 2012) that exist solely to cater for a male heterosexual gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

Where there is no doubting that pandering to the heterosexual male gaze has been the intention of entertainment companies when promoting girl groups, as evidenced in the disturbing moment a producer of Mnet idol survival show *Produce 101* admitted his desire to “make healthy pornography for guys” (Yeo, 2016), assuming that this is the sole appeal of K-pop girl groups ignores the body of heterosexual and queer female fans of girl groups. Girls' Generation are routinely criticised for their regressive pandering to *oppa* in their song lyrics (Oh, 2015), yet members of the group such as Taeyeon and Yuri have long been popular with queer

female fans in Korea (Koreaboo, 2021). Taeyeon, the leader and one of the most recognisable members of Girls' Generation, has ranked within the top 20 in a survey of popular idols amongst queer Korean women for the past four years in a row (Koreaboo 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018). Readings of female idols in both domestic and international contexts, therefore, can transcend the idea that they exist solely as objects of heterosexual male desire.

Although this promotion of girl groups to older male fans (especially during the second generation) has been the dominant industry narrative, Kim (cited in Herman, 2021), notes that “the ‘female’ audience has played far more important roles in promoting the girl groups and their music than male fans”. Although there are instances of fanwars amongst girl group fans (2NE1 fans and Girls' Generation fans had several) female fans of girl groups support other girl groups, and co-operate with other fandoms, a trait that is repeated amongst female idols (Herman, 2021). Yet, girl groups are often absent from narratives on the global popularity of K-pop, in part owing to domestic-global divides: girl groups are seen as more popular domestically, and boy groups are seen as having more global success (Bell, 2022).

Despite the validity of the domestic-global divide argument, it can also be argued that part of the global success of boy groups was inspired by the successes of girl groups during the second generation. Groups such as KARA, 2NE1, Girls' Generation, T-ara and Wonder Girls may not be familiar names to newer K-pop fans who are better acquainted with BLACKPINK and ITZY, but in the early 2000s they were making strides in popularising K-pop. Wonder Girls, with their 2007 single “Tell Me”, were one of the first K-pop groups to go viral on YouTube, gaining millions of views in the early days of the video streaming site (Herman, 2018). In 2012, the

five-member girl group KARA were the highest-ranking Korean group in a survey by Nikkei Entertainment, beating domestic idol group AKB48 (Lee, 2012). The 2011 single “Roly-Poly” by girl group T-ara was the highest-selling single in Korea (allkpop, 2011). 2NE1 and Girls’ Generation are two of K-pop’s most successful groups of all time. 2NE1 pushed the boundaries of what was expected from a girl group, and in 2012 became the first Korean girl group to hold a solo arena show in the United States (Bell, 2022). Girls’ Generation have been affectionately dubbed “The Nation’s Girl Group”, are the first and only Korean girl group to sell over 100 million records (Valley, 2020).

Kim (cited in Herman, 2021), states that “women have tended to spend their money and time on music and musicians through a variety of fan activities more actively and intensely that [those men who] merely consume K-pop groups as objects for male visual, and even sexual, pleasure”, yet this concept has only recently been applied to female fans of K-pop girl groups. Girl group concepts are frequently categorised into the binary dichotomy of innocent/sexy, with little outlet for experimentation beyond this binary. Even when idols offer concepts that disrupt this binarism, the gaze through which female idols are viewed is reduced to infantilisation or sexualisation. According to Choi (cited in Park, 2021) “female idols are constantly objectified, with the most representative images being those of a young schoolgirl, elf or goddess. These three labels have been visually associated with “traditional” feminine ideas of purity, naivety, and harmlessness” (Park, 2021). This objectification of female idols has also contributed to the marginalisation and tensions of female fans, who according to Kim (cited in Herman, 2021) “it’s said many female fans of the girl groups are feeling conflicting emotions about representations of the girls in music

videos or stage performances, which reflect the male gaze, or the girls' bubblegum pop produced by male producers" (Herman, 2021).

Thus, female fans of girl groups are a marginalised group who go against the normative expectations of the K-pop industry: women are fans of boy groups, and men are fans of girl groups. Female K-pop idols are subject to routine objectification and placed on a binary of innocent/sexy, yet these categorisations assume a heterosexual male gaze. Female fans, be it of girl or boy groups, are more dedicated consumers and are more likely to invest time and money into their favourite groups. Additionally, perhaps because of the marginalisation of girl groups and their fans, female fans of girl groups are more likely to support the successes of other girl groups, challenging the dominance of boy groups as the K-pop success story. As evidenced by the popularity of Taeyeon and Yuri amongst queer female Korean fans, female fans view female idols in ways that contrast with their readings according to an assumed heterosexual male gaze.

'The Baddest Female': 2NE1, CL, and 'Unni' Cool

According to Bell (2022), the popularity of girl groups in the domestic market has only recently started to be realised in the global market. This is a result of girl groups starting to attract female fans in their mid-20s to early 30s, with the aesthetics and styles of girl groups changing to reflect this. One girl group that have long been identified with challenging the normative hyperfeminisation of K-pop girl groups is 2NE1, described as "one of K-pop's most recognisable and internationally celebrated groups" (Glasby, 2013). With their oscillation between unapologetically confident "if we're talking about my value, I'm a billion dollar baby" (Color Coded

Lyrics, 2011) and shamelessly vulnerable “I am shrinking away & am lonely endlessly” (Color Coded Lyrics, 2011), 2NE1 went against the grain with their unique aesthetics, cutting-edge futuristic fashion, and more hip-hop influenced musical style. 2NE1 debuted in 2009 under YG Entertainment, and the four-member group consists of leader and rapper CL (Lee Chae-rin), vocalist Bom (Park Bom), vocalist Dara (Sandara Park), and rapper/vocalist and dancer Minzy (Gong Min-Ji). With an expression of femininity of women as strong, fierce, independent, yet at the same time vulnerable (Kim, 2008), 2NE1 gained a fanbase predominantly consisting of young females (Kim, 2017).

The group debuted with the single “Fire”, releasing two music videos in the process – the “space” version, and the “street” version. At numerous points in the “space” version, CL, dressed in a silver sleeveless biker-style jacket and wearing sunglasses, rides a white motorbike emblazoned with ‘2NE1’ in red lettering. In the “street” version, the members arrive in a Rolls Royce in street fashion: CL wears a Versace jacket and trainers as they dance in a back alley. The semiotic message of the song and music video (MV) is one that distances itself from traditionally feminine K-pop motives – lyrics featuring the word *oppa*, childlike gestures in choreography, bright, pastel colours, skimpy outfits, high heels – instead, offering lyrics about self-confidence, more typically ‘masculine’ motifs (motorbikes, cars, trainers), and a more ‘street’ and ‘futuristic’ concept. When “Fire” was released in 2009, both videos had been viewed over one million times within the first 24 hours, making them the first group to achieve such a feat in such a short period of time (Park, 2009).

Their follow-up single “I Don’t Care” earned the group their first Triple Crown¹⁵ on *Inkigayo!* Since its initial release in 2009, the song hasn’t left the MelOn Daily 1000 chart (Koreaboo, 2022). In 2010, the group experienced their first major commercial breakthrough with their first full-length album, *To Anyone*. The group released three singles from the album – “Clap Your Hands”, “Can’t Nobody” and “Go Away”. “Go Away” went on to earn a Triple Crown on *M Countdown*. With this commercial breakthrough, the popularity of the group continued to grow, and in 2011, they released their second EP, the self-titled *2NE1*. The single “I am the Best” would go on to become one of the group’s defining songs, as well as one of the most recognisable K-pop songs released by a second-generation K-pop group.

2NE1 debuted during a time where girl groups were beginning to proliferate the domestic K-pop market. Alongside fellow YG Entertainment boy group BIGBANG, they were one of the early K-pop groups to attain popularity with Western audiences. Part of both the domestic and international success of *2NE1* was down to their defiance of established norms of what was expected from a K-pop girl group at the time. This dissidence embodied in the semiology of *2NE1*’s singles and performances exposed them to scrutiny, and not long after their debut, the members of the group were criticised for being ‘ugly’. These allegations were not only coming from Netizens, and as revealed by CL in a 2012 appearance on the entertainment talk show *Strong Heart*, the ‘ugly’ sentiment was also being echoed by YG Entertainment CEO Yang Hyun-suk, who was even recorded calling the members ugly in their reality show, *2NE1 TV* (Bark, 2012, Koreaboo, 2019). By not conforming to the stereotypical beauty standards of female idols, who were expected to be feminine and

¹⁵ In the K-pop industry, a Triple Crown is a coveted award given to a group when a single takes the number one spot on a music show for three consecutive weeks

‘innocent’ or ‘sexy’, 2NE1 did not fit the industry mould. In a 2018 interview with *Billboard*, youngest member Minzy confessed their struggles with beauty standards: “people, netizens were critiquing the fact that, you know, we were not the prettiest group [...] we were the ‘ugly group’ [...] when you’re up against these girl groups who look like models and you’re doing something different – cool, but different – you deal in a different way” (Benjamin, 2018).

Criticism did not deter the group, and to counteract the tough, cool girl image that they had cultivated, singles such as “Ugly” and “Lonely” demonstrated their vulnerability, making them more relatable to their female fans:

I think I’m ugly
And nobody wants to love me
Just like her I wanna be pretty
I wanna be pretty
Don’t lie to my face tellin’ me I’m pretty

(Color Coded Lyrics, 2011)

The lyrics of “Ugly” are tinged with a sentiment of self-hatred – “why am I this ugly?” – yet the music video shows the members “rebellious against and defacing society’s generic representations of beauty” (Seoulbeats, 2012). The chorus of the song is sung entirely in English (see above), expressing the pain of feeling ‘ugly’ in a society and industry that praises stereotypical beauty. Although “Ugly” was praised for its willingness to discuss hard feelings, the necessity for 2NE1 to demonstrate their vulnerability speaks for the expectation that female idols need to be able to counteract ‘tough’ personalities with ‘tenderness’. Lyrically confident songs such as “Go Away” and “I am the Best”, demonstrating strength and empowerment, can only be accepted if they occur alongside more vulnerable songs such as “Ugly” and “Lonely”.

The appeal of 2NE1 went beyond lyrical content, and fans praised the ‘sisterly bond’ between the members. Even after the group officially disbanded in 2016 due to their contract with YG Entertainment expiring, the members have regularly been pictured together supporting each other’s solo ventures, and even reuniting in a surprise group performance at music festival Coachella in 2022 (Benjamin, 2022). The particularly close relationship between Bom and Dara (both surnamed Park), led to them labelling themselves as the ‘Park Sisters’. The impact of 2NE1 reaches beyond the fandom, and several current and former girl group members have cited them as an inspiration, with BLACKPINK’s Lisa and æspa's Giselle singling out CL as an inspiration. The case of 2NE1 is an example of some of the difficulties facing female idols in an industry which is dominated by men. Despite this, they are an example of how female idols can find success outside of appealing to an older male audience.

Of the members of 2NE1, CL has had one of the greatest impacts on the K-pop industry. Known for her stage presence and ‘tough’ image, CL’s influence has extended beyond K-pop and into the fashion scene (Guiducci, 2016). Described in *Elle* as “arguably one of the fiercest girls to come out of Seoul” (Yi, 2013), CL is seen as a representative of female empowerment in the K-pop industry. Prior to the release of 2NE1’s final full-length album *Crush* in 2014, CL released her first solo single “The Baddest Female”, with her aim “to change the [general] image that people have of Asian women [...] I want people all around the globe to know that there are girls in Asia, like me, who like hip-hop and dress uniquely” (Oak, 2013). The lyrics are reflective not only of CL’s appeal to men, but also, her position as a role model to younger women. The latter is conveyed through her use of the word *unni*

throughout the song, reflective of recent reframing of the term to index sisterhood in the face of patriarchal norms in Korean society.

Guys call me honey
Girls call me unni
My cool words have a good effect
Round round, this strange melody
turns and turns yeah

(Color Coded Lyrics, 2013)

In the lyrics to the song, being addressed as *unni* is likened to being called ‘honey’ by a guy. The line “girls call me *unni*” draws subversive parallels to fictive usages of *oppa*, positioning CL as an aspirational figure for younger women. In the music video, CL wears a knuckleduster ring on each hand, emblazoned with ‘GIZIBE’ (‘bad girl’) and ‘UNNIE’. As noted by Garza (2021), the choice to feature *unni* in English orthography on a gold knuckleduster ring serves multiple semiotic functions: gold indexes wealth, knuckledusters are associated with combat, and finally, the use of *unni* indexes CL’s position in accordance with the Korean society hierarchy. Garza (2021) further suggests that the decision to use English orthography – *unnie* – as well as the use of younger female dancers when the word is used in the lyrics, serves to index to global fans that *unni* has a place in the hierarchical system of Korean address terms (Garza, 2021).

Figure 5

CL's 'unnie' knuckleduster in the music video for "The Baddest Female"



The use of *unni* is relatively uncommon in songs by female idols, especially when contrasted with the overuse of *oppa* in girl group song lyrics. In “The Baddest Female”, the word *unni* is used several times in the song’s lyrics, and towards the end, CL repeats “now do the *unni* (hey)” multiple times. The meaning of ‘doing the *unni*’ is never specified, but it can be assumed that it has links to CL’s portrayal of the *unni* figure throughout: a woman who is strong, fierce, confident, and a role model for younger girls. The image that CL portrays in “The Baddest Female” correlates with the 썸언니 *ssen-unni* ‘tough sister’. CL’s use of the word *unni* in “The Baddest Female” is reflective of the changing attitudes towards the term in Korean-speaking contexts. Lee and Yi (2020) observe that “in the context of Korean feminist practices, the use of the word *unni* has become an exercise to actualize feminist ideology”. They cite the feminist activist group UNNInetwork, who have reconceptualised *unni* as a term used amongst members to express mutual solidarity and enhance feelings of sisterhood.

Lee and Yi (2020) further note that the adjective *ssen* ‘tough’, takes on pejorative connotations when used to describe a woman, again, as ‘toughness’ is perceived as a negative trait for a woman to have. Should a man be labelled as *ssen*, then he is seen positively as powerful and fearless, yet when applied to a woman, it implies that she is brazen or brash. Lee and Yi (2020) explain that “the underlying message of the *ssen* actions by these women [*ssen-unni*] is an outright opposition to the traditional patriarchal ideology and a projection of themselves as independent, assured, unapologetic, and rebellious”. Thus, the expression of a *ssen-unni* comes from performing acts that resist and challenge normative patriarchal structures and gendered expectations of women, such as being tough, drinking alcohol, or smoking tobacco.

In the Korean entertainment industry, the *ssen-unni* label is applied to a female celebrity who is strong, fearless, and protective of her younger sisters. The *ssen-unni* does not operate independently from the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship dynamic, and is also a figure of admiration and aspiration, providing a female role model. Despite there being greater recognition of the *ssen-unni* figure in recent years in the Korean entertainment industry, often, female celebrities who embody the traits of the *ssen-unni* are constructed as scary and intimidating figures. The Korean American rapper Jessi (Jessica Ho) has established herself as the semiotic blueprint for the *ssen-unni*, an image cultivated by her appearances on the TV shows *Unpretty Rapstar* (2015) and *Sisters Slam Dunk* (2016).

Jessi originally debuted in 2005 but did not gain more widespread recognition and popularity until her appearance in the first season of Mnet’s rap survival reality show *Unpretty Rapstar* (2015). Conceived as an all-female spinoff to the rap survival

reality show *Show Me the Money* (SMTM), *Unpretty Rapstar* followed a structure where female rappers competed in ‘diss battles’ against each other each week to win a place on a track produced by well-known producers. The tracks were all compiled into an album at the end of the show. Although the show, to some extent, boosted the visibility of female rappers, who are underrepresented in the Korean hip-hop and rap scene, Song (2020) if this was achieved, stating that “*Unpretty Rapstar* becomes a stage for catfights where women are depicted as emotional and jealous”.

From the very first episode of the season, Jessi was introduced as a ‘tough’ contestant who the others were afraid of and intimidated by. Her conceptualisation as ‘tough’ and ‘intimidating’ was boosted by her upbringing in the United States and fluent command of the English language. When the contestants are asked to introduce themselves in the form of a rap, Jessi is quoted as saying “we are not a team, this is a competition. What [it] is, every man for themselves” (Koreaboo, 2015). Amongst the contestants – Cheetah (age 32), Jace (age 41), Tymelee (age 37), Jolly V (age 33), Jimin (age 31), Lil Cham (age 31), Kisum (age 28), and Yuk Ji-dam (age 25) – Jessi (age 33), was not the eldest, yet, as she had been in the industry for 10 years, was able to assert her industry experience over the other contestants, in the *sunbae* role. Despite viewers being given the impression that the other contestants were afraid of Jessi, Yuk Ji-dam, the youngest contestant, stated in an interview that this impression was enhanced by Mnet’s so-called ‘evil editing’: “I think they used evil editing powers for Jessi unni’s diss rap. I wasn’t scared, but it seemed like everyone was scared” (Jay, 2015). Kisum, another contestant, did admit that she feared Jessi “honestly, she’s scary. I didn’t know her very well at the time so it was even scarier” (Koreaboo, 2016).

Jessi's 'scary' and 'tough' persona established her image as a *ssen-unni*, a 'tough sister'. Later in the series, Jessi took on a mentorship role with Yuk Ji-dam, almost ten years her junior. Yuk Ji-dam affectionately referred to her as 엄마 *eomma* 'mother'. Although the supposed focal point of the show was showcasing the talents of female rappers, female role models and mentors were noticeably absent: San E, the male host of the show, routinely refers to himself as *oppa* in front of the contestants, asserting his dominant position as a male in relation to the female contestants. The judges and producers who evaluate the talent of the female contestants are also men, leaving the rappers with no female role models in the show (Song, 2020). As such, Jessi taking Ji-dam under her wing (Cheetah had a similar relationship with Kisum), represented the 'tender' side of the *ssen-unni*, and the fulfilment of the duty of care and protectiveness in the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship.

What the examples of 2NE1 and Jessi's role in *Unpretty Rapstar* illustrates is the restriction on performances of non-normative femininity. For the *ssen-unni* image to be acceptable, there must also be a display of tenderness or vulnerability. Despite this, female celebrities such as CL and Jessi have taken steps to disrupt the dominance of the *oppa* idealisation system by inviting other women to embrace being the *unni*: by being tough, charismatic, outspoken, unapologetic, and perhaps most of all, a role model to younger women. As an image that is defiant of patriarchal notions of how a woman should be, the *ssen-unni* is framed as intimidating, ugly, or frightening, as it threatens the already established social and gender norms. Where entertainment companies have traditionally framed female idols as the object of romantic desire for older men, the *ssen-unni* presents female idols and celebrities as an object of desire for female fans.

Contemporary Girl Groups and the ‘Girl Crush’ Concept

In recent years, the phrase ‘girl crush’ has been a popular buzzword in the K-pop industry, and in wider Korean entertainment. Originating in English to indicate platonic admiration for another woman, pinning down the exact meaning of the phrase as used in K-pop is tricky, as Kelley (2018) explains “defining K-pop’s version of “girl crush” presents a logistical challenge because it has such a dynamic meaning. The term could refer to a group’s overarching concept (think girl group powerhouse 2NE1), a more ephemeral song concept (like Girls’ Generation’s sassy kiss-off “You Think”) or even an individual group member (TWICE’s short-haired Jeongyeon)”. It’s difficult to ascertain at which point girl crush entered the K-pop vernacular, though it appears to have first been used around 2015-2016. By 2016, the term had become well-established in the K-pop industry, in some ways drawing parallels with the *ssen-unni* concept, but in other ways, offering a different type of appeal. Where the *ssen-unni* label can be easily applied to an individual female celebrity and has a more well-defined semiotic construct, girl crush is applied more liberally, functioning descriptively.

Girl crush might sound like it fits comfortably into internet vernacular, but according to the OED, the first usage of girl crush in the English language dates to 1915. It is described as a colloquial phrase for an “intense liking or admiration felt by one girl or woman for another” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Despite the ‘intense’ natures of the admiration, girl crush is often defined as a purely platonic, non-romantic admiration. Girl crush can either refer to the act of crushing, or to the object of admiration. The term girl crush is most used towards female celebrities, often in an admiration of beauty, style, behaviours, or overall demeanour. Although attraction is subjective, in the English language media, there appears to be a

consensus on certain female celebrities that hold specific appeal to other women, including Scarlett Johansson, Margot Robbie, Mila Kunis, Olivia Wilde, and Jennifer Lawrence. Despite the romantic connotations of ‘crush’, in the context of the girl crush, it is more understood to refer to the intense feelings of a crush rather than any type of romantic attraction. As one article notes “it’s about women who make us feel inspired and powerful and like we could be rich and famous too if we ever get round to leaving our sofa” (Usmar, 2012).

Thus, having a girl crush involves finding a role model in a female celebrity. As such, the ideal girl crush must be a celebrity who is relatable to other women, as well as ‘down to earth’, rather than ‘threatening’. Jennifer Lawrence has long been held up by the media as an example of a celebrity girl crush, owing to her relatability and ‘down to earth’ nature. There are several articles that list the reasons why she is such a popular girl crush, with most of them citing her talent, style, honesty, and her humanity (Betches, 2017; Dray, 2013; McKnight, 2013). Her appeal lies in “being the totally relatable millionaire/Oscar-winner/world-famous celeb we all know” (Betches, 2017), a “total natural beauty” (Dray, 2013), and the fact that “she doesn’t diet or exercise” (McKnight, 2013). The appeal of Jennifer Lawrence as a girl crush is therefore multifaceted and rooted firmly in being perceived as a relatable celebrity who presents a different image to what would be expected from a world-famous female celebrity.

The platonic nature of the girl crush is of utmost importance in definitions for the phrase, and this is usually made explicit: “a (normally) straight girl’s crush on another girl, often a celebrity. It is mostly platonic in nature. A girl who is girlcrushing must be straight, otherwise it’s just a regular crush” (Urban Dictionary,

2014). The general gist of the girl crush in both English and Korean language is usage is thus as follows: it refers to platonic feelings of admiration from one woman towards another. In English language usage girl crush appears to have experienced peaks of popularity followed by lulls in usage, experiencing the highest usage during the early to mid-2000s. This spike in usage correlates with the girl crush becoming a buzzword in the fashion industry, used by female journalists working for fashion and entertainment centric media outlets. Additionally, girl crush appears to be predominantly a crush that occurs from a distance. An article in *The Frisky* notes that although girl crush can be used for a friend you don't see often, or a former classmate/colleague, you are less likely to find the phrase being used for somebody with whom the speaker is currently acquainted with (Gold, 2010).

Girl crush, as a phrase, is therefore one that indicates a distant admiration, abstracted from close physical intimacy, making it suitable to refer to feelings of admiration for female celebrities. The examples below illustrate how girl crush has been used in English language entertainment and media publications:

(1) A girl crush is by no means a physical or sexual attraction. It's part jealousy, part admiration (Gold, 2010)

(2) The girl crush is more along the lines of a female bromance. It's a strictly-platonic straight girl kind of longing where a hetero woman becomes infatuated with a fellow lady who possesses traits – inside and out – that the crusher admires (like say, beauty, sophistication, sass, confidence, etc.), and too, hopes to emulate (Lucas, 2011)

(3) It's hard to put a real definition on it, but it's basically when one girl admires another girl. There doesn't have to be romantic or sexual feelings involved, you simply like them. Sometimes quite intensely, and you want to spend more time in their company (Curtis, n.d.)

(4) It refers to that fervent infatuation that one heterosexual woman develops for another woman who may seem impossibly sophisticated, gifted, beautiful or accomplished (Rosenbloom, 2005)

In English language usage, the links between girl crush and sexuality are explicitly drawn. The girl crush, by its very nature, is non-romantic, and is therefore platonic. Nevertheless, the use of the word ‘crush’ and its inherent romantic connotations necessitate the explication of this fact. In the examples above, this is achieved using lexical markers: ‘platonic’, ‘hetero’, ‘straight’, ‘admiration’. Negation is used to further reinforce these links between the girl crush and female heterosexuality: ‘by no means a physical or sexual attraction’ and ‘there doesn’t have to be romantic or sexual feelings involved’. Traits shared by women who are regarded as ‘girl crush’ material include being sophisticated, gifted, accomplished, sassy, and confident. This insistence on the heterosexuality of the girl crush has not been without controversy in online discourse, as the phrase has been compared to similar phrases such as ‘no homo’ and ‘bromance’, slang terms that remove the potential of same-sex intimacy from the potential of being read as queer. Critics of the phrase argue that where the term is positive through its indexing of feelings of admiration between women, the use of ‘crush’ in the phrase causes problems for queer women who experience romantic feelings for other women, by undermining the validity of the term in queer romantic contexts (Taylor, 2017).

Overall, the girl crush in English is a phrase that goes beyond subjective attraction to index a certain type of female celebrity. First, popular girl crush celebrities tend to be well-known in popular media and culture and are usually actresses or popstars. Second, where it is assumed that girl crush celebrities are physically attractive, the celebrities frequently cited as girl crush material, such as Jennifer Lawrence, are known for having a more ‘natural’ beauty. Third, girl crush celebrities are supportive of other women, and have aligned themselves with supporting women in the industry. Margot Robbie has opened about her desire to “be a female role model by

example, in charge of producing female-driven content” (Tedmanson, 2018), with Mila Kunis, Olivia Wilde, and Jennifer Lawrence also outspoken critics of sexism in the film industry (Bailey, 2016).

In the process of migration to a Korean speaking context, some of these discourses have remained in place. On the page for *걸 크러쉬* *geol keureosi* on *Namu Wiki*, girl crush is described as “different from same-sex relations, love, or lilies¹⁶. A girl crush is when a woman respects, praises, or idolizes another woman. To put it simply, women who appeal to other women are said to be girl crush” (Namu Wiki, n.d.). When it comes to more specific traits of the girl crush, it goes on to further state “it is likely that celebrities that exude an air of strength and independence or are multi-talented are most likely [to be labelled as girl crush]”. *IDOLE Magazine* suggests that there are two factors that have incremented the popularity and ubiquity of girl crush concepts in recent years. First, entertainment companies avoid erasing the male fandom by styling female idols in *ssen-unni* clothing, whilst having them sing lyrics about romance or feature love interests in music videos. Second, the lyrical content of girl crush songs features the idols speaking in the first-person as ‘me’. Where the use of *oppa* in girl group songs previously allowed male fans to imagine themselves as the object of the idols’ affections, the use of ‘me’ in girl crush style songs allows female fans to connect emotionally with the songs and the idols.

In the past few years, girl crush has become a highly lucrative concept for K-pop girl groups as entertainment companies look for ways to appeal to female fans, and some have argued that the prevalence of girl crush has oversaturated the girl

¹⁶ *Yuri* ‘lily’, is used in the Japanese anime/manga industry to refer to romantic content with two women

group market: “there are few safe bets in life but, right now, you could almost stake everything you have on a fourth generation girl group coming out with a girl crush concept” (Daly, 2022). According to big data analysis from *Daumsoft*, the term ‘girl crush’ was only mentioned once on Korean social media in 2011, rising exponentially to around 44,000 times in 2015. A year later, in 2016, the number had risen again to 146,000 times, with *ssen-unni* also experiencing an increase from being used just 571 times in 2011 to 20,718 times in 2016. Descriptors that accompanied *unni* also changed, with a decrease in 착하다 ‘kind’ and an increase in 멋지다 ‘cool’ and 당당하다 ‘confident’ (Ha, 2016). This is reflective of how girl crush is redefining relationships between female fans and female idols.

Many of the early articles about girl crush are dated from around 2016, with one on *The Korea Herald* that lists ‘K-pop’s top girl crush groups in 2016’, stating “you don’t have to be a fanboy to have a crush on female stars. You know you’ve had at least one idol you fell in love with. They’re beautiful, charming and almost always look perfect” (Kpop Herald, 2016). It appears that the phrase entered Korean through the entertainment industry, where it has continued to grow in popularity and become established amongst female K-pop idols and girl groups. In 2015, the girl group MAMAMOO released a single titled “Girl Crush” as part of advertising for the mobile game ‘Innisia Nest’. The lyrics of the song identify some of the key conceptualisations behind the girl crush concept – financial independence, body confidence, being unique, and loving oneself – in the Korean entertainment industry.

I don’t play games, I’m honest with my feelings
I have different worries from other girls
I’m freakin’ naughty girl
I don’t care about what others think
cause I love myself (...)

(Color Coded Lyrics, 2015)

Where the construction of the *ssen-unni* can form part of girl crush, not all idols who are considered girl crush will be considered *ssen-unni*. As was demonstrated by some of the *Unpretty Rapstar* contestants being afraid of Jessi, the *ssen-unni* is more associated with having certain personality and behavioural traits, rather than just dressing a certain way, or performing certain choreography. Much of the discourse is the same – female empowerment, confidence, charisma – yet girl crush is a more generalised and descriptive concept. The phrase ‘girl crush’ only entered K-pop vernacular from about 2016 onwards, but girl groups and female idols who have embodied the characteristics and aesthetics of the girl crush have existed before. Idols such as EXID’s Hani, Red Velvet’s Seulgi, Girls’ Generation Taeyeon, GFRIEND’s Sinb, BLACKPINK’s Lisa, and MAMAMOO’s Moonbyul have all been identified as girl crush idols. Where the girl crush has played an instrumental role in disrupting girl group adherence to the ‘innocent/sexy’ binary, as pointed out in *IDOLE Magazine*, the girl crush concept is rarely articulated in a way that completely erases male fans, thus limiting its potential for true female empowerment.

This section has explored the migration of the ‘girl crush’ from English to Korean and back to English again. As a phrase that has mostly been negotiated in media contexts, girl crush is only acceptable when used from a distance to refer to a female celebrity. Although it indexes same-sex admiration between two women, girl crush as a phrase is firmly heteronormative, making explicit the fact that the admiration is platonic and not romantic. In a K-pop context, girl crush is a highly fluid term that moves between word classes and is not as restricted in usage as in anglophone contexts. Being a girl crush is associated with being ‘cool’ and ‘confident’,

and with the popularity of the girl crush boosting the number of female fans of girl groups, *unni* now indexes a ‘cool girl’ rather than just a kind older sister figure.

Constructing Unni in Anglophone Contexts

The use of *unni* (often written in the form *unnie*) in anglophone contexts largely mirrors the use of *oppa*, as idols are either addressed directly as *unni*, or ‘name + *unni*’. *Unni* is used to show respect or admiration towards a female idol or celebrity, and as girl groups such as TWICE, ITZY, æspa, BLACKPINK and LOONA have bucked the trend of K-pop girl groups only being popular domestically, girl groups and their female fans now have more international visibility. As exposure to *unni* occurs through the avenue of K-pop girl group interactions, fictive usages dominated the data. There were well-developed connections between the use of *unni* and the traits of an older sister: responsibility, maturity, reliability and being caring were all associated with being an *unni*.

In many cases, being an *unni* within a K-pop group was equated to the performance of a ‘role’ that was triggered in certain contexts that necessitated it. In this way, being an *unni* was likened to the role of the ‘leader’ in the K-pop group, and idols who held both roles were seen to have a particularly large burden of responsibility. The symbolic value of *unni* as a senior figure to be respected by younger women was retained, and the role of the *unni* was understood in relation to the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship and the *unni-maknae* relationship, demonstrating an awareness of the behaviours and traits of both interlocutors. This was further evidenced in examples that recognised when these roles were reversed, for example, in references to groups with a ‘mature *maknae*’ and ‘childish *unni*’.

Besides more standardised constructions of *unni*, other examples from the dataset constructed *unni* as something of a ‘sex symbol’, with phrases such as ‘unniewhore’ and ‘unnie chaser’ indexing an idol who has a particular fancy for older women. Idols who exhibited such behaviours were also subject to having their sexuality questioned, reflecting queer desires for mature, older women. In more sexualised contexts, the maturity associated with *unni* was read as sexual maturity. Where the ‘older brother’ element of *oppa* was expressed through interactions with women, reference to men or connections between *unni* and men was noticeably absent from the corpus data. This does not mean that *unni* was spared from heteronormative framing, as the data also presented examples of certain female idols being addressed as *oppa*. Ironic usages of *unni* were diverse, including the use of the form ‘unnir’, and the practice of referring to non-Korean celebrities as *unni* to simultaneously mock global anglophone fans who use *unni* and replicate instances where female idols have used address terms for non-Korean celebrities. Besides idols themselves, the word *unni* was also used towards members of staff, for example, managers, as a means of showing respect.

There was less confusion about the indexicalities of *unni* in comparison to *oppa*, where fans likened the term to ‘daddy’ or ‘baby’, and the role of the *unni* as an ‘older sister’ was more realised in the data than the realisation of *oppa* as an ‘older brother’. In the case of both, they were seen as sexually desirable. However, in the case of *unni*, this also extended to desirability in the capacity as a role model, not just as a ‘hot’ older woman. Part of this appeal lay in the ability to oscillate between ‘dependability’ and being ‘cool’. *Unni*, as a role model figure, was rarely subject to infantilisation, and where ironic forms were used (‘unnir’), examples usually also

included ‘oppar’ or *oppa*, suggesting that the bulk of the stigmatisation towards non-Korean K-pop fans was leveraged towards female fans of boy groups.

Defining Unni in English

Global anglophone fans of girl groups have for the most part been exposed to the address term *unni* through interactions between girl group idols. Due to the structure of K-pop groups and different lengths of training times, K-pop groups can sometimes have a large age gap between the eldest and the younger member. Given K-pop groups are expected to portray an image of sharing a special ‘bond’, female idols often use *unni* between each other. As such, exposure to *unni* often occurs through more ‘real-life’, interactional contexts. Although articles and studies (Kim, 2008; Yang, 2007) written on the use of *unni* expressed an erosion of symbolic meaning of the term in Korean-speaking contexts, multiple English language definitions mentioned the use of the term to convey ‘respect’ or ‘admiration’, suggesting that they were in line with the contemporary revival of *unni* as a symbolic term in Korean-speaking contexts, or indicative of a reverence of *unni*-like figures. Along with *oppa* and *skinship*, *unni* was one of the words that was added to the OED in the recent Korean words update (Salazar, 2021), defined as follows:

In Korean-speaking contexts: a girl’s or woman’s elder sister. Also as a respectful form of address or term of endearment, and in extended use with reference to an older female friend or an admired actress or singer.
(Oxford English Dictionary, 2021)

The extended use of *unni* implies that using *unni* in fictive contexts toward a female celebrity carries connotations of admiration. This was also reflected in definitions for *unni* on *Urban Dictionary*:

(1) A Korean term that means older/big sister that females call a female relative or a older girl they admire or respect. It is sometimes used as a honorific or to replace a person's name.

There are many variations on spelling like Eonnie, Eonni, Unnie, Eunni, Eunnie, or onnie. The male version of this term is Nuna or Noona.

Yoona-unni is so nice she helped me study for high school exams.

(Urban Dictionary, 2010)

(2) If you are a girl, this is what you call another girl who is older than you, or a girl who you respect. (Korean term)

Talking to CL: Unnie, you are the baddest female.

(Urban Dictionary, 2013)

The definitions on *Urban Dictionary* display an understanding of *unni* as a respectful term used between a younger and an older woman. Again, there is some confusion around Korean politeness and honorific language. Korean kinship terms are made honorific through the affixation of the honorific suffix -님 *nim*. *Oppa* becomes 오라버니 *oraboni*, *hyeong* becomes 형님 *hyeongnim*, and *nuna* becomes 누님 *nunim*. 오라버니 *oraboni* is regarded as archaic, however, and there is no way to make *unni* honorific. Jeong and Yu (2021) suggest that this is reflective of differences in how same-sex relations are perceived in Korea according to gender dynamics: for male speakers, conveying deference is of similar importance to displaying affinity. For women, *unni* is constructed as a more intimate and casual term in Korean-speaking contexts (Kim, 2008). The symbolic value of *unni* in English language definitions seems to have preserved, however, as a term used towards a woman you ‘respect’.

The ‘Role’ of the Reliable Unni as Older Sister

Where *oppa* has become steeped in romantic and sexualised connotations to the point where some avoid using the word entirely, *unni* has been reconstructed by the global anglophone fandom as a caring, and dependable older sister. This has likely been influenced by observations of real-life *unni-dongsaeng* dynamics between

female idols. When used in such a context, *unni* was not necessary always affixed to the name of older members and was instead used to index a reliable and dependable member within a K-pop group. *Unni*, in such contexts, was associated with being protective, caring, dependable, and reliable.

- (1) The "dad-like" part of her [Irene¹⁷] is her "unnie" mode which is what's expected of an unnie in the first place Her maturity comes from being an unnie
- (2) I find it so adorable that the younger girls are comforting their unnie Nayeon having a special way of treating Momo, I'd say she has special ways for all her Twice dongsaeng , caring for them and stepping up as the unnie when it's needed
- (3) People around byul said she is shy, wise, cool, funny and always be a role model and dependable unnie
- (4) bcs she is a leader, unnie , idol, rolemodel, etc Jihyo has big...unnie energy
- (5) Imo as a unnie & leader, she [Irene] thinks she needs to be mature, independent & be the strong unnie whom her members can rely on
- (6) Commemorating Nayeon being the strong unnie right now of course as a leader it's her responsibility to take the lead and be the unnie
- (7) I feel like a protective unnie

Traits that are associated with fulfilling the *unni* role include: dependability, reliability, leadership, maturity, being strong, and being caring. Two of the examples mention members from the JYP Entertainment group TWICE. TWICE is a girl group that debuted in 2015 and consists of nine members: Nayeon (born 1995), Jeongyeon, Momo, and Sana (born 1996), Jihyo and Mina (born 1997), Dahyun (born 1998), and Chaeyoung and Tzuyu (born 1999) (Kprofiles, 2022). There are four years between the oldest member, Nayeon, and the youngest member, Tzuyu, and she is part of what is known as the 'unnie line' (Nayeon, Jeongyeon, Momo), a phrase used in the K-pop industry and fandom to refer to the members that are the eldest in a group.

¹⁷ Where this is no idol reference mentioned in the example and the specific idol is relevant to the discussion, the name of the idol has been inserted in square brackets

She is described as ‘caring’ for her *dongsaeng* and ‘stepping up as the *unni*’ when necessary. In the final example, Jihyo is also credited with having ‘big unnie energy’ (an adaptation of the internet slang phrase ‘big dick energy’), linked to her position as the leader of the group and being a role model.

The examples in (1) and (5) discuss the leader from SM Entertainment girl group, Red Velvet: Irene (born 1991). Red Velvet are a five-member girl group who debuted in 2014 under SM Entertainment consisting of: Irene (born 1991), Seulgi and Wendy (born 1994), Joy (born 1996), and Yeri (born 1999) (Kprofiles, 2022). The age gap between Irene and Yeri is one of the largest in K-pop, and Irene is both the oldest member of the group, and the leader. In the examples, being an *unni* and being a leader are constructed as involving similar traits – being a role model, being reliable, and taking care of younger members. In such a way, the phrases have experienced a level of overlap in how they are conceptualised by global anglophone fans. The role of the leader is to motivate and take care of the other members, and they are sometimes seen as the public representatives of the group (Soompi, 2018). Being an *unni* and a leader, as described in (4), seems to involve a twofold level of responsibility. Sometimes the role of the leader can be likened to that of a parent – ‘dad-like’ – as the expectations of their behaviours of a leader go beyond what would be expected of an *unni*.

Being an *unni* in a K-pop girl group is equated with being ‘strong’, ‘in control’, and ‘responsible’. The dynamics of K-pop groups are often likened to that of a ‘family’, and idols spend large periods of time living together as ‘trainees’ before they are selected to debut in a K-pop group. The term ‘trainee’ is used to refer to an idol who is undergoing training at an entertainment company – including singing,

dancing, language classes – and the length of the trainee period can last for many years. The trainee period of an idol’s career is particularly difficult, as eventually debuting in an idol group is not guaranteed, and the training is rigorous and demanding on the trainees, who are usually teenagers. Trainees are separated from their families and friends and expected to undertake strict diets and physically demanding training schedules, under immense pressure to make the cut and debut (Sesoko, 2022).

The average training period for the members of Girls’ Generation was 5 years, and during the trainee periods and after debut, idols tend to live together in dormitory settings. As such, trainees are ‘growing up’ together in close settings that can mirror that of sibling-like relationships. Older idols will have to take care of younger idols in high intensity environments, and this can contribute to the construction of interpersonal relationships between trainees who end up debuting. Thus, interpersonal relationships between idols are formed not only from the point of debut onwards, but during the trainee period, which can last up to 9 years. Trainees are isolated from their family members and may turn to each other for support and guidance.

Examples (1), (2), and (6) imply that there is a state of being an *unni*, described in example (1) as ‘unnie mode’, or something that is invoked when there is a need to ‘take the lead’ or ‘step up’ within the group dynamic. This is further expressed in examples (9), (10) and (11), which equate *unni* with a ‘role’ or ‘act’.

(8) I mean she's always the unnie (a genuine one that takes it seriously) and in consequence the one in control and alongside that all the responsibilities that come with it

(9) After all, her actual friend circle [Irene] are her age so she probably feels more comfortable and not having to do the ' unnie ' role which she has said that she doesn't mind doing but still

(10) jisoo looks firm and acts unnie

(11) I feel like it would be really interesting to see her get rid of the unnie "act"

The examples, especially (9) and (11), seem to imply that fulfilling the role of the *unni* may not necessarily always be a genuine act or desire from older female idols, and rather, may be part of an expectation of being an older K-pop idol in a girl group. It also points to differing ideas of whether idols are taking the responsibility of being an *unni* 'seriously' or not. It is assumed, therefore, that there are certain expectations and norms associated with being an *unni* – responsibility, control, dependability, being a role model – and even though a female idol can be designated an *unni* in line with the age-based hierarchy, if she does not embody these traits, or perform certain behaviours, she may not be regarded as a 'genuine' or 'serious' *unni*. Being an *unni* was therefore additionally constructed as a performative 'act', triggered when an idol needs to demonstrate their ability to subscribe to pre-existing expectations and norms. Looking 'firm' was equated with 'acting *unni*', again, indicating that being an *unni* is understood to be an additional role within a K-pop group, hinging on responsibility, caregiving, and strength.

In a similar vein to having an 'unnie mode' or putting on an 'unnie act', examples from the corpus data also made reference to certain idols having 'unnie vibes'.

(12) But she [Irene] does give off that tough unnie vibe really wish she'd get the same opportunity as the others where she meet a wonderful unnie that will take care of her

(13) Not sure about age because she [Irene] mostly has this dominant unnie vibe

(14) Sixteen Jeongyeon gave me the biggest unnie vibe too

(15) She doesnt give out an unnie vibe with them they have even called her by her name without using unni [Irene]

The tendency for *unni* figures to be defined in terms of ‘modes’, ‘vibes’, or ‘acts’ is markedly different from the dominant associations between *oppa* and physical appearance. Being classified as an *unni* was more likely to be based on behavioural traits that were inferred from interpersonal relationships between idols within a girl group. As explicated in example (1), there was a concern that playing the role of *unni* may involve a level of personal sacrifice in taking care of younger members. The commentor indicates a desire for Irene to also ‘meet a wonderful unnie that will take care of her’, recognising a burden in having to present the ‘tough unnie vibe’. Having an ‘unnie vibe’ included being ‘dominant’, and the examples were aware of the elevated position of *unni* in the social hierarchy ‘they have even called her by her name without using unni’. In example (4), the fact that other members were able to address Irene without using *unni* went against having an ‘*unni* vibe’, suggesting that to fulfil the role of *unni* there needed to be a clear line of seniority drawn. In all the examples that discussed Irene from Red Velvet, there appeared to be disagreement on whether she was comfortable in the *unni* role, implying that ‘*unni* vibes’ are inferred subjectively, and vary from fan to fan.

In the examples, being an *unni* in a K-pop girl group was conceptualised as another role, like that of the leader. Acting as an *unni* was not imagined as a constant state, and rather, was triggered when there was a need to ‘step up’. The word *unni* was associated with responsibility, maturity, dependability, reliability, as well as being caring. In such a way, the semiotic connections between *unni* and the traits of an older sister were well represented. The high level of responsibility involved in

being an older member of a K-pop group was recognised, and the examples expressed concern that putting on the ‘*unni* act’ may be emotionally exhausting, implying the perception of a level of performativity behind being an *unni*. Thus, the reliability and maturity of being an *unni* was also understood to involve an element of vulnerability and inability to drop the ‘*unni* act’ and be taken care of.

Cheeky Dongsaengs and the ‘Mature Maknae’

The construction of *unni* as an individual who is responsible, mature, dependable, and dominant was dependent on the construction of the *dongsaeng* and *maknae* as needing to be taken care of. The *unni-dongsaeng* or *unni-maknae* relationship is a bilateral one, and the expectations and norms of each individual role inform the dynamics of the total relationship. The *unni* will be expected to care for younger members and take on greater responsibility, and the *dongsaeng* will be expected in turn to respect and defer to older members (Sung & Lee, 2013). There was recognition in the corpus data of a reversal of these normative expectations:

- (1) the weirdest thing is sooyoungie always say to other members, as she is quite younger than others but she still talk like a unnie to the dongsaeng
- (2) Byul definitely cannot miss the chance teasing her unnie lmao
- (3) This bear is too much, making fun of her unnie crying
- (4) They often get looked over because people see their interactions as a teasing sibling dynamic ("samo is incest" is a popular phrase among fans)
- (5) hahah why do you love to tease your unnie
- (6) Dongsaeng dislikes unnie's commands and meddling, so she fights back

The examples show disruption to the normative roles in the *unni-dongsaeng* relationships, and further demonstrate how this disruption was treated as humorous. Roles, including those that are assigned (leader) and those that are ‘automatically’

given according to age-based hierarchy (*unni*, *maknae*) are articulated on multimodal levels, including verbally (the use of address terms), haptically (*skinship*, bowing) and behaviourally (taking care of younger idols, ‘teasing’). As such, fans are given multiple semiotic clues from which to infer when a role is being reversed. Example (2) mentions Girls’ Generation member Sooyoung, who is the third youngest member of the group. Despite there only being a marginal age difference between Sooyoung and Seohyun, the *maknae*, the commentor notes that Sooyoung ‘talk like an unnie to the dongsaeng’. Recalling the example in the previous section that suggested Irene did not give out an ‘unni vibe’ due to other members not addressing her as *unni*, fans appeared to have a certain level of awareness of speech styles and what may be considered as formal or intimate speech. However, it still appeared that *unni* was constructed primarily as a respect term, rather than an intimate term used to bring closeness between interlocutors.

As fans perceive the role of the *unni* to be the responsible older sister who is to be respected, the role of the *dongsaeng* was in turn perceived to be one that was playful and childlike. In examples (2), (3), and (5), a *dongsaeng* ‘teasing’ or ‘making fun’ of their *unni* was seen as something humorous. This ‘teasing’ and defiance in the face of the seniority of *unni* was seen as something that was particularly well-defined in the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship, differing from the deference and idealisation of the *oppa-dongsaeng* relationship, due to the increased seniority afforded to male figures. As the ‘girl crush’ concept has swelled in popularity, so has the idea of the ‘deviant’ little sister, as noted in example (6) ‘dongsaeng dislikes unnie’s commands and meddling, so she fights back’. In the ITZY song “Dalla Dalla”, the lyrics centre on being comfortable with being different and not being affected by others who judge one’s appearance. One of the lyrics states “sisters [*unnideul*] tell me I still have a long

way to become mature. I'm sorry sorry, I don't want to be mature, nope" (Color Coded Lyrics, 2019). In essence, the lyrics express a desire that is counter to the advice of the *unni*, which is to be 'mature'. Thus, besides the more traditional elements of the sibling dynamic, there were further recognition of a playful and teasing element.

- (6) Tzuyu is such a sweet maknae of the Kpop girl group TWICE, who is always ready to pamper her unnie
- (7) Seohyun : the one and only upright cute maknae who 'control' her unnies
- (8) childish unnie with mature maknae
- (9) Seo Joo Hyun is the mature maknae ! *even her unnie is childish
- (10) I want to see maknae manhandle all them unnies
- (11) She is the youngest yet could keep up with her unnies

This role-reversal was more well-articulated when it came to the relationship between the *unni* and *maknae*. Of the different roles in a K-pop group, *maknae* is the one role that is automatically assigned (unless adopting an eldest as leader approach), by virtue of denoting the youngest member of a K-pop group. The *maknae* is expected to "be cute, do a lot of *aegyo*, and just have attention showered upon them by the other members since they're the youngest" (SBS PopAsia, 2017). The role of the *maknae* is therefore to be 'cute' and 'spoilt' by older members of the group, but, as the lowest in the social hierarchy, they are also expected to be polite and express deference to all the older members of the group. The role of the *maknae* has spurred the creation of the phrase 'maknae on top', used for "the group's youngest member who is, in fact, superior in many other aspects" (OSEN, 2019). Traits that can identify a 'maknae on top' include being very talented, not afraid to speak up to older members, teasing, and being adorable and cute no matter what

they do. In example (1), Tzuyu is perceived to defy the expectation of the ‘pampered’ *maknae* by instead pampering her *unnis*.

Girls’ Generation member Seohyun (nicknamed as ‘Seobaby’) is the *maknae* of Girls’ Generation and is frequently cited as an example of a mature and sensible *maknae*. This reading of Seohyun as ‘mature’ is intertextual, as it is not only read in relation to interactions with the older members of the group, but also due to her own individual personality traits. In a guest appearance from when Girls’ Generation leader Taeyeon was on the scripted reality show *We Got Married*, Seohyun was quoted as saying “unhealthy diet accumulates and eventually you’ll die”, taken by Girls’ Generation fans as evidence of her responsible and healthy behaviour. She further stated that should Girls’ Generation disband, her career goal would be to become UN Secretary General (Kenneth, 2012). Outside of her personality traits and individual expression, Seohyun’s characterisation as a ‘mature *maknae*’ has also been constructed through comparisons of her behaviours to that of her *unnis*, who in the corpus data were constructed as ‘childish’.

The semiotic constructions of *unni*, *dongsaeng*, and *maknae*, whether following traditional normative expectations or not, were understood to be part of a bilateral relationship, evident of how well constructed these roles are in K-pop entertainment. Seohyun’s role as a ‘mature *maknae*’ was not solely constructed from interpretation of her personality and behavioural traits but was also enhanced by perception that the older members of Girls’ Generation were childish. *Unni* was afforded an elevated status in the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship, yet when members who were *dongsaeng* or *maknae* disrupted the seniority of *unni*, it was seen as playful and humorous. This can be seen as the result of how these roles are played up

to and performed in Korean entertainment contexts. Despite the existence of the term *akgae*, which refers to a deviant fan identity that denotes a fan who is aggressive in their interest in one specific idol in a group (usually deriding the others), it is generally expected that fans will be paying attention to all members of a group and how they interact with each other. Interactional qualities between idols can make significant impressions on fans, and idols playing up to these behavioural expectations can give stronger impressions of intimacy, and the impression of 'family' bonds between members of a group. Awareness of dynamics that deviate from the norm can be a way for fans to demonstrate their knowledge of how the Korean social hierarchy works, and the deviance can give an essence of authenticity to interaction.

'Badass' Unni

In the examples, *unni* was often described with adjectives such as 'cool', 'badass', 'sexy', and 'powerful'. As *unni* denotes an older woman, the use of these adjectives connected them with maturity and seniority.

- (1) bitch please, taeyeon is a badass unnie she even said she used to kick some dudes she's not a fucking passive puppy
- (2) badass unnie Seulgi protecting her Juhyun unnie they just think she's a cool unnie
- (3) Ah was a fun, sexy, and badass debut for After School; it really put them on the grid as powerful unnies During the 2009 rush of girl groups, After School's Ah made its impact with its powerful bad girl image
- (4) She didn't have that ssen unnie image at all and she just looked like a pretty, outgoing, cute and innocent unnie

Disagreements on fan perception of idols, as articulated in (1), can often provoke strong emotional responses. The commentor asserts their opinion that Taeyeon is a 'badass unnie' by saying that she used to 'kick some dudes', and 'she's

not a fucking passive puppy’. The qualification for Taeyeon (nicknamed ‘Kid Leader’ amongst Girls’ Generation fans) to be considered ‘badass’ is through the implication that she has fought with men and is counter to the perceived allegation that she is ‘passive’. Example (2) posits Seulgi as a ‘badass’ *unni* for ‘protecting’ Juhyun [Irene] *unni*. The possessive determiner ‘her’ places Seulgi in the dominant position as the ‘protector’. *Unni* in these contexts indexed an older woman who is cool, sexy, and powerful, as well as protecting others and fighting men. This exists in contrast to the ‘pretty, outgoing, cute and innocent unnie’, implying certain idol’s role as *unni* may be read differently in accordance with personality traits. In example (3), After School’s portrayal as ‘fun, sexy, and badass’ in their 2009 debut single “AH!” contributed to their being labelled as ‘powerful unnies’. Their putting out a ‘fun, sexy, and badass’ debut song contributed to the solidification of girl group After School as ‘powerful unnies’. The emphasis on the impact of the song reinforces the ideas that presenting a ‘powerful’ female image runs counter to the dominant expectations that female idols should be ‘innocent’ and ‘chaste’, thus imbuing ‘sexy’ and ‘badass’ concepts with an additional element of appeal. Generally, being ‘badass’ was seen as a positive trait of being an *unni*.

‘Getting Them Unnies’, ‘Unni Whoring’, and ‘STRANGLE ME WITH YO THIGHS UNNIR’

Not unexpectedly, *unni* also had a function to index a hot, physically attractive older women. In these contexts, the maturity and seniority of the *unni* was interpreted as sexual experience, and ‘getting’ an *unni* was praised as an achievement. In these examples, the *unni* was quantified, and it was implied that certain idols had a specific preference for being friends with or otherwise being around older women. Though less overtly sexualised than in the *oppa* data, multiple

examples expressed sexual desire for a ‘dominant’ *unni*, again illustrating how seniority in the social hierarchy can be coded as sexual dominance over a submissive younger individual by global anglophone fans. By virtue of *unni* being seen as a sex symbol, younger idols who were able to acquire *unnis* were applauded.

In the corpus data, idols who were *unni* were afforded an elevated level of appeal and desirability. Through phrases such as ‘unnie chaser’, ‘unnie seeker’, and ‘unnie magnet’, the image of the *unni* in fan perception of an older woman who was desirable to a younger woman to the point that she would seek out several.

- (1) Seulgi go get em unnies
- (2) Wendy is such unnie bait lol. Unnies seem to love her
- (3) lol Maknae getting them Unnies
- (4) I started getting alot of dongsaengs lately..

Where the figure of the desirable *oppa* usually implied a sole referent, *unni* was instead often treated in plural. In each three of the examples, the verb ‘getting’ was used, whether in reference to getting ‘unnies’ (2), or ‘dongsaengs’ (3), implying that both are obtained or received. In these usage patterns, to ‘get unnies’ functioned in a similar way as the phrase ‘getting girls’, carrying a slight romantic connotation. The ‘unnies’ are vaguely mentioned as a plural monolithic entity likened to a collective commodity, and younger women who exhibited appeal to ‘unnies’ or a skill for ‘getting’ them were commended. In example (2), Red Velvet’s Wendy is characterised as ‘unnie bait’ since ‘unnies seem to love her’.

- (5) I thought it was common knowledge that my fellow unnie whore, Jessusica, was at least Bi if not full-on lesbian

The figure of the *unni* as attractive and desirable was also expressed by fans themselves. In (5), the user uses the phrase ‘unnie whore’, a term coined in the Girls’

Generation queer female fan community to refer to Jessica Jung's (written here as 'Jesusica': 'Jesus' + 'Jessica') tendency to prefer the company of older women as proof that she is at 'least Bi if not full-on lesbian'. Her 'unnie whore' behaviour is well documented in Girls' Generation fan communities and includes her close relationship with older female celebrities BoA, Kang Min Kyung, and Lee Hyori. One frequently cited example of Jessica's 'unniewhoring' (also used as verb) is during an appearance on a reality show where she calls Lee Hyori, saying "everyone said they wanted to talk to a guy. But I wanted to talk to you" (Soshibutts, 2014). Within the queer female fandom of girl groups, having a propensity for wanting to be around older female idols (especially when they are outside of the group) can function as a signifier of an idol having a romantic interest in women.

(6) It's hard to speculate about anything anymore. To me, she's [Yuri] like an unnie chasers (I mean in a good way)

Another similar phrase used in the corpus was 'unnie chaser', applied to Girls' Generation member Yuri in example (6). Like Jessica, the global anglophone fandom of Girls' Generation have long speculated about the sexuality of Yuri. This has been aided by unfounded rumours of her involvement in a same-sex love triangle with two Korean actresses. In 2013, a rumour spread stating that Yuri (born 1989) was involved in a love triangle with two other older female celebrities, speculated to be actresses Son Ye-jim (born 1982), and Han Ye-seul (born 1981) (Asian Junkie, 2015; Soshibutts, 2013). The rumour appears to have originally surfaced on the Korean internet in 2011 on *Nate* and *dcinside*, though the sources were dubious and speculative. Nevertheless, the rumour spread to the global anglophone Girls' Generation fandom, fuelling readings by queer female fans of Yuri as being romantically attracted to women. The rumour was mentioned multiple times in the corpus data:

- (7) but the rumor about yuri and han ye seul and son ye jin is already relatively known
- (8) The story I heard was that it was a love triangle between Yuri , Han Ye Seul and Son Ye Jin
- (9) yeah I remember that lesbian love triangle rumour yuri was involved in all the way back in 2011
- (10) Like honestly the only dating rumor about her is the actresses love triangle one

As with Jessica, Yuri's association with older women, and her love triangle rumour, have accelerated fan speculation about her sexuality. As such, this suggests that in queer readings of female idol relationships, the normative romantic relationship is the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship. Yuri's reported 'love triangle' was well known amongst fans, and suggested to be her sole dating rumour, thus adding further weight to readings of her as romantically attracted to women. Of all the female idols mentioned in the data, Yuri was by far mentioned the most, with over half of the instances occurring in relation to her reputation as an 'unnie chaser'.

- (11) wow that unnie is hot...where's yuri ?
- (12) Yuri's not called an unnie seeker for no reason!
- (13) SYJ likes dating younger "boys" (lol ok yejin), plus Yuri likes a bit of an older age difference

Yuri was portrayed as 'liking a bit of an older age difference' and being an 'unnie seeker'. The first example jokingly suggests that you would expect to find Yuri around a 'hot' *unni*. Yuri's desires for older women were therefore constructed as one that was romantic and sexual. Not only was she constructed as liking 'unnies', but it was also further implied that the 'unnies' she did seek out and 'chase' were objectively attractive and 'hot'. Where in heteronormative contexts using *oppa* the seniority afforded to the older male interlocuter posited them in a position of power with the choice of multiple eligible *dongsaengs*, this was reversed in the case of the romanticised *unni-dongsaeng* dynamic. Rather, the *dongsaeng* (in these examples, exemplified by Yuri), was presented as a 'player' who was able to appeal to and

obtain multiple 'unnies'. *Unni*'s position as a senior figure was therefore obtained, but the female *dongsaeng* was positioned as more successful in their attempts to court eligible 'unnies'.

(14) I think lots of fans of girl groups seem to be drawn to a more powerful/mature 'oppa' like vibe which often seems to be the older ones and that's why the unnie lines are more popular

(15) Also imo unnies tend to be very popular - so many wlv look for an older girlfriend lol

(16) And then you have unnie line that already have that sort of defined sexiness that maturity brings

(17) I think overall the ' unnie lines ' seem to stand out more and be responsible and mature as they are the older ones in the group, I feel this pulls in a lot of fans as they seem to have a greater 'duality' because of their age and role in the group

Other examples from the corpus suggested that this was tied to dominant ideas of the 'unnie line' in K-pop girl groups being more popular than the 'maknae line'. The reasoning for this popularity was 'maturity', rather than physical attractiveness. Where being 'sexy' was mentioned, the appeal of the 'sexiness' was a mature sex appeal, rather than an infantilised one. This goes against what has previously been assumed about the appeal of female idols. The marketing of K-pop girl groups (and sometimes groups themselves) have long been criticised for conforming to the 'Madonna-Whore Dichotomy', which according to Bareket et al., (2018) "denotes polarized perceptions of women in general as either "good," chaste and pure Madonnas or as "bad," promiscuous, and seductive whores". Erianne (2016) takes this into a K-pop context, by suggesting that "K-pop's portrayal of the madonna-whore dichotomy in the industry reinforces the 'general consensus' that the pure and innocent girl is the more socially acceptable and morally upright one while the sexually liberated female is 'tainted' and seen as the 'less respectable' one of the two" (Seoulbeats, 2016).

One article on Korean site *Instiz* suggests that the girl group concept most disliked by male K-pop fans was ‘girl crush’, with male commentators calling for a return to ‘sexy’, ‘cute’, or ‘innocent’. As expressed in the examples in this section, female idols are understood on a more multifaceted level by female fans. Being ‘innocent’ or ‘cute’ is rarely as praised as being ‘hot’ or ‘mature’, and the reading of female idols as *unni* conveys a level of respect and admiration. The *unni-dongsaeng* relationship is understood bilaterally, and older female idols are desired for their ability to display varying aspects of their personality, including maturity, responsibility, duty of care to younger members, and sex appeal. Rather than something that occurs independently, for female fans, the ‘sexiness’ of female idols was an offshoot of maturity. Example (17) suggested that the appeal of the ‘unnie line’ in K-pop girl groups came down to ‘greater duality’. The word duality, as understood in a K-pop context, is used to refer to the “ability of a person, usually an idol, to deliver on contrasting concepts and expressions. An idol’s duality is often brought out on stage during performances, especially when they switch songs” (allkpop, 2021). The ‘unnie line’ are not always the most popular members in a group (in BLACKPINK the ‘*maknae* line’ are more popular), but part of their popularity appears to stem from the dual reading of them as responsible and mature, yet sexy.

(18) STRANGLE ME WITH YO THIGHS UNNIR

(19) UNNIE STEP ON ME!!!!!!!

(20) Yes, spank me unnie What fangirls want from oppa is not what they want from unnie

There were several examples that took sexual desire for *unni* to a more explicit level. Language such as ‘strangle me’, ‘step on me’ and ‘spank me’ all index a submissive partner in a sexual encounter with a more dominant partner, in these examples, presented as *unni*. According to *Urban Dictionary*, ‘step on me’ is defined

as “wanting someone you find sexy to actually step on you, displaying dominance over you” (Urban Dictionary, 2017). As a phrase, it is most used in reference to being stepped on by a woman. In example (20), the commentor notes that ‘what fangirls want from oppa is not what they want from unnie’, implying that *oppa* and *unni* do not fulfil the same desires for fangirls. This use of sexual language referring to feminized sex acts ‘step on me’ and ‘strangle me with your thighs’ firmly indicates that the sexual desires for *unni* are indeed not the same as the sexual desires for *oppa*, reaffirming same-sex attraction.

(21) self-confident nayeon makes my heart race i bet she has an unnie kink
Omg why do I find that cute as?

(22) Lisa and rosé with their unnie kink lol

Where the concept of being an ‘unnie chaser’, ‘unnie whore’, or ‘unnie seeker’ was understood in a more romantic sense, for example of indication of a dating pursuit, having an ‘unnie kink’ was presented as more overtly sexualised. Like with ‘oppa kink’, having an ‘unnie kink’ was associated with being ‘turned on’ when addressed as *unni*, finding it to be sexually satisfying. Other definitions, however, implied that having an ‘unnie kink’ may just be a term to refer to a female idol who has a fetish for older women. As has been explored in this section, *unni* was constructed as a sexually desirable older woman. Rather than this sexual attraction coming from an objective performance of feminised sexuality (e.g., suggestive choreography or gestures, revealing outfits), it stemmed from being seen as mature, self-confident, and powerful. Desire for the company of *unnis* was in certain instances read as a marker of same-sex female attraction.

‘UNNIR DIDN’T MEAN IT!!!!111!!!!11’

Like the equivalent form ‘oppar’, ‘unnir’ was used in ironic, humorous, and satirical ways to mock fans who were overly invested in their favourite idols. ‘Unnir’ also originated on *LiveJournal*, before expanding into wider global anglophone K-pop fan usage. The K-pop dictionary page on *Tumblr* posted the definition for ‘unnir’ back in 2012. Given the overlap in the creation of ‘oppar’ and ‘unnir’, it can be theorised that the addition of the ‘r’ in ‘unnir’ serves the same function to mock anglicised pronunciation of Korean words.

(1) Here we can talk how we sarang our oppars/unnirs, are your unnir yeoppo?

(2) "Unnir didn't mean it!" they need to gtfo bc it's unnir slut shidae all day errryday lol blackjacks are known to be elitists, just as sones are known to be crazed unnir fans

(3) YeRiN uNnIr SLAY ME thats cause she's a plastic unnir and you're natural donate poor unnir some wonnies and she'll make you whatever you want Because UNNIR DIDN'T MEAN IT!!!!111!!!!11!!!!11!!!!

Examples from the corpus that used ‘unnir’ followed similar usage patterns to ‘oppar’, by being simultaneously used to deride both female idols and their fans. In comparison to ‘oppar’, ‘unnir’ took more overtly humorous and playful tones and was significantly less popularised. Again, the use of ‘unnir’ correlated with other phrases that were associated with Koreaboo behaviour in the K-pop fandom: the adaptation of the phrase ‘oppa didn’t mean it’ into ‘unnir didn’t mean it’, and the disjointed use of Korean words in English sentences ‘are your unnir yeoppo?’, and ‘how we sarang our oppars/unnirs’. Example (3) makes use of two CMC features to express sarcasm: alternating caps ‘YeRiN uNnIr’ and ‘!!!!11!’. Alternating caps is defined on *Urban Dictionary* as “the texting way of being sarcastic” (Urban Dictionary, 2019), and *Know Your Meme* (2022) credits it as having originated in a 2017 Twitter meme featuring animated character SpongeBob SquarePants to indicate a mocking tone.

Likewise, the use of !11! to indicate sarcasm through over-enthusiasm is a popular feature of CMC, originating as a common typo due to QWERTY keyboard layout necessitating the user to press down the shift key when switching between ‘1’ and ‘!’, with ‘1’ becoming a common typo when typing quickly. *Urban Dictionary* defines it as “used to make a sarcastic statement even more exaggerated” (Urban Dictionary, 2016).

The sarcasm and mockery in example (3) are further exaggerated through the ironic use of the phrase ‘slay me’. Slay is an extremely popular word in internet slang, and along with many other words that have been popularised in online communities and on social media “its origins come from Black and Latine LGBTQ+ ballroom culture in the 1970s and ‘80s, where it started to be a metaphor for “killing it” with regards to attitude and style” (von Aspen, 2022). One user on the *OneHallyu* forums describes ‘slay’ in a K-pop context as an “overused nonsensical word that means the opposite of flop, another overused nonsensical word. Means to kill, eliminate etc...In kpop it can range from anything like being at the top of the charts to a random picture of your bias eating, everything slays” (Miss.Miss, 2014). The addition of ‘slay’ is conceptualised as a hard to pin down ‘nonsensical word’, thus adding an additional layer of sarcasm to the post. The term ‘wonnies’ is a childlike way of writing the Korean currency, the Won. ‘Plastic unnir’ is a reference to a woman who has had plastic surgery (also indexed in the phrase ‘Gangnam *unni*’, in referenced to the area in Seoul where plastic surgery clinics are concentrated), and both carry derogatory mocking connotations.

The conceptualisation of ‘crazed unnir fans’ again points to more generalised stereotypes of K-pop fangirls as ‘crazy’. The example in (2) labels Blackjacks (fans of

2NE1) as ‘elitist’, whilst noting that SONEs (fans of Girls’ Generation) are ‘crazed unnir fangirls’ and that ‘it’s unnir slut shidae all day errrday’. The phrase ‘unnir slut shidae’ is a play on the Korean name of the group – 소녀시대 *seonyeoshidae* (literally ‘Girls’ Generation) – and jokingly suggests that fans of the group are the ‘*unni* slut generation’. In the example, being a ‘crazed unnir fangirl’ is not portrayed as negative, and instead is seen as something to be proud of in contrast to the perceived ‘elitism’ of Blackjacks. While far less common than ‘oppa didn’t mean it’, the fact that ‘unnie/unnir didn’t mean it’ also exists indicates that ideology leveraged against presumed overly invested fans exists across the K-pop fandom and is not limited in usage for female fans of boy groups. However, instances of ‘unnie didn’t mean it’ are almost non-existent when compared to their *oppa* counterpart, reflective of ideas that boy groups are more likely than girl groups to command a dedicated and defensive fanbase when compared to girl groups, who are subject to greater scrutiny and criticism from the public (Herman, 2021).

The primary difference between the female fandom of boy groups and the female fandom of girl groups often boils down to the issue of gender inequality and pre-existing biased attitudes, particularly towards female idols. While there are boy group fans who hold male idols accountable for problematic behaviour, there is an abyss of difference between what is considered a scandal for a male idol and a female idol. Fans domestically and internationally have both been critical of the industry ‘double standards’ in the treatment of male and female idols, and the double standard is articulated on multiple different levels of the K-pop industry. After ITZY made their comeback with the single “Not Shy”, Ryujin spoke out against commentators who noted that the group’s choreography was ‘difficult for a girl group’.

She argued that the phrase ‘for a girl group’ was “implying that we’re a little better than they expected...? It didn’t really feel like a big compliment. We weren’t doing this thinking, “That’ll do because we’re girls”” (Valley, 2020). The implication behind the comment is that female idols are incapable of doing complex choreography in the same way that male idols can, and that a girl group having ‘difficult’ choreography was unexpected.

On the more macrocosmic level, female idols are often drawn into scandals based on defying the strict gender expectations of women. Red Velvet’s Irene was drawn into a scandal for reading the Korean feminist novel, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, with male fans of Irene resorting to burning her merchandise in protest of her allegiance with ‘feminism’ (Lee, 2018). The late Sulli, formerly of f(x), was a frequent target of gendered hatred, and was drawn into multiple scandals for opting to not wear a bra (SBS PopAsia, 2017). The late Goo Hara, formerly of KARA, was victim-blamed for being in an abusive relationship, with netizens commenting her allegations of physical abuse at the hands of her boyfriend (Cha, 2020). Park Bom was vilified as a ‘drug smuggler’ in the media for her use of the prescription ADHD medication Adderall (illegal under Korea’s strict drug laws) (The Korea Herald, 2018). Perhaps in one of the most illustrative expressions of the levels misogyny directed towards female idols is articulated on (with vitriol usually concentrated on male-dominated community sites), Hani of EXID was criticised for ‘crying too much’ in public appearances after enduring an emotional breakup with her boyfriend (Koreaboo, 2016). These are just a few of sadly too many examples where female K-pop idols have been vilified and subject to torrents of abuse for relatively benign behaviour perceived as ‘scandalous’. By contrast, more serious criminal allegations made against male idols failed to receive the same levels of abuse, with fans of

BIGBANG member Seungri continuing to defend and support him after his involvement in drug use and prostitution. As a key player in the high-profile ‘Burning Sun Scandal’, the allegations against Seungri span serious crimes such as sexual assault, tax evasion, police corruption, and hidden camera footage (Kelley, 2019).

As evidenced by ‘unnir’ and ‘unnie didn’t mean it’, female fans of girl groups may also defend their favourite idols when they engage in problematic behaviour. Red Velvet member Wendy, who has lived in both the United States and Canada, has a documented history of using a ‘blaccent’ – an accent that mimics African Americans – in media appearances. Having first used it in 2014, she doubled down in 2018, being defended by some fans and scrutinised by others (AsianJunkie, 2018). The members of MAMAMOO appeared in ‘blackface’ during a performance of Bruno Mars “Uptown Funk”, shortly after the group were widely condemned for glorifying domestic violence against women in the music video for their 2016 single “Décalcomanie” (Herman, 2017). Lines of defence – hence, ‘oppa/unnie *didn’t mean it* – often hinge on the assumption that K-pop idols are ‘culturally ignorant’ and have a lack of cultural awareness due to their upbringing in Korea, a homogenous country (Herbrink, 2020).

Further examples in the corpus used the first-person to mock imagined fans who were overly invested in their favourite idols:

(4) I sarang itzy for this song seriously itzy unnies lets get married oppaduel unnie fighting!

(5) All the oppadeul and unnies have been waiting for this

(6) I have no friends or family, just my oppas and unnies. I live in a torn box outside of a McDonalds, using the WIFI to stream my faves comebacks

(7) i stan feisty unnies that are very cool lisa unnie is saying i can drink scotch whiskey, so i will drink scotch whiskey and drink away my problems

Recalling the discussion around the TWICE song “I’m Gonna be a Star” in the introduction, the lyric ‘all the oppadeul and unnies’ was leveraged as a linguistic strategy to mock fans. The sentence ‘I sarang itzy for this song seriously’ in example (4) follows the Koreaboo usage pattern of inserting unnecessary Korean words into English sentences. In all the examples, the mockery was expressed through the first person, speaking for a well-developed semiotic construction of overly invested K-pop fans. Where in the *oppa* data there was greater criticism of ‘delulu’ desires to marry *oppa* and ‘become Korean’, the data in the *unni* corpus was more critical of the level of fan investment in their favourite idols. The imagined fan in example (6) is presented as a loner without a home: ‘I have no friends or family’, ‘I live in a torn box outside of a McDonalds’. Despite this, the priority is to use the free WIFI to ‘stream my faves comebacks’.

Example (7) is also written in a first-person perspective, criticising the fan desire to buy certain products just because they are endorsed, used, or promoted by their favourite idols. It refers to the partnership between Lisa from BLACKPINK and renowned whiskey company Chivas Regal in a 2022 advertising campaign called ‘I Rise, We Rise’. The intention behind the campaign was to rebrand the associations between whiskey and wealthy, older men, and market the brand to a more youthful audience. In a behind the scenes video, Lisa is quoted as saying “it was a no-brainer to partner with Chivas, as their values are so closely aligned with my own, plus I’ve always been a whiskey fan!” (Northman, 2022). The move was controversial in Lisa’s native Thailand, where individuals are forbidden from advertising or displaying the name and brands of alcohol (Patanasophon, 2022). The imagined fan in example (7)

states that due to Lisa's endorsement of the whiskey, they too 'will drink scotch whiskey and drink away my problems'. In many of the ideological constructions of the over enthusiastic fan, they are conceptualised as being devoid of any kind of individual identity or interests outside of K-pop. Product endorsement and advertising by idols is a large part of the K-pop industry's wider success outside of music, and fans have demonstrated that they will often purchase items used or worn by idols, regardless of high price tags. In 2021, a Louis Vuitton carrot shaped pouch bag (costing \$1,300) sold out after BTS member RM posted with it in a selfie (Tan, 2022). Thus, examples (6) and (7) both offer criticism of investment in K-pop leading to ignorance or denial of 'real life' problems.

(8) Omg so excited Mariah Carey unnie is shaking because the superior Christmas song is on its way leave cher unnie alone and stream Also Noona Taylor Swift and Unnie Billie Elish are my favorite Kpop stars

(9) it reminds of Gaga unnir when she ate a paper lol

(10) She's on a whole different level Mariah Carey unnir is shaking

Furthermore, fans also used either *unni* or 'unnir' when referring to well-known celebrity singers from the United States, most notably, Mariah Carey. It is likely that the frequent references to Mariah Carey in the K-pop fandom are influenced by the convergence of celebrity 'stans' on stan twitter (abbreviated as stan twt). Though K-pop stan twitter is treated as an individual subsection of wider stan twitter, there is some level of convergence and overlap, especially in stan twitter vernacular and lexical items. On stan twitter, K-pop fans pick up lexical items originating in AAVE like 'wig', 'slay', and 'queen', as well as being exposed to popular memes. Through stan twitter, memes and lexicon then drip into wider fandom usage, though often without refined understanding of what the words mean, where they originate from, or how they are used. Mariah Carey is particularly popular on stan twitter and referred to as her fans (known as 'lambs') as a 'skinny legend', defined on

Urban Dictionary as “commonly used to refer to celebrities such as Mariah Carey who are glamorous and talented, no matter their weight. It is also used ironically to refer to cute animals, people, objects. Twitter trolls often use it in their memes” (Urban Dictionary, 2017). With the popularity of Mariah Carey on stan twitter spreading to the wider pop culture sphere, K-pop fans often jokingly compare K-pop idols with good vocals to her or refer to her as ‘unnie’ or ‘sunbaenim’.

The phrase ‘Mariah Carey is shaking’ is an extension of this convergence and is often used by K-pop fans when their favourite idols or groups display vocal talent (or not), implying that their vocals are so good to have Mariah Carey worried, as an artist well-known for her vocal talent and musical success. The phrase can become so popularised within certain subsets of the K-pop community that in 2017, three members of the now disbanded girl group PRISTIN were confused when they read aloud a comment on V Live stating ‘Mariah Carey auntie is shaking’. The practice of using *unni* for famous singers from the United States functions as an additional linguistic strategy for indexing mockery, mimicking the practice of anglophone K-pop fans referring to their idols using *unni* in a culturally inappropriate way. Additionally, it may have been influenced by K-pop idols referring to popular non-Korean celebrities using *unni* or *sunbaenim*. In an appearance on a variety show, Hyerin of EXID referred to the antagonist of the *Harry Potter* series ‘Voldemort *sunbaenim*’, Lia from ITZY once referred to the rapper Nicki Minaj as ‘Nicki Minaj *sunbaenim*’, and after collaborating with the rapper Cardi B, the members of BLACKPINK referred to her as ‘Cardi B *unni*’ (Cha, 2020).

Patterns of mockery shared several similar traits with those used in the *oppa* corpus, and the repetition of certain discourse pointed to a well-formed ideological

construct of the negative K-pop fan stereotype. According to this stereotype, a more extreme K-pop fan was likely to be female, delusional, obsessive, and lack any type of life outside of following K-pop and their favourite idols. These types of fans were perceived as having tunnel vision for their favourite idols and were seen to be using Korean words inappropriately. In these constructions, the use of the first-person served to mock as well as to distance the speaker from negative fan stereotypes. It also pointed to an idea that overly invested fans were viewed as ‘shameless’, with no qualms about expressing their level of investment in K-pop idols. Derogation also served to re-assert the normality of the fan who was performing it, by making fun and personally distancing themselves from those fan stereotypes by providing imagined narratives.

Although mocking usages in the *oppa* corpus rarely made mention of *unni*, most of the examples in the *unni* corpus made mention of the term alongside *oppa*. This suggests that female fans of boy groups are perceived as more likely to engage in the acts associated with negative stereotypes of K-pop fans. This is not surprising for multiple reasons. First, high-profile toxic fandom allegations have overwhelmingly been associated with female fans of boy groups (EXO, BTS, TVXQ!), second, awareness of the toxic behaviour of female fans of girl groups only appears to have recently been questioned and brought to more general attention, especially against the fandom of BLACKPINK (Blinks). Finally, the prevalence of heteronormative ideas and the idealised relationship between an older man and a younger woman has ensured that the dominant marketing method is boy groups to female fans.

Calling Female Idols ‘Oppa’

Despite being a popular practice in parts of the shipping community, especially those that imagine female idols as men rather than women, the practice of addressing certain female idols as *oppa* has drawn polarised opinions. Posters on a *OneHallyu* thread expressed some of the key concerns that “when girls call a female idol oppa it seems like they cant accept being attracted to a female, so they have to call her oppa and pretend that she is manly in some way” (---, 2016). A further poster laments that “no matter how girly she’s dressed up, they’ll [Taeyeon fans] find a way to say “Taeng oppa” looks “handsome” and that’s why they think she’s attractive [...] is it that hard to come up and say “gosh, she looks gorgeous today!”?” (noctua, 2016). Others, however, stated that “it’s not that serious” (kimchi, 2015) and was just a joke. The concerns echoed by the posters around calling female idols *oppa* is the reduction of same-sex admiration or attraction to heteronormative paradigms. Thus, same-sex interactions are read through a lens where one interlocuter is assigned ‘masculine’ features, and the other ‘feminine’. The possibility for both interlocuters to demonstrate fluid traits of both masculinity and femininity is thus denied. For fans who did call female idols *oppa*, it was just seen as a ‘joke’ for when female idols showed masculine traits.

(1) In the same way, I find jokes like Tae(yeon) oppa and Hani oppa funny

(2) How else am I supposed to celebrate my oppar Sana!!!!

In example (1), referring to Taeyeon and Hani as *oppa* were presented as ‘jokes’ that were ‘funny’. Example (2) referred to TWICE member Sana using the ironic form ‘oppar’, making a mockery of fans who used *oppa* for female idols. Generally, the practice of using *oppa* to address female idols is not as widespread as addressing them with *unni* and is likely to only occur in relation to certain female idols. Mirroring the usage of *oppa* when used to refer to male idols in an idealised,

romanticised context, factors such as age become less important than a mixture of visuals, behaviours, and personality traits. Female idols that are often referred to as *oppa* in the global anglophone K-pop community include Hani (EXID), Taeyeon (Girls' Generation), Lisa (BLACKPINK), Jeongyeon (TWICE), and Seulgi (Red Velvet). As described by a user on *Quora* (in relation to 'Lisa *oppa*'), the reasons for using *oppa* instead of *unni* include giving off a 'male vibe', complimenting other members as if she were their boyfriend, 'protecting' the other members from paparazzi as well as behaving like a 'gentleman' (Salazar, 2020). Another user on the *OneHallyu* forum (in relation to 'Taeyeon *oppa*') cites "Fany [Tiffany] bought something, Taeyeon paid for it and also held the bag while leaving" and "while Fany was sleeping, Taeyeon left a gift and wrote on a post-it "I bought it while thinking about you" before leaving" (fourplay, 2016). Hani, on the other hand, is usually labelled as *oppa* when displaying a tendency to 'flirt' with female idols. Seulgi (Red Velvet) was once questioned about being addressed by fans as *oppa* or 'husband', responding that she "I actually like these kind of comments. Because I like word "cool" rather than "pretty"" (kseulwan, 2018). Her performances of boy group choreography, 'boyish charm', and 'cool' personality are what trigger being addressed as *oppa*.

Thus, looking at the examples of some female idols who are routinely addressed as *oppa*, it appears to be context dependent and influenced by various behaviours and personality traits: behaving like a 'gentleman' or 'boyfriend' towards other members, 'flirting' with female idols, and being 'cool' or otherwise boyish/masculine in some way by giving off a 'male vibe'. Examples in the corpus that supported female idols being addressed as *oppa* often linked this to style and

appearance, further suggesting that having a 'handsome' *unni* eradicated the need for having an *oppa* entirely.

(3) Surely, when you see how great she looks [Moonbyul] in a men's inspired fashion style, you'll end up telling yourself, "Who needs an oppa, when you have a handsome unnie?"

(4) She [Jeongyeon] looked more like a handsome Oppa in this style. If you don't hear her talk, you'd think she's really a handsome guy

(5) This unnie is more handsome than any oppa

In the examples, that all use the adjective 'handsome' to describe female idols, this was treated as correlative to being compared to the *oppa* figure. The 'men's inspired fashion style' referred to in example (3) is not specified, though Moonbyul is known for frequently wearing stereotypically masculine looks on stage such as tailored suits and military inspired uniforms. It is suggested that having a 'handsome unnie' who wears 'men's inspired fashion style' was preferable than having an *oppa* 'who needs an oppa'. Like example (3) that cited 'men's inspired fashion style', example (4) also cited a specific – 'this style' – as the reasoning for Jeongyeon for looking like an *oppa*. The masculinisation of Jeongyeon's appearance by the commentor suggests that her visual appearance alone is enough to be labelled as *oppa* (Jeongyeon is often labelled as *oppa* purely based on having short hair), and if you 'hear her talk', the illusion of her as 'really a handsome guy' would be shattered. The final example in (5) also posits the 'handsome *unni*' as more desirable than 'any *oppa*'.

This reading of female idols as *oppa* was articulated on multiple semiotic levels: acting 'masculine' ('protecting' other members, being a 'gentleman'), wearing certain clothes and styles ('men's inspired fashion style', short hair), personality/physical traits (being 'cool' or 'handsome') and behavioural traits (acting

in a way akin to a 'boyfriend'). As such, when female idols were viewed as *oppa*, these semiotic constructions aligned with the romanticised and idealised *oppa* as the 'ideal boyfriend'. Thus, returning to quotes from the *OneHallyu* forums that allege the practice of calling female idols *oppa* functions as a heteronormative rationalisation of same-sex attraction (not necessarily romantic) to a female idol, the contexts which trigger *oppa* comparisons do indicate that calling female idols *oppa* may have a function similar to 'girl crush' or 'no homo': the recognition of same-sex attraction, but an implicit need to ground it as non-sexual and purely platonic or as a form of admiration. In the previous examples, *unni* was used by fans to index a sexy, confident, and mature woman who knew how to take care of herself and others. Where all the idols mentioned above have also been addressed as *unni* in the corpus data, the practice of addressing female idols as *oppa* seems to be less grounded in a recognition of the multifaceted semiotics appeal of female idols, but rather, only context dependent when performing acts or behaviours that can be read as romantic.

(6) My eyes roll back to my head everytime I see "omg oppa !" or "my actual husband" like wtf

(7) saying unnie cool or unnie handsome is lesbian, calling oppa is not lesbian at all

(8) She calls me aegiya korean term for baby and I call her Oppa for that added sensual tension between us

The opinions expressed by the users quoted earlier from the *OneHallyu* forums were not isolated instances, and some examples from the corpus data expressed their distaste at the practice of addressing female idols as *oppa* or 'husband'. Example (6), whilst not elaborating on what aspect of hearing 'omg opp!' or 'my actual husband' triggers their eyes to 'roll back to my head everytime', can be read to have a link to the negative stigma attached to *oppa* and the fans that use it. *Oppa* fans are usually portrayed as 'stupid' and 'immature', and in the example, this

construction appears to also be leveraged towards female fans who address female idols as *oppa* instead of *unnie*. Example (7) takes their disdain further, noting that where it is acceptable as a lesbian to call an *unni* ‘cool’ or ‘handsome’, calling a female idol *oppa* is not acceptable. Queer fans have argued that the re-imagining of female idols as men (‘Taeng Oppa’, ‘Limario Oppa’, ‘Yul Oppa’) reduces the possibility of same-sex female attraction into a heteronormative viewing framework by ‘justifying’ attraction to female idols by assigning them stereotypically masculine traits such as being ‘handsome’, behaving like a ‘gentleman’, or otherwise demonstrating a ‘manly’ side. The practice of ‘genderbending’ idols is most common in the fanfiction community, and often, but not always, the characterisations of idols after having their gender re-imagined completely switches. Traits that can be read as vulnerable – Yuri’s desire for attention from older women, Taeyeon’s caring behaviour towards Tiffany – can be translated into sexual dominance, womanizer behaviour, cheating, and other behaviours associated with toxic masculinity.

In example (8), it is noted that ‘I call her Oppa for that added sexual tension between us’. As *unni* has less overtly sexualised connotations than *oppa* in more general understanding of the word in the global anglophone K-pop fandom, some heterosexual female fans of girl groups may not be able to experience the sexualised connotations of *unni* as readily as queer fans. Thus, despite the example indicating two female interlocuters, it is the use of *oppa* that can bring ‘added sexual tension’, not *unni*. Where the intention behind using *oppa* to address female idols can be read as a playful fun way of recognising more masculine sides to a female idol’s personality, for queer female fans, it can erase the validity of same-sex female attraction by only making it acceptable if one female idol is viewed as the *oppa*, thus centring it within a heteronormative framework. Furthermore, the understanding of

femininity and masculinity in such cases is one that is understood in line with stereotypes, evidenced by the context-dependent triggering of *oppa*.

Conclusion

Unlike *oppa*, where fictive meanings appeared to draw confused understandings of the word from global anglophone fans, the occurrence of *unni* in the interactions of female idols facilitated a more well-grounded understanding of how the word was used, and what the role of the *unni* was within a K-pop group. *Unni* was characterised as a reliable, strong, dependable, and tough older sister figure, who took care of younger members and had a greater level of responsibility in the context of K-pop girl group dynamics. The role and responsibility of the *unni* was read in tandem with the bilateral *unni-dongsaeng* and the *unni-maknae* relationships, with the expectations and performances of each role in the highly mediated context of Korean popular culture leading to them being perceived in accordance with industry stereotypes. The role of the responsible *unni* was likened to the role of the K-pop leader and was not presented as a constant state of being, rather, it was a state that was triggered when necessary.

When *unni* was identified as a romantic object of affection or desire, this desirability stemmed from traits such as ‘maturity’, rather than physical attraction. Thus, the desires of female fans of girl groups display subversive attraction through reading female idols in a way that abstracts them from the madonna-whore dichotomy. *Unnis* were treated as a ‘sex symbol’, and desires for being around older women was read as queer, leading to speculation of the sexuality of idols. The process of ‘getting unnies’ framed them as a monolithic commodity, and the

successful collection of them was praised and applauded. *Unni*, as a term, was rarely infantilised, and in the framing of the *unni-dongsaeng* relationship, the role of the *dongsaeng* was not presented as passive and subordinate, and rather, was seen as active and determined, as well as playful.

Unni did also have meanings that indexed a performance or irony and mockery, though this semiotic construction of *unni* was far less prevalent than the construction of *unni* as a sexy, mature, and responsible role model. Most of the mocking usages of *unni* co-occurred with *oppa*, again cementing the idea that the fan demographic most associated with over-the-top fan identities are female fans of K-pop boy groups. Female fans of girl groups did not feel ashamed of being ‘unnie chasers or unnie whores’, and rather, embraced these sexualised desires for *unni* with positivity. For female fans, *unni* as an address term was versatile in being able to index platonic admiration as a role model, as well as being able to index sexual desire as a mature and therefore ‘sexually experienced/dominant’ figure. Overall, the usages of *unni* were done in good humour, and there was less rigid discourse around the use of *unni* as inappropriate or culturally appropriative. The term thus primarily served to enhance solidarity and humour between female fans of girl groups.

More than Just a Touch: Skinship and ‘Authentic’ Interpersonal Relations

This chapter aims to depart from the address term focus of the previous two case studies, and explore another Korean cultural term popularised through Korean popular culture, *skinship*. Having initially circulated in Japanese English (*wasei-eigo*) before embarking on a linguistic journey to South Korea and then into anglophone usage, *skinship* is a highly mediated term. In the context of Korean culture and society, *skinship* is used to refer to intimate physical contact between two individuals, involving a range of behaviours such as hand holding, hugging, and caressing. As an intimate act with cultural elements, *skinship* goes deeper than touch, and can be considered as a communicative practice. *Skinship* was additionally conceived in relation to the ‘skin-to-skin’ intimacy between mother and child, yet usage has now expanded to wider contexts, and *skinship* can now be used to define acts of physical intimacy between friends and even romantic lovers.

For global anglophone fans who may be unfamiliar with the practice of expressing close physical intimacy with friends, *skinship* has been met with apprehension, and is often negatively equated with homosexuality, especially when the acts are performed between two men. Beliefs that *skinship* is ‘weird’ or ‘uncomfortable’ are particularly concentrated in the United States, and despite this discomfort, it is constructed as an integral and unavoidable part of Korean culture. Through its associations with Korean culture and society, for ‘shippers’, *skinship* (or sometimes even lack of) can be read as indicative of ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ same-sex romantic desires. This presents *skinship* in opposition to the ‘inauthentic’ and ‘performative’ fanservice, despite the subjectivity of both making it difficult to determine differences between ‘authentic’ *skinship* and ‘inauthentic’ fanservice.

Some fans expressed concerns that increases in same sex *skinship* and fanservice was an example of ‘queerbaiting’.

Opinions on *skinship* are therefore driven by ideological and cultural frameworks: as Korean culture is framed as the ‘other’, *skinship* is framed as a ‘Korean oddity’ that is only acceptable or understood when expressed in the context of Korean culture. The perception of *skinship* as ‘weird’ often occurred through comparison with the United States, which was instead presented as ‘normal’. Attitudes were either articulated as ‘I understand *skinship* (because it also occurs in my local context, or from my own personal experience’, or ‘I don’t understand *skinship* because it is beyond my scope of understanding as a non-Korean’. In the context of idols and shipping culture, *skinship* was understood to either occur ‘naturally’ or be ‘forced’. The overlap between *skinship* and fanservice has led to many discussions over how to discern the difference, and both were shown to be perceived as ‘excessive’ or ‘too much’ in certain contexts.

[Skinship: A Journey from Motherly Bond to ‘Queer Love’](#)

The linguistic journey of the word *skinship* has been complex, and the word has attained numerous new layers of meaning as it has been negotiated and mediated in several different linguistic and semiotic contexts. According to the OED definition, *skinship* is a blended word consisting of ‘skin’ and ‘kinship’, and the word is defined as follows:

Esp. in Japanese and Korean contexts: touching or close physical contact between parent and child or (esp. in later use) between lovers or friends, used to express affection or strengthen an emotional bond

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2021)

According to Innami (2021), the word *skinship* was popularised and promoted in the early 1970s in Japan by the Japanese paediatrician and psychiatrist Hirai Nobuyoshi, used to refer to the intimate skin-to-skin touch contact between mothers and small children. Hirai had reportedly picked up on the word when it was used by an American teacher during a 1953 World Health Organization (WHO) seminar on the mental wellbeing of children, with a focus on themes of motherly love and maternal issues. With concerns over mother-child intimacy in changing family structures in 1970s Japan, Hirai reformulated the word in Japanese as *sukinshippu*, using it to advocate for greater intimate bonds between mothers and young children. There has however, been confusion over the exact origins of the word, and whether it can be classified as *wasei-egio*, due to allegations that Hirai may have misinterpreted the word ‘kinship’, thus actually creating the word *skinship* himself (Namu Wiki, 2022).

The importance of maternal relationships in Japan, and by extension wider familial relations, is one that is replicated across East Asia, given that China, Japan, and South Korea share cultural influences from traditional Confucian culture (Chen & Li, 2014). As per Confucian tradition, familial lineage is of the utmost importance, most notably that of patrilineal family lines, ensuring that male members of the family take on greater responsibilities than their female counterparts, who are generally expected to engage in childrearing and household activities (Kim & Park, 2010). Confucian tradition has been highly influential in shaping familial behaviours and structures in East Asia, and according to Park and Cho (1995) “these [Confucian] values can be observed in Korean hierarchical social relations, such as those between ruler and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife”.

Men and women in East Asian countries were therefore placed into clearly defined roles as dictated by dominant Confucian gender ideologies. Women were expected to care for children, and men were expected to work and sustain the family. As such, existing literature on family relations in East Asian families tends to focus on mother-child relationships. In a study into *skinship* and bodily intimacy in Japan, Tahhan (2010) argues that where *skinship* is most frequently associated with bodily forms of touch, “*skinship* can encompass different kinds of touch which are not necessarily locatable in physical forms”. Ideas that *skinship* can be solely attributed to physical touch thus limit and restrict the full haptic communicative potential of *skinship* as an intimate act between two interlocuters. Tahhan (2010) further found that understanding and perception of what constitutes *skinship* differed between mothers and fathers, with mothers more likely to report more physical forms of *skinship* between their child, and fathers more likely to report behaviours such as gazing and playing with their child.

Thus, where *skinship* is not a gendered concept, both sexes engage in *skinship* acts, and what constitutes *skinship* can differ across genders, attributed to different expectations behind the roles of men and women in accordance with traditional Confucian family structures. Despite being understood to be equivocal with physical intimacy, the ways in which a mother and child experience *skinship* with each other goes beyond the limits of the physical body, with one participant in Tahhan’s (2010) noting that “*skinship* is both skin-to-skin contact and heart-to-heart communication”. Connections between *skinship* and mother-child intimacy have largely flourished and been negotiated in a Japanese context. *Skinship* therefore goes beyond the physical and transcends into a form of emotional communication.

The word *skinship* (스킨십) appears to have begun circulating in Korea during the early 1990s, at first retaining the original usage referring to the mother-child bond. Around this time, the meaning began to expand beyond the limits of the mother-child relationship, with a 1993 piece on religion in the *Kookmin Ilbo* suggesting “prayer is *skinship* with God” (Hanmadi Korean, 2016). By the mid-1990s, usage of the word started to shift towards its more contemporary application to describe intimate, romantic acts between two individuals. This is the usage that has endured in Korean society and has further facilitated understandings of platonic *skinship* as that which typically occurs between two individuals of the same sex. From the late 90s, *skinship* started to be recognised by non-Korean commentators, and was described in a 1999 English language article in *The Korea Herald* by the author as “the Korean affinity for touching one another” (Kiaer, 2020). This is an example of the tendency for non-Korean commentators (especially those in the West), to reduce *skinship* acts to Koreans having a greater than average desire to touch one another.

Searching for 스킨십 (*skinship*) in Korean on Google predominantly brings up results that focus on romantic *skinship* between two individuals of the opposite sex. Articles range from ‘the most liked *skinship* between men and women’ (Elle, 2017) to a *Wiki How* article on how to ‘how to perform *skinship* with a woman’ (Bilotta, 2020), and even a guide on how to perform *skinship* with your pet dog (Jang, 2022). It is evident that in a Korean context, *skinship* acts are normalised, and there is no hesitancy to apply the term *skinship* even to relations between pets and their owners. Absent from many of the main page results is the earlier association between *skinship* and mother-child physical intimacy, suggesting that

this is no longer the primary definition for the word in Korean-speaking contexts. Despite there being all the potential to perform *skinship* with God through prayer and with your pet dog, the dominant conceptualisation of *skinship* on Korean Google is a set of physically intimate acts that can index initial romantic attraction or serve to bring an established pairing closer together.

For observers outside of Korea, the prevalence and ease of *skinship* in Korea is contrary to Western stereotypical ideas that East Asians are less physically affectionate, linked to ideas that Korean communication styles are ‘indirect’ and ‘passive’ (Kim, 2003). Interpretations of touch-based communication in Korea have likely been influenced by the system of social hierarchy in Korean society. Where in the United States or in Europe it is normal to hug or kiss the cheeks of a stranger or unfamiliar individual, this is far from the case in Korea, and will be considered as overly familiar. *Skinship* acts are thus reserved for individuals who share a close, intimate relationship with each other, and are reflective of such a connection. As such, this reluctance to express physical intimacy with a stranger, when compared with the wide range of physically intimate acts performed between close acquaintances can be confusing for Anglocentric consumers who invertedly (or overtly) subscribe to the mindset that this is ‘abnormal’. Nevertheless, despite the abnormality, *skinship* is recognised as an important part of Korean culture and society.

One English language article suggests that “South Korean boys and men practice a thing called *skinship*, where they pretty much touch each other nonstop” (Iannone & Stacey, 2014). The idea that *skinship* involves boys and men touching each other ‘nonstop’ reflects many dominant ideas from the United States that the

physical intimacy performed in Korea is 'excessive'. Further articles and blog posts express alarm or discomfort with the concept of *skinship*, again, with special mention of physical intimacy between two men: "in a male to male setting, Koreans are much quicker to initiate 'skinship,' than are British or North Americans and when initiated it is quickly upgraded to a level we would construe as 'almost sexual,' 'certainly suggestive,' and 'definitely alarming'" (No Kangho, 2010). For non-Korean observers, *skinship* acts are therefore constructed on levels of acceptability: 'almost sexual', 'certainly suggestive', and 'definitely alarming'. *Skinship* is always located back to Korean contexts or Korean people.

Skinship is often construed as a 'shocking' or 'unexpected' aspect of Korean culture and society, and despite its importance in Korean culture and communication, seemingly unknown to non-Korean individuals until they view it for themselves, at which point they recognise that whether they like it or not, they will have to adapt and 'get used to it'. Again, this may be an offshoot of Western misunderstandings of Korea, based on ideas that East Asian societies are less 'touchy' than those in the West. In Korea, *skinship* is expressed by both genders, but relying on English language articles and blog posts for information about *skinship* may give the impression that it is only expressed between two men, reflective of ideological constructs of physical intimacy between two men as taboo, thus rendering the more normalised expression of *skinship* acts between women irrelevant in the 'strange *skinship*' discussion.

To non-Korean observers, the supposed 'peculiarity' of *skinship* acts appears to be most defined when they are performed between two men. This narrative is most dominant amongst Western observers, particularly those based in Europe or

the United States, due to the lack of similar *skinship* culture between friends. For observers in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, where similar acts of platonic *skinship* are performed, individuals are less likely to participate in the ‘othering’ of *skinship* acts. For those in the West, acts of physical touch between two individuals may often be limited to greetings, such as handshakes or hugs, and it is uncommon to see two male friends holding hands. An article looking at hand holding between male friends in the UK and India notes that “in our society you only get a hug from your mate when you’re in the pub and have had a few” (Wright, 2018).

With a lack of platonic touch-based intimacy between friends, Western observers have constructed *skinship* as an act of homoeroticism, thus further contributing to the othering the behaviour, as it now simultaneously ‘foreign’ and ‘homoerotic’, both of which challenge dominant social order (that order being Western and heterosexual). Ideas that *skinship* infringes on physical acts that would be considered ‘gay’ in Western culture, as well as the romantic underpinnings of the word when used in Korean-speaking contexts, has had a significant impact on the way the word is used and understood by global anglophone K-pop fans. As this question from the language learning website *HiNative* asks “why is same-sex *skinship* not seen as homosexual romantic behaviour?” (HiNative, 2017).

Pocketwala (2021) argues that this is as “in Korea, same-sex touch between men is not as prone to being interpreted as sexual or romantic, because the taboo homosexuality carries has normalised heterosexuality in a way that makes such interpretations less likely; whereas in the U.S., societal homophobia may make men feel pressured to project an image of heterosexuality”.

As the definition for *skinship* on the website *Fanlore* indicates “while the intention is ostensibly platonic, fans often use *skinship* to support theories behind RPF [real person fic] ships. Fans might also feel conflicted if idols seem uncomfortable with *skinship*, as it is likely that they are asked to do so to appeal to fans” (Fanlore, 2022). As mentioned in the definition, discussion, and debate around *skinship* acts performed between idols is mostly concentrated within the subset of fans who engage in the practice of ‘shipping’. Imported from wider fandom lexicon, the term shipping refers to the imagining of a relationship between two characters/individuals, and in the K-pop fandom, this usually manifests in the form of imagined romantic relationships between same-sex idols. For fans who engage in shipping, *skinship* as an act of physical intimacy between two same-sex idols is “tracked as a subterranean sexual economy” (Laurie, 2016), and a single act of *skinship* can often become the focal point and plotline of an entire fanfiction.

This ‘queering’ of *skinship* acts by global anglophone fans has, however, been complicated by the potential for a lack of understanding of the complex sociocultural factors behind the prevalence of *skinship* in Korean contexts, as well as the application of Western attitudes towards Korean cultural phenomena. For fans who are unfamiliar with same-sex physical intimacy, the behaviours of male K-pop idols may be read as ‘gay’ or homoerotic (Lee, Lee, & Park, 2020). Discussions of fanservice and *skinship* have been controversial in the K-pop fandom, not least for their ties to the shipping community. As an industry, K-pop is fan driven, and there have been suggestions that Korean entertainment companies may be encouraging idols to engage in acts of *skinship* together to increase sales and promote the idea of ‘authentic’ physical attraction between idols. In 2021, an idol dance trainer alleged that Korean entertainment companies were ‘forcing’ male

idols to perform acts of physical intimacy with each other to increase social media visibility and boost sales (Park, 2021). Other have highlighted the fallacy of reading onstage idol interactions as queer given South Korea's stance towards LGBT rights and individuals, with the most recent statistics from Pew Research indicating that just 44% of Koreans surveyed feel that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Poushter & Kent, 2020). Equally, to counter this argument, others have argued that this hostility towards homosexuality in Korea reduces the possibility that idols are able to express their sexuality openly and freely to fans.

Siwon from the boy group Super Junior has on multiple occasions expressed his views against same-sex relations, first in 2012 by stating (in a since deleted Tweet): “while I respect all genders, I do not wish to acknowledge homosexuals as I have been taught that God created Man and Woman with specific characteristics and duties” (SBS PopAsia, 2015). In 2015, Siwon appeared to double down on these views, by retweeting an article that proclaimed, “so-called same-sex marriage doesn't exist”. Following the backlash, he issued an apology, though prior, many fans highlighted his routine engagement in *skinship* with other members of the group. Siwon's conflict of 'homoerotic' activity with other members of Super Junior and expression of homophobic views is an example of the complicated relationship between global fans, K-pop idols, sexuality, *skinship*, and the K-pop industry itself. *Skinship*, for all its merits as a form of communication that transcends physical touch, is often perceived by global K-pop fans and the public (especially those in the West), as homosexual, a reading that is only possible when *skinship* is abstracted from its sociocultural history in Korean-speaking contexts.

‘Shipping’ Culture in the K-Pop Fandom

Skinship and discourses around the boundaries between it and fanservice is centralised amongst fans who engage in the practice of shipping two idols together (usually of the same sex). Shipping (no relation to nautical vessels), is a well-established practice within media fandoms, and is defined as follows by the OED:

To discuss, portray, or advocate a romantic pairing of (two characters who appear in a work of (serial) fiction), esp. when such a pairing is not depicted in the original work

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2020)

The term shipping and related terms can be traced back to the late 90s, originating in the online fandom (known as “X-Philes”) of the 1993 TV series *The X-Files*. Airing at a time where the digital communication on the internet was beginning to flourish, *The X-Files* amassed a cult following, and the show has been cited as one of the first to experience a growth in viewership alongside digital advancements in communication technology. The show follows Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) special agents Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson), as they investigate the so-called ‘X-Files’, unsolved FBI cases involving extra-terrestrials, the supernatural, and the paranormal. Despite the relationship between the two characters beginning as platonic, Knibbs (2015) notes that “a healthy contingent of “X-Philes” were interested (or, well, painfully obsessed) in Mulder and Scully developing a romantic relationship”. Prior to the relationship being explored ‘officially’ in the show, fans expressed their romantic fantasies of the pairing through the creation of fan created works such as fanfiction, works of fiction written by fans (Knibbs, 2015).

An individual who engages in shipping is known as a ‘shipper’, defined below:

A person who discusses, portrays, or advocates a romantic pairing of two characters who appear in a work of (serial) fiction, esp. when such a pairing is not depicted in the original work.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2020)

The word 'shipper' developed as a shortened form of the term 'relationshipper', before being further shortened to the word 'ship', a noun form for a romantic pairing that fans supported. In the early 2000s, the word became popularised in verb form ('to ship') amongst fans of the *Harry Potter* franchise (Miller, 2016). The fandom centric Wiki page *Fanlore* (n.d.) notes that the term 'shipper' used to previously be reserved for pairings of the opposite sex ('het'), distinct from the term for individuals who wish for a romantic relationship between two male characters 'slasher', and individuals who wish for a romantic relationship between two female characters 'femslasher'. In contemporary usage, however, the term shipper can be used to encompass all possible romantic relationships and is no longer restricted to fictional characters. Fans can support multiple different ships, and when they do, they may have one or several OTP(s) (one true pairing), a term used to index a fan's preferred couple of all.

Within shipping culture, shippers of a specific pairing may have their own denominational names and ships themselves tend to be named ('ship names') through the creation of a portmanteau of the names of the pairing involved. For example, the ship of Taeyeon and Tiffany of K-Pop girl group Girls' Generation is known as 'Taeny' (**Taeyeon & Tiffany**). Besides allowing fans to refer affectionately to their favourite pairing, the use of ship names allows them to easily search for related fan works and assist shippers in identifying others who also support the same ship as them. In a reference to the standard usage of 'ship' as a type of nautical vessel, ships are defined as either 'sinking' or 'sailing', depending on whether the

interactions between the pairing support or deny the potential development of romance. Additionally, fans may ‘abandon the ship’ prior to a ship ‘sinking’, a further play on the adaptation of the word from nautical lexicon.

Shipping is no longer limited to the fandoms of fictional media, and the term has entered more generalised slang usage as a way of indicating that you support and believe in a potential couple, even between your own friends (Kircher, 2015). Although shipping discourse is usually restricted to fandom contexts, the mainstream media may also promote or express support or interest in specific real-life celebrity couples, known as ‘supercouples’ or ‘power couples’. One popular example is ‘Bennifer’, the name given to the pairing of singer and actress Jennifer Lopez (popularly known as ‘J-Lo’) and actor Ben Affleck, known for their whirlwind romance in the early 2000s. Other examples include ‘Brangelina’ (actors Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt), ‘Posh and Becks’ (singer and fashion designer Victoria Beckham and footballer David Beckham) and ‘TomKat’ (actors Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes).

In the K-pop fandom, shipping falls firmly into a category known as Real Life Pairings (RLP) or In Real Life (IRL) shipping, where people ship real life people. The practice is most associated with the fandom of boy groups, such as One Direction, though the practice is also extended to girl groups in the K-pop fandom (Blaise, 2019). Given the strict and stringent rules on idols dating, shipping practices in the K-pop fandom typically involve same-sex pairings, and pairings are usually from the same group. K-pop idols have historically been subject to ‘dating bans’, and idols of the opposite sex being pictured together can cause scandals, and as a result, idols are usually refrained from revealing their relationship status. When

K-pop idols Hyuna and E'Dawn, both working for the company Cube Entertainment announced that they were dating, they were both fired, effective immediately (Yim, 2018). As such, offstage interactions between idols of the opposite sex tend to be limited to avoid the development of a potential scandal, and Laurie (2016) has noted that the K-pop industry functions in a predominantly homosocial space. Despite the firing of Hyuna and E'Dawn spurring on greater discussion and debate about the moral issues behind dating bans and the pairing generally being received well by fans, issues remain when it comes to idols revealing information about romantic relationships. In 2020, Chen, former member of boy group EXO, was criticised heavily by fans for revealing that he was engaged to a non-celebrity and was expecting a baby. Fans called for his removal from the group, and staged protests in Seoul, with many of them feeling 'betrayed' (Yim, 2020).

Although attitudes towards idols dating appear to be changing – especially amongst global fans and alongside greater transparency about idol relationships from entertainment companies – shipping same-sex idols together remains popular. Fanfiction rarely features two opposite sex idols as the focal point, and most fanfiction that centres around relationships with male idols features female 'OC' (original characters). A core tenet of K-pop idol shipping content is based on fan perceptions and interpretations of the personalities and behaviours of their favourite idols, which in turn informs how their interactions with other idols are understood and contextualised. Speculation behind the romantic potential in idol relationships is largely informed by a mixture of both onstage and offstage interactions.

Hong (2020) further argues that this desire for same-sex pairings in the K-pop stems from the fannish desire to see “something unusual” in the inter-group dynamic, suggesting that “it is the belief in a deeply intimate intragroup dynamic (regardless of whether this is meant in a sexual, romantic, platonic, or familial sense) that drives fan desire for the group”. A driving force behind the characterisation of idols by global anglophone fans is the emotional bond shared between members of the same K-pop group. As mentioned by Hong (2020) above, interpretations of the interpersonal dynamics between K-pop idols can oscillate between ‘sexual’, ‘romantic’, ‘platonic’, or ‘familial’, depending on what is assumed from interactions. In either case, the thread running through each of those interpretations is intimacy, relevant to both conceptualisations of fanservice and *skinship*, where fanservice is a lack of real intimacy, and *skinship* is seen to be proof of real intimacy.

The fans of the girl group Girls’ Generation (known as SONEs), have long touted the idea of the ‘Soshi Bond’, described by one user on a Girls’ Generation blog as “the best sisterly bond ever” (love4soshi, 2012). As a group of nine girls of a similar age (the youngest member Seohyun is only two years younger than the eldest member Taeyeon) who trained together pre-debut for an average of about five years, the ‘Soshi Bond’ is routinely likened to that of a group of sisters. The legitimacy of the ‘Soshi Bond’ was thrown into question when in 2014, main vocalist Jessica Jung suddenly announced her departure from the group on Chinese social media platform, Weibo, announcing “I was excited about our upcoming fan events only to be shockingly informed by my company and 8 others that as of today, I’m no longer a member” (SBS PopAsia HQ, 2014). The abruptness of Jessica’s departure and the implication that she was kicked out in her statement led fans to question

whether the ‘Soshi Bond’ was real, with sentiment toward the Soshi Bond turning sour: “face it. SNSD’s “eternal bond” was as contrived and constructed as every other group in the biz” (OneHallyu, 2014). Others, however, continued to believe in the bond, refusing to believe that Jessica’s departure ruptured it.

The question of the ‘Soshi Bond’ is still under discussion, and speculation around Jessica’s departure remains a topic in the Girls’ Generation fandom, despite occurring almost nine years ago. Words that are frequently mentioned in the discussions are ‘trust’ and ‘betrayal’, giving insight into the impact of the perceived ‘Soshi Bond’ on the interpretation of inter-group dynamics for Girls’ Generation fans. Soon after Jessica’s departure, one user on Reddit (2014) rationalised the strength of the ‘Soshi Bond’ through the ‘betrayal’ of Jessica by stating “whether it was intentional or not, feelings among the members of SNSD have been hurt. The feeling of hurt caused by a loved one is like no other and may cause regretful words to be said and intense feelings of betrayal. Betrayal, itself, is defined as a violation of trust meaning that the SNSD members wholeheartedly trusted each other”. The ‘Soshi Bond’ is afforded legitimacy through the fact that the definition for betrayal implies that trust had to exist in the first place to be broken. Jessica’s untimely departure ultimately proved to cause a rift in the Girls’ Generation fandom, with fans split between those who continued to support all nine members (OT9 ‘one true nine’), and those who no longer regarded Jessica to be a part of Girls’ Generation (OT8 ‘one true eight’).

This example serves to illustrate the fan emphasis placed on the interpersonal bonds between K-pop idols, and the wider inter-group dynamics, facilitated through fan perception of intimate moments. Following Jessica’s

departure, fans sought to find reasoning and evidence that it was imminent, including looking for proof that her relationships with other members had fractured. One theory alleged that Taeyeon (the leader of the group and other main vocalist) and Jessica's once close relationship had soured, with Taeyeon seemingly ignoring and avoiding Jessica from 2012 onwards (Channel Korea, 2021). Other fans noted that the reason for Jessica's departure was simply to do with the fact that she wanted to work on her business, creating conflicts with the schedule of the group and tensions with SM Entertainment (Channel Korea, 2020). Fans, without access to the private, intimate lives of idols, are left to speculate and interpret intimacy between their favourites.

These boundaries can become more blurred and less clear when they are applied to real-life celebrity fandom, where the source text itself is media appearances, interviews, social media posts, and other sources. The interpretation of such content is largely subjective, and as such, it can be difficult to ascertain the authenticity of interactions and make assumptions about idol interactions that are grounded in objective reality. With no real end and no beginning to the interpretative potential of K-pop idol content, there is an almost infinite amount of information that individuals who engage in shipping can work with (Busse, 2006). This is where the issue of authentic and scripted interactions starts to come into play. K-pop idols are celebrities, and according to Holmes (2005), the construction of the celebrity's image is an interlocution of three personae: the professional persona in the public eye, the private persona, and the 'real' persona, that is behind the construction. Where the public persona is that which is most readily available to a media consumer, access to the private and the 'real' is more reliant on alternative sources.

For anglophone K-pop fans, accessibility to all aspects of idol personae is hindered by the existence of the language barrier, as verbal interactions between idols are negotiated and interpreted through fan translations. The boundaries between the public persona and the 'real' persona provides the divergence point for fanservice and *skinship* acts. Fan perception of idol personalities and behaviours are interwoven into discourses about fanservice and the authenticity of *skinship* acts, as they observe idols through a mixture of onstage and offstage appearances. According to Busse (2017) "the observer fantasy imagines the celebrities' secret private selves so that its driving force is the emphasis on the gathered facts as a basis to imagine the potential "truths" they hide".

Shipping culture in the K-pop fandom has not been without significant controversy. Criticisms of shipping tend to hinge on the fact that "the core of shipping culture is manifested by the forced definition of the nature of the relationship between two people – that is, the institution of shipping revolves around the idea that fans define the relationship of two people on behalf of those two people" (Seoulbeats, 2011). This further hinges on the fact that same-sex shipping practices often occur in direct opposition to the lack of support for same-sex romantic relations in South Korea, where government policy and public sentiment has been influenced by the powerful lobbying powers of Christian religious groups (Laurie, 2016). As one commentor on the *Seoulbeats* article stipulates "the thing is, it does affect some fan's perception of reality and almost blinds them", going on to further state that "the major shipping cults occur when the idols themselves are all over each other" (Seoulbeats, 2011). Thus, there is an awareness that the most popular pairings within shipping culture gain popularity due to the quality of their intimate interactions.

To conclude, shipping is a practice that is part and parcel of many online fandom communities, and this is no different in the K-pop fandom. Criticisms of shipping culture in the K-pop fandom arise from the fact that idols are real-life individuals, and not fictional characters, as well as the fact that the prevalence of same-sex shipping in the K-pop fandom is contradictory to the country's general stance on same-sex relationships. Shipping practices blur the lines between fantasy and reality, and with the lack of a well-defined body of canonical material, the perception of intimate interactions between K-pop idols is down to individual interpretation. The celebrity persona operates on three different levels, and fans utilise public appearances and social media content to build their characterisations of K-pop idol personalities, as well as their interpersonal dynamics with other idols. Fanservice, presented as a manufactured interaction, will generally fall into the category of the public persona, and *skinship*, regarded as an aspect of Korean culture and society as well as a more 'authentic' display of intimacy, will be used to form the basis for the 'real' persona of K-pop idols.

In K-pop shipping culture, this potential 'hidden truth', alluded to by Busse (2017), that idols are trying to hide, tends to be their same-sex relationships with other idols. Though shipping can take multiple different forms, one aspect of shipping culture involves believing that *skinship* interactions are indicative of same-sex love between idols (Laurie, 2016). This has arisen from the separation of fanservice and *skinship* as 'inauthentic' and 'authentic' respectively, with *skinship* more likely to be subject to interpretations of romantic, queer intimacy between two idols. In this section, the popular pairing of Solar and Moonbyul of the girl group MAMAMOO will be used as an example to build a repertoire of *skinship* acts that are perceived to index a real, romantic relationship.

MAMAMOO are a four-member girl group that debuted in June 2014 under the entertainment company RBW (Rainbow Bridge World) Entertainment. The members are leader and main vocalist Solar (real name Kim Young Sun), rapper Moonbyul (real name Moon Byul-Yi), vocalist Wheein (real name Jung Whee In), and vocalist/rapper and *maknae* Hwasa (real name Ahn Hye Jin) (Kprofiles, 2016). The group debuted to much fanfare with the single “Mr. Ambiguous”, drawing praise for their powerful vocals and jazz inspired beats (Seoulbeats, 2014). In the years that followed, the group continued to gain traction, with their 2015 single “Um Oh Ah Yeh” from their EP *Pink Funky* taking the number one spot on four different real-time music charts (Allkpop, 2015). The momentum of the group continued to build, and 2016 marked a breakthrough year as their single “You’re the Best” from their first full-length album *Melting* earned them their first music show win on *Inkigayo*, followed by wins on *Music Bank* and *M Countdown*, with the single winning on a total of eight times on music shows during the promotional period (Karchives, 2020).

Particularly notable was the fact that the group was known for having considerably more female fans than male, going against the pervasive ideas that the point of K-pop girl groups is to appeal to an older male demographic. When asked about the large female fanbase in an interview with *ELLE Korea*, rapper Moonbyul noted that “since we are the same gender, it feels like they understand even my inner self” (Cho, 2021). In 2022, Korean website *Aladin Music* released data about the gender demographics of K-pop album purchases on their site. According to their statistics, an overwhelming majority of MAMAMOO album purchases were made by female fans, at 75.2% to just 24.8% of male fans (Ha, 2022). Besides their fans being mostly female, MAMAMOO are known within the K-pop industry to have a strong

queer following, both domestically and internationally. The group have their own official LGBTQ+ fan group, called the “RainbowMooMoos”, who have been involved in supporting queer causes, and is one of the only queer Korean fan groups in the K-pop industry (Twitter, 2021). The group have been vocal about their support for the queer community, including performances with drag queens, wearing RainbowMooMoo pin badges, challenging heteronormative gender stereotypes, and voicing their support of love between individuals of all genders (Sweeting, 2021).

Although it would be reductive to note that all queer fans are looking for in idol pairings is romantic connections and intimacy, MAMAMOO are well-known within the K-pop industry for their “unlimited fan service” (Allkpop, 2016). During the promotions for “Um Oh Ah Yeh”, members Solar and Moonbyul (referred to by fans as ‘MoonSun’) tricked Korean paparazzi site *Dispatch* by pretending to be on a date, with Moonbyul cross-dressing as a man (Amino, 2015). The pair staged photos typical of those released by *Dispatch* when announcing dating news, before revealing that it was part of their promotional cycle. In the subsequent music video, both Moonbyul and Hwasa cross-dressed, featuring as potential love interests alongside Solar and Wheein (Do, 2015).

By far the most popular pairing within MAMAMOO is MoonSun, a pairing that has aided the popularity of the group amongst queer and non-queer global anglophone fans. On popular fanfiction site *Asianfanfics*, there are a total of 3,268 works dedicated to MoonSun (Asianfanfics, 2022), and the MoonSun dedicated thread on the OneHallyu forums spans a total of 819 pages (OneHallyu, 2022), with thousands of unique replies. On *The L Chat*, the MAMAMOO thread is focused on discussion of Moonbyul and Solar’s relationship, with a total of 410 pages and

20,491 individual posts (The L Chat, 2022). The impact of the MoonSun pairing has played a significant role in the wider popularity of MAMAMOO as a group, as several fans have noted that their interactions function as a gateway into discovering the group, with one suggesting in 2017 that it “seems Mamamoo is getting popular because of this ship” (OneHallyu, 2017).

Moonsun is described by one definition on *Urban Dictionary* as “the GAYEST ship you will ever see. “Moon” belongs to Moonbyul (the main rapper of MAMAMOO). “Sun” belongs to Yongsun (the leader and main vocalist of MAMAMOO). People ship these two because they are so close to each other, even though they hated each other before they debuted” (Urban Dictionary, 2018).

Where there are numerous different K-pop ships even within individual groups, certain ships become more popular and widespread than others. As mentioned in the definition for Moonsun above, this is often dependent on perception of the quality of interactions between idols. Interactions aside, another key factor is the perception of the personality of the idols involved.

As shipping involves an imagined pairing of two idols, there must be mutual interactions between the two idols involved in the pairing for the ship to be viable and generate fan interest. Besides physical intimacy such as hugging, kissing, or touching, fan perceptions of idol personalities play into how a ship is understood and popularised. Within MAMAMOO’s fanservice and *skinship* performances, Moonbyul is labelled as being ‘greasy’, described by a user on the K-pop *Amino* as “the act of being cheesy, corny, or sappy. It could also mean saying cheesy lines or making exaggerated gestures and doing it in a flirty or funny way. You can probably imagine the lead couple in a drama once they finally get together and they’re being

all cute with each other. But it's the kind of cute you either get gushy about or cringe at" (Amino, 2016). The anglophone fan use of 'greasy' is adapted from the Korean adjective 느끼하다, which when applied to food means 'greasy' or 'oily', and when applied to the person, is similar to being 'cheesy'. One blog commentor notes that it could also imply the speaker carrying an air of over-confidence in their flirting with, usually, the opposite sex (Ducle Refugio, 2009).

Solar, the older of the two, is perceived to be 'in denial', and more conservative or strict in her affections, almost functioning as a counteraction to the 'greasy' behaviour of Moonbyul. The characterisation of Solar as more 'resistant' to the overt *skinship* and 'greasy' behaviour of Moonbyul has contributed to the idea that she is less obviously expressive in her affections and is less likely to initiate contact or *skinship* acts with Moonbyul. These characterisations of Moonbyul and Solar are constructed from the stream of content that is provided to fans, with King-O'Riain (2021) noting that "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". With the popularity of platforms such as V Live offering insight into the personal lives of idols, elements of the personality traits and characteristics of K-pop idols are abstracted from various resources. A common practice in the 2000s used to be the entertainment company labelling idols themselves – the 'cute' one, the 'smart' one, the 'sexy' one – this process of personality construction has now been made easier with the popularity of live-streaming app V Live (Hong, 2020). The characterisation of 'greasy Moonbyul' is so well-enshrined in the MAMAMOO fandom lore that there are several pages of videos on YouTube with compilations of her 'greasy' behaviour. The characterisation of 'greasy Moonbyul' is one that is interactional and is dependent

on the reception of her greasy behaviour by other members of the group, most notably, Solar.

The establishment of defined, and well-constructed roles can elevate the popularity of the ‘believability’ of certain pairings over others. Moonbyul and Solar’s complementary opposition as the ‘greasy’ instigator and the hesitant receiver is a rich semiotic environment for the imagination of fans, with the ‘opposites attract’ reading of their relationship elevated by their names themselves: moon and sun. This gives an example of how wider semiotic principles can play into the popularity of certain K-pop idol pairings over others, as a lens through which physical intimacy and interaction can then be viewed. A Koreaboo article (Lamenez, 2020) titled ‘11 Times MAMAMOO’s Solar And Moonbyul Did Skinship With Each Other While Chilling At The Airport’ places specific emphasis on the physical differences between the pair: “bare-faced Moonbyul with simple-makeup Solar”, “Solar’s white dress perfectly complements Moonbyul’s dark top”, “Moonbyul’s printed shirt is balanced out by Solar’s dark top”. These contrasts, even occurring on the level of personal style and aesthetic, can present additional semiotic material for the construction of the pairing.

This concept of ‘opposites attract’ is not only evoked in the MoonSun pairing and has also been the core theme of other popular same-sex female idol pairings such as TaeNy (Taeyeon and Tiffany) and Seulrene (Seulgi and Irene). Responses to *skinship* acts expressed between the two ‘opposite’ idols usually fall onto the binary of one idol preferring or being more ‘comfortable’ with *skinship* than the other, who is more ‘reluctant’ to engage in *skinship* acts. In fanfiction and shipping culture, this reluctance to engage in *skinship* acts can then elevate them to an even more

significant status, than should both idols in the pairing engage in regular *skinship*. Thus, idol characterisations and fan perception of the personalities of idols individually, and when paired up with other idols largely inform how *skinship* acts will be read.

Building the Skinship Repertoire

Examples taken from the corpus will be used to create a repertoire of acts, behaviours and gestures that constitute acts of *skinship* in global anglophone K-pop fan contexts. The data revealed that for global fans, *skinship* was perceived on levels of intimacy. Acts that were more generic and lower down on the intimacy scale such as hugging and stage interactions were likely to be perceived as either standard, expected interactions, or fanservice. Intimate acts that were higher on the intimacy scale, such as kissing, gazing into each other's eyes, and excessive touching could be read as intimate and comfortable *skinship* acts, or as a sign of something more romantic. The perception of intimacy between two idols is highly subjective, and where an individual who ships MoonSun might infer romantic intentions from touch-based interaction, an individual who does not may simply see it as a form of fanservice. Thus, this section simply intends to provide general examples of how *skinship* performed between two idols is understood by global anglophone K-pop fans.

(1) even then it will probably be a 'back hug', as face to face is even more intimate. And that would be considered skinship. But it could also refer to anything from holding hands, to something more intimate

(2) Yeah, skinship is about skin/physical contact. Holding hands, back-hugging, butt-smacking, etc

(3) we tend to look at skinship that are often subtle and not for the camera, for example it's different when they are on stage and are all over each other; and when they are holding hands subtly on a vlive

(4) Skinship - two or more people touching in one way or another

(5) Even when someone is not particularly into skinship , they'll still give in to one back hug or another

(6) Skinship is like hugging someone, holding hands, kissing on the cheek, putting your arm around someone's neck, etc

(7) Skinship doesn't only mean sexual touching. Skinship means bonding through skin, something like comfort contact

The examples highlighted some of the acts of touch that would be understood to constitute *skinship* acts: a back hug, holding hands, butt-smacking, kissing on the cheek, and putting your arm around someone's neck. For global anglophone K-pop fans, the concept of *skinship* mostly appeared to involve a range of acts that involved 'touching in one way or another'. Where few of the examples made links to *skinship* as a form of touch-based intimacy in Korean culture and society, it was not understood to only be performed with another individual who was close. In that sense, only the understanding of *skinship* in example (7) came close to capturing *skinship* as 'bonding through skin' rather than just 'touching in one way or another'.

The 'back hug' was commonly cited as a form of *skinship*, and treated as low on the intimacy scale, as example (5) noted that even idols who were not particularly 'into' *skinship* would at the very least give in to a back hug. In example (3), *skinship* was perceived differently depending on how subtly it was performed. Expressions of *skinship* acts when idols were onstage and 'all over each other' were not the same as idols 'holding hands subtly on a vlive'. This example pointed to ideas of the 'authentic' and 'genuine' *skinship* acts versus the 'inauthentic' and the 'forced'. Where the expression of *skinship* on stage is described as idols being 'all over each other', the apparent subtlety of holding hands during a live stream was thus coded as a more intimate and therefore, more genuine *skinship* moment.

Skinship was therefore indexed by idols performing certain acts with each other – back hugging, butt smacking, holding hands – though other culturally relevant information was often absent. Of the three words featured in this study, *skinship* has been the one subject to the most rigorous process of decontextualization from its original Korean understanding. This is most obvious in the difference between global attitudes towards *skinship* as being same sex ‘touch’, and attitudes in Korea erring towards *skinship* as intimate, romantic acts that tend to occur between individuals of the opposite sex. In Korean contexts, *skinship* goes further than just choosing to hug somebody, and is restricted to intimate and close relationships. Certainly, the impression given in the above examples is one that suggests Koreans are ‘back hugging’ their ways all around the country and are ‘all over each other’. This reduces *skinship* to its common English language translation – physical intimacy – whilst failing to recognise the ‘heart-to-heart’ element of *skinship* as a form of haptic communication.

This section has explored the etymological origins of *skinship*, which was originally conceived as a phrase to refer to the close ‘skin-to-skin’ bond between mother and child. Studies on *skinship* in parental contexts have found that for mothers and fathers, what constitutes an act of *skinship* is conceptualised differently, likely because of women occupying more traditional roles in the household. In contemporary Korean contexts, *skinship* has been found to mostly refer to intimate acts performed between a male and a female, either those who are desiring a romantic relationship together, or are enhancing intimacy in an already existing romantic relationship. *Skinship* was then conceptualised in an anglophone context, where it was presented as ‘excessive’ and borderline ‘homoerotic’. In Korean contexts *skinship* can be performed by all genders, yet, particularly in

Westernized interpretations, the central element of *skinship* was physical contact between two men. *Skinship*, therefore, was often treated as a Korean oddity that involved excessive touching between individuals for no reason.

Thus, the primary difference lay in the fact that *skinship* in anglophone contexts was construed as an ‘expected’ form of intimate touch, that was ubiquitous in Korean culture and society and was equivalent to being ‘touchy feely’. In Korean contexts, on the *ELLE* article about the preferred *skinship* of men and women, *skinship* is not categorised according to a range of well-defined behaviours, and rather, the most appealing aspect of *skinship* was the ‘unexpected’ nature of *skinship* acts (*ELLE*, 2017). In the article, the context for the performance of *skinship* was also important – *skinship* was not just randomised – it was often the result of a semiotic inference of the need for *skinship* in a moment. As one commentor on the *ELLE* (2017) article notes “rather than the physical touch, the moment of gazing into each other’s eyes for 1-2 seconds right before something happens is the most exhilarating, as everyone knows what is about to happen next”.

‘Inauthentic’ Fanservice

In K-pop fandom spaces, there is another word that frequently appears in discussion alongside *skinship*: fanservice. A combination of ‘fan’ and ‘service’, the word fanservice (ファン-サービス) originated in Japan, and is generally used to refer to acts specifically performed by celebrities, usually idols, performers, or athletes, for the pleasure of fans. This can include autographing fan’s belongings or blowing kisses to the audience during a live performance. In media works, notably Japanese anime and manga, the related and sometimes interchangeable term

‘service cut’ is used to refer to scenes that feature gratuitous content, usually involving nudity, for the viewing pleasure of fans (Russell, 2008). Despite fanservice typically being associated with sexual or erotic content, the term is not bound to sexual forms of expression and can involve just giving an autograph or posing for a selfie.

In the K-pop fandom, the concept of fanservice is used simultaneously and sometimes in opposition to *skinship*. Fanservice as a word is self-explanatory in its aims, yet, what is less clear are the boundaries between what is considered fanservice and what is not. Given fanservice is typically applied to anime and manga contexts, where, according to Russel (2008) fanservice acts are ‘anticipated’, it is harder to distinguish such boundaries when it comes to physical intimacy between two individuals. This ambiguity around what acts of physical intimacy are authentic or staged is where fanservice and *skinship* occupy a murky space riddled with subjectivity and individual interpretation.

The differences between the two are further reflected in online definitions taken from *Urban Dictionary* and the OED:

Fanservice

A rather disturbing phenomenon that seems to originate in the Japanese and the Korean media primarily, where two people act intimate towards each other for the media. Mostly men of the same boy bands etc, fan service could include touching, holding hands or giving an impression to the fans that they is something more going on.

(Urban Dictionary, 2010)

In general, fan service refers to scenes designed to excite or titillate the viewer. This can include scantily-clad outfits, cleavage shots, panty shots, nude scenes (shower scenes especially), etc. Some broader definitions also include things like cool mecha, big explosions, battle scenes, etc. Basically, if it has little plot-redeeming value, but makes the viewer sit up and take notice, it's probably fan service in one form or another.

(Urban Dictionary, 2003)

Skinship

In Korea, the term "skinship" is used to describe the act of intimate, non-sexual touching between very close (Usually same-sex, but can include both genders.) platonic friends. It involves acts such as holding hands/arms, hugging, and kissing on the cheeks.

Sometimes it goes even deeper than that and can even involve bathing together, as Koreans (And the Japanese) believe that group nudity helps break down the barriers and helps establish a closer relationship.

(Urban Dictionary, 2014)

In Japan and Korea, the term "skinship" is used to describe the intimacy, or closeness, between a mother and a child. Today, the word is generally used for bonding through physical contact, such as holding hands, hugging, or parents washing their child at a bath.

(Urban Dictionary, 2008)

Esp. in Japanese and Korean contexts: touching or close physical contact between parent and child or (esp. in later use) between lovers or friends, used to express affection or strengthen an emotional bond.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2022)

Looking at the definitions above, both fanservice and *skinship* are associated with usage in both Japanese and Korean contexts. Where *skinship* is understood to occur in intimate, personal contexts, fanservice is applied only in media settings. The *Urban Dictionary* definitions imply that *skinship* is either intimacy between mother and child, or platonic intimacy between friends. This is elaborated upon in the OED definition, where it is further noted that *skinship* occurs between lovers as well as friends, which also places the emphasis on *skinship* to express affection or strengthen an emotional bond. This provides the basis for interpretational differences between what constitutes fanservice and what constitutes *skinship*. Fanservice, as noted in the definition, is “designed to titillate and excite the viewer” (Urban Dictionary, 2003), and by contrast, *skinship* is an ‘intimate’ act.

With *skinship* understood to have links to Korean culture, fanservice acts are typically constructed as more ‘expected’ and ‘typical’ behaviours that are less

organic, natural, and spontaneous, as well as being likely to be performed without a concern for whether they appear genuine or not. Fanservice cannot be defined by one single act, however, as Russel (2008) and others (Wittenfelt, 2020; Graffeo, 2006) have shown, certain behaviours have become highly indexical of fanservice.

This is no different in the K-pop industry, where fanservice occurs on two different levels. The first level of fanservice is that which is performed between fan and idol. This can occur in multiple different forms, including the more direct, such as physical contact at fan signings or meet and greet events and interacting with fans on social media, or the more indirect, such as referring to fandom in-jokes or performing certain gestures on stage. The second level of fanservice in the K-pop industry is that which occurs between idols, that usually involves physical intimacy such as kissing and hugging, or speaking to each other in certain ways, for example, using intimate address terms or nicknames. It is the latter type of fanservice that is more likely to be overlap with *skinship*.

(1) Showing abs/skin during a performance to get the audience excited is usually called 'fanservice'

(2) I think there is classic fanservice that most K-pop bands do, especially on variety shows (the Pocky game, the I love you game, the passing paper game etc.)

(3) i do think the fanservice nowadays is nothing much compared to some of the fanservice a few years back. pocky games and the whole passing paper with their mouths thing have decreased as well. Idols do fanservice with the understanding that people will see that only as fanservice

(4) Beyond what is obvious fanservice (kissing games, pepero games, photo shoots where they look cuddly/coupley, jokes about being romantic together or questions about who would you date if he was a girl, etc)

Many of the fanservice acts that have been mentioned above, labelled in (2) as 'classic fanservice' are those that will be expected from K-pop idols, regardless of their gender or their individual group. 'Obvious' fanservice such as showing

abs/skin, kissing games, and romantic jokes or interactions between idols are encouraged on variety shows and idol entertainment programmes, therefore leading to an expectation that idols will perform such acts in these contexts. Many of these acts are therefore mediated by a third party (usually the host or other guests on the show), acting as an interference to the possibility that the acts could be perceived as genuine acts of physical intimacy.

As explicated in example (2), certain fanservice acts have been enshrined as “classic fanservice”. Showing abs/skin, kissing games, and romantic jokes were all mentioned as examples as ‘obvious’ or ‘classic’ fanservice. Fanservice covers a range of activities, and again, it is necessary to note that many fanservice acts can be highly subjective to individual interpretation. Several of the examples made mention of the Pocky/Pepero game and the passing paper game, both of which fall under the latter. The Pocky/Pepero game and the passing paper game can both be categorised under the wider umbrella term of ‘kissing games’ and are usually performed on K-pop variety shows. Pocky is the name of a chocolate covered biscuit stick released by the Japanese company Glico in 1966, with the name inspired by the Japanese onomatopoeia word for the snapping sound – *pokkin pokkin* – they make when being eating (Pocky, 2022). A similar Korean version of the snack, named Pepero, was launched in 1983 by Lotte (Fifield, 2015).

The Pocky game reportedly originated at Japanese *konpa* (‘company’ and ‘party’) drinking parties, typically organised amongst students or workplace colleagues. The rules of the game are simple: two individuals face each other and place the opposite ends of the Pocky into their mouths. The goal is to reach the end of the stick fastest, without the stick breaking in the process or the other person

moving away (Zenpop, 2022). The ‘fanservice’ element of the game comes from the fact that as the participants eat the Pocky, they may end up touching lips or accidentally kissing each other. The game is popular in Japanese anime/manga, as well as in J-pop and K-pop, as a form of shared culture in popular culture contexts in both Japan and Korea. In the K-pop industry, the game is named the Pepero game rather than the Pocky game and is typically performed between idols of the same-sex and from the same group.

Figure 6

Momo (left) and Mina (right) of girl group TWICE playing the Pepero game at a fan event



The passing paper game operates in a similar way to the Pepero game, but instead involves placing a small piece of paper in the mouth, before passing it onto subsequent idols using only the mouth. In K-pop contexts, the intention behind both the Pepero game and the passing paper game is usually to induce an ‘accidental kiss’ between the two idols involved. As mentioned in the examples,

these games are a mainstay of K-pop idol fanservice, usually since idols are encouraged to play the game on variety shows or at other fan events. Idols are not always enthusiastic to play the game, and the passing paper game has been described as “something idols aren’t particularly fond of [...] yet something that fans absolutely love” (SBS PopAsia, 2016).

(5) i really dislike fanservice. not sure if this is unpopular, but fanservice is really cringy and unnecessary. what's worse is that i feel as if a lot of fans can't really tell when idols are faking their interactions

(6) most kpop fans are used to their fav groups doing forced and cringe fanservice

(7) It just breeds delusional (the most recent example being the reaction to Chens marriage/he was called the fansign boyfriend) Half of the time I wonder how idols feel doing that fanservice. 99.9% probably cringe while doing it

In the corpus data, fanservice was unlikely to be conceptualised as a ‘genuine’ act, and it was frequently referred to as ‘faked’, ‘forced’, or ‘cringe’. Rather than idols being blamed for the ‘cringy’ qualities of their fanservice acts, critics placed the blame firmly at the feet of the fans, as it is argued that fan demand for fanservice is what fuels its prevalence. Fanservice was cited as one of the reasons for fans becoming ‘delusional’, and commentators expressed concerns that fans were unable to discern ‘fake’ interactions. Example (6) accepts that most fans are ‘used to’ their favourite idols doing ‘forced’ and ‘cringe’ fanservice, yet example (5) is unsure of whether disliking fanservice was ‘unpopular’ or not. This is indicative of the polarised split in attitudes towards idol fanservice acts. In the shipping community, *skinship* and fanservice (whether towards fans or between idols) often form the basis of how idols are conceptualised in fan material, especially in ‘romantic’ interactions. For more casual fans, fanservice may be nothing more than an annoyance to feed the ‘delusions’ of fans.

In some examples, scepticism around the authenticity of fanservice as an act of intimacy or closeness between idols led *skinship* to be equated with fanservice.

(8) Skinship is sometimes performed as part of fanservice in Korea by idols

(9) The amount of skinship in Kpop groups is a bit over exaggerated and is masked as fan service

(10) Anyways I heard skinship between idols is only fan service but I kinda don't believe it

(11) But more on the skinship. Truth is, I think it might be a mix of genuine affection along with fan service

In the examples, there was a reluctance to admit that *skinship* between idols may be part of fanservice. Phrases such as 'I kinda don't believe it' and 'truth is' imply that thinking this might be the case goes against what would be hoped is the case: that *skinship* is a genuine act that has no relation to fanservice. In these examples, rather than straight out being labelled as fanservice, *skinship* was construed as 'part of fanservice' or 'masked as fan service', both less overt ways of saying that *skinship* acts could indeed be read as fanservice. Fanservice, therefore, was constructed as the 'inauthentic' and 'forced' equivalent of *skinship*, commodifying physically intimate acts as content to be provided to fans.

'Weird' Skinship, 'Touch Starved Americans', and Normalising Skinship

In the corpus data, when *skinship* was discussed in the context of lived experience in Korea, it was often constructed as 'weird', 'a bit much', and 'uncomfortable'. This was most likely to be the case when questioning the experiences of Korean idols who had been born or spent time in the United States or another country outside of Korea.

(1) I understand that it's part of the culture for Koreans, but is skinship not a bit weird for Americans who go to Korea to become a trainee? Having lived most of their life in America (or wherever they're from), then going to Korea

and having to get used to being all on top of your friends seems like a bit much

(2) but what if an idol is from a different country where skinship isn't part of the culture? do they just get used to it during their trainee days?

(3) Do you think it is necessary for them to get used to skinship or is it not that important anyway?

In the examples, *skinship* was presented as something that idols who were born or raised outside of Korea would need to 'get used to'. This identified *skinship* as a concept that could only be attained naturally in a Korean context, and the repeated use of the phrase 'get used to' implies that *skinship* is framed as something strange that idols are required to normalise to function as idols in Korean society. Example (1) framed *skinship* as 'a bit weird', involving being 'on top of your friends', further articulating the implication that *skinship* is a strange, or at least, unfamiliar way of performing intimate platonic acts. Fans, as non-Koreans, therefore expressed their own reservations about *skinship* through imagining the experiences of non-Korean idols where '*skinship* isn't part of their culture'. In such a way, becoming familiar and comfortable with *skinship* was perceived by non-Korean global fans as part of being a K-pop idol.

(4) My male friends (I am male) would hold my hand, sleep on my thighs, hold my waist etc and as someone who found skinship uncomfortable; it was really weird at first. Nowadays I've definitely gotten used to it

(5) Nobody will think that is weird to do. was socially acceptable to be touchy with the same gender in South Korea. (Even females do it too) However, when I came to the States, I quickly realized that people don't do that around here unless their sexual orientation was homosexual

(6) In Malaysia, it is normal for girls to hold hands but not for guys so it was really hard for me to get used of these skinship thingy

Other examples on *skinship* being 'weird' focused on lived experiences, again, with repeated use of the phrase 'get used to'. In the cases of lived experiences of *skinship* as 'weird', most of the examples were taken from posters speaking from

the experience of male-to-male *skinship* acts. In example (2), the difference between the performance of platonic same sex *skinship* acts between men in Korea and in the United States was so stark that it was ‘quickly realized’. The example goes on to add that being ‘touchy with the same gender’ was uncommon amongst people in the United States ‘unless their sexual orientation was homosexual’. As discovered in the study by Lee, Lee, and Park (2020), for audiences in the United States, acts of *skinship* were only regarded as acceptable and platonic when played out in a Korean context, wherein they were ‘normal’. *Skinship* is legitimised as an aspect of Korean culture that is performed by both men and women, but mostly understood as occurring in same-sex contexts. The act of two men ‘holding hands’ was cited ‘uncomfortable’, and in example (5) was identified as ‘abnormal’ when compared to two girls holding hands, which was ‘normal’.

(7) I don't like it either when idols give too much fan service and when they feed their fans' shipping fantasies. I appreciate it if they are really close but doing it just to satisfy the fans' fantasies makes me cringe

(8) i know theres cringe fanservice in kpop, my fav groups have done and so has yours and i thought it was really unbearable

(9) I find a lot of international fans cringe when idols preform acts of fan service, particularly overly cute or overly sexy ones but with time I've come to appreciate fan service

By contrast, fanservice was not often described as ‘weird’, but was regarded to be ‘cringe’ and ‘unbearable’. Fanservice was most likely to be described as ‘cringe’ when it involved acts of fanservice that were performed towards fans, and not that which was performed between idols. The negative attitude leveraged towards forms of fanservice between idols and fans is articulated on two levels: first, the ‘cringe’ factor is amplified by the fact that these excessive acts of fanservice is desired by fans, and second, the idols are also criticised for performing fanservice to ‘feed their fans’ shipping fantasies’. Example (6) specifically mentions ‘international fans’ as

finding fanservice 'cringe', again cementing ideas that fanservice is particularly uncomfortable and abnormal for non-Korean audiences.

Skinship and fanservice were both described as 'too much'. The use of a quantifier in 'too much' implies that there is a level of fanservice/*skinship* that is acceptable, but there are moments where the level becomes excessive or unnecessary.

(10) To end this, I just wanted to say that I would blame the companies and the kpop culture before blaming the idol's themselves for this " excessive " fan service

(11) They're both uncomfortable with unnecessary skinship

(12) the videos was basically the members full on making out for fun and just being kinda very over the top touchy (i know skinships is apart of the culture but this was a bit too much lol)

Fanservice and *skinship* are both understood to be a part of K-pop idol culture, with (10) and (12) carrying the implication that fanservice was very much a result of fandom and wider Korean culture. The recognition that fanservice and *skinship* acts will be performed is accompanied with a desire for these acts to be performed at a level where idols are not acting to appease fans, or out of a genuine desire to express a level of physical intimacy with another idol. Thus, in global anglophone usage, *skinship* and fanservice both appear to be treated as they can be quantified on a scale of amount. Both run the risk of crossing an imagined, subjective line of acceptability, at which point they are cringe inducing, or considered 'too much', 'excessive', or 'unbearable'. Where *skinship* had more well-articulated ties to real-life experiences in Korean culture and society and was treated as a Korean cultural act that individuals would need to 'get used to', fanservice was presented as manufactured, and as the product of an excessive fannish desire to view idols performing acts on excessive levels.

The 'weirdness' in the perception of *skinship* supported Lee, Lee, and Park's (2020) observations that K-pop was being perceived as a cultural 'other', that existed in contrast to 'normality'. Like one might be expected to learn Korean when they move to Korea to be able to be an active participant in Korean society, *skinship* was presented as something that needed to be acquired or 'gotten used to'. Whether an individual was willing to participate in *skinship* or not, it was portrayed as an unavoidable facet of Korean culture and society. Curiosity about *skinship* was navigated either on the level of personalised experiences, or questions about how non-Korean idols perceived the culture of *skinship* after arriving in Korea. This suggested that at least for some fans of K-pop, *skinship* indexed an overly familiar, uncomfortable type of physical intimacy that despite being 'weird', was part and parcel of operating in a Korean context. Initial discomfort around participation in *skinship* acts was therefore something that could be altered.

Although understood to be different from *skinship*, perceptions of fanservice also functioned in a similar way. Fanservice is constructed as part of K-pop idol culture, and again, whether the individual likes it or not, an encounter with fanservice acts is inevitable as a consumer of K-pop. Fanservice, as a performance, was placed onto the binary scale of 'cute' and 'sexy', pointing back to the popularity of the concept of the 'duality' argument in K-pop idol personalities and performances. *Skinship* and fanservice themselves become further articulations of these dualities, with *skinship* functioning as the 'authentic' and 'innocent' expression of physical intimacy to fanservice's 'inauthentic' and 'sexualized' expression of physical intimacy. Whether *skinship* or fanservice, there existed an imagined boundary between what could be considered 'normal' and what was 'excessive' in the articulation of either. In the case of *skinship* and fanservice both,

moments of ‘excess’ could be mitigated by accustoming oneself to Korean culture. However, in the case of fanservice, part of the acceptance of fanservice acts included recognising that it was a direct result of the desires of fans, and physical intimacy may not necessarily be the prerogative of idols.

With *skinship* framed as a ‘weird’, yet integral part of Korean culture and society, there were several examples in the corpus that tried to ‘normalise’ *skinship* either in Korea, or in other countries. The adjective ‘normal’ was used multiple times throughout the corpus data.

(13) Seeing things as romance coded has a lot more to do with how we individually interact with people in our lives as opposed to whatever a "standard romantic" behaviour is. okay like from a personal perspective, hugging and cheek kissing is normal for me bcs i do it with my friends that are comfortable with skinship as well

(14) Like I live in northern Europe and here it is normal for girls to hold hands, hug, sleep in the same bed and even kiss as friends, while guys barely hug each other

(15) To a certain degree, it could be fanservice, but the foundation is really cultural -- it is normal for Koreans (and other Asian cultures, for that matter) to be more physically affectionate

(16) Also it's important to remember skinship is a normal thing in Asian countries

(17) It can include but is not limited to: hooking arms together hugging bumping or smacking each other holding hands touching each other's hair, arms, etc This is completely normal in Korean society

The word *skinship* frequently featured in concordance lines with the adjective ‘normal’, as fans discussed how *skinship* was a ‘normal thing’ or ‘completely normal’. Two examples, (15) and (16), noted that *skinship* was also normal in other ‘Asian countries/cultures’, extending the normality of *skinship* to a Pan Asian context. Where all the examples presented *skinship* as ‘normal’, there appeared to be a general recognition that, as explored previously, *skinship* acts were

evaluated against a level of normality or acceptability. *Skinship* acts such as ‘hugging’, ‘kissing’, and ‘holding hands’ were presented as normalised, although example (13) equates this normalisation of *skinship* acts with their own personal perspective, noting that the ‘coding’ of *skinship* acts as romantic was more reflective of individual perspective rather than them belonging to a standardised category of acts that are inherently romantic. The example expresses a desire for the romantic connotations of *skinship* acts to be treated subjectively, rather than as fact. Example (14) notes that whilst there are elements of *skinship* behaviour in ‘Northern Europe’, these are limited to ‘girls’, as the ‘guys barely hug each other’.

The normality of *skinship* as a form of physical intimacy appeared to vary in accordance with whether the *skinship* act was being performed between men or being performed between women. In general, *skinship* acts performed between men were more likely to be a less familiar concept than *skinship* acts performed between women, which were presented as more normalised.

(18) I think some of the skinship in kpop is very exaggerated for fanservice, but Asian men aren't as touch starved as American men for example

(19) i get where you're coming from (that skinship isnt something familiar with western celebrities) bc in my country (which happens to be in asia), there are less skinship for guys too

(20) cos where I'm from skinship is not as intense as I've seen with Koreans (especially among men) but it's also not as bad /taboo as I've seen with western countries

In the examples, fans from the West were identified as the demographic who were least likely to be familiar with *skinship*, due to being ‘touch starved’ or finding it to be ‘bad/taboo’. The difference cited for these attitudes was perceived to be a lack of normalisation for male-to-male physically intimate acts in the West, when compared with Asia and Korea. *Skinship* acts by Korean men was characterised as

‘exaggerated’ and ‘intense’, suggesting that at times, even for fans who are familiar with *skinship* in their own local contexts, *skinship* between Korean men was on another level. This contrasted with the non-existence of *skinship* between men in the West, where *skinship* was regarded as an unfamiliar or even ‘taboo’ concept. Again, this ties into the earlier examples where *skinship* was presented as a natural concept that required non-Koreans to ‘get used to it’ due to its perceived prominence in Korean culture and society.

(21) Can I just say something about the skinship ? Its very normal for girls to be touchy

(22) In my culture women being touchy is fine but I never see men doing it so the skinship hits harder

(23) Of course, I understand the thoughts of the fans who hate that. it's considered gay, but when girls use skinship .. it's nothing

(24) yes skinship is VERY normalized in korea. especially between women They can flirt like nobody's business and go full-force with the skinship

When it came to utilisation of the *skinship* repertoire, the corpus data indicated that *skinship* acts between women were more normalised at a greater level of intimacy than those between men. Women were able to ‘go full-force’ with *skinship* acts, and it was normal for them to be ‘touchy’ with each other. The greater normalisation of *skinship* acts between women was represented through comparisons to *skinship* acts between men. Women could be ‘touchy’, ‘flirt’, and go ‘full-force’, but men ‘never’ performed *skinship*, or, if they did, it would be perceived as ‘gay’. In both cases, *skinship* acts experience a level of stigmatisation. The abnormality of *skinship* acts between men is evidenced in the fact that they are ‘taboo’ or ‘never’ performed, whereas the normalisation of highly intimate *skinship* acts between two women such as ‘flirting’ could be a result of fetishization of same-sex female relationships. In either case, it was clear that *skinship*, as read by global anglophone K-pop fans, was read, and constructed through a gendered lens.

(25) Skinship not gay topic for Korea, skinship normal for both sex, it is not only female

(26) Skinship to them is a fairly normal thing among same sexes as they assume it's all platonic

(27) Dont ship idols, in korea its normal for guys to show skinship is doesnt mean they are dating

(28) Fanservice with homoerotic undertones can be seen as fun for some, but many others see it as an offensive device, because it's based on the fact that skinship between people of the same sex is weird, funny and not acceptable as a normal thing, which are very outdated and heteronormative views

Fan perceptions of *skinship* as 'gay' brought out some emotive responses in the corpus data. In Korean contexts, *skinship* was portrayed as 'normal' for both sexes, and because of this normality, was not seen as a 'gay topic', and therefore idols engaging in *skinship* acts 'doesn't mean they are dating'. In these defences against 'homoerotic' readings of *skinship*, the normality of *skinship* in Korea was asserted, and this normality was attributed precisely to the fact that *skinship* between the same sex was rarely read as queer in Korean contexts. In example (28), homoerotic fanservice was criticised for presenting same-sex intimacy as 'weird', 'funny', and 'not acceptable as a normal thing'. This example points to concerns of the fetishization and sexualisation of same sex fanservice as a 'fantasy', rather than a genuine sexuality. This will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

To summarise, *skinship* was portrayed as 'weird', 'excessive', and 'uncomfortable'. These attributions were most prevalent when attached to *skinship* acts performed between two men, and *skinship* acts between women (even to the level of outright flirting) were highly normalised. The reasoning for these gendered differences in the perception of *skinship* act seemed to not be understood well, and there was little reflexivity on the part of the commentators to express why they might read *skinship* acts a certain way. *Skinship* appeared to be presented on a scale of

being 'excessive' or 'intense', and perceptions of *skinship* were rarely moved from the cultural observation point of the commentor. Perceptions of *skinship* as 'weird' were therefore mostly articulated on the level of cultural difference in an 'us versus them' style, rather than associated with any type of personal preference or bias towards being platonic physical intimacy. There were very few examples that pointed to the coding of *skinship* as romantic intimacy as a direct result of individual interpretation, rather than being chalked to a wider and more ambiguous issue of 'culture'. This thus reflects wider ideas in the global anglophone K-pop fandom that Korean culture is a strange 'other'.

Skinship and 'Touch Starved Americans'

In multiple examples, *skinship* was coded as so culturally embedded in Korean culture and society that understanding it was not possible for non-Korean fans. Again, the demographics identified as most unlikely to understand *skinship* were 'Westerners' and 'Americans'. Understanding *skinship* or not was presented both as a comprehension issue, as well as an issue of viewing K-pop and Korea through a 'Western view'. Framing *skinship* as something beyond the understanding of non-Koreans in this way illustrated some of the concerns surrounding the consumption of Korean popular culture with a lack of cultural or societal understanding of Korea, nor the ability to remove Westernised interpretations.

(1) 'skinship' is just one of those things that non-Koreans can never comprehend. It's like way over their heads

(2) Probably because ifans can never truly eliminate the bias of Westener view/eye of Korea's skinship (and other interactions)

(3) americans are probably the most awkward about skinship in the developed world because they think everything is gay (no homo etc)

(4) it's just that don't behave like they're all innocent and oh it's just friendly skinship and oh it's a different culture that we just don't get

Skinship in example (1) is 'way over the heads' of non-Korean fans and is something that they can 'never comprehend'. As *skinship* is understood to be a facet of Korean culture and society, perceived failure to understand *skinship* is interpreted as being culturally unaware or biased to view Korean culture in a certain way. *Skinship* was therefore constructed as a form of knowledge that could either be known or unknown, depending on the individual. The interpretation that appeared to dominate attitudes towards Westernised perceptions of *skinship* was that *skinship* was read as 'gay'. Example (3), localising this problem to 'Americans', noted that this stemmed from a belief that 'everything is gay', citing the term 'no homo'. The term 'no homo' is defined on *Urban Dictionary* (2019) as "a word used to show that whatever you did no matter how gay isn't gay as long as you say no homo", and according to Pascoe and Diefendorf (2019), one use of 'no homo' as a phrase is to "convey disapproval for men's homosexuality or behaviour that is not gender normative". As such, the reference to 'no homo' is cited as evidence of an inability on the part of 'Americans' to view same-sex intimacy between men as anything other than homosexual.

We can read these localised criticisms of a certain demographic of 'culturally ignorant/insensitive' K-pop fans as formed in part from wider stigmatisations of K-pop fans, specifically those from the West, or United States. Americans were referred to throughout the data as reluctant to engage in certain forms of physical intimacy that occurred in Korea, and on a wider level, in Asia. For Zur (2007), there is a dominant tendency in American culture to perceive physical contact on the binary dichotomy of infantilization or sexualization. Interestingly, the concept of

‘infantilization’ and ‘sexualization’ are frequently cited by those who are critical of fan attitudes towards K-pop idols. Public displays of affection, including many of those that constitute *skinship* in Korean contexts – hugging, kissing, holding hands, caressing – are perceived as suspect, and this is most pertinent when it comes to same-sex physical contact between men. Zur (2007) further states that the ‘acceptability’ of same-sex physical contact between men is context dependent: that is, although it occupies a ‘taboo’ status culturally, hugging after a successful sports game is normalised. Zur (2007) notes that this treatment of physical intimacy as taboo juxtaposes with the overt sexuality and nudity on display in the American media, creating the kind of confusion referenced in the examples.

(5) Yeah as american , I can say a lot of people here are touch starved and probably would feel better if they could have that kind of relationship with friends

(6) It's just their culture, and for us (outside of Korea), may feel this "skinship thing" is kinda excessive due to most of us barely have skinship even with our closest friends or families

(7) I have a theory that some tend to to get into it more than the native koreans do to past deprivation of friendly affectionate physical contact (cough United States cough)

(8) America (and the rest of the western world) is so much worse than K-pop when it comes to skinship

(9) I split my time between America and Korea for work, and there's a fair amount of skinship in both places though it's just presented in different ways

For non-Korean fans, the inability to understand *skinship* in the same way as a Korean would do marked it as something that could be subject to theorisation.

Example (6) presents a ‘theory’ that some non-Korean fans may get more into *skinship* than Korean fans due to a lack of physical affection in their local context, with again, the United States cited as an example. *Skinship*, as it has been in other examples, was also referred to as the ‘skinship thing’, in effect trivializing *skinship*

as a mere ‘thing’ rather than a part of Korean culture and society, suggesting a reluctance on the part of some fans to recognise or accept *skinship* as a ‘normal’ part of Korean culture and society. Repeated throughout the dataset was the tendency to compare *skinship* in Korea to either personal experiences and interpretation, or to performances (or lack) of *skinship* acts outside of a Korean context. Where *skinship* can be identified as part of Korean culture, as in example (5), it must simultaneously be recognised as ‘kinda excessive’ for fans who are located outside of Korea.

Examples (7) and (8) counter arguments that posit *skinship* as non-existent outside of Korea by alleging that it does exist, but it takes different forms. Again, *skinship* is quantified and allocated a value: ‘so much worse’ and ‘there’s a fair amount’. Acts of *skinship*, as performed in America/the West and in Korea, are unable to occupy the same space. *Skinship* must either be ‘better’ or ‘worse’, or entirely non-occurring. Part of this inability to assign *skinship* in Korean and *skinship* in non-Korean contexts to the same value points to commonly held beliefs within the fandom that *skinship* must occur ‘naturally’ to be legitimised. For *skinship* acts to be perceived as natural, they can only be performed in Korea, by Koreans.

Although the quantification of *skinship* as ‘normal’ or ‘excessive’ suggests a level of subjectivity, attitudes towards *skinship* were often articulated by individual speakers on behalf of the entirety of ‘America’, ‘outside of Korea’, or the ‘Western world’. By attaching such broad generalisations to interpretations of *skinship*, acts of *skinship* in Korean contexts were therefore articulated as *objectively* excessive for entire populations consisting of an unspecified, yet large quantity of individuals.

Fans thus posit themselves as cultural representatives, and according to Oh (2017), for White fans, “their readings and their enjoyment of a text are situation in whether it can be read as resonant to their local experience”. Where the ‘it’s their culture’ argument is often utilised as an explainer for the *skinship* experience in Korea, expressions of *skinship* being ‘weird’ in American/Western contexts is never accompanied with reasoning or rationale. For global anglophone K-pop fans, *skinship* can only be perceived as resonant under the following conditions: either *skinship* also occurs in the local context, thus enhancing understanding, or the individual acknowledges their own participation in *skinship* acts.

The characterisation of ‘Americans’ from the ‘United States’ as particularly unfamiliar and uncomfortable with *skinship* acts draws parallels with the archetypal Koreaboo fan being a White female from the United States. This can be reflective of stereotypical conceptualisations of the ‘foreigner’ in Korean cultural contexts, as the complicated historical and political history interaction between Korea and the United States may have contributed to stereotypes of a non-Korean as an individual from the United States specifically. This construction therefore could have informed ideas that individuals who are reluctant to appreciate Korean culture are ‘Americans’. A key component of being a Koreaboo fan is ‘cultural ignorance’, and this criticism of American attitudes towards *skinship* is portrayed as a type of cultural ignorance whereby they are unable to shift their Westernized perception of cultures that are outside of the West.

Idols Framed as ‘Comfortable’ or ‘Uncomfortable’ with Skinship

The chapter has thus far explored how *skinship* is perceived as a more general concept in Korean culture and society, including how it is linked to the performance of fanservice. The following section will pay greater attention to how *skinship* is understood specifically in K-pop idol culture and interactions. One tendency identified in the corpus data was to categorise idols dependent on whether they were ‘comfortable’ or ‘uncomfortable’ with *skinship*.

(1) In all the groups I follow, there is quite the range of members who dislike skinship, members who are naturally clingy, and those who ham it up for the camera

(2) If two members are "comfortable with skinship" then you'll see them hugging, holding hands, touching each other, physically playing with each other, etc. If a member is "uncomfortable with skinship," they don't like physical touch, might shy away when others try to be affectionate, etc

(3) He claims to hate skinship but often secretly initiates it

(4) Dahyun: Quirky, lovely, and is straight from my eyes. She seems to love skinship but doesn't go overboard like Sana

Example (1) recognises that in the multiple K-pop groups that they follow, there is a range of receptivity to *skinship* acts. Some members ‘dislike’ *skinship*, others are ‘naturally clingy’, and then some ‘ham it up for the camera’. Again, this posited *skinship* as an act of physical touch that was to some extent expected in the context of Korean culture and society. Where the commentor recognises the role of the individual in how *skinship* acts are received, the reception of *skinship* is generalised, and does not appear to be either context dependent, or dependent on the individual with whom they are interacting with. Example (2) further exemplifies the idea that reception of *skinship* is simply a matter of being ‘comfortable’ or ‘uncomfortable’ with *skinship*, with no bearing on how the articulation of *skinship* acts may depend on the individual interpersonal relationships K-pop idols share with one another.

Example (3) refers to an unnamed male idol who is claimed to ‘hate skinship’ yet despite this, ‘secretly’ initiates it. This suggests distrust and artificiality in the way idols self-identify their relationship with *skinship*, as well as a belief that ‘hating’ *skinship* is an attitude that is negotiable and subject to change in different contexts. In example (6), where both Dahyun and Sana were associated with ‘loving skinship’, the articulation of *skinship* acts was perceived on a level of either going ‘overboard’ or not. This reflected the ideas in the previous section of the chapter that *skinship* occurred on a scale. *Skinship* by idols could either be perceived as ‘normal’, or ‘excessive’, regardless of whether the specified idols were ‘comfortable’ with *skinship* or not. In (2), being ‘uncomfortable’ with *skinship* was equated with being ‘shy’ or avoidant of physical touch and was presented once more without awareness that reactions to *skinship* may be context dependent, and there may exist the possibility that idols who are perceived as ‘uncomfortable’ with *skinship* are only regarded as so because they do not express *skinship* in K-pop specific contexts.

The performance of *skinship* by idols outside of K-pop contexts is perhaps not information that is accessible to fans, as it constitutes the ‘private’ and ‘personal’ lives of idols, and despite fan beliefs that there is a ‘real’ idol persona who has an individual personality outside of the performative and mediated context of K-pop, being ‘comfortable’ or ‘uncomfortable’ with *skinship* is rarely assumed to have a connection to allegations that certain *skinship* acts in K-pop idol culture are ‘forced’ upon idols to demonstrate strong bonds to fans. Idols, therefore, are bound in construction to the information that fans perceive to be true about them, and the idea that an idol who ‘loves’ *skinship* in the context of their intergroup dynamic might not actually love *skinship* in more intimate, interpersonal dynamics,

threatens the legitimacy of the K-pop idol bond and the idea that idols are performing together as a ‘family’.

Reading Skinship as ‘Gay’

Readings of *skinship* between idols as ‘gay intimacy’ was controversial, and as has already been explored in the sections above, was associated with the ‘unnecessary’ romantic coding of *skinship*. Several examples in the corpus expressed concerns that the coding of *skinship* as same-sex romantic intimacy posited it as a ‘fetish’ for fans who were straight and homophobic outside of their supposed support of same-sex intimacy in K-Pop contexts. This echoed the concerns of queer female fans in the *unni* chapter that choosing to render female idols as *oppa* or as men reduced the potential of same-sex romantic attraction to something that could only become acceptable when erased into a heterosexual relationship.

(1) one of the most unsettling things of it to me is how some of the fans are : some of the straight ppl who adore this skinship are totally homophobic and only fetishizing like it makes me sick...

(2) I'm seeing so many Kpop fans using videos or pics of idols kissing and hugging eachother while talking about the LGBT community, and most of the time they're calling these idols "Lesbian queen", "Gay legend" etc. Now I don't mind skinship , it's been a thing in Kpop for years now, but why are we acting like it's not happening for male gaze or crazy fangirls?

(3) i know a lot of what idols are doing is fanservice and stuff but all these fans that are saying that all this skinship that idols are doing is NORMAL and has 0 gay intentions i cant really believe it

With Korea’s conservative stance on homosexuality, queer fans have long expressed concerns about readings of *skinship* as ‘gay’. Example (1) expresses this sentiment strongly, as they note that some of the fans who ‘adore this skinship’ are ‘totally homophobic’ and therefore fetishizing same-sex interactions for their own

gratification rather than seeing it as a valid sexual identity. These concerns are echoed by Lucas (2022), who notes that for some K-pop fans, their support of shipping or reading of same-sex romantic fanfiction is not translated to allyship in real-world contexts. She states “fans who “ship” – promote the idea of relationships – between same-sex idols by writing LGBT fan fiction are often the same ones who insist that K-pop stars aren’t gay”. Thus, although some aspects of shipping culture in the global anglophone K-Pop fandom can be read as subversive, this does not always correlate to real-world opinions.

These dissident attitudes towards same-sex shipping and real world same-sex romantic acts could be the result of the wide global spread of the global anglophone K-pop fandom. Lucas (2022) states that “many countries with sizable K-pop fan populations, like Indonesia or Brazil, also have large religious opposition to homosexuality”. Thus, as using Korean address terms can be read as ‘accessoring’ the Korean language, reading *skinship* as ‘gay’ yet expressing opposition to homosexuality in real-world contexts can be seen as accessorising *skinship* and physical intimacy to legitimise fetishist shipping practices. Example (2) further expresses concerns that the reading of idol fanservice acts as gay is leading to idols wrongly being labelled as ‘lesbian queen’ and ‘gay icon’ even if they have not demonstrated any type of support for queer fans or homosexuality. They state that they don’t mind *skinship* as a concept but recognise that it needs to be conceptualised as a manufactured tool to draw in fans to appeal to either the ‘male gaze’ (presumably in the case of female idols) or ‘crazy fangirls’ (presumably in the case of male idols). K-pop idols have in the past expressed support for the LGBT community (as discussed earlier in this chapter), yet example (2) suggests that this

expression of support should not be equated with being indicative of the actual sexuality of the idols, and that fans should not then jump to conclusions.

K-pop has a sizeable queer fanbase, yet, due to rampant homophobia, many fans feel that they must keep their identity quiet. Furthermore, as evidenced by the ‘girl crush’, shipping practices may only be perceived as ‘acceptable’ in the fandom when they are constructed and expressed by fans who identify as straight. There are only two openly Korean idols in the K-pop industry – MRSHLL and Holland – and overt support for the LGBT community is rare, due to the powerful lobbying power of far-right conservative Christians in Korean society. Sunmi, a female soloist formerly of Wonder Girls, voiced her support for the LGBT community during a 2019 performance in Amsterdam. Whilst wrapped in a rainbow flag, Sunmi was quoted as saying “I have many different sides of me”, before referring to herself as an “LGBT queen”. The subsequent clip that spread on Twitter featured only a partial section of her quote, making it seem that she had ‘outed’ herself as LGBT. Sunmi later clarified herself on Twitter, saying “yeah, I support LGBT but don’t get me wrong guys” (The Korea Times, 2019).

Against the backdrop of the homophobia in Korean society, non-Korean fans reading *skinship* as ‘gay’ is complex, and at least in part rooted to cultural ideologies and norms in other cultures that perceive same-sex physical intimacy as homoerotic. Where it can also be argued that the reading of idols as ‘gay’ is a way for queer fans to seek representation for themselves in a heteronormative industry, the prevalence of homophobia in the global anglophone K-pop fandom puts into question the extent to which certain shipping practices are subversive. Example (3) recognises that most idol interactions are either fanservice or *skinship* yet notes that

they personally ‘can’t believe’ it’s possible that the interactions do not have any gay undertones. As an indicator of same-sex romantic attraction, *skinship* serves a complicated dual function. Due to ‘excessive’ *skinship* not being read as homoerotic in Korean contexts, some fans argue that this therefore makes it easy for pairings to demonstrate their physical affection for each other, under the guise of *skinship* being ‘totally normal’. On the other hand, some instead argue that couples performing ‘excessive’ *skinship* would be too obvious, thus suggesting that idols who perform less *skinship* are more likely to be involved in same-sex romantic relationships.

In either case, the reading of *skinship* acts as ‘gay’ boils down to pure speculation. Few idols have openly expressed their support for the queer community, and only two idols have come out as gay. Homophobia remains an issue in Korean culture and society, and we can stipulate that once more, these readings come down to the interpretation of Korean culture through a Westernized lens. Given the challenges and stigmatisation faced by the queer community in Korea, speculation by fans and demands for idols to reveal that their apparent ‘gay’ sexuality can be problematic. As *skinship* is perceived as an intimate act of physical touch, which is then coded as romantic in other cultures, it is often viewed from outside the perspective and context of Korean culture and society, rather than from within.

‘Authenticating’ Skinship: MoonSun is ‘Real’

With such scattered views and attitudes towards whether *skinship* is ‘genuine’, ‘authentic’, or ‘real’, fans make efforts to authenticate certain *skinship*

acts as evidence of real intimacy that went beyond what was presented onstage. Indeed, the concept of the 'stage' and the performativity that it brings posited it as a battleground for perceptions of *skinship* and fanservice. If interactions between two idols were restricted to the context of the 'stage', they were much more likely to be read as performative, and therefore, as fanservice. However, interactions that occurred offstage were more likely to be perceived as evidence of genuine, and real affection between two idols. This section will explore how these concepts are articulated in the corpus data in relation to the MoonSun pairing (Moonbyul and Solar).

(1) I think the other big ship was Taeny? Could someone explain to me how that ship fairs to moonsun ? Or is moonsun on some other level? As a sone, I can say as close and sometimes very suspicious Taeny are/were, MoonSun are on a different level

(2) Coming from a soshi fan and lowkey taeny shipper, Moonsun honestly strikes me as somewhat different in their interactions. at this point, i honestly believe there is a good possibility there's something between them

In several examples, the interactions between MoonSun were compared to that of TaeNy (Taeyeon and Tiffany from Girls' Generation). Prior to the debut of MAMAMOO, TaeNy were known for being a 'big ship' in girl group fandom. TaeNy shippers were nicknamed 'locksmiths' because of 'couple necklaces' that the pair used to wear. Tiffany was seen as the 'lock' and Taeyeon as the 'key'. Tiffany and Taeyeon are known for being very close with each other, and locksmiths were often subject to criticism for their tendency to see every minute interaction between the two as evidence that they were dating, including scrutinising likes on Instagram posts. Fans who are not involved in shipping the couple argue that part of the reason for the popularity of TaeNy over other pairings is their close friendship, and the fact that Tiffany is regarded as the 'fanservice queen' in Girls' Generation. As with MoonSun, the relationship between Tiffany and Taeyeon was also framed as

one where 'opposites attract'. As a Korean American from California, Tiffany was frequently interpreted as the extroverted counter to Taeyeon's Korean introversion.

When Taeyeon was revealed to be dating EXO member Baekhyun, and Tiffany 2PM member Nickhun, some locksmiths alleged that the relationships were cover ups for TaeNy, due to the lack of acceptance for homophobia in Korean society "what if locksmiths are not delusional? What if the ship keeping SNSD alive since 2011 are really sexually attracted to each other? In Korea, friends don't flirt with each other in public. Eye sex. Before you call this "fanservice", remember, Taeyeon can't act so it's impossible that she's been faking her attraction towards Tiffany for more than 10 years. This not fanservice. This is reality. They have been affectionate since predebut. BaekYeon and KhunFany are cover ups for TaeNy. SNSD's image would be ruined if Korea finds out about TaeNy's relationship" (Wonder, 2015).

The idea that having a same-sex idol couple in a group could 'ruin the group's reputation in Korea' may initially sound like concern about the conservative attitudes towards homosexuality in Korea, however, when used in the context of justifying the legitimacy of a ship, it is used to rationalise any heterosexual interactions (Taeyeon and Baekyeon, Tiffany and Nickhun) as nothing but 'cover ups' for the actual 'hidden' same-sex relationship occurring within the group. The legitimacy of TaeNy as a romantic pairing was further added through the allegation that 'Taeyeon can't act', and as fanservice is a 'performance', there is therefore no way that acts of physical intimacy from Taeyeon directed towards Tiffany can be perceived as fanservice. Although in the *OneHallyu* post this is all seen as 'proof that TaeNy is real, the examples in (1) and (2) suggest that MoonSun is 'different'.

To legitimise MoonSun as a highly suspect relationship, comparisons to TaeNy are used to elevate the ship to ‘another level’ or a ‘different level’. The difference between MoonSun and TaeNy as articulated in example (2) is the belief that ‘there is a good possibility there’s something between them’.

(3) i didn't think too much of their actions because i thought they were just another touchy, fanservice-y ship with all their flirting and touching on stage. yknow, touchy, strangely intimate bffs. 1.5 years since discovering moonsun and taking the time to know them better and understand how the people around them react to them as a couple, i realize that they could very, very, very likely be more than friends and i'm stuck on this ship now

(4) Anyway, hopefully more people visit this thread! I have been into Mamamoo and shipping Moonsun for a couple of months now (it's all very recent) and I have been dying to have someone to discuss certain situations, actions, etc

(5) This is cute af but i love it when solar is the one who initiates: This is one of my favorite MoonSun moments because it's just looks like such a small intimate gesture in the middle of everything going on around them. Also some people think Solar says "Saranghaeyo" to MB there and then catches herself, but I find that doubtful

(6) Lol, I think Byul was actually sympathetic to Solar's loneliness still - Moonsun have play-fought to express affection since basically the beginning of everything we've seen from them. Actually when that Vlive first came out there was a fair amount of discussion over whether Byul kissed Yong's cheek on her way out the door the first time

(7) Am I the only one that sometimes gets jealous vibes from Wheein? Like I have noticed in a lot of videos were Moonsun interact, Wheein is side-eyeing them or gets serious all of the sudden when she see them even if a second before she was laughing

As if reflective of this ‘other level’ that the MoonSun ship operates in, discussions about interactions were lengthy, suggesting that fan belief in the pairing had been a consistent feature. In examples (3) and (4), both commentators specifically explicate the amount of time that they have spent shipping MoonSun: ‘1.5 years’ and ‘a couple of months’. Integral to being a MoonSun shipper in example (4) was having a likeminded individual to discuss the ship with, including ‘certain situations’ and ‘actions’. The examples gave the impression that MoonSun shippers

were carefully monitoring interactions between Moonbyul and Solar. Perception of whether a ship was ‘real’ or not did not just hinge on interactions between the idols themselves, but was further dependent on how other idols, especially those within the same group, responded to the pairing. In example (1) and (7), reactions to MoonSun as a couple (Wheein’s jealousy, for example) adds further proof that they may be involved romantically. Jealousy as a feeling is coded romantically, and as Wheein is framed as ‘jealous’ of MoonSun’s interactions, this implication circles back to the idea that she is jealous *because they are in a romantic relationship*.

Examples (4) and (5) focused on speculative close-reading moments of intimacy between Moonbyul and Solar. Again, the community emphasis of shipping practices was evident. In example (5), it was stated that ‘some people think Solar says “Saranghaeyo” to MB there’, but notes that they themselves ‘find that doubtful’. This statement of the observation of others, followed by the opinion of the individual, could be a way of gauging whether other individuals in the thread believed that Solar might have said ‘Saranghaeyo’ to Moonbyul. Example (6) is similar, stating that there was a ‘fair amount of discussion over whether Byul kissed Yong’s cheek or not’. Thus, as the example of MoonSun seeks to serve, shipping communities may read interactions as *skinship* and therefore intimacy, even if this interpretation is purely speculative, before gauging whether these responses are socially appropriate in communication with other fans.

The practice of shipping, as with many other fannish practices, some of which have been discussed in this thesis, often operates on levels. These levels, again, range from ‘normal’ to ‘delusional’. The fandom term ‘delulu’ is clipped from

the word 'delusional', and is used to refer to fans who, in their necessity for 'proof' that their idols are indeed dating, latch onto every interaction.

(8) it also heavily feeds into the shipping mentality, which in turn causes delulu fans who analyse the simplest things. they sneezed next to each other? omg they're dating. llike brUH. i get its an idol thing but the reactions from the fans is eeww

(9) and adding on 30 whole minutes of moonsun lmao Havent watched this yet, so idk how delulu it is, but its at least a cute moonsun moments compilation

(10) A lot of times it appears that Sana is the one who is always "attacking" Dahyun, but when Dahyun is the one initiating contact, somehow it seems sweet or tender... Am I swimming into delulu fanfic territory here?

As expressed in the examples, being 'delulu' was associated with analysis of the 'simplest things'. In example (8), the commentor suggests that this can occur on the most microscopic level of reading two idols that 'sneezed next to each other' as indicating that they could be dating. Again, there was reluctant admittance that this was simply a facet of K-pop idol culture. When acts of *skinship* and fanservice were perceived to be a part of K-pop fandom culture, it was, yet again, the reaction to those actions from the fans that attracted the most scrutiny. The cycle of behaviour was therefore seen as being fan-led, and idols being shipped together was circled back to fans desires for idols to be shipped together.

In examples (9) and (10), shipper fans demonstrated awareness that certain readings of their ships may be delusional, but this potential for reading as 'delulu' was not treated as discouragement for consuming content. When there was the possibility that behaviour or actions were 'swimming into delulu fanfic territory', fans often sought for responses from other fans that either asserted their delusion, or, brought them back to 'reality'. Overall, shippers appeared to be aware that their close reading of interpersonal interactions between idols (either speech, gesture,

gaze, or touch) could be regarded as ‘delulu’. What appeared evident from the examples was that the perceived personalities of each idol in a ship was socially constructed and did not often occur on the individual level. When fans identified ‘proof’ or read interactions in certain ways, this information was often relayed back to other fans, who either confirmed or denied it. Thus, even highly subjective interpretations of intimacy were subject to some level of social negotiation.

Conclusion

Skinship, as understood by global anglophone K-pop fans, was interpreted as a ‘weird’ and ‘excessive’ desire to be ‘touchy feely’ with friends and other individuals. Although *skinship* in Korean-speaking contexts mainly focuses on the performance of *skinship* acts between opposite-sex individuals (interestingly, the interpretation of *skinship* in K-Drama fandom contexts mirrors this), the ‘oddity’ of *skinship* had a direct correlation to the idea that *skinship* could be performed between two individuals of the same-sex. Perceiving *skinship* as uncomfortable was most well-articulated when it came to *skinship* between men, reflecting cultural ideologies that expressions of same-sex physical intimacy between men was ‘gay’. *Skinship* was often used for cultural comparison, yet, these comparisons often made generalised assumptions on the part of an entire population or demographic (or rather, culture), and were devoid of admission of personal bias. Where examples were all too willing to point out how *skinship* acts made them ‘uncomfortable’, the idea that comfortability of engaging in *skinship* acts could be down to varying factors and not just ‘culture’ was notably absent from the corpus data.

In shipping contexts, *skinship* acts were often leveraged as proof that idols were involved in a romantic relationship. Due to romantic relations between male and female idols usually being negotiated in secret, this was predominantly understood to be the case between two idols of the same sex in the same group. When *skinship* was interpreted in this way, it was not just the act of *skinship* itself that could have bearing on how intimate certain relationships were perceived, rather, lack of *skinship* could also suggest the breakdown of intimacy between two idols. Where *skinship* happened or not (as in the two examples of MoonSun), fans often displayed a tendency to imagine that it did, a viewpoint which was then corroborated by fellow shippers. This therefore presented the concept of the ‘imagined *skinship*’, a repertoire of acts that may or may not have been there.

Where some examples recognised that *skinship* was not restricted to Korean contexts (mostly those speaking from other Asian countries), the *skinship* that occurred in Korean contexts was routinely characterised as ‘excessive’ and ‘too much’, again, especially in the context of same-sex physical contact between two men. As understood in anglophone contexts, *skinship* was recognised as a range of acts of physical contact between two individuals, however, the intimate, communicative ‘heart-to-heart’ function of *skinship* was decontextualised from anglophone usage. Despite the understanding of *skinship* being abstracted from Korean contexts, it was still framed as the ‘authentic’ form of physical intimacy to the ‘inauthentic’ performance of fanservice. General attitudes towards *skinship* appeared to have no consistency, once again emphasising the subjectivity of *skinship* and by association, fanservice, in global anglophone K-pop fandom contexts. Interpretations of *skinship* were solely influenced by media appearances of idols, and despite fans demonstrating knowledge of this, idols were still placed

into binary distinctions of either being 'comfortable' or 'uncomfortable' with *skinship*, with no account for the potential for the reception of *skinship* acts to be context dependent.

Conclusion

As the primary means by which to legitimise the K-pop fandom as the fans of K-pop – not pop – the Korean language has become a complicated battleground for the demonstration of adherence or dissidence to dominant fan ideologies. In this thesis, these ideologies are conflated with binary interpretations of fan identity ‘normal’ (culturally aware, therefore ‘culturally appreciative’) and ‘abnormal’ (culturally ignorant, therefore ‘culturally appropriative’), and they are rarely found to occupy a middle ground. By offering an interdisciplinary approach, the thesis has demonstrated that readings of Korean culture and society by global anglophone K-pop fans have been highly influenced by consumption of highly mediated popular culture texts. Throughout the chapters, it is found that the usage of the selected Korean words – *oppa*, *unni*, *skinship* – is highly context-dependent, and although usage patterns are influenced by patterns in Korean-speaking contexts, it is difficult to argue against a process of decontextualization and abstraction to support the function of the Korean language as an ideological tool and linguistic strategy to index either knowledge of Korean culture and society, or mockery of it. Culturally significant Korean words, therefore, can only be perceived as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’, due to their intrinsic connection to fan identity, rather than to actual Korean culture.

This is since Korean culture as understood by K-pop fans is not one that is ‘real’, it is a Myth, socially constructed by fans and the predominantly performative contexts where fans gain exposure. Although fans often argue for the existence of the ‘offstage’ persona of idols, this information is not accessible to them, and is instead pieced together through a selective number of performative acts. *Skinship*,

although generally held up as an example of ‘genuine’ intimacy to counter the ‘performativity’ of fanservice, is reduced in interpretation to acts of physical intimacy, and as something that idols are either ‘comfortable’ or ‘uncomfortable’ with. Throughout each chapter, it has been argued that understanding of Korean culture is subject to binarism and cultural comparison. A shared trait amongst all three case studies was the tendency for the words to become sexualised, suggesting that idols bodies and interactions are coded as romantic or desirable, making the case for an element of fetishization.

Importantly, the shared meanings of these Korean cultural terms were socially constructed, thus enshrining a well-defined set of norms and normative behaviours. As address terms that could be used to address idols, *oppa* and *unni* were subject to mockery and irony, and well-established patterns that identified a derogatory performance – use of the first-person, using Korean words inappropriately, CMC features – are evidence of the multiple articulations of stigmatisation: K-pop is a form of pop music, and fans of pop music are stigmatised for their enjoyment of a ‘lowbrow’ and ‘feminized’ form of music. The general demographic of K-pop fans is young women, who, through the pejorative application of the term ‘fangirl’, are portrayed as ‘obsessive’, ‘delusional’, and ‘hysterical’. K-pop is a form of global popular culture that disrupts the dominant hegemony of the West and is therefore subject to racialized stigma. The negative stereotype of a K-pop fan, therefore, is a young female who obsessively consumes lowbrow, feminized, and racially coded music which is ‘inferior’ to the already stigmatised pop music of the West.

Where the function of forms such as ‘unnir’, ‘oppar’, and ‘oppa didn’t mean it’ is supposedly to be a way to call out the toxic and problematic behaviour of K-pop fans, what the use of these forms achieve is cementing ideologies of stigma around Korean culture and society. In these cases, Korean cultural terms are used as ideological tools to critique fans who ‘overuse’ such terms inappropriately, but this perception of Korean address terms as being able to be used inappropriately says more about how Korean culture and society is conceptualised through the mediated landscape of popular culture. Global anglophone K-pop fans are rarely exposed to Korean culture and society through non-fictional or performative means, and Korean culture, therefore, is perceived as a type of performance. This performativity is enhanced through negotiation in the medium of the internet, as users are free from the constraints and limitations of ‘real life’, fans are free to speculate about and discuss topics that may be taboo or controversial freely, and without judgement.

Overall, this thesis demonstrated that the use of Korean words played an important role in the construction of fan identities, yet, these identities were often conflicting, by virtue of being placed on a binary scale of ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’. Opinions on Korean language use were completely polarised, and whether used to display respect for Korean idols or to deride, Korean words played an integral function in either alignment or distance from specific fan identities. Although this study has looked at three very specific case studies, it provides a window into the potential complications of disruptive media flows, and the ‘cultural competitiveness’ that can arise from transcultural fandom.

Limitations and Future Research

As was mentioned in the methodology section, an approach that considers multimodality in the communicative practices of the online global K-pop fandom could offer an interesting and more comprehensive insight into meanings are decoding, recontextualised, then spread to other individuals in the community to form ideology and norms. Additionally, although the fandom was broadly interpreted as a community of practice, applying this theory to smaller sub fandoms (for example, queer fans of MAMAMOO on *The L Chat*) could offer greater insight into how community specific discourses and vernacular repertoires are developed. Where more general items of K-pop fandom vernacular have been discussed in this study, it is recognised that K-pop fandom is complex, and each different fandom may employ different tools and lexical items to communicate and negotiate more individualised meaning. Furthermore, the overreliance of online internet data made it impossible to draw comprehensive conclusions on whether Korean language attitudes and ideologies differed accordance with different identities.

Glossary

Fandom Lexicon:

Aegyo: *aegyo* is a type of manipulated ‘cute’ act performed to please others. It is typically framed in the media through the gendered practice of “childish *aegyo*” performed by young women (Moon, under review). *Aegyo* encompasses a range of linguistic and haptic behaviours, including gesture, ‘baby talk’ and nasalisation.

Ajeossi: In the system of Korean kinship terms, *ajeossi* is used to refer to a ‘married older man’, more generally applied to middle aged men. The term is not gendered and may be used by a male or female speaker.

Daddy: A term originating in homosexual prison culture, daddy denotes a sexually dominant older man who takes a more ‘active’ role in a sexual relationship. The term has become popularised in internet subculture and is commonly used on Twitter to index a desire of being sexually dominated, sometimes regardless of age.

Delulu: *delulu* is a term coined in the K-Pop fandom from the English word ‘delusional’. The word can be used either as an adjective “my delulu behaviour” or as a noun “I am a delulu”, and typically refers to a K-Pop fan who is so deep into K-Pop that they are disassociated from the real world.

Dongsaeng: ‘Younger sibling’ in Korean. The term is not gendered and could be used for ‘younger brother’ or ‘younger sister’. Like other terms, it can be used in and out of a familial context.

Eonni: *eonni* is a kinship term for ‘older sister’ when used by a younger female towards an older female with whom she is intimate. It can be used both in and out of a familial context.

Fanfiction: Fanfiction is a work of narrative fiction that has been written by a fan. It is particularly common in shipping culture.

Hyeong: *hyeong* is a kinship term for ‘older brother’ when used by a younger male towards an older male with whom he is intimate. It can be used both in and out of a familial context.

Kawaii: Originating in Japanese, the adjective *kawaii* can be translated as ‘cute’ in English and occupies a prominent space in Japanese popular culture. The term is sometimes used by K-Pop fans to denote a certain type of cuteness based on being charming, vulnerable, and shy.

Koreaboo: Derived from the term Weeaboo (see below), Koreaboo is a derogatory term for a K-Pop fan (usually white American female) who wishes to revoke their own culture and become Korean. Koreaboo behaviour includes inserting any Korean words into sentences out of context, being obsessed with Korean culture, and wanting to somehow ‘become Korean’.

Maknae: Meaning ‘youngest sibling’, *maknae* in a K-Pop context is used to refer to the youngest member of a K-Pop group. Within K-Pop group culture, being the *maknae* is a well-defined role.

Nuna: *nuna* is a kinship term for ‘older sister’ when used by a younger male towards an older female with whom he is intimate. It can be used both in and out of a familial context.

Oppa: *oppa* is a kinship term for ‘older brother’ when used by a younger female towards an older male with whom she is intimate. It can be used both in and out of a familial context. The term has become ubiquitous in Korean entertainment and within the English-speaking K-Pop fandom and has a range of glosses, including “hot guy” or as a substitute for “daddy”.

Oppa Kink: Adapted from “daddy kink”, the love of sexually dominant behaviour carried by a “daddy”, “oppa kink” is a term commonplace in K-Pop fanfiction to indicate derivation of pleasure from being addressed as “oppa”.

Oppar: Coined on a popular LiveJournal site, *oppar* is a way of mocking K-Pop fangirls who overuse the term and defend their favourite idols against (sometimes warranted) criticism. The addition of the ‘r’ at the end is to mock US English mispronunciation of the term.

Senpai/Kouhai: In Japanese culture, the terms *senpai* ‘senior’ and *kouhai* ‘junior’ are terms that denote a hierarchical relationship, typically in school settings, martial arts settings, or in the workplace. The *senpai-kouhai* relationship is not age restricted, and an individual can still be *senpai* if they are in a more senior position than another individual of the same age.

Seonbae/Hubae: Derived from the same Sinological origin as *senpai/kouhai*, *seonbae/hubae* relationships in the Korean entertainment industry are based on the year of debut. The honorific ending *-nim* can be affixed to create the form *seonbaenim*.

Shipping: Not to be confused with nautical vessels, the term ‘shipping’ is used in fandom subcultures to refer to the act of wishing for romance between two people (real or imagined). Pairings are referred to as ‘ships’, and in the K-pop fandom, shipping usually occurs between same-sex idols.

Weeaboo: The term Weeaboo originated in the global anglophone fandom of Japanese anime/manga and is used towards an overzealous fan of Japanese popular culture. Weeaboo behaviour is characterised by a desire to ‘become Japanese’, as well as using ‘gratuitous Japanese’. Weeaboo formed the basis for the word Koreaboo (see above).

K-pop Groups:

2NE1: Four member YG Entertainment girl group: Minzy, Bom, CL, and Dara. Debuted in 2009, disbanded in 2016.

2PM: Originally a seven-member JYP Entertainment boy group: Jun.K, Nickhun, Wooyoung, Chansung, Jaebeom, Junho, and Taecyeon. Debuted in 2008. Jaebeom (now known as Jay Park) left in 2009.

aespa: Four member SM Entertainment girl group: Karina, Giselle, Winter, and Ningning. Debuted in 2020.

BIGBANG: Originally a five member YG Entertainment boy group: G-Dragon, Taeyang, Daesung, Seungri and T.O.P. Debuted in 2006, Seungri retired from the entertainment industry in 2019 after being involved in the Burning Sun scandal and T.O.P left in 2023.

BLACKPINK: Four member YG Entertainment girl group: Rosé, Jisoo, Jennie, and Lisa. Debuted in 2016.

BTS: Seven-member Big Hit boy group: J-Hope, Jin, Suga, RM, Jimin, V, and Jungkook. Debuted in 2013.

EXID: Originally a six member AB Entertainment girl group: Yuji, Hani, Haeryeong, Jeonghwa, Elly, and Dami. Debuted in 2012. Yuji, Dami, and Hyeryeong left in 2012. Hyelin and Seolji joined the group in 2012.

EXO: Originally twelve-member SM Entertainment boy group: Suho, Kai, Sehun, D.O., Chanyeol, Baekhyun, Lay, Chen, Kris, Tao, Luhan, and Xiumin. Debuted in 2012. Kris and Luhan officially left the group in 2016. Tao officially left in 2018. Still active.

f(x): Originally five-member SM Entertainment girl group: Victoria, Luna, Krystal, Amber, Sulli. Debuted in 2009. Sulli left in 2015 and sadly committed suicide in 2019. Although all members are no longer under contract with SM Entertainment, they have not officially disbanded.

GFRIEND: Six-member Source Music girl group: Umji, SinB, Yuju, Sowon, Yerin, and Eunha. Debuted in 2015 and disbanded in 2021.

Girls' Generation: Originally a nine member SM Entertainment girl group: Sunny, Jessica, Tiffany, Taeyeon, Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Seohyun, Yuri, and Yoona. Debuted in 2007. Jessica left the group in 2014. Group were on hiatus from 2017-2022 and are still active.

ITZY: Five member JYP Entertainment girl group: Yeji, Lia, Ryujin, Chaeryong, and Yuna. Debuted in 2019.

KARA: Originally a four member DSP girl group: Gyuri, Seungyeon, Nicole, and Sunghee. Debuted in 2007 and active until 2016. Sunghee left, and Hara and Jiyoung joined in 2008. Nicole and Jiyoung left and Youngji joined in 2014. Hara sadly

committed suicide in 2019. KARA (Nicole, Gyuri, Seungyeon, Jiyoung, and Youngji) reunited in 2022 and are still active.

MAMAMOO: Four-member Rainbow Bridge World girl group: Hwasa, Solar, Moonbyul, and Wheein. Debuted in 2014.

Red Velvet: Originally a four-member SM Entertainment girl group: Irene, Wendy, Joy, and Seulgi. Debuted in 2014. Yeri joined the group in 2015.

Super Junior: Originally a twelve-member SM Entertainment boy group: Leeteuk, Heechul, Kyuhyun, Shindong, Sungmin, Donghae, Siwon, Ryeowook, Yesung, Eunhyuk, Han Geng, Kibum, and Kangin. Debuted in 2005. Henry and Zhou Mi joined Mandarin Chinese subunit Super Junior-M in 2008. Kibum announced temporary leave in 2009 and officially left in 2015. Kangin left in 2009 after getting a DUI. Han Geng terminated his SM Entertainment contract in 2009.

TVXQ!: Originally a five-member SM Entertainment boy group: Yunho, Changmin, Jaejoong, Yoochun, and Junsu. Debuted in 2003. Jaejoong, Yoochun, and Junsu left in 2010, forming the group JYJ. Yunho and Changmin are still active as TVXQ!

WJSN: Originally twelve-member Starship/Yuehua Entertainment girl group: Cheng Xiao, Bona, Dayoung, Meiqi, Luda, Dawon, Seola, Exy, Soobin, Eunseo, Yeoreum, and Xuanyi. Debuted in 2016. Yeon-jung (Produce 101/I.O.I) joined the group in 2016. Xuanyi, Cheng Xiao, and Meiqi left the group in 2022.

Wonder Girls: Originally a five member JYP Entertainment girl group: Sohee, Hyuna, Yeeun, Sunmi, and Sunye. Debuted in 2007 and active until 2017. Hyuna left in 2007 and Yubin joined to replace her. Sunmi announced she was leaving in 2010 and was replaced by Hyerim. The group went on hiatus in 2013, with Sohee leaving the group. Sunye officially left the group in 2015, and Sunmi, Yubin, Yeeun, and Hyerim performed as a four-member group until official disbandment in 2017.

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Appendix

Table A1

Detailed Table of Oppa Corpus Compilation.

	Thread/Page Sources
Quora	What-is-the-meaning-of-OPPA-in-BTS
https://www.quora.com	What-does-Oppa-mean-and-why-do-people-refer-to-Jungkook-as-Oppa Korean-language-What-does-Oppa-mean What-is-the-actual-meaning-of-oppa-for-K-pop-idols What-is-the-difference-between-欧巴-oppa-in-Chinese-and-oppa-in-Korean Korean-language-When-does-oppa-become-ahjussi What-is-a-senpai-and-oppa Would-the-Korean-Oppa-be-best-translated-to-Baby-or-Daddy-to-those-with- no-knowledge-or-understanding-of-the-language-or-Korean-honorifics What-is-the-Korean-equivalent-of-calling-your-man-daddy When-a-Korean-guy-calls-you-noona-does-it-mean-he-s-not-interested-in-you- as-his-girlfriend-What-if-he-pays-everywhere-and-invites-me-to-hang-out-with- him-all-the-time When-a-Korean-girl-calls-you-oppa-does-it-mean-brother-or-boyfriend

How-do-Koreans-feel-when-foreigners-who-are-fluent-in-Korean-language-
and-culture-use-honorifics-like-oppa-hyung-and-unnie-when-addressing-them

What-does-the-word-koreaboo-mean

Do-Koreans-get-annoyed-with-Koreaboos

What-makes-someone-a-Koreaboo

How-do-Korean-guys-feel-about-non-Korean-girls-calling-them-Oppa

When-do-Korean-guys-hate-being-called-oppa

Jungkook-is-my-oppa-would-it-be-okay-if-I-called-him-that

Is-it-okay-to-call-a-Korean-Oppa-if-you-are-not-Korean

Do-any-international-kpop-fans-find-it-weird-to-call-idols-oppa

What-is-the-problem-with-Indian-mentality-If-I-like-K-Pop-why-do-they-look-
down-on-me-and-make-fun-of-my-idols-and-oppas

How-is-it-bad-to-use-honorifics-to-Korean-Idols-just-because-I-am-not-
Korean-I-am-genuinely-trying-to-be-respectful-Ive-asked-people-this-and-they-
said-I-sounded-like-a-Koreaboo-if-I-use-the-term-oppa

I-said-Oppa-once-and-Aish-accidentally-I-gave-an-apology-and-never-did-it-
again-Got-exited-for-trying-Japanese-Korean-food-Wants-to-live-in-Japan-

Never-wanted-to-change-my-looks-ethnicity-Am-I-a-koreaboo-weeaboo

Do-you-personally-know-a-saseang-K-pop-fan-Koreaboo

What-does-a-hardcore-K-Pop-fan-look-like

official-do-you-have-unpopular-k-pop-opinions

<https://forum.allkpop.com>

official-big-bang-thread

official-super-junior-artist-thread

exo-planet

OneHallyu

the-official-super-junior-thread

<https://onehallyu.com>

bts-beyond-the-scene-official-thread-map-of-the-soul

official-ot9-exo-thread

THE-OFFICIAL-BIGBANG-(빅뱅)-THREAD

fangirl-terms-that-make-you-cringe

what-makes-you-cringe-the-most-about-kpop

dont-you-think-its-hypocritical-to-call-out-non-koreans-for-speaking-broken-korean

when-you-call-an-idol-who-isnt-korean-oppa

do-you-think-its-wrong-calling-a-female-idol-oppa

what-is-the-most-cringy-koreaboo-thing-youve-ever-seen-on-the-internet

share-cringey-koreaboo-stories

which-member-of-idol-group-youd-call-oppa

ive-seen-a-lot-of-defending-oppa-comments-but-this-one-takes-the-cake

grown-women-are-already-asking-txt-if-they-can-call-them-oppa

someone-call-me-pathetic-koreaboo

why-are-people-so-annoyed-angry-when-non-koreans-uses-simple-korean-words

how-do-you-feel-about-non-koreans-calling-other-non-koreans-oppaunnieetc
what-do-you-think-of-people-who-use-the-terms-oppa-and-senpai-unironically
why-do-you-think-about-international-k-pop-fans-using-korean-words-
randomly-even-though-they-cant-even-speak-korean
are-koreaboos-aware-that-they-are-in-fact-kboos
the-most-koreaboo-fanfic-youve-read
have-you-met-a-koreaboo-or-weaboo-irl
you-shouldnt-call-females-oppa
most-cringeworthy-koreaboos
why-do-people-find-using-korean-phrases-with-friends-cringy
wwhere-would-you-cross-the-line-at-someone-being-a-koreaboo
question-for-fanfiction-readers
the-official-koreaboo-thread-~_~aegyokimchioppar
whats-wrong-with-being-a-koreaboo
oppar-didnt-mean-it
why-is-everybody-writing-oppar-when-its-oppa
why-does-oh-use-the-word-oppar-instead-of-oppa
from-1-to-5-how-much-do-you-care-about-your-oppar-and-unnir-sexual-
preference
how-would-you-feel-if-you-find-out-that-your-oppar
when-you-spend-all-your-money-on-your-oppar-and-it-shows
types-of-koreaboos-i-cant-fking-stand

what-if-your-oppa-ask-u-to-have-sex-with-himher

this-oppa-ended-your-unniers

this-australian-boy-group-is-hotter-than-your-oppas

so-my-friend-is-an-oppa-didnt-mean-it-koreaboo

oppa-is-confusing

the-most-annoying-thing-koreaboos-say

ok-you-fcking-feminist-kpoppers111

i-had-to-share-this-gay-seulgi-oppa

if-jungkook-oppa-ends-up-with-his-current-fling-who-will-he-probably-go-to

for-all-the-delulus-who-belive-they-can-take-my-man-haha

my-oppawallyour-oppas

i-think-twice-oppas-are-tired-of-this-shit-again

Soompi

<https://forums.soompi.com>

bts-official-thread

official-super-junior-thread

the-official-exo-thread

bigbang-the-official-thread

Table A2

Detailed Table of Unnie Data Sources.

	Thread/Page Sources
The L Chat https://www.thelchat.net/forum	red-velvet-korean-girl-group moonsun-moonbyul-and-solar-of-mamamoo blackpink-gay-stuff korean-entertainment-kpop-film-dramas-etc twice-kpop-girl-group snsd-girls-generation chat-ot fanfiction korean-pop-culture asian-entertainment sgsd-feed
OneHallyu https://onehallyu.com	who-do-you-think-is-a-lesbian-in-kpop girl-group-idol-caught-admitting-to-love-fondling-her-unnir-and-receiving- great-satisfaction le-unnir-has-good-finger-skills who-is-prettier-your-unnir-or-nina-dobrev taeyeon-unnir-having-no-energy-to-sing-after-beakzy-duet

official-secret-unnie-thread
so-seohyun-and-yuri-is-more-popular-than-taeyeon-unnir-beak-oppars-secret-
gf
kind-of-dangerous-mistake-of-the-stylist-unnie
my-unnie-is-so-beautiful
i-have-a-question-about-unniehyung-thing
theqoo-did-you-see-that-pretty-unnie-at-exo_s-concert
gangnam-unnie-groups
suzy-unnie-im-so-sorry
wenseulrene-unnie-line
queens-unnie-30th-b-day

Reddit

<https://www.reddit.com>

ari_unnie
we_should_call_idols_oppa_and_unnie_to_respect
younger_version_of_unnie
who_is_gidles_8th_floor_unnie
noona_unnie_oppa_hyung
taylor_unnie
omg_naevis_unnie_exposed
just_dongie_claiming_her_unnie_spot_in_exchange
why_does_winter_call_karina_and_giselle_unnie
unnie_this_is_the_battle_i_wanted_to_see

our_goth_unnie_and_bodybuilder_oppa
yejii_unnie_new_bts_member

Table A3*Detailed Table of Skinship Data Sources.*

	Number of Threads
The L Chat https://www.thelchat.net/forum	moonsun-moonbyul-and-solar-of-mamamoo twice-kpop-girl-group snsd-girls-generation
OneHallyu https://onehallyu.com	official-moonsun-thread-south-koreas-1-mango-juice-consumers-happy-two-years who-do-you-think-is-a-lesbian-in-kpop exos-sensual-skinship foreign-members-of-groups-and-skinship why-are-bts-members-more-awkward-with-skinship-than-other-bgs why-is-skinship-used-as-a-major-factor-in-determining-whether-or-not-an-idol-is-gay-or-in-a-relationship-with-a-group-member arent-you-tired-of-kpop-fans-associating-idols-who-do-skinship-with-the-lgbt-community korean-and-skinship pann-choa-is-there-any-type-of-skinship-that-you-fantasize-about which-idol-do-you-think-of-when-i-mention-the-word-skinship pann-idols-who-are-the-best-at-doing-skinship

your-favorite-skinshiplesbian-moments-in-girl-groups
hyuna-really-loves-same-sex-skinship-both-males-and-females

Reddit

<https://www.reddit.com>

is_there_a_big_difference_between_idol_skin_ship
what_does_skinship_encompass
idols_should_be_held_a_bit_more_accountable_for
fan_service_is_horrible_and_cringy
i_wonder_what_goes_on_behind_the_scenes
fanservice_culture_or_reality
i_really_dislike_fanservice
does_skinship_really_just_boil_down_to_fan_service
does_anyone_ever_get_bothered_by_the_skinship
foreign_traineesidols_and_skinship
im_jealous_of_idols_doing_skinship
are_kidols_really_so_affectionate_in_real_life
question_about_skinshipfanservice
what_are_the_chances_that_kpop_idols_are_actually
its_okay_to_ship_members_because_their_behaviour
can_i_just_say_something_about_the_skinship
the_fanservice_with_idols_acting_like_your_bfgf
i_dont_like_idols_who_do_lots_of_fanservice
idols_that_like_to_do_fanservice

kpop_groups_queerbait_in_the_name_of_fanservice
moments_where_idols_just_werent_up_for_doing
whats_fan_service_everybody_talks_about_this_word
rant_about_fan_service_in_kpop
fanservice_in_kpop_is_not_that_bad
youre_not_some_sort_of_superior_fan_for_disliking_fanservice
do_you_think_theres_a_class_for_fan_service
fanservice_is_insulting_to_lgbt
most_kpop_fans_like_fanservice_way_more
favourite_acts_of_fan_service
how_can_you_tell_when_something_between_idols_is_fanservice
i_will_never_care_that_blackpink_doesnt_do_fanservice
some_fans_forget_most_idols_flirty_behavior_is_fanservice
that_type_of_fanservice_is_literally_so_cringe

Soompi

the-official-red-velvet-thread

<https://forums.soompi.com>
