

Commentary

Always Fans of Something: Fandom and Concealment of Taste in the Daily Lives of Young Koreans, by Lee Eungchel

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One of the most interesting aspects of K-pop idol fandom expanding beyond Korea, into East Asia, then Southeast Asia, and now to the entire world, is that it is not just fandom of Korean idols that is spreading but also Korean fandom practices. Korean fans developed the model for how to support idols—often based on earlier examples from Japan, where the idol concept was developed—but it has evolved over time. K-pop fandom has even arguably helped K-pop’s international spread, as fans not only partake in music and related products but also become part of an exciting new culture, with its own internal vocabulary and established sociocultural norms that create strong “in” and “out” groups. Yet often, overseas fans lack a clear understanding of how idol fandom in Korea has developed in response to Korean attitudes towards the passion of youth, especially the passion of young women for popular music stars. Fans abroad experiencing judgmental attitudes due to their interest in foreign artists who may not conform to local cultural norms may imagine that idol fandom in Korea is more normalized. Instead, there is a general, worldwide dismissive attitude toward youth enthusiasm for things the older generation did not discover first, and in Korea, due to strong awareness of generations and age, it is perhaps even more pronounced.

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I am confident that researchers and students reading the translation of Lee Eungchel's article on the fandom practices of and challenges faced by Korean idol fans will find it valuable for articulating the experience of many Korean idol fans. As Lee explains, fandom is a "realm into which young South Koreans pour huge amounts of passion but are not, in reality, supposed to reveal this to others." The hidden nature of fandom is reflected in the use of terms like *deokming* out, which means to disclose that you are a fan, and *ilko*, to be a fan who pretends to be a "normal" person. In fact, it is only with increased interest in idols from not just abroad but specifically from Western Europe and North America that Korean idol fans have begun to be less apologetic and secretive about their interests—although, due to the time period of Lee's research, this increased confidence in idol fandom is not reflected in this piece. When I taught Korean first-year university students between 2013 and 2015, idol fandom was still somewhat embarrassing; students in their 20s were more comfortable admitting a preference for international artists or Korean artists with sub-cultural cool, and they would downplay their interest in idols in many circumstances.

Lee collected interview data at a similar time, 2014 to 2017, from 277 women in their 20s, and supplemented that with online data mining. Lee found that fandom was "becoming more universal and everyday," and that *paenjinil* (the practice of being a fan) was regarded by fans as an important component of their identity because it determined aspects of their life process. As presented in the article, the fans were well aware of the manufactured or artificial aspects of the idol pop industry, characterizing it as a fantasy. The fandom depicted in the article is at times self-deprecating—when fans discuss worshipping idols; and at times, the fandoms are self-aggrandizing—claiming that idols are only popular due to fans. These tensions would make a good topic for a follow-up study. One of the most fascinating parts of the study is when Lee discusses fandom peer pressure, such as youth who learn enough about their friends' favorite idols to hold a conversation, even if they do not care for idol pop, explaining that liking idols is an "everyday ritual process." Lee's article is densely peppered with both Korean terms and fan slang—some of it in use for decades, while other terms are relatively new. At various points, the focus of the article shifts to these terms and how they work as markers of identity for the fans, as in the case of *deokbu* (the Korean equivalent of *otaku* in Japanese) or in attempts to reclaim quasi-insults (like *ppasumi*, crazily ardent female fan).

Lee addresses *yeonseong*, fan-made K-pop-related products, and the differing motivations for members of large and small fandoms to make it. According to Lee, fans in small fandoms may feel almost pushed into creating *yeonseong* due to lack of official products. Lee, however, treats the subject very cursorily within a discussion of consumption as an important activity in fandom. In the last couple of years, I have started a large project on the “K-pop adjacent industry”—the fans who create *yeonseong* and other K-pop-related services, turning their interest in music into their work. I would argue that the creation of careers grown out of fandom activities is important, and, in fact, the increasingly common story of fans developing careers from their K-pop interests allows young fans to think of their fandom as more than just a waste of time. This is similar to how the existence of professional gamers allowed computer game-playing youth to feel like they were “training” and that a potential career awaited (Jin 2020: 3735). Online fan activity is another area that Lee examines, noting how increased use of social media has made fandom more individualistic and accessible, but it has also pushed fans to more actively construct their own fan identities. Lee posits that the increasingly important role of Twitter in K-pop fandom has reduced and weakened the role of specific websites (often linked to paid membership) that used to be centers of fandom activity.

Gender plays a role in fandom. Whereas female fans are disregarded in some fandoms (such as sports), the female interviewees in this study challenged male fans, suggesting that they sexualize not just female celebrities but all women. However, this complex topic is not unpacked in sufficient depth. Certainly, Lee does not mention the role that the media plays in packaging female idols as sex objects and presenting them through the male gaze. If one considers the mediatized framing of idols, as I have in my past publications (Saeji 2013), it becomes clear that female fans are actively encouraged to sexualize male idols as a deflection from accusations that male fans sexualize female celebrities. Yet, as one of Lee’s interviewees points out, female fans may sexualize idols, but male fans sexualize idols *and* ordinary women—a key difference in perspective.

Near the end of the article, Lee returns to the ways that idol fans often hide their fandom from the general public, because even though idol fans exist in large numbers, negative stereotypes about fans are plentiful. Fandom of “low-brow” culture, like pop music, runs into the same derogatory attitudes in Korea as it does in other countries. Here Lee

compares idol pop fans with fans of Japanese *manga* and *anime*, which bear the extra burden in Korea of coming from the former colonizer. This is one of the most developed sections of the paper, including heart-breaking stories of fans who are not even honest with their own families about their interests.

Lee is very clear in the conclusion that this article is laying a foundation on which other studies should be built, which begs the question of why Lee has not built the article on any scholarship on fandom beyond that published in Korean. The article would benefit from some engagement with theories of fandom (classics like John Fiske and Henry Jenkins are ignored, although Edgar Morin, translated into Korean, is referenced), and, as with many Korean articles, it seems to ignore articles on fandom written outside Korea. Connecting to some of those ideas, even to question their validity for understanding Korean fandom, would improve the article. For example, the idea of seeing idols as parasocial kin has been applied fruitfully to Korea (e.g. Elfving-Hwang 2018)—indeed, in Korea, fans literally speak of their idols using fictive kinship terms. Other scholars have examined collecting fan merchandise (Maliangkay 2013), Korean media portrayals of idol fandom (Kim 2015), and the roles of influential fans, such as YouTubers, on the fandom (Oh 2017; Chun 2017). Even articles published on K-pop fandom in Korean are not referenced in the very short bibliography, although this could be due to the lag between research, publication in Korean and, now, this English translation. All in all, I feel that this article is valuable for scholars of fandom seeking to understand the Korean fan experience and for overseas fans seeking to understand more about the fandom they have entered. This article lays groundwork, introduces vocabulary, and exposes fruitful paths of research for the next scholar to embark upon.

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