Always Fans of Something: Fandom and Concealment of Taste in the Daily Lives of Young Koreans

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(Abstract) This article addresses fandom and *deokjil* (a word recently coined to indicate obsessive fan activity) among young Koreans. Rather than focusing on a particular genre, it comments on tendencies found in fandom as a whole. Most existing studies of fandom examine that of idols. While it is true that idol fandom is large in scale, well-organized, and accounts for a large proportion of all fandom in commercial terms, fandom and *deokjil* among young Koreans encompass a much broader area and wider variety of genres. For instance, in addition to multiple genres (comics, film, indie music, fiction, history, sport and computer games), fandom can also focus on specific members of a certain band. Young Koreans who grew up in tandem with the growth of the internet and media in South Korean society access media naturally and are used to fandom. Even if the objects of their preference changed as they grew up, fandom itself is an everyday activity for them. Though fandom differs a little according to genre, the consumption of cultural products is generally an important part of it. In addition to officially produced goods such as records and streamed tracks, the consumption of secondary creations is an important part of showing one's legitimacy as a fan. Fans use various media platforms to obtain information and materials and have recently made extensive use of Twitter. Fandom is a question of what one likes. But fans sometimes have to hide their fandom and pretend to be normal people. Idol fandom, for example, can be seen as trivial, while Japanese *manga* fandom can invite animosity. And female sports fans are thought to like athletes only for their good looks. Fans who do not want to be judged for their tastes when the latter are placed in this type of hierarchy try to hide them.

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1. Introduction

In his novel about Bak Jonghyeon, a fan of Japanese animation *Genesis Evangelion*, Jang Gangmyeong describes how the narrator pictured the protagonist before meeting him:

> I imagined Bak Jonghyeon would look like a typical *otaku*: glasses, lots of zits, porcine body, awkward laughter accompanied by *otaku* jargon, and quick to lose heart whenever anyone reacted to him with bewilderment. He would never have had a girlfriend, of course, would have no close friends, and would possess absurdly high self-esteem despite a total lack of social skills. He would masturbate in front of adult animations, and he would pop his zits then secretly smear the puss under his desk. I was worried that this was the type of person I would meet. (Jang Gangmyeong 2014: 12)

Contrary to the narrator's negative expectations, Bak turned out to be "not a spotty pig with glasses but a very handsome young man," likable and zit free.

Previously in South Korea, the passionate fandom attracted labels such as *anyeodwae* or *ppasuni*;[1] even today, these images have yet to disappear completely. Fandom of a particular celebrity idol or star has long been an object of scorn, seen as a worthless or useless waste of energy or the unreasonable pursuit of an illusion. This tendency has been influenced by negative views of popular culture, accompanied by the reproduction in media of elite discourses that brand popular taste as low-brow.

In antiquity, being passionate about something, and the resulting joy, were permitted only to a minority of individuals by the grace of the gods. Ancient societies believed that "mania" was a blessing from the gods, and productive activity driven by such passion was possible only after receiving this blessing (Schroeder 2014: 141). If passion in ancient society was a favor from the gods, it is constantly appealed to in contemporary society by money. Companies organize youth-oriented activities and issue job advertisements citing passion as a key criterion. In popular culture, too, passion is constantly mentioned on survival audition programs, while displaying it is described as the only key to success, even though "passion itself guarantees nothing" (Jeong Jinung 2014).

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1 (Translator's note) *Anyeodwae* is portmanteau comprising the first syllables of the words *angyeong* ("glasses"), *yeodeureum* ("acne") and *dwaeji* ("pig"); *ppasuni* is a derisive term for obsessive female fans, usually of a male celebrity or athlete.

In South Korean society today, fandom is a prime area in which young people invest time and effort, are ready to make material sacrifices, and show tangible passion. One informant (HY) used the following word sequence to describe it: "fandom, kingdom, martyrdom, and freedom." According to her, fandom is a kingdom, at the center of which a star is placed and "worshipped"; and it is a paradoxical realm in which freedom can only be attained through martyrdom and sacrifice. The passion manifested in fandom is not something you are forced, by external demands from money or industry, into pretending to have; it results from spontaneous and autonomous behavior that comes at the cost of personal sacrifice and effort.

This study is about fandom, a realm into which young South Koreans pour huge amounts of passion but are not, in reality, supposed to reveal this to others. I will address the general characteristics of fandom among young South Koreans today, including idol fandom. It is true that characteristics and some cultural rules differ according to fandom genre. Addressing fandom in general, without focusing on a particular genre, risks neglecting specific contexts or partially sacrificing accuracy. However, this study is an attempt to deal not with individual fandom but with the tendencies revealed in the fandom of young South Koreans, particularly that of women in their 20s. Though I will address this in detail later on, fandom in South Korean society today is becoming more universal and everyday while showing a tendency to divide into various fields. Here, I will go only as far as illustrating the general tendencies associated with fandom, namely the general trends related to it in South Korean society today. The differences between types of fandom and the details of their changes must be further investigated in future studies dealing with specific fandom genres.

Data used in this study were collected in the form of 277 self-ethnographies regarding popular culture fandom received from students during a three-year teaching period from 2014 to 2016 and through ongoing conversations with students. My informants were women in their 20s, born in the early- and mid-1990s. I communicated with some of them by email or various online platforms. As I collected data, I told the informants that it might be used in this study. Based on the principle of maintaining total privacy for the informants, I have used only randomly appointed initials to distinguish them in this text. I also used data from various documents, blogs, and websites.

2. Fandom and the Cultural Industries

Some view fans as active adopters, defying the negative social perception of fandom (Hong Jongyun 2014: vi–viii). Others criticize such perspectives for portraying fandom in too positive a light, but several cases suggest that seeing fans as an active and productive presence is not entirely baseless either.

Informants describe stars produced by the cultural industries and publicized by popular media as workers living the lives of "manufactured images." A particular kind of worker within the capitalist society, stars sign contracts with companies and earn money through performance, obliged to endure intense emotional labor. In the words of informant MH:

> You could say idols are almost like commodities, presenting an embellished image (fantasy) and selling themselves to lots of fans based on that fantasy. It's not that people ignore the fact that they're humans with personalities, but the reality of the idol industry is that they cover up their real selves with a fantasy and sell it. In the process of creating idols as commodities, singing and dancing talents are sometimes regarded as necessary qualities, but they are just a part of what makes up the idol fantasy, not indispensable elements.

MH called fandom the pursuit of a fantasy wrapped up to resemble the truth and saw clearly that idol images created by the cultural industries are fantasies.

Moreover, fans are quite aware of and self-deprecating about how they are regarded by entertainment companies and the media as pushovers and easy targets. They often talk, too, about how, while they like to comfort themselves by pretending that they are in one-on-one relationships with stars, the stars are unaware of the existence of individual fans and merely see them as one big indeterminate mass.[2] They also talk about the asymmetrical relationship of appellation: fans call stars by their names, but stars address their fans collectively (HS). This is why it brings such joy for an individual fan to approach a star, even just for a moment. One informant and *Star Trek* fan, DH, proudly told her friends several times how she had personally handed a homemade cushion to one of the actors from *Star Trek*

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2 (Translator's note) The colloquial term used in Korean for this mass is *saeujeot*, meaning "pickled and salted shrimps." *Saeujeot* is made of thousands of tiny shrimps that all look the same and are difficult to discern individually.

Beyond when he arrived at Incheon Airport for the film's premiere.

Fandom is not the result of efforts to be recognized by a star as an individual fan. It is the cultural embodiment of an attitude that says, "I am so-and-so's fan and (s)he is popular thanks to me." Fandom is a "culture newly created by the group of fans of a particular popular star" (Kim Yi Seunghyeon and Bak Jeongae 2001: 160); as such, it constitutes spontaneous and autonomous activity by this group. Fans know that the star's image has been created by the cultural industries, but they also know that they must express their interest in and affection for this created image in a variety of ways. Of course, big entertainment companies have been creating and managing fan clubs since the 1990s, and this phenomenon has not disappeared entirely today; but fandom in its entirety cannot be seen as a cultural phenomenon subordinate to the cultural industries. It should be viewed as a cultural phenomenon and fulfillment process that is both closely linked to entertainment companies and exists spontaneously outside them, as shown in multiple examples: the continued activity of fans after the breakup of a group or retirement of an idol; their calling out of unreasonable behavior by entertainment companies or the organizing of protests to make their opinions known and rally autonomous resistance to such behavior; fans' attempts to exercise shareholder rights by buying shares in entertainment companies; and their actions to bring heavy pressure upon companies advertising on programs that feature biased reporting, in order to force corrections. Through these processes, fans have created an active and participatory type of fandom, planning various actions and producing related "goods," taking part in a series of culturally productive activities and experiencing pride, joy, tension, and competition in the process (Kang Jinsuk, Kang Yeongon, and Kim Mincheol 2012).

The informants have witnessed such processes of fandom from a young age and are quite familiar with them, even when they themselves are not enthusiastically active fans. To them, fandom is not something special, known only to a minority of people, but a familiar part of everyday life. In the following section, I will address the everyday nature of such fandom.

3. Everyday Fandom

1) Paenjil as a Life Process

Organized fandom in Korean pop music appears to have begun forming in the 1970s. But large-scale fandom is generally seen as having surfaced in earnest in 1992, with the emergence of Seo Taiji and Boys. Informants now in their 20s belong to a generation that has been in natural contact with idols and idol fandom from a young age. Born in an era of rapid growth in South Korea's popular culture industries, they grew up in frequent contact with a variety of cultural products and content, accustomed since childhood to obtaining information through the internet. They were able to watch and listen to pop culture-related information and materials with ease. As many informants commented, they naturally saw idols and heard their music through the internet and music broadcasts; from a young age, they found nothing at all special or strange about being someone's fan.

In this regard, one informant (KD) used the phrase "*paenjil*[3] as a life process." To her, fandom is something she started doing in childhood and continued ever since; she aged along with the stars (and vice versa). Though she had been an idol fan through middle and high school, her favorite groups and stars changed a few times, and now, in her early 20s, she had become a fan of pro basketball. She had been a "very keen" fan in middle and high school, but, rather than regarding this as a shameful episode in her past, her attitude was to claim she did not regret anything that happened back then.

"*Paenjil* as a life process" is a continuous one. It also signifies changes in the role of fans, according to social circumstances. One informant, SH, used to be active as a fan mostly through broadcast media, news articles, and online information. But after graduating university, getting a job, and securing a higher income, she bought a camera and lenses and became a "*jjikdeok*,"[4] dabbling in concert-going and other off-line activity. She

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3 (Translator's note) The suffix *-jil* generally indicates (the act of) doing, or doing something with, the noun to which it is attached. Here, *paenjil* and *deokjil* mean "doing fan (*paen*) activity" and "doing *deokhu* activity." *Deokhu* is a Korean word for fan, to be explained later.

4 (Translator's note) Portmanteau of *jjikda* ("to take [a photo]") and *deokhu*, meaning a *deokhu* who takes photos.

described herself, however, not as a typical "cannon goddess"[5]—taking photographs professionally for economic profit, or at least the symbolic income of a reputation—but as an "ordinary fan," sharing her photos with only a few acquaintances.

These and most other informants had accessed content from the cultural industries via the internet and broadcast media since middle school. Because of the fun it brought them, fan activity had become part of their everyday lives. As mentioned by many of the informants, acquiring information via the internet played an important role. The coincidence of their childhoods with the rapid growth that began in the South Korean IT industry in the late 1990s allowed them to become used to accessing information through the internet. Amid this network of information, finding resources they liked was easy.

Though some fans have liked just one or two groups since childhood, many naturally came to like the same stars as their friends. Sometimes, the objects of their affection changed constantly. And while some became fans of a particular star, others divided their lives to date into several periods, chronicling what they liked during each one. In this respect, fandom research must be described not just as determining the characteristics of a single phase but in terms of the accumulation of experience over time.

But the phrase "*paenjil* as a life process" is significant, both in terms of life lived together up to the present and of a kind of ritual process that must be undergone in the course of it. Since childhood, the informants have been used to popular cultural content, idol performances, and the variety of entertainment programs on which they appear; they accepted these things as natural, while most of their friends were fans of something too.

In a daily life fundamentally premised on *paenjil*, the question of who you like depends on both taste and context. Within the life processes of young South Koreans, being an idol fan can sometimes be a means of maintaining friendships. Most of informant SY's friends had been fans of idols, but she herself had not been particularly interested in them and had instead been a fan of musicals since high school. She said she had looked up on the internet "only as much information as needed" to talk with her friends. Only by doing that, she said, were she and her friends able to

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5 (Translator's note) A term referring to the cannon barrel-like appearance of a telephoto lens.

understand each other and get along without feeling awkward. HY, another informant, said that she was able to get closer to her friends by telling them, "This song is really good!" when they played her a song by an idol, even if it wasn't great. Informant YJ said she had "faked being a *deokhu*" because she thought, "If I don't do something together with them, I can't be included in their group." Stars, in other words, functioned both as objects of affection and vehicles for everyday interactions.

Paenjil or *deokjil* as life processes sometimes also became channels or "rooms of one's own" for escaping various external issues. In the words of informant MK:

> *Deokjil* can't be reduced to just liking. *Deokhu* jargon contains a lot of extreme expressions. "You're so pretty I want to kill myself," "smash the walls, demolish the house," and so on. (…) It's hard to find other words to express the emotion and energy contained in *deokjil* language. (…) When I started doing *deokijl*, it gave me a space of my own. I go in there to escape whenever I get tired of life. None of the complicated stuff in life—school grades, human relationships, money—can get in. I'm ready to go into my space at any time, like a comic book hero flitting between the real world and other worlds.

Young South Korean fans today, familiar with fandom from a young age, grew up in parallel with South Korea's information-based media, including the cultural industries and the internet. To them, liking idols is an everyday ritual process. Such experiences played an important role in helping star fandom become established in a variety of areas. They have also resulted in the expansion of fandom, over time, to objects other than idols.

2) The Diversity of Fandom and the "Battle-hardened Toughness" of Deokjil

South Koreans in their 20s declare themselves to be fans of a wide variety of genres. Though idol fandom accounts for the largest part, diverse other genres include film, sports, classical music, musicals, indie music and a long list of others. In fact, the genres themselves are further subdivided: fans do not just say they like "comics" but tend to be quite detailed in describing their tastes, claiming to like a specific type of Japanese *manga* or a genre of film with a certain type of mood. Objects of fandom emerge in areas where we would never normally expect to find it, such as essays and history. Informant SW, who likes history, naturally became a fan of history-related

TV dramas and films. Even among idol-group fans, it is quite common to hear specific group members mentioned, such as "Baekhyun from Exo." Other fans claim to like the oeuvre of writer Kim Eunhee or certain situations, such as rock festivals. It is also common to be a fan of several things at once. There are also rare cases of individuals who claim to be fans of electronics, politicians, or military weaponry and strategy. Some fans even specify the way they enjoy a given genre: when it comes to TV dramas, for example, some fans prefer to download and binge-watch a whole series, while others claim it is essential to watch series episodes as and when they are aired.

Another means used by informants to classify *deokjil* is with terms such as 2D, 2.5D, and 3D. The term 2D refers to two-dimensional pictures in comics or illustrated works; 2.5D indicates *deokjil* of characters in films or TV dramas; and 3D means liking real people, such as celebrities. Liking the actor Benedict Cumberbatch counts as 3D; liking the character Sherlock Holmes, as played by Cumberbatch in the drama *Sherlock*, is 2.5D; and liking two-dimensional printed material with photos or drawings of him or comics about Sherlock Holmes qualifies as 2D. In fact, it is almost impossible to achieve detailed classification of fandom and *deokjil* and record the content of each category. In the words of informant BM, "Everything in the world is an object of *paenjil*."

Fans' everyday lives are reorganized and divided through their relationships with the objects of their fandom. Informant and baseball fan YW likes going to watch games at the stadium in baseball season but gets most of her information from broadcasts and articles since she can't make it to every game. She talks of how inconvenient it was for her when her smartphone broke mid-season since she wasn't able to read the baseball news. New baseball news articles generally go online at about 7:00 am, 2:00 pm, 5:00 pm and 9:30 pm, so when her smartphone was broken, she had to resort to the inconvenience of using her computer to read the news every hour. For YW, not only daily but long-term life is reorganized and perceived through the lens of baseball. For example, from November, when the baseball season finishes, to February, player transfers become a hot issue, leading to a proliferation of gossip and rumors on baseball communication channels. YW has to spend her school vacations verifying these stories then confirming them in official news articles.

These kinds of individuals are fans in that they gather diverse information from their fields of interest, "study" it, and interact and exchange knowledge

with people who share their tastes. They describe themselves as fans or *deokhu* in their respective fields. The terms *paenjil* and *deokjil* are frequently used with regard to fandom. The latter derives from *odeokhu* and *deokhu*, Korean pronunciation-based variants of the Japanese word *otaku*, and is sometimes used to denote an extended version of *paenjil*. Used as a label for people with manic levels of liking for a particular area, it is made into portmanteaux including *yeongdeok* (film *deokhu*), *myudeok* (musical *deokhu*), and *mildeok* (military *deokhu*). Though *paenjil* and *deokjil* are at times used differently according to context, they are now sometimes used interchangeably. Examples include phrases such as *ipdeokhada* (to become a fan), *deok-ming out* (to declare oneself a fan)[6] and *Exo deokjil haeyo* ("I'm an Exo fan").

Many informants mentioned the fact that they were not just fans of a single genre or star but had maintained interests in diverse fields, such as comics, songs, film, fiction, voice acting, idols, actors, and computer games since childhood. While some said they had engaged in *deokjil* to a "normal level," interviews revealed that these levels were not, in fact, normal. Fans who like something, whatever it is, build up extensive knowledge about it; they are practically experts in their respective fields. When asked what field of popular culture they liked, most informants, even if they hesitated at first, would speak freely, and they knew a considerable amount about the object of their fandom. They considered being "a fan of something" to be part of their identity, while fandom-related activities (collecting information through online communities and Twitter, sporadic participation in related activities, buying and consuming cultural products, etc.) were highly integrated into their daily lives.

Of course, it cannot be said that all young South Koreans are into *paenjil* or *deokjil*. Clearly, people whom those in the fandom world would regard as "muggles" also exist. But fandom is too diverse to be discussed only in terms of celebrity idols, and there are too many people living as fans in these various realms and genres to be ignored.

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6 (Translator's note) A pun on "coming out," an English term imported into Korean with its original meaning—revealing oneself to be non-heterosexual—intact.

4. Some Characteristics of Fandom Today

1) Membership through Consumption

Information is important in *paenjil*. What counts is collecting related information, such as when concert tickets go on sale, a favorite star's schedule, or how other fans are analyzing new episodes—"faster and more accurately than anyone else" (KL). In this respect, "the key thing in *deokjil* is that knowledge is power" (PJ).

In addition to information, the consumption of various cultural products is considered important in *paenjil*. The desire to own items related to stars is nothing new. In the 1940s, Hollywood stars received requests from fans for items such as photographs, soap, pieces of fur, rouge wiping-paper, spoons, salt and pepper holders, chewed strips of gum, bicycles, strands of hair, hairpins, shoes and stockings, cigarette butts, watches, dresses, handkerchiefs, matchbox lids, trained fleas named after stars, signed underpants, and blades of grass from lawns. Morin saw this as a desire to obsess over scraps or symbols of objects of love (i.e. stars) in the absence of the actual stars themselves (Morin 1992: 120–122).

In idol fandom, the consumption of albums, streamed tracks, concert tickets, and a variety of other "goods" become symbols that demonstrate the fandom itself. To fans, music, various products, and images of idols are objects of consumption of such importance that they would seem to be connected to idols by an occult force. Informant KS, once a passionate idol group fan, spoke in great detail about consumption in fandom. Music-related products are most important of all. Records are a prime example: the volume sold within the first week of release is crucial. Because fans must ensure that their record stays at the top of the sales charts, they buy it in advance before its release, then buy it again on the day of its release, then once again two or three days later. Online sales are important, but so are off-line purchases at retailers such as Kyobo Hottracks. On top of this, fans must endlessly stream the track in question on music sites and increase its number of hits on video sites like YouTube in order to increase awareness of it overseas. Other important duties include buying "supporting tools" sold by the idol's label and buying products contractually endorsed by the idol. This is because buying products up to a certain value or more earns fans tickets to events such as meet-and-greets, signings, video meetings, or complimentary idol-related items. Another consumption-based fan event

is known as the *ppasuni* tour. These involve visiting businesses run by fans' favorite star or her/his parents, buying products there, and leaving support messages to help the business. Meanwhile, *paenjil* through non-consumption also exists. For example, after JYJ spun off from TVXQ, JYJ fans boycotted products promoted using TVXQ members as models.

All information about particular products or the appearance of new "goods" is conveyed via various fan sites and Twitter. Actively engaging in this kind of consumption is a way of proving one's fandom. This is why one fan named "money, time, and stamina" as the three elements of *paenjil* (HK). One fan with a job went so far as to say, "I work to earn money for *paenjil*" (JJ). Stars and fans are connected via the media, but from an entertainment company's point of view, fans are consumers of stars' albums and related products. Fans, too, are well aware that they are consumers labeled fans by the cultural industries. But the fact of this labeling is outweighed by the fact that it brings them pleasure. One informant, HR, put it this way: "Fandom is a world inhabited by fans with a passionate love for stars, a world that is bought for a price." Yi Dongyeon has described this phenomenon as follows: "By owning cultural products imprinted with stars, fans are exerting a symbolic power of property, mediated by stars. In this process, collecting star products is an act of accumulating symbolic property that exceeds monetary value and increases fans' cultural confidence and sense of solidarity" (2001: 449).

If fandom was once confined to the consumption of official items produced by the cultural industries, today it can be internally divided into the production and consumption of "secondary works." *Yeonseongmul* or *yeonseong*, the products made by secondary creators, generally known as *yeonseong*-ers, are bought by consumers within fandom. *Yeonseong* are generally primary materials such as footage captured from broadcasts or performance videos, composite photos, Flash or animated GIF files, unofficial tracks lifted from radio broadcasts, and photos or videos taken by fans; or secondary creations like fan pics and fan art, calendars, DVDs, fan books, and photo books with printed versions of fan pics and art (Yang Inhwa 2014: 105–106). The very wide scope of *yeonseong* also includes various accessories, ornaments, everyday items, clothes, figures, and stationery with designs featuring star-related logos or illustrations. Opinions differ within fandom as to what can be regarded as a *yeonseong*. In general, however, star- or character-themed secondary creations—things produced by individual fans rather than officially released by entertainment

companies—are regarded as *yeonseong*. The distinction between *yeonseong*-ers and consumers, too, is ambiguous. In large fandoms, "division of labor" is possible, whereby competent producers known as *jonjal*[7] work as *yeonseong*-ers and regular fans act as consumers. But in small fandoms or fan communities, some fans become *yeonseong*-ers through dissatisfaction with their roles as consumers. Here, they are trying on their own to create the *yeonseong* they desire. In such cases, they confess in advance that they are not *jonjal* or *neimdeu*,[8] so the quality of their creations will not be high, saying that since they have made an item of this standard, they hope someone more talented will step forward and make a higher-quality version.

Some regard the production of fan creations known as *yeonseong* and their consumption by other fans as a reciprocal gift economy, and they take a negative view of expecting financial compensation through fan activity, claiming that "in the series of processes that deliver feedback to creators, the relationship between creator fans and other fans consists not of monetary compensation but of symbolic values such as reputation or respect" (Hong Jongyun 2014: 68–74). But such claims are not always accurate. The *yeonseong* made by some *jonjal* fetch high amounts of financial compensation. It is well known that planning certain "goods," taking orders for them from fans, and producing and selling them by oneself brings a small profit; this is why some fans specialize in producing goods. Moreover, the variety of secondary creations made is very wide. Fan art and fandom goods are created in most current areas of *deokjil*. Not only are idol- and star-themed secondary creations made and sold but so are a variety of goods related to computer games, such as *Ensemble Stars!*, and the animation *King of Prism*, which tells the story of a young idol in training.

Fans think of such goods, or the consumption of *yeonseong* and the production preceding it, as objects that demonstrate their identity as fans and materialize the stars or genres that they like. Materializing distant, untouchable stars and popular culture that existed only as stories gives concrete form to the object of fans' love, so buying them signifies the faithful observance of a fan's duty.

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7 (Translator's note) A portmanteau of *jonna jalhanda*, a coarse way of saying "does it really well"; used here to mean "people really good at what they do."

8 (Translator's note) The English word "named," transliterated into the Korean alphabet, to refer to a *jonjal* with a reputation for high-quality work.

2) Use of Online Platforms for Collecting Information and Individualized Fan Activity

The most general course of action as an idol fan is to join a fan site, a gallery on DC Inside, or an online café hosted by a portal site. In South Korea, Twitter has recently emerged as an important platform for *paenjil*. Here, fans engage in non-organized, individual fan activity, interact, and gather information unconnected to their activity in fan communities or fan sites. Twitter is used particularly often by Korean fandoms. The ease of creating and deleting accounts and of reading other people's tweets, as long as their account is not set to private mode, make it a very useful platform for rapidly acquiring information.

The following description of fandom activity on Twitter is worth noting:

> Previously in fandoms, the identity of each fan was produced and controlled within the fandom community. But the growth of social media has liberated fans from control by the community, opening new possibilities for them to acquire and embody their own identities. The individualization of fandom is ambivalent in nature. It has allowed fans to escape the rules of the group and given them the chance to freely form their own fan identities. At the same time, however, it has brought them the burden of having to find and create their own identities. Ultimately, the individualization of fandom and the individualization of identity deny individual fans the possibility of depending on the group and leave them with the freedom and responsibility to create and manage their own identities. (Yi Heonyul and Ji Hyemin 2015: 35)

Twitter replaces fan sites and websites, characterized by strong rules and excessive joining regulations, with the advantages of easy joining and easy finding of necessary information using hashtags or friend introductions. But these are only possible on an individual basis and through individual effort.

In general, Twitter *paenjil* and *deokjil* begin with the creation of an account (known as a *deokgye*)[9] for the purposes of fandom. *Paenjil* using a *deokgye* is premised fundamentally on relationships of mutual respect and etiquette. Using polite terms of address and requesting mutual following are important. Sending direct messages (DMs) is possible only within relationships of mutual following. Mutual following is not mandatory on

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9 (Translator's note) *Deokgye* is a portmanteau of *deokhu* and *gyejeong* ("account").

Twitter itself, but it becomes necessary etiquette when using Twitter for the purpose of being a fan. Requests for particular pieces of material or information or new and unique *yeonseong* are carefully phrased, and thanks must be given when a request is accepted. Becoming friendly with aforementioned *jonjal* off-line, too, is helpful in making Twitter relationships closer. Meeting off-line can be particularly advantageous when it comes to asking for materials needed. Sometimes, fans "digging" (intensively *deokjil*-ing) a certain genre find and converse with a private bot (an account that plays the role of a particular character and is personalized according to the taste of its interlocutor).

But sometimes, when a difference or clash of opinions occurs—when a fan does not like a certain situation or comment, or when somebody criticizes or attacks "someone else's genre" without knowing anything about it—fans use functions such as blocking or muting to avoid the offender, or they launch a counteroffensive with mentions or re-tweets of negative comments. Another method sometimes used is creating a new *algye* ("egg account," named for the empty oval shape left after creating an account without uploading a profile picture), using it to bombard a user with negative comments then "blow up" the account. These processes can also serve to make the role of *jonjal* or *neimdeu*, with lots of followers, more important. The more followers a user has, the more influence her opinion will carry. Indeed, some fans avoid using, or hesitate to use, Twitter because of indiscriminate attacks and "public shaming" from users with different opinions, despite their awareness of the need to use the platform for gathering information.

3) Fandom and Gender

Gender is an important issue when it comes to fandom. Though some studies have been made of male fandom and the kind of men known as "uncle-fans,"[10] many other studies focus on female fandom. The term most commonly used to dismiss or scorn female fans is "*ppasuni*." This word, used pejoratively in reference to female fans of idols, can roughly be

10 (Translator's note) A term meaning older men who are fans of young girl-group members. The term "uncle-fan" in some ways uses the ageism and familism of Korean society to conceal feelings of sexual love or attitudes of sexual objectification toward female idols on the part of some male fans.

summed up as meaning "pathetic, immature girls who disregard their studies and everything else to spend all their time chasing older boys around." Of course, terms such as *ppasuni* and XX-*ppa*[11] are often used within fandoms as "terms of endearment" for fans of certain genres, while female fans often apply gender-disparaging terms such as *nanyeon*[12] in reference to themselves. These are sometimes attempts by fans within the same fandom to encourage and respect each other's tastes or to destigmatize and neutralize the negative meanings of externally conferred images by making active use of them themselves. But it is hard to ignore the negative force of such terms when applied to those inside fandoms by those on the outside.

Despite the presence of large male fandoms—not only of idols but of computer games, such as *Starcraft* and *League of Legends*, and of sports—some studies focus only on the emergence of female fans, female sports fans within fandoms, or women interested in games; these women are often regarded as odd creatures. Female fans of sports and e-sports are constantly attacked on- and off-line by men. The most easily found example of such attacks is criticism of female fans as *eolppa*.[13] This term is often used by male fans to disparage female fans in areas such as sports and computer gaming, meaning that women know nothing about soccer, baseball, or computer games and only like good-looking players. "A lot of people call all women who like soccer *eolppa*, even when they're genuine fans," says informant and female soccer fan LS. "I've been asked several times if I know what the offside rule is when I say that I really do like football. A lot of people see sports as the exclusive domain of men." Her friend JY also likes soccer a lot. She collects original jerseys from German and Spanish clubs and is always seen as "a woman who just collects uniforms." E-sports, too, is regarded as a male realm; women taking part in games are branded "creatures who can't play," and those watching games among pro-gamers are simply called *eolppa*.

One female fan responded as follows:

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11 (Translator's note) XX is replaced by the name of an idol group, to mean *ppasuni* of XX. For example, *Exo-ppa* would mean *ppasuni* of Exo.

12 (Translator's note) "Bitch-me."

13 (Translator's note) A portmanteau of *eolgul* ("face") and *ppasuni*, implying fandom based purely on good looks.

> *Eolppa* are fans too. It's not as if we don't have feelings towards male players as members of the opposite sex. But that doesn't mean we're not fans. Aren't men *eolppa*? When they watch girl groups, they claim to like them because they have pretty faces and they sing well—doesn't that make them *eolppa*? Do men who like girl groups know lots about music or dance? Do you have to know lots about musical arrangement and composition to like singers? Doesn't that mean they know nothing about songs? As long as they like singers for their faces, they shouldn't criticize women. And when you become a sports fan, you learn more about the rules and legal issues as time goes by, even if you don't know them at first. You want your player to do well, so you have to know those things if you want to support him properly. (KD)

For a long time, female fandom has been regarded as worthless in comparison to that of men because of gender ideology that sees women as inferior beings. At Cliff Richard's Korean concert in fall 1969, groundless rumors spread that some frenzied fans had thrown not only gifts and handkerchiefs but also their knickers at the singer, actions branded as "the immature behavior of young women." In the 1970s, it was disparagingly reported that the audience at concerts by Nam Jin and Na Hoon-a were filled with "kitchen maids, bus girls, and factory girls" (Kim Hwanpyo 2012: 174–176). Such episodes reveal the inherent gender and class bias in elitist discourses about fandom that precede any analysis of it.

The gender-based conflicts within fandom are too many and too complex in nature to be mentioned in brief. One fan, GH, points out that misogyny has always existed in fandom, as has gender-entrenching imagery. Some object when criticism is aimed only at male fans for seeing girl-group members as sex objects, even though this is not much different from female fans seeing boy-group members as sex objects. But female fans respond by saying that while some of them do see boy-group members as sex objects, this view does not extend to men in general, while men view all women (girl-group members or not) as sex objects. They see this as a big problem in South Korean society at large. Since I believe these themes need discussing in more detail in separate studies, here I will merely point out that gender issues constitute important points of contention, and these are also related to the concealment of taste that I examine in the next section.

5. Discrimination, Distinction, and Self-protection through *Ilko*

In January 2010, one South Korean cable channel broadcast a program depicting *otaku* as extremely weird. After this, a negative image of *otaku* remained widespread among the general public for some time. Recently, however, media have been labeling *deokhu* as "enthusiasts" and presenting them as "talented people," "highly knowledgeable people," and "experts." Some companies have even recently run recruitment campaigns using the expression *deokhu* instead of "proactive, talented person."

Though *deokjil* is being re-assessed as talent and knowledge, it is very rare for this to lead to a profession. Many young Koreans know that the dream of a hobby or passionate interest becoming a job—making them what is known as "a successful *deokhu*" or a "*deogeop ilchi*"[14]—is hard to achieve. Informants explain how today's South Korean society instructs them to "do what you want to do, with passion," but regards them as pathetic the moment they reveal the passion they showed in their *paenjil* or *deokjil*. I therefore believe that the view of *deokjil* as talent remains confined to the realm of media. *Deokjil* is seen as surplus and is removed from the productive activities of society (see Choe Taeseop 2013). Therefore, in the intense competition of today, where only showing one's "productive abilities" can earn treatment as a "useful and competent individual," revealing *paenjil* or *deokjil* is dangerous. Indeed, many informants are quite scared of revealing their *deokjil* tendencies ("*deok-ming* out") and try to avoid doing so if possible.

Hiding one's fandom is known as *ilko*, a contraction of *ilbanin cosplay*.[15] Idol fandom is a typical realm where *ilko* is required. Informant JS, who became a fan of an idol group in her first year of middle school, told the story of a friend she met in the third year. The friend was a fan of the British group Oasis and was very proud of being a fan of "talented foreign artists." Unlike idol fans, she considered herself a person of superior musical knowledge and claimed that idols were all the same: they had no talent or character, only did whatever their companies ordered them to do, and could never be treated as artists. Such experiences make it hard to

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14 (Translator's note) A synthesized expression meaning "*deokjil* and job in conformity."

15 (Translator's note) *Ilbanin* means "normal person," while "cosplay" implies "disguise." *Ilko* can be understood as "dressing up as a normal person" or simply "pretending to be normal."

reveal oneself as an idol fan.

Another informant wrote the following long explanation of circumstances that make going *ilko* an inevitability:

> Among people who enjoy popular culture are many types of fans. Musical, theater, film, TV drama, actor, singer—there are so many types of fans, and idol fans are among the most numerous. But idol fans are dismissed quite a lot in spite of their high numbers. Musical fans, film fans, even actor fans who are into celebrities in just the same way, try to look down on and dismiss idol fans. They call them scornful names like *ppasuni*. If they're not middle school students but university students or workers, they're seen as even more pathetic. "How can you still like idols at your age?" they'll ask, often following up the question with a lecture on how they tried all that when they were younger and how it was just a waste of time. And many people, after finding out that you like idols, tell you, with a sense of superiority, that they don't like that kind of thing. You often hear people, online or in person, proudly saying how they don't recognize anyone on music broadcasts these days. It's as if they're saying, "Liking idols is low-brow. I'm not like you; I don't like that kind of low-level stuff." All fans have met people with that kind of sense of superiority who look down on *ppasuni*. When they have sad experiences like that every day, fans start putting themselves down in mocking ways. They sometimes call themselves *pparegi*, a combination of *ppasuni* and *sseuregi*,[16] or say that *ppasuni* are "untouchables." At first, they said these things self-deprecatingly, but when these situations kept recurring, they developed a tendency to look down upon themselves. In my case, I once went to be a live audience member on a TV program featuring my favorite idol and saw a Western girl who looked like a European doll. When I told my mum about it, saying, "Why would that kind of girl go to a place like that?" my mum said, "You didn't go there because there's something wrong with you. You went because you like it, too." When I heard that, it was like a slap in the face. (SI)

Some fans even go *ilko* within their own families. This is especially necessary in middle and high school, when one "has to look" as if one is focused on preparing for the university entrance examination and fully immersed in study. It can be tiresome in several ways if family members, especially one's parents, find out that one is a fan of an idol.

> One day when I was in middle school, I came home from an after-school academy quite late and found that the albums (of idol group XXX) I had arranged in the corner of my room were gone. I looked all over my room for

16 (Translator's note) *Sseuregi* means "trash."

> them, but they weren't there, so I asked my mum if she knew. "Albums are for listening to songs, so don't you just need the CDs?" she said, sounding completely nonchalant. She told me she had kept the CDs and thrown out everything else in the albums: photo books, photo cards, lyric books, etc. I'll never forget the sense of loss and despondency I felt then. The Japan debut albums I had bought from foreign websites and paid sky-high postage for, the limited-edition albums, the photo cards of former group members that were almost impossible to collect—gone, just like that. I couldn't even tell my dad I had been collecting things like that (he thinks idol *ppasuni* are really pathetic), and my mum was kind of an innocent person who thought I really bought albums just to listen to music, so I couldn't protest to anyone. (JS)

When faced with fans of H.O.T., the biggest fandom of the early 2000s, fans of Seo Taiji showed a "chosen people"-type, elitist mentality, regarding all idols at the time as part of Seo's legacy (Yi Dongyeon 2001: 442). This indicates that hierarchy has been present in fandom for a long time and that idol fandoms are seen as occupying a low position in this hierarchy. Exposing oneself as an idol fan after the transition from adolescence to early twenties, amid the pressure of ageism as a social norm, can invite the stigma of not acting one's age.

In addition to idol fandom, another genre that requires *ilko* in Korean society is that of Japanese *manga* and animation fandom. Informant MH's only hobby for the past 10 years has been watching Japanese animations. Despite this, she never mentions it when filling in the "hobbies" section of job application forms. When a new acquaintance asks what her hobbies are, she often gives an indirect answer, saying that she likes watching movies. She cannot hide it completely, of course, so she sometimes admits to liking animations, but, rather than specifying the work or genre she likes, she says something along the lines of, "I just watch stuff like *One Piece*." In so doing, she is trying to give the impression that she is not the kind of *otaku* others might imagine; instead, she's just a normal person, like them, who likes one or two famous Japanese animations. She says this despite the fact that she is always looking for information about new animations and spends at least two hours watching them every day. MH says she has to prevent her hobby from becoming the butt of others' jokes or earning her treatment as a traitor.[17] Another informant, MJ, said she watched Japanese animations for at least two hours every day while in

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17 (Translator's note) For historical reasons, Koreans who show appreciation for Japan or Japanese culture are sometimes accused by other Koreans as traitors.

elementary school, but after getting the sense that those around her thought it strange, she had gone *ilko*. Because of that, she lost interest in the genre after a while.

Some people end up retracting their interest in Japanese popular culture due to concerns about the relationship between Japan and South Korea. Informant KW told how, while reading *Attack on Titan*, she had been thrown into confusion by the controversy over the author's secret racist Twitter account and controversial views, including that Korean society and culture had developed thanks to Japan. She ended up losing interest in the *manga* and not reading it to the end.

It is widely known that Japanese popular culture strongly influenced its South Korean counterpart through plagiarism and hybridization (Kim Hyeonmi 2003) before South Korea officially legalized it. Despite this, it had to be superficially concealed and was subject to negative reactions. The situation remains largely the same today.

> Korean consumers of Japanese popular culture in the 1990s widely consumed and distributed Japanese cultural texts based on the awareness that political ideology and cultural tastes were separable. When they said they were just fans of Japanese animation, which didn't mean they had a good impression of Japanese society as a whole, they meant that the national character of popular culture was no longer an important guiding point in their consumption of culture. (Kim Hyeonmi 2003: 167)

This tells us that although the image of illegality did have a powerful effect on those consuming Japanese popular culture before it was officially allowed into South Korea, its national character did not play an important role. Koichi Iwabuchi (2004), too, cites "cultural odourlessness" as one of the features of Japanese *manga* and animations. But since Japanese popular culture became legally allowed into South Korea in the late 1990s, the fact of its Japanese nationality has actually acted as a more prominent point of contention. Though popular culture is fundamentally meant to be enjoyed and to provide entertainment, its nationality is always emphasized when it comes from Japan. This phenomenon reveals two characteristics of South Korean society. Firstly, historical experiences, memories, and judgements can sometimes filter judgements of other things. Secondly, though it is impossible to examine and analyze the content of all the popular cultural content in the world, when it comes to Japanese popular culture, its "political/historical appropriateness" is questioned before its content is

analyzed.

In addition, sometimes tastes within a single genre must be hidden. Things such as sexual preference, homosexual or heterosexual relationships, fondness for violence or comedy are all mentioned as issues of taste and, in some cases, regarded as things that must not be revealed. Those from outside fandom apply hierarchies to it and look down on idol fans; within fandoms, Twitter and website comment sections often feature ongoing demands for *chwijon* (a contraction of *chwihyang jonjung*)[18]—respecting individuals' tastes and not coercing them in other directions—and disputes surrounding such demands. When it comes to fandom, taste has now become a realm where explanation and comparison are required, and where value is sometimes judged and disputed. It is when fans grow tired, or risk growing tired, of such disputes, or when they are judged by their tastes, that their tastes must be concealed.

Phenomena like these allow us talk of the hierarchization of fandom. In addition to the gender issues discussed previously, a hierarchy of "good fandom and not-good fandom" is at work in South Korean society. *Chwijon* has become an important term because of this hierarchization in fandom, embodied by the following question from informant HN: "Why is someone who likes musicals a fan, but someone who likes idols a *ppasuni*?" It is a demand to not interfere in "other people's genres" and to respect their tastes since tastes can differ, and fandom is a matter of taste. Perhaps it could be said that the principle-based demands of anthropological cultural relativism have surfaced within the realm of fandom.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the fandom that has become part of everyday life for young South Koreans. General talk of fandom has often been limited to interest in and affection for idols; this study, too, has tended to concentrate on the same area. This is because of the unique cultural characteristics it manifests, being huge and organized in equal measures. But fandom occurs across a much wider realm and vis-à-vis various objects. It is boosted by the rapid and abundant information and materials available through the internet and is active in individual forms

18 (Translator's note) "Respect for preferences."

via platforms like Twitter. Fandom is both a society maintained by internal rules of conduct and a space of contradiction and conflict enforced by coercive gender issues and hierarchical orders.

Kim Hwanpyo (2012, 2013) sees fandom in South Korean society as a means of fulfilling desire for recognition:

> Because social elites have monopolized the media, which can be described as the principal means in the struggle for recognition, regular people have extremely few ways of fulfilling their desire to be recognized. In societies where a uniform, unipolar order, like that of South Korea, exerts force in all areas, this phenomenon manifests itself even more strikingly," he writes. "Stars are a powerful means for ordinary people to fulfill their desire for recognition. (2013: 183–184)

Here, Kim is saying that fans achieve vicarious satisfaction by identifying with the stars. Though it is hard to completely deny that fandom is a type of "labor of love," characterized by a struggle for recognition, it must be remembered that this alone cannot explain it either. By only mentioning the need for recognition, without asking questions such as who recognition must come from or why it is needed, such explanations reduce fandom to an issue of individual desire and psychology rather than a social phenomenon.

The actions of young people we label as *paenjil* and *deokjil* must not be discussed in the same terms as conventional idol fandom: as strange, unique phenomena divorced from general social life or passive roles formed at the behest of the cultural industries. Fans use the resources at their disposal to play active, albeit limited, parts in a role play, including as managers (Jeong Minu and Yi Nayeong 2009) and as judges (Jeong Jinung 2014). Fans do see through the logic of the cultural industries, but, rather than regarding it as something to be avoided, they use the products provided by these industries as resources and engage in cultural practices that turn them into sources of entertainment and pleasure within the contexts of their own lives. Meanwhile, though they play the roles assigned to them by the cultural industries, they also use secondary creative products to engage in cultural production in forms not provided by these industries.

Bak Jonghyeon, the protagonist of Jang Gangmyeong's novel, wonders what *Evangelion* means to its *otaku*. *Evangelion* was something with meaning for someone, whatever that meaning might be (Jang 2014: 243). Its *otaku* were not people who liked a particular genre called *Evangelion*; they were beings who shared its worldview. Just as Bak thought, *paenjil* is

something with meaning. Fans think their *paenjil* is meaningful behavior, be it just fun, or heterosexual attraction, or escape from university entrance preparation stress, or a brief feeling of liberation from exams. In a reality where "nothing goes right, even though you do have passion and you are making an effort" (GH), *paenjil* is easily accessible, rewards effort with recognition within fandom, and lets you like what you actually like. In today's South Korea, where appeals for passion create no actual advantage, fandom and *deokjil* are the only areas in which passion is permitted and encouraged, and creates results. On the other hand, the fact that they could not exist without mediation from cultural industries suggests that they can never be completely free from the latter.

This study has attempted to describe some characteristics of "fandom as a whole." In the future, it will be necessary to identify and analyze specific situations in specific genres in more detail through further studies. Only then will we be able to gain a more concrete understanding of the complex world of fandom and *deokjil*.

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