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**Defending K-pop Idols Online:
The Fanbase's Underlying Issue of Ignorance**

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ENGL 128: Writing and Research: Literature and Culture

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Introduction

In recent years, we have seen a surge in political correctness and accountability on social media platforms; every wrong step celebrities and influencers take is called out immediately by the general public. Despite this, there are some communities that witness the other side of the spectrum. The rightfully upset are attacked rather than understood, and missteps and toxic behavior are covered up rather than called out. These communities are those of loyal fans who blind themselves to any wrongdoing, with their feelings of friendship and loyalty to celebrities promoting ignorance toward their actions. This has especially been clear in fandoms—groups of enthusiastic fans—with the rise of Korean Pop Music, or K-pop, in recent years. In the eyes of their fans, K-pop idols can do no wrong. The kind, relatable personalities they promote cause fans to grow protective and push blame in the other direction.

With the rise of celebrities through social media platforms, recent research has delved into how these relationships of one-sided loyalty are formed through relatability. Along with this, researchers have found that communities online promote groupthink and cohesiveness without critical evaluation. From these two aspects of communities and fanbases online, we can begin to understand why defensiveness and the promotion of ignorance is so rampant on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. When loyal to a celebrity and part of a community that pushes this single mindset forward, many fall into a trap where they are unable to step back and hold K-pop idols accountable for mistakes that they have made. By the way that they are structured, K-pop fandoms online inherently push forward ignorance. K-pop's celebrity-fan relationships and the echo chambers of fandoms on social media platforms lead to a toxic environment online where K-pop fans continue to excuse and ignore the wrongdoings of idols.

In this paper, we will be exploring the different aspects of K-pop fandoms that influence willful ignorance within the community. In order to do this, we will be examining the psychology behind fans' minds as they interact with both their favorite celebrities and with each other. After looking into certain psychological phenomena that are promoted by celebrity influence and social media platforms, we will be able to apply them to recent cases of toxic defensive behavior within the K-pop community. By recognizing how these issues occur, along with ways to successfully educate and debate within social media spaces, we will be able to acknowledge our own missteps and those of others. Change will never happen within these spaces unless we first discover why such problems are so rampant. But before going into these things, it is important to first explore the background of K-pop in a Western context.

The Hallyu Wave

How has K-pop grown to become so prominent in Western pop culture, coming all the way from Korea? An important contributor to this rise of popularity is *hallyu*, which literally translates to “Korean Wave.” This refers to the international rise of Korean pop culture that began in the late 1990s, a phenomenon that was evident in East and Southeast Asian regions. Such pop culture included not only music, but Korean dramas, fashion, technology, and more. More recently, there has been a new phase of the Korean wave that was first mentioned mid-2010, referred to as “hallyu 2.0.” Some researchers “equate hallyu 2.0 with the penetration of K-pop in the Western markets in tandem with the creation of K-pop fandom (Song and Jang, 2013).” Others “attribute the new Korean wave to more than one genre, including digital content... and gadgets (Kim 2013)” (Jin & Yoon, 2016, p. 1278). But either way, there are two

defining features that characterize this new wave of Korean pop culture. One is, as mentioned before, the sudden rise of popularity among Western, especially North American, audiences. The other is the significant role that social media has played in the production, distribution, and consumption of Korean content.

This second part is evident through the usage of social media platforms by Korean companies. Korean content is now easily accessible for international audiences, especially as hallyu communities grow in numbers abroad. In this new digital era, advertisements and sales are no longer limited to the country a brand belongs to. This is visible through promotion posts done in English or other languages. AprilSkin is a Korean skincare brand whose ads often pop up on Facebook for English-speaking users, calling attention to their products from a global audience. Along with Korean models, they also showcase pictures from reviews given by people of various ethnicities. Their Facebook page is notably labelled as “global.aprilskin.official,” and is separate from the one they use for Koreans (Aprilskin, n.d.). Many other Korean brands have a similar system—this includes not only cosmetic brands, but music labels, television networks, and more. Along with this, fan communities help to broaden the audience for Korean media even more, contributing to translations and subtitles for both products and shows. These aspects of social media leads to the possibility of a global outreach that has never been witnessed before.

K-pop and Parasocial Relationships

The rise in the use of social media to distribute content has led to K-pop idols having a special relationship with fans that is unique from other fanbases. To understand this, we will be taking a look into the activities of different entertainment companies in South Korea, including

Big Hit Entertainment (the company behind global superstars BTS) and JYP Entertainment (one of the famed “Big 3” of K-pop, which are especially well regarded in the industry for the training, formation, and promotion of leading K-pop stars). Big Hit Entertainment utilized an incredible multi-tiered marketing strategy in order to expand BTS’s audience abroad. An important note to make is that as a company, they had few resources to make use of. They were an extremely small company that was barely known for music artists in Korea, let alone abroad. For this reason, they had to look elsewhere in order to grow the group’s popularity—this was why they were able to understand the value of social media, using it to the best of their ability. “The group’s members regularly uploaded content such as vlogs, selfies, dance and song covers, and more onto various platforms. Platforms they used included Weibo, Fancafe, Vapp, Facebook, Instagram... Youtube channels, and Twitter” (Bautista, 2020). Through these activities, which began even before their 2013 debut, fans could keep up with the daily lives and progress of the members. Seeing the seven boys living life in their tiny one room apartment, training together in practice rooms, uploading funny pictures of each other, and interacting with fans through live streams struck a chord in new fans. They didn’t have the production value, but fans felt that they had talent and personality. Being able to see so deeply into their lives made fans feel as if they practically knew the members in real life, with every small idiosyncrasy and heartfelt moment being exposed to the world.

This is something that is extremely different from Western celebrities—the exposure of personal moments and personal struggle for all fans to see. Though not all Korean entertainment companies put an emphasis on this, this method of promotion can be seen all over K-pop. We can see the effectiveness this method has on fans through the promotion videos of groups in JYP

Entertainment. This entertainment company is one that has been at the forefront of the Korean wave abroad, with it being behind hit groups such as Wonder Girls and 2PM. In the present, the company continues to see this success, and uses a great variety of media in order to do so. This ranges from light-hearted vlogs of the idol groups travelling abroad, such as TWICE's show *TWICE in Switzerland*, to shows where members get paired off and talk about their friendship and history, such as Stray Kids' *Two Kids' Room*.

One specific example of a video from JYP Entertainment that hit fans deeply is ITZY's "Letters to MIDZY"—a video where the five girls opened up to their fans on the struggles they've experienced. They each have their own separate sections; one talks about her constant guilt regarding her inability to dance as well as her other members, while another talks about the constant hate she receives for her looks and how she struggles to put a self-confident image up for fans. The youngest, who was 15 at debut, speaks on her inexperience with life and the stress she has due to her desire for perfection (ITZY, 2020). This video received an outpouring of love and support from fans, praising the girls for their openness. This is evident through the comments, many of which were written in the form of the fans' own mini letters to the girls. One user wrote, "Chaeryoung, even if you feel sad or feel like crying in front of us, that doesn't make me think any less of you as an idol. If anything it makes me feel closer to you because you have to remember, even [though] you're an idol, you're still a human" (Ayamee Soyaa, 2020). Another wrote, "I didn't know one day I'd love these girls this much. Thank you for being so honest and vulnerable with us... Thank you for not giving up. Thank you for trying to be yourself" (R U A, 2020). What we can see through these comments is that fans evidently feel closer to the members of this group because of the perceived genuine openness in the video.

Having this as a promotion video not only allows the girls to feel that they are being more open and honest with their fans, but feeds into the fans' feelings of love and understanding toward them. Even without the people from either side knowing each other in real life, these feelings work to form a special relationship between the celebrities and the fans.

This special relationship leads toward a certain phenomenon—parasocial relationships. The term “parasocial relationship” was first coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956 to describe the one-sided psychological attachment formed from viewing television personalities (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). The term is now often used to describe relationships with stars on social media in particular, as their fanbases both rely on and grow through “relatability.” In a recent study, “How does a celebrity make fans happy? Interaction between celebrities and fans in the social media context,” Professors Minseong Kim (2020) and Jihye Kim (2020) investigated how parasocial relationships are established in the modern era, along with the statistically significant relationships they have with aspects such as commitment and loyalty. Data was collected on fans in the United States who followed their favorite celebrities social media activity (across different platforms), with the use of a questionnaire to measure different aspects of how they perceive their favorite celebrity and impacts on their daily life (measured on a 7-point Likert-scale). Their findings show that celebrities grow relationships through the use of similar language and voluntary self-disclosure of personal facts, leading to feelings of intimacy. The high factor loading of statements such as “I want to give something back to my favorite celebrity in real life” demonstrate how intimacy leads to loyalty. Though through the numbers, the fans seemed to be aware that their celebrities don't actually *know* them, they still demonstrated a desire to take actions for the happiness of their celebrities. This “giving

back” can be seen in the form of spreading or streaming their work, sending gifts/fanmail, and defending them against hater’s online. Fans will invest a great amount of time and effort into doing these things in hopes to help the celebrity they love, just as one would do for close friends and family. As we will see with fandoms on social media platforms, this loyalty can easily turn into something toxic.

Social Media Platforms as Echo Chambers

As one explores social media, they will find that people with the same interests often gravitate towards each other, forming communities. K-pop fandoms are formed in the same way—in fact, many users within these fandoms create accounts only for the purpose of staying up to date with their K-pop groups and communicating with other fans. As humans, we enjoy engaging in conversation with people who see things the same way we do. This phenomenon is called *homophily*—the tendency for individuals to be more attracted to others who are similar to themselves, may it be in traits, values, or interests. The study of homophily has been present ever since classical philosophy with Aristotle and Plato, but the more recent “digitalization of social networks has created opportunities for researchers to examine large-scale documentation of virtual relationships.” Along with this, “Kossinets and Watts (2009) also noted that homophily is induced when individuals are primarily presented with opportunities to interact in homogeneous networks (p. 407)” (Passe, Drake, & Mayger, 2018, para. 9). Social media presents this exact opportunity to all of its users. In other words, social media both promotes the occurrence of homophily in the modern world and allows for better documentation of the phenomenon.

In the past, homophily was heavily influenced by geographical limitations, organizational affiliations, and family ties. Now, however, digital networks allow us to move past those things. Though some experts thought that this would lead to online spaces of diversity and build up the common conversation, homophily led users toward others that agreed with their pre-existing views. Because of both this grouping and recommendation algorithms, the dangerous *echo chamber effect* has become prominent on all social media platforms (Passe et al., 2018). The echo chamber effect is caused by the fragmentation in conversation between ideologically different groups. When one only converses with a group that holds the same opinion they do, they simply hear their own viewpoint repeated back to them, like an echo. This leads to a constant reaffirmation in the beliefs that they hold (Bright, 2018, p. 17). This is dangerous as it creates an impervious bubble to outside ideas and opinions; slowly, the common conversation amongst all ideological groups will begin to disappear.

We can see that this is already happening through recent research conducted on Twitter users. One such study, led by five New York University professors, used a dataset of 3.8 million Twitter users and 150 million tweets to explore whether online communication on issues resembles an “echo chamber” or a “national conversation.” Though some uniting events did lead to a national conversation, they observed that more polarizing political topics (such as the 2012 presidential election) led to the formation of echo chambers. Some topics even began as a national conversation before slowly transforming into a more polarized exchange, as homophily caused users to continue conversation with those holding similar beliefs (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015, p. 1). Another researcher, Shira Dvir-Gvirsman (2017), found that this effect has additionally been amplified by media audience homophily, where people tend to

favor certain websites solely due to the audience they cater to. Individuals with extreme ideologies were found to partake more in media sources specifically for the audience that they are part of, rather than going around to different sites to find differing voices. This leads media users through a spiral of reinforcement. Social media users spend their time communicating with those who have the same beliefs, and read articles that cater to the beliefs that they “should” have. Through combining the findings of these studies, we can come to understand how groups have become so polarized. It is inevitable that the longer a user spends in a community, the more extreme their ideology will become. As their ideology becomes more extreme, so will their actions.

How does this relate to K-pop? Like any other community, K-pop is filled with opinions and different stances. Different users have different favorite groups, find different aspects of the industry interesting, and support their idols using different means. At the end of the previous section, we witnessed how parasocial relationships lead fans to invest their time and energy into certain actions in hopes to uplift their idols. Along with this, we saw situations in which fans heavily praised and felt love toward K-pop celebrities. On social media platforms, these fans will encounter others who think alike to them. The implications of parasocial relationships are already visible on an individual level, but they go to a greater extent when ideas are echoed within specific fandoms. In this next section, we will be exploring the power and influence that online fan communities hold in their numbers, especially when certain mindsets, stances, and ideas are amplified within the fandom.

Power and Influence of Fandoms

When fandoms grow big, they begin to have influence in outside realms. This happens as more activist voices join into the community; they lead the fans to take action in social and political spaces, using the tight community bond and the sheer numbers to their advantage. This is evident from the recent heralding of K-pop fandoms in political spaces. With the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement amidst the George Floyd protests, social media platforms saw a rise in activism. This was no different in the K-pop community. ARMY, the fandom of BTS, was recently highly praised across many different news websites for the actions they took with spreading awareness and donating to the movement. The fans had one project specifically that took the media by storm which went by the name “#MatchAMillion.” This came after the K-pop group’s \$1 million donation to Black Lives Matter. One specific Twitter account, One in an ARMY, arranged this project for fans to match BTS’s donation. BTS’s donation was announced on June 6, and “[b]y late evening on June 7, [ARMY’s] donations surpassed \$1 million” (Haasch, 2020). The general public was stunned by the political activism and generosity of the fandom. Though fan communities in the past have also had their spurs of activism, activist projects at this level is almost unheard of coming from fandoms.

Even jokes within the fandom have ended up influencing the real world outside of K-pop. One example of this was when K-pop fans (along with TikTok users) were credited for sabotaging Donald Trump’s Tulsa rally. Fans rushed to reserve the free tickets to the rally, and ended up “skewing the Trump campaign’s projections and securing the empty seats” (Sinha, 2020). The effect on the rally was so drastic that even the Trump for President campaign’s digital

media director, Brad Parscale, pointed out the interference through a Tweet (Sinha, 2020). This all happened simply because the fandom was presented with an idea the general community liked and found fun, and so they collectively jumped straight into it. Bouncing around within the echo chambers, this idea reached the general mass of fans on social media, and action was promoted through shares and conversation.

Something that is important to note is that for both of these “projects,” along with many other projects K-pop fandoms have taken up regarding global issues, the media responded positively. The actions that these fans took put the fandom—and therefore, the group itself—into a spotlight of praise. In fact, some news articles noted that the perception of K-pop fans has flipped as a result of this activism, with people who once found them annoying now praising them for the work they have done (Chaudhry, 2020). This encourages fans to continue with using their power and influence for good. As mentioned before, fans want to give something back to their favorite celebrities; in this case, what the fans are doing is helping to paint them in a more positive light in the eyes of the general public. This is a huge bonus on top of the fun and “hype” the fans have along the way. But what happens when activism doesn’t add to a positive public perception? What about when the activism comes down to calling out problems within the K-pop industry and from the K-pop idols themselves? The power that these fandoms hold in socio-political spheres can be strong, but it can also become dangerous when directed in the opposite direction.

Cultural Appropriation and Insensitivity in K-pop

The fact is that although fandoms often work as a force for socio-political good, they only do so if it will uplift the artists that they support. When movements against issues (such as cultural insensitivity, for example) are directed against their own idols, fans often turn a blind eye. This ignorance is something that has been witnessed many times over the past few years, especially as K-pop has evidently worked to incorporate more global influences into their music. As you listen to the sounds within K-pop as a genre, you will notice that it pulls a lot of inspiration from other cultures. This has been true ever since what was considered the very first K-pop group, Seo Taiji and the boys, which made use of elements such as breakdancing and rap within their performances and discography. K-pop groups in the present use dance moves popularized by the African-American street dance scene, and will often recruit foreign choreographers to put together their iconic performances. There is also a strong rap culture within K-pop, with almost every recent “title track” of the more popular groups having a rap segment or two weaved into the song (Gardner, 2019). This isn’t inherently an issue as these things can be done through cultural appreciation—the recruitment of foreign artists to craft these songs and performances, along with the research that goes into understanding and authenticity, would be something that should be praised. However, we can see that this often is not the case.

A recent example of this comes from September 2019, where there was a significant amount of outrage online regarding something said by (G)I-dle’s Leader, Producer, and Main Rapper, Soyeon. The outrage revolves around a clip from a show called Queendom. In the segment shown, the group was planning a future performance together in which they needed to take an old song from another K-pop group, 2NE1, and perform it as their own. In the aim to reproduce the track with their own sound and colors, Soyeon made statements such as “I want

[Yuqi] to sing this part in an African style, like a shouting tribal chief.” She also said, “Let’s replace the beat with African drums,” causing the group to excitedly beat on the table in a stereotypical manner. And lastly, the statement at center of the controversy, “Let’s go with ‘ethnic hip’”—with the “ethnic hip” part being said in English (Baddie Louis Misoo, 2019). People were offended by her casual promotion of stereotypes surrounding tribal chiefs and Africans, along with the ignorance in her use of this “ethnic hip” phrase.

There is something innately problematic about the way that they pulled harmful stereotypes from these other cultures, mixed and matched them as they please, and sprinkled them onto their performance without doing any research. As celebrities, they have an influence. Them taking these actions demonstrates to their audience that it is acceptable behavior. For this reason, the initial outcry was loud, with the clip going viral within the K-pop community on Twitter. Albeit this, (G)I-dle and their company never released a statement about the situation, and never lost any fans for it. In fact, the resulting performance gained them a lot more recognition and was heavily praised among fans, with people calling things such as the war cry a “killing part”—a key point of the performance that stunned the audience and brought the performance together as a whole. How could they move past this so easily?

In the eyes of (G)I-dle’s fans, called Neverlands, the girls are evidently good people. They show it through their politeness, their friendship with each other, and the love they constantly display for their fans. And in the way that one would defend their family or friends, the Neverlands jumped to defend the group on all the social media platforms they were getting called out on. Fans would reply saying that haters are obsessed and reaching for things to hate on (G)I-dle for. The general consensus among the majority of fans seemed to be, “oml literally none

of this is offensive” (joshu list, 2019), “stop putting your western views onto [Koreans,] it doesn’t mean the same thing” (neverbong, 2020). The bond that the parasocial relationship had formed caused fans to push away any “haters” they came across. But as toxic and unproductive as this back and forth argument between fans and non-fans may seem, at least there is a dialogue happening there. This area is the sliver of interaction between different communities, and genuine conversation has helped some less extreme fans to understand the inherent issues.

Something strange occurs when we take a turn and dig deeper into specific sides. On the side hoping to educate the girl group and hold them accountable, there are many popular threads that examined the issues within the performance and Soyeon’s statements—yet if you were to go into their replies, you would notice a lack of response from actual Neverlands. These threads mostly see replies that reaffirm their ideas. On the other hand, if you switch scopes and go into the Neverland community on Twitter or the comments under the YouTube video of the performance, you’ll only see praise. Even threads that attempt to excuse (G)I-dle’s actions aren’t widespread in the community (neverbong, 2020). A majority of the fandom tries to ignore the problem entirely and focus their energy into praising the performance, as mentioned earlier. The smaller voices in these spaces that question the cultural insensitivity are squashed by the fans immediately who call the issue nonsense, not wanting the girls to be painted in a bad light. On social media, this fandom formed a space where they could continue to promote ignorance, as outside voices would merely bounce off the walls of their bubble.

The extremes rarely interact, and when they do, the conversation often devolves into petty insults; this reaffirms pre-existing beliefs that the other side is not worth having a conversation with. Since fans found more comfort in staying within and conversing with their

own fandom, after a week, they seemed to mostly forgive and forget (Gonsalves, 2020). One Reddit user questioned how everybody in the fandom forgave and forgot so easily without a single statement, the fans replied, “a statement would blow this up even more” (generaltoe, 2019). One replier responded with another commonly seen argument when it comes to cultural insensitivity in K-pop. “[T]he U.S. is not the target audience of this show. Just because the U.S. has huge problems with racial inequality and racism itself the whole world shouldn’t be obligated to take care of their issues” (generaltoe, 2019).

This statement has been used extremely often in excusing problematic behavior from the Korean entertainment industry. However, as K-pop has a growing global audience, it matters that they take these issues into account. Well-known groups in K-pop, including (G)I-dle itself, are growing in influence globally, conversing with international audiences and striking brand deals abroad. So when these slip-ups occur, it is important to hold them accountable in order for idols to understand the implications of their actions, even when there is no ill intent behind their ignorance. One thing to note about South Korea itself is that it is amongst the world’s most ethnically and culturally homogenous nations, leading to many Koreans being unaware of outside social issues. In an interview conducted by John Kojiro Yasuda, Professor Gi-Wook Shin (the author of “Ethnic Nationalism in Korea”) talked about the pride that South Koreans have in their ethnic homogeneity, with it being an integral part of their nationalism. He mentions that the lack of diversity that this promotes can be linked to a lack of knowledge regarding racial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and discrimination against minorities. K-pop celebrities are no exception from this—many grow up in a South Korean society, ignorant to outside issues. This is the reason for why offensive mistakes can often be attributed to ignorance rather than ill

intent. Nevertheless, these mistakes work as opportunities to educate idols on the effect their words and actions can have. Fans are responsible for helping K-pop idols in this manner.

This example with (G)I-dle is one of many. We have seen this outcry and the resulting pushback plenty of times before, such as when Red Velvet's Wendy imitated a "blaccent" on a TV show (Kekiikatt, 2018) and when TWICE's Jihyo called herself "Indian Jihyo" while wearing a Native American Halloween costume ("TWICE's Jihyo Criticized," 2018). These are only a few examples amongst many others. When we ignore this behavior, then idols will think that what they are doing is acceptable. With the Korean audience that they mainly converse with, they may even think that these culturally insensitive jokes are funny. Additionally, fans who look up to these idols and have yet to understand the implications of these issues will laugh along and imitate their behavior. Even fans who feel offended will push down negative feelings to go along with the crowd, forming excuses (Redvelvutsus, 2020). Ignorance teaches people that being insensitive is not a problem, and even promotes such behavior. Going further than this, the K-pop fandom has often been seen turning against communities where the outcry is the loudest.

Anti-Blackness Within K-pop Fandoms

Despite the K-pop fandom's recent political activism with charities and the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a constant trend of Black fans facing racism within the community. The change of perception around K-pop fans in activism masks the problem even more than before. Though the impact of "K-pop allies" is admirable, on a deeper level, their actions merely seem to be performative. Whenever a Black fan raises concerns over misappropriation of African American culture, they are immediately labelled as haters or "antis."

When they suggest that idols use their platform to speak up on social issues, they experience pushback from the fandom. In an interview, a BTS fan from Maryland stated, “It’s difficult to watch the press praise a group of fans who typically do not support Black fans when it comes to racial critiques regarding a group or artist’s anti-Black behavior” (Stitch, 2020). Not only are their concerns drowned out, but B mentions how Black fans encounter a lot of “name calling (the N-word and other racial slurs) and even death threats when they point out racism” (Stitch, 2020). These same fans who insult them are the ones with #BLM in their Twitter bios, who like and share articles about the amazing activism within the K-pop community. All these fans care about is their favorite idol’s reputation (Luna, 2020).

This clearly demonstrates how the desire to defend can lead directly toward not only ignorance, but racism itself. Black fans are often perceived as the “oversensitive” ones within the fandom, yet this is solely because there is such a significant amount of ignorance on Black people within K-pop itself. Since K-pop idols often make mistakes that are offensive to Black people, it is inevitable that Black people will be the ones who most often call out their actions. Chelsea S., a Black K-pop fan who has been in the community since 2006, stated that they do these things because “[they] want to see the idols [they] like do better... [that’s] why [they] try and correct them in the first place, because [they] like these people. [They] like the music” (Chaudhry, 2020). These people are not attempting to hate on or bring down K-pop idols, but lift them up through educating them, helping them become celebrities to look up to from all around the world. But because of the oversensitivity of the fandom, they are pushed away.

Though this is the most severe with Black K-pop fans, the same attitude is often seen toward other minority groups that K-pop enjoys pulling from, such as Hispanics and South

Asians. The hate they receive is almost ironic, with these cultures being the same “concepts” that are heavily praised among the general fandoms. Fans love to see their K-pop idols looking ethnic, yet refuse to acknowledge any advice on how they can do so in a more respectful manner. All individuals that speak up when feeling hurt and disrespected get “doxxed and harassed to no end” (Sanjay, 2020). How will we be able to learn and improve if we don’t listen to these voices?

Recent Improvements

Despite all this, there has been improvements over the past few years, with some fandoms taking it upon themselves to educate on and fix mistakes. Spreading the word and mass emailing the company has actually led to apologies and results, and the hate revolving around these issues was quick to die down afterward. A recent example was the Blackface controversy around Stray Kids’ Hyunjin’s costume on a variety show. “In the latest episode of their new season of *Finding SKZ*, each member of the group put together a costume that would make the rest of them laugh. For his attempt, Hyunjin put on a curly wig and a pair of big, red lips” (“Stray Kids Apologize,” 2020). This costume was based on the Korean cartoon character Go Eunae. This character is well known among South Koreans; however, little of the general population knows that this character was initially designed using racist stereotypes of Black people. Though it was unintentional, this mockery hurt the feelings of many Black fans. The fandom worked together to send emails to the show producer and the group’s entertainment company, hoping to teach Hyunjin and the other members about why this action was so hurtful. After a few days, Stray Kids (2020) eventually posted an apology directly to their Instagram account:

We strongly believe that everyone, no matter which culture they are in, has the right to be respected; therefore, we reject all discrimination based on any orientation and oppose all forms of inequality in the world. Yet, we are still lacking in many things and we are trying our hardest to become better. We would like to apologize to anyone if we have stepped on a rake. It was never our intention but due to our lack of understanding. We promise you that we will do our best to become better Stray Kids.

This demonstrates that the words of the fandom can actually reach the group. Along with this, most of the voices that joined for the sake of the “hate train” died down afterwards, as the controversy was ended by the apology. There was still a significant amount of anti-blackness within the community, with some fans saying that these Black fans were being oversensitive, but the group’s acknowledgement helped to get the right message across nonetheless.

Another example comes from the biggest girl group in K-pop, BLACKPINK. Their most recent music video for “How You Like That” “received negative publicity from Indian fans as the Hindu deity Ganesha was used as a prop.” Though “YG Entertainment did not respond directly to the controversy,” they “respond[ed] swiftly by editing the MV” (“YG Swiftly Edits,” 2020). The entertainment company contacted YouTube behind the scenes in order to replace those sections of the video without actually having to take it down. Though they did not directly address the controversy in words, their actions showed an understanding of their mistakes and a real effort to make change. The outcry likely would have died down after a few weeks if they ignored it, but the company took the steps to take out the offensive imagery.

These examples both demonstrate that having these conversations can spark change. Fans were extremely happy to see that their voices were listened to and were reassured by the

acknowledgement of the mistake, whether the fix was direct or more subtle. Realizing their own insensitivity also pushes the idols themselves to further understand global issues; this leads to less of the same missteps in the future. When fans get out of the mindset of “blind defense,” they will realize that they can genuinely help K-pop celebrities to improve for the future, setting a better example for all of their followers. We will only see change when we stop ignoring the issues that are right in front of us and begin to bring up the conversation in a respectful way.

Bringing Up the Conversation

Having respectful and productive conversations on social media platforms is a widespread struggle. Anonymity and limited message lengths online often lead to discourse that spirals into misunderstandings and petty insults. How can we improve for the future? How can we bring necessary conversations into these spaces, especially when the community is unwilling to listen? One thing that is important to keep in mind is staying civil during online debate. Recent studies have revealed how online, “uncivil political discourse produces negative emotions and attitudes toward the opposing side... emphasizing antagonism... [and eroding] individuals’ expectation about reaching consensus through deliberation” (Hwang, Kim & Huh, 2014, p. 623). This leads to a greater polarization in the common conversation, pushing both sides of the argument further toward their respective extremes. When participants of a different study were randomly presented with either civil exchange or uncivil exchange, researchers found that there were higher expectations of public deliberation when the online debate was civil (Hwang et al., 2014). Though these studies were done using political debate, similar ideas can be applied to any type of debate from opposing sides on an ideological spectrum. In order to get a message across, we are responsible for carefully considering the words and tone that we use.

Although we must use kind and respectful language, this does not mean that we should skirt around the issue at hand. They must be addressed directly. Professors Prudence Carter, Russell Skiba, Mariella Arredondo, and Mica Pollock (2016) strongly support the idea that race must be directly addressed within racial discipline disparities. In order to “effectively address inequity, the role of race must be explicitly acknowledged” (p. 207). If we avoid digging deeper and unravelling implicit biases that lead to problematic behavior, nothing changes. The same idea can be applied to a multitude of issues within K-pop. Fans on social media who truly care about educating their artists and other people in the fandom need to dive straight into the problem, speaking both respectfully and directly. Change is possible through these means, as we have seen in music education itself. Music teachers have been advised to take the time to learn the “social and historical implications to teaching and learning music from marginalized cultures before doing so” (Howard, 2020, p. 69). This dismantles cultural appropriation by bringing recognition into the classroom—teachers will learn how to present these complex issues to the students that learn under them. The same can be done with K-pop celebrities. When these celebrities are brought into the conversation and take the time to learn about these issues, they will be able to set a positive example for their fans to follow. This is the power that their influence holds. Through these means, we can transform cultural appropriation into cultural appreciation, and racial insensitivity into respect and compassion.

Conclusion

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. However, this does

not mean that we are unable to change. In recent years, the K-pop stan community has been making its improvements on learning and educating about political correctness; nevertheless, there are still many underlying issues that must be re-examined. Fans must realize that we do not actually know our celebrities as friends, and must stop idolizing them. Most importantly, we need to realize that just like the rest of us, they are humans, and can therefore both make and learn from their mistakes. Holding them accountable does not drag them down—in fact, it teaches them how to appeal to a growing global community, turning these celebrities into more aware influences. Through examining the root causes of these issues, we will be able to make a shift toward positive change within the community. After all, recognition of the problem is the very foundation of change.

For people who are a part of such communities online, it is important to take a step back and realize when you or those around you are coming up with excuses, defending things you should not be, and accepting apologies that are not meant for you. By learning how to promote constructive conversation in fandoms and by honing the skill of pushing accountability rather than forming negative accusations, K-pop fans on social media will be able to help their favorite idols and create a more welcoming community for everyone of all backgrounds, just as they often say they hope to do.

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