

## **K-Pop Fans React: Hybridity and the White Celebrity-Fan on YouTube**

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Reaction videos by White celebrity-fans of K-pop reveal hybridity's formations in the global reception of K-pop in the West. A deeply understudied genre of YouTube, the reaction video needs scholarly attention. This article reveals that White celebrity-fans produce YouTube reaction texts that perform limited hybridity. Their hybridity is open to the symbolic meanings of K-pop texts and resistive practices demonstrated through deep commitments to non-White music and performers, but it is constrained by White racial logics that support postracism and gendered logics of their local spaces.

*Keywords: K-pop, audience reception, YouTube, White fans, microcelebrity, hybrid potentiality*

The splash of the "Korean Wave" has been widely felt as its ripples have spread far across the world's oceans. Korean popular culture has been a countercurrent that has lapped onto the borders of the West. These counterflows, however, would not be possible if it were not for new media technologies (Ono & Kwon, 2013). YouTube works particularly well in the promotion of K-pop because of the highly visual nature of K-pop performances. In response, some fans have uploaded K-pop reaction videos, which in turn have created minor *celebrity-fans*, blurring production, reception, and text. Celebrity-fans express their fan interests while cultivating fans of their own through the very platform in which they receive K-pop. Their reception of K-pop texts as fans is produced with the illusion of simultaneous fandom in the form of reaction videotexts. At the same time that blurring occurs through the reception and production of fandom, they produce hybrid spaces as their fan interests in the Korean *Other* intersect with their racially different identities.

Despite YouTube's widespread use and space in the cultural imagination as the primary site of user-created content, reaction videos are largely unstudied, despite being one of the most viewed "genres" on the platform (Palladino, 2016). Indeed, the only published research I could find is Yeran Kim's (2015) work on K-pop fan reaction videos. She argues that the videos blur reception and production by navigating the tension of authentically immersive responses versus the labor of production and self-branding. In the popular press, reaction videos are maligned as uncreative, insubstantial, and aesthetically

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valueless. As Bourdieu (1979) points out in his homology thesis, social capital is aligned with class such that bourgeois tastes are valued most highly. Thus, the dismissive attitude toward reaction videos does not conclude their unimportance, but rather reveals an exertion of cultural power. Thus, to study reaction videos is to give voice to the everyday tastes of fans.

K-pop fan reaction videos of White English-speaking fans, in particular, are theoretically interesting because their videos are an articulation of discourse that fits within global racial logics still structured and advanced by Whiteness.<sup>2</sup> It would be too simplistic to make a singular claim about cultural appropriation in this case because their fan interests mean that they elevate the specifically Korean text as important in the construction of their (White) identities; yet, it would be naïve to argue that K-pop reaction videos open unproblematic intercultural spaces. Thus, reaction videos on K-pop provide important insight toward understanding White hybrid reception within existing racial logics, their local contexts, and fan practices.

For this project, I focused on the most popular White YouTubers that primarily upload K-pop fan reaction videos. Overall, 52 channels were identified, and the 17 most popular were chosen from that group. Ultimately, I examined eight men's and nine women's channels with the criterion that they have at least 5,000 subscribers. Arranged by popularity, the channels for YouTube men include Dylan Jacob (U.S.), kpopsteve (U.S.), Shane's Kpop videos (U.S.), Grissle's World (U.S.), Awkward Luc (U.S.), Ronnie Icon (Netherlands), MW K-pop (U.S.), and John Norman (U.S.). The women are Gwiyomi Galaxy (U.S.), Hannah May (UK), Katy 케이티 (U.S.), Gizibes (U.S.), Vera 베라 (Germany), LampG4H2 (U.S.), Insomniacs withkpopprobs (U.S.), Hallyu Doing (UK), and 4maybeso (Norway).

Sampling White YouTubers was imperfect because they rarely racially self-identify and did not respond to inquiries. Therefore, sampling decisions were based on my reading of the YouTubers' racial identity and infrequent self-identification in the videos. Fortunately, the two YouTubers whose racial identities were most ambiguous clarified during their "question and answer" (Q&A) videos that they are Sicilian (Gizibes) and French American (Awkward Luc). Because of their self-identified ethnonational origin, it is most likely that they self-identify as White. Even still, because reading race is at best a contested proposition, I corroborated with two focus groups recruited from a college in the Northeast United States. The first consisted of nine women and four men—12 White participants and one Black participant. The second consisted of six women and four men—eight White participants, one Black Latino participant, and one Asian American participant. The first focus group identified all YouTubers as unambiguously White. The second group was nearly unanimous in viewing the YouTubers as White. Two participants (Asian American man and White woman) thought that the YouTuber, Shane's K-pop videos, is possibly Latino or White, and two members (Asian American man and White woman) thought that Vera 베라 is possibly biracial Asian White, despite her location in Germany and her blonde hair and green eyes. Despite the lack of unanimity, 21 of 23 participants viewed Shane's Kpop videos and Vera 베라 as White, and there was full agreement on the racial reading of the remaining YouTubers.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to implicitly reify White audiences as singularly important, but, rather, the work is meant to study White celebrity-fans to make Whiteness visible, an identity that gains power through its invisibility (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

To focus the analysis, I purposively sampled eight music video reactions. The first two were Mamamoo's "Um Oh Ah Yeh" and Big Bang's "Bang Bang Bang." Using Gaon Charts, the most influential source of K-pop sales, I started with the most popular male and female "idol groups" of 2015. Next, I looked through the YouTubers' reaction video playlists to find common videos. The most common "boy bands" were BTS and EXO, and the most common "girl groups" were Girls' Generation and 4Minute. For these groups, I chose their most recent major hits: BTS's "Run," EXO's "Call Me Baby," Girls' Generation's "Lion Heart," and 4Minute's "Crazy." To diversify the reactions, I chose two ballads, including Park Hyo Shin's "Wildflower" and Taeyeon's "I." Altogether, I analyzed 40 reaction videos, which ranged in length from 5 to 15 minutes, and to more fully situate myself in their responses, I viewed many of the YouTubers' other reaction videos and all of their skits and Q&As.

For the analysis, I used an audience reception framework situated in cultural studies. Thus, I assumed that the YouTubers are active audiences, interpreting media through their own situated cultural experience (Hall, 1999). I also understand that their reception is complicated by the production of their own texts and the cultivation of their own audiences (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, they not only are fans of K-pop but also develop their own fans through the production of K-pop intertexts. Studying the reaction videos raised unique challenges because they blur audience reception and textual representation. Because celebrity-fan YouTubers *perform* authenticity and self-brand for audiences, the methodologically safer choice is to view the reaction videos as texts rather than as ethnographic audience reception data. However, it would be an overcorrection to assume that the reactions do not reflect genuinely felt articulations of fandom. Thus, I do not claim that their performances are like actors', which is separate from their actual selves, but, rather, I argue that the performances are a version of themselves as celebrity-fans. To structure the argument, I begin with a brief review of the literature on the transnational reception of K-pop, hybridity, and White reception of non-White texts, and then I turn to the analysis of the reaction videos, examining the YouTubers' emotional investments and gender differences in reception.

### **Consuming Korea, Producing Hybridity**

Globalization of media texts can be understood as transnational flows that symbolically join nations (Lin, Song, & Ball-Rokeach, 2010). This creates interconnectedness and global identities (Curtin, 2002) that provide access to multiple representational codes and symbolic worlds (Hannerz, 1996). It allows distant fans virtual spaces to meet, support, and cultivate each others' interests (Jenkins, 2003). As spatial distance collapses, fans' copresent uses of transnational texts promote hybridity (Jin & Ryoo, 2014), which can be understood as spaces between fixed identities—the local culture that is experienced and the global culture that is received (Bhabha, 1994). Consistent with views of globalization that argue that the local culture is the lens through which transnational cultural texts are received (Iwabuchi, 2005; Liebes & Katz, 1986), K-pop researchers argue that global fans interpret and use K-pop in ways that are meaningful in their local experience (Jung, 2011; Sirituvusak & Shin, 2007). The received global Other is admired and consumed but still distant and other, so the site of interpretation is an imagined space in which hybrid third meanings exist (Maira, 2005).

For K-pop fans, who are mostly young and digitally fluent, they create participatory fan spaces online (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013). The Internet helps to bridge their geographical distance by creating

virtual communities where they can find like-minded fans (Jung, 2011). Finding online spaces is a feature of fandom as fans are marginalized in everyday life because of their "excessive" interests (Jenkins, 2003). The ridicule is exacerbated when becoming fans of texts that are locally marked as racially different and marginalized in global hierarchies of power (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013). For fans in the West, their admiration, identification, and emulation of K-pop idols and texts occur within dominant (White) racial logics. Although hybridity does hold the promise of greater intercultural understanding, it should be remembered that flows of texts are still organized with asymmetrical power (Hannerz, 1996; Iwabuchi, 2005). As Kraidy (2005) notes in his concept of critical transculturalism, audiences are empowered to interpret but that this happens in negotiation with uneven media flows that structurally advantage the West.

Because of context collapse, the idea that online producers have multiple audiences and few context cues to know whom they are addressing, new media users err on the side of caution in their self-presentation (Marwick & boyd, 2010). It should be expected then that online spaces would follow dominant cultural norms. Concerning racial difference, the dominant view is the advocacy of colorblindness, which is linked to postracism, the belief that race should not matter in social relations and that racism no longer substantively shapes life outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This is true on social media, too (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015; Oh, 2016). Although postracism is the prevailing racial logic of the current conjuncture, overt racism is still present. On YouTube, videos straightforwardly circulate problematic Orientalist tropes (Smith & McDonald, 2011). Even in the case of KevJumba, a prominent Asian American YouTuber, he ambivalently recycles anti-Asian stereotypes to attract popularity (Saul, 2010).

If White reception practices, generally, of racial Others are a guide, then it might be expected that their reception is also marked by global power that favors their interpretations, that trade in dominant racial beliefs about Asians (Jung, 2011; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006), that consume racial difference for Whites' pleasure (hooks, 1992; Maira, 2005; Watts & Orbe, 2002), that confirm beliefs in postracism (Jhally & Lewis, 1992), and that fetishize Asia as a fantasy world to allow personal self-discovery (Blouin, 2011; Morley & Robins, 1995). Yet, it is not this straightforward. White fans of K-pop complicate global flows through their hybrid interests and participation in fan communities. Their fandom suggests an admiration of and identification with the racial, ethnic, and cultural specificity of their favorite performers and songs that can lead to resistive, hybrid identities. They would be joining transnational online communities that are marked by support for their fan interests and the promotion of their idols (Darling-Wolf, 2004), so criticism, particularly racialized criticism, would be difficult to level in these spaces. It raises the following question: How do White K-pop celebrity-fans on YouTube construct hybrid identities through their simultaneous fan reception of K-pop and their production of K-pop reaction videos?

### **"Oh My God"—Reacting to K-Pop**

K-pop reaction videos have a generic form separated in three parts (Kim, 2015). The first and shortest is the introduction when YouTubers welcome their viewers and discuss the object of their reaction. In the middle, YouTubers are foregrounded watching and responding to the music video. Typically, the music video is placed in a small screen about one ninth to one twelfth the size of the screen with lowered volume levels. After the music video ends, YouTubers discuss their feelings, sense-making of

the music video, and their evaluation of it. Because K-pop music videos are not simply or even primarily aural texts (Lie, 2013), YouTubers react to the "visuals" of the performers, the "choreo," and the "story" of the music video in addition to the song and qualities of the music.

Perhaps, the most salient feature of reaction videos is the articulation of affective investments in K-pop. Emotional connection to texts is a hallmark of what it means to be a fan (Hadas & Shifman, 2013). As Grossberg (1992) notes, fans demonstrate an affective sensibility that is demonstrated through their absorption in the text. This absorption requires ideological work to justify their interests, and as such, it holds potential to resist dominant ideology by smoothing over difference. Although Grossberg does not explain interests in the Other through the prism of hybridity, arguably, fan interests deepen entanglements with another's culture, leading to the development of hybridity, particularly because fans' emotional investments are used as resources to construct identities, not only as fans, but in the broader construction of self. For YouTube celebrity-fans, emotional commitment is demonstrated through their focused attention on their screen and away from the camera, and emotional commitment is shown through anticipation prior to watching a new video and pleasure derived at the moment of reception.

During many of the videos, YouTubers danced or bobbed their heads during the song, smiled and laughed, occasionally shouted in delight, sang along to the English hooks, and clapped their hands. Grissle's World simply said, "Ah, damn, I'm diggin' this beat" as he danced to 4Minute's "Crazy." When watching Taeyeon's "I," Dylan Jacob exclaimed, "This is like the happiest I've felt in a really long time, and this just made everything in the world okay." Gizibes were also demonstrably excited as they put their hands above their heads and waved them rhythmically to mimic being in a club as they watched Big Bang's "Bang Bang Bang." Afterward, Ronnie of Gizibes said, "That was awesome. I'm sweating. I'm sweating." During some reactions, their pleasure overwhelmed them. While watching 4Minute's "Crazy," MW K-Pop repeated, "Oh, my God!" several times and spun around in his chair. Afterward, he was left speechless, saying, "I feel like I need to say something, but I can't say anything." In some cases, the sense of being overwhelmed was not because of happiness, per se, but because of emotional connection. During her viewing of Park Hyo Shin's "Wildflower," Vera 베라 wiped tears from her eyes while smiling, culminating in her sobbing into her hands. For the same video, Katy 케이티, whose eyes were swollen with tears during the romantic ballad, said, "This guy is like making my heart shatter into 5 billion pieces."

The pleasure they experience is complicated because of the nature of fan pleasure, generally, and because of the form of the YouTube reaction videos, specifically. The reaction video blurs the boundaries of reception and production, so there is no clear dividing line between the pleasure of reception and the pleasure of production. Perhaps, however, it is unnecessary to analytically distill pleasure into a particular site because fan activity has always been marked by this fuzziness (Jenkins, 1992). Textual production is one of the differences that mark an ordinary viewer and a fan. Fan production is labor that intensifies fans' emotional connections to a text and provides pleasure through the validation of supportive fan communities (Burwell, 2015; Hanmer, 2014). This is especially necessary as many of the YouTubers in Q&As discussed how they feel alienated because their K-pop interests are marginalized in their locally experienced lives (see Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013). In fact, two of the YouTubers, 4maybeso and Katy 케이티, both used the expression "forever alone" when describing their fan interests. Because pleasure is also found in resistive readings (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Radway, 1983), the YouTubers described the videos as

empowering what was perceived as peculiar identities without K-pop (e.g., John Norman, Awkward Luc, and Gizibes). It is important to note that fans “poach” meanings from fan texts to empower their own identities (Jenkins, 1992), so when fans’ interests reach beyond the boundaries of their own cultural identities, it necessarily creates hybrid third spaces where fan identities intersect with transnational texts.

Hybridity finds its most tangible form with the expressed desire for sexual and romantic union. In the aforementioned reaction to “Wildflower,” Katy 케이티 said, “How old is he? He sounds like an older guy. But, he’s really hot. He looks really handsome.” Stevie of Hallyu Doing was also attracted to Park Hyo Shin, saying, “I fancy him a lot. I’m just almost in love with him. I fancy him in a lovely way.” Women’s heterosexual desire was most visible in reactions to EXO’s “Call Me Baby.” The music video did not have narrative meaning, but instead showcased the group’s dancing talent. Several YouTubers pointed out that EXO is known for its dynamic dancing and noted the choreography for “Call Me Baby” as sexually charged with the members’ multiple “crotch grabs.” Savannah of Gwiyomi Galaxy playfully articulated her sexual attraction to the members with decreasing subtlety. At first, she said, “They all look so good. Ah! Call me, baby. I will.” As the video progressed, her body moved around fitfully, and with the song’s conclusion, she and her sister Annabelle engaged in the following dialogue:

Savannah: Any thoughts, or are your ovaries [motions with her hands down and outward]?  
 Annabelle: Savannah was freaking out the whole time [gently slaps her sister’s cheek].  
 Are you okay there? She was like dying the whole time. I was just dying on the inside.

At the conclusion of the video, Annabelle also playfully joined along.

Savannah: Call me, baby.  
 Annabelle: EXO’s “Call Me Baby.” I’m gonna have a baby.

As female fans self-represent attraction to K-pop idols, it challenges the representations of asexual and undesirable Asian/American masculinity in the West (see Espiritu, 2004; Hamamoto, 1994; Ono & Pham, 2009). As White celebrity-fans produce texts that bring together symbolic worlds for their viewers, they construct hybrid third spaces that allow for identities unbound to the hegemonic meanings in their local spaces (see Bhabha, 1996).

### **“Just Watch the Glory”—Fan Investments in Celebrities and Texts**

For fans, emotional investments lead to active engagement with texts (Jenkins, 1992). In their reactions, K-pop YouTubers interacted with the texts, expressed admiration for their favorite performers, and worked on behalf of the groups to raise recognition. Unlike the products of globalization that Iwabuchi (2004) points out, K-pop is not “culturally odorless.” It does not disguise cultural traces of the originating culture. Rather, K-pop is a hybrid form that mixes Western popular music and images with indigenous tastes, creating texts that have *mugukjeok* qualities meant for global distribution (Jung, 2011). *Mugukjeok* literally means “nationlessness,” Jung’s (2011) conceptualization of *mugukjeok* refers to the ways in which Korean texts retain their Koreanness but with enough transnationally recognizable elements to facilitate global reception. Its hybrid nature allows it to be relatable but with Korean cultural specificity.

One way in which fans of Korean media actively engage texts is through deep readings that deconstruct texts for their representational codes (Schulze, 2013). For the YouTubers, the practice of decoding tended toward seeking preferred meanings (see Hall, 1999), but because they lack the cultural and linguistic knowledge to fully understand the text, their first readings are negotiated. As such, their readings are hybridized. As negotiated readings, the YouTubers' lived experiences in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway are brought directly into the reading of the text (see Fiske, 1987). As they learn the "true" meaning of the songs and music videos, they generate hybrid connection as they internalize the meanings of a different cultural terrain into their worldview, articulating themselves differently into the local culture.

Because of their inability to understand the language, the visual readings of the texts are important to global fans' interest in K-pop (Ono & Kwon, 2013). They actively work to interpret the meaning of the music video apart from the song with stated intentions of later matching it to the lyrics when English translations become available. This interpretive work was most visible when the meanings are obscured such as in Big Bang's "Bang Bang Bang," which features each performer individually in various dystopic environments, and in BTS's "Run," which features hooliganism, partying, and in-fighting. After the "Run" video, kpopsteve pointed out that he enjoys the conversations the (English-speaking) K-pop fan community has to understand it. He said,

I'm not going to have the correct meaning, but I'm sure no one does because I know so many people online are like this is this, but it seems like everyone's theories are different. But, I think it's cool, it's so cool when they give everyone something to talk about.

Ronnie Icon and Hallyu Doing both appealed to the fan community to participate and help in decoding the preferred meaning. Ronnie Icon said,

I'm gonna need your help explaining what this is, what has happened with what the "I Need You" video was about because I did a reaction back then and I was like what the, what is going on? [Flashback to earlier video]. And, of course, there were these die-hard *sasaeng* fans or whatever, who were like, no, you don't get it, no, you are stupid.

Here, he makes three interesting moves that need further deconstruction. First, he demonstrates intertextual knowledge by connecting the "Run" video to an earlier release ("I Need You"). His use of intertextuality demonstrates his legitimacy as a fan. As Jenkins (1992) notes, heavy involvement with texts, intertextual understanding, and attention are necessary to join fan communities. Next, he uses the term *sasaeng*, which is Korean youth slang for an excessive fan who is overly involved in the personal lives of their idolized celebrities, stalking and spending exorbitant amounts of money on them. By using this culturally specific term, he demonstrates an understanding of Korean fan culture while also distancing himself from it. Because K-pop fans do not tend to make culturally broad interpretations online, but rather focus on narrative tropes as a norm in the global fan community (Schulze, 2013), it is unclear whether his distancing is racially meaningful as a way of distancing himself from deviant Korean fandom.

The combination of the fan-specific norm to avoid invoking cultural difference also is sutured with postracist colorblind discourse that silences race talk (Esposito, 2009). Because the embrace of superficial multicultural difference prevents discussions of systemic inequality and racism (Grzanka & Maher, 2012), it might explain why White K-pop fans almost never discuss their own racial identities as salient to their experience of fandom. They are clearly cognizant of their racial difference as seen in the Q&As when they explain their initial interests in K-pop, often saying that it seemed strange to them at first or that they do not look like people who would be interested in K-pop, implying a racial understanding. Even when 4maybeso talked about prejudice as a cause for Norwegians' disinterest and mocking, she does not link it overtly to anti-Asian racism or to White supremacy. This appears, then, to be a limit to Whites' hybrid textual production. White K-pop fans reify colorblindness, which is, as Ono (2010) notes, a strategic feature of postracist discourse. Suturing K-pop fan norms with postracism articulates easily into their experience as locally privileged members of their respective dominant racial orders.

Like previous audience reception research on K-pop (Jung, 2011; Siriyuvasak & Shin, 2007), White YouTubers, too, react to the music videos through the perspective of their local experience, one in which Whiteness is a privileged identity and that consumes the Other's cultural practices and artifacts for their own pleasure (hooks, 1992) and that allows Whites to see themselves as cosmopolitan and progressive (Maira, 2005). This is not to try to overturn the earlier point that hybridity is constructed through the pleasure articulated in K-pop, but rather to moderate the optimistic claim by understanding that White racial logics still persist. This was most visible in their reading of Taeyeon in her music video for "I." In the song, Taeyeon appears with hair dyed blonde. In their adulation of her, three of the six YouTubers who reacted to the video used the description "angel" to refer to her. For instance, Awkward Luc said, "She really does look like an angel. Her voice is also, so [pauses] angelic, it's the only word I can think of." In all of the other videos, this description is used only one other time by Hannah May as she described Sunny of Girls' Generation as looking like a "little angel," infantilizing her when she appeared in a red wig. Although the word "angel" itself is meant as praise, it is also aligned with Taeyeon's closer proximity to Whiteness with her blonde hair.

### ***Playful Participation***

Another way in which fans actively participate with texts is to imagine themselves in the texts. They project their own identities and meanings onto the action of the text and wish for inclusion within the texts and the lives of their favorite idols. Cohen (2001) writes that identification with a text as a fan is an imaginative process, empathizing with and adopting the perspective of the characters on screen and losing the perspective of the viewer. This was particularly evident in Taeyeon's music video for "I." In the only scenes that indicated a story, Taeyeon works as a waitress in a pub and is treated poorly by her boss, the bartender. In a pivotal moment, Taeyeon quits by throwing her apron at her boss and taking his car keys. During this scene, several of the female YouTubers identified with Taeyeon, empathizing with her frustrations. For instance, Hannah May playfully created dialogue, saying, "I'm done. I'm done. Bye! I love that. I'm done. Sassy Taeyeon."

Reflecting even deeper interaction with the text of the music videos, several YouTubers imagined themselves inside the text. Reacting to Big Bang's "Bang Bang Bang," Gen of Gizibes imagined herself as a

judge in a talent competition and said, "I would be missing from my booth. My chair would be spinning around. I'd be down there in the field humping their legs. That's how amazing it was [laughs]!" Her quote also reveals the sexual charge she invests in the Korean male performers. Because she is drawing on the global to inform her local meaning-making, this would produce hybridized desire in the politics of representation. Similarly, Hallyu Doing imagined participating with the men of BTS in their video "Run." In one scene, the men cause havoc in a highway tunnel, stopping traffic, jumping on cars, and vandalizing windshields with spray paint.

Katy: If they jumped on my car, I'd be like I'm so sorry my car's in the way.

Stevie: [Laughs] Let them in. Open the door and be like welcome.

Their strong desire, sexual or otherwise, to the performers leads to imagined participation within the text where they engage in "wish fulfillment" (Fiske, 1987), hoping to be together with the stars and imagining lives that extend into the music video.

A few YouTubers wanted to be proximate to the idols in real spaces rather than the imagined spaces of the text. For Awkward Luc, he longs to party with BTS. He said, "I remember when I saw the Instagram videos, and I wanted nothing more than to turn up with them because, I don't know, it seems fun, and I wish they'd do that more, although maybe they do, I don't know." In addition to wanting to be near their favorite performers, some identified with them. Reacting to BTS's "Run," Ronnie of Gizibes said, "That's me at a party. I'm like, fuck, I had too much of whatever that was." For others, identification moves into emulation. Some of the YouTubers produced their own fan dance covers and song covers. Imitation allows for a desired connection and relationship with their favorite K-pop groups (Fraser & Brown, 2002). This includes 4maybeso, who said, "You know that feeling when you want to jump in the video and be one of them and be as awesome as them, but you know you can't." Jung (2011) writes that a goal of K-pop fans is to be like their favorite celebrities. Although emulation is not a goal of all YouTubers who react to videos, most articulate a desire for varying proximity to their celebrated idols.

### **Biases**

A popular question that the YouTubers answer and that they speak to frequently in their Q&As is who their *bias* is. The word's use in K-pop fan communities refers to a person's favorite performer in a group and to their favorite groups or soloists. As a form of community socialization, it is important to be able to articulate a bias to demonstrate an intimate understanding of the different performers and their relative value to the fan. Articulating biases is also a form of active participation. It involves fans more deeply in the text, and it connects them with the norms of K-pop fan communities. By articulating their biases in reaction videos, it demonstrates fan belonging while also legitimating norms. Dylan Jacob provides a clear example of this in his reaction to the opening shots of Girls' Generation's "Lion Heart." In an excited voice, he exclaimed, "Taeyeon is emerging. Oh my god, the goddess that she is. Sooyoung gets a second line. Oh my god. Yoona, baby. Hi. Hi, Yoona. Yoona is perfection." In this quote, he not only names the members but also has intimate intertextual knowledge, noting for instance that Sooyoung is usually shortchanged and not as highlighted as others in her group.

Although Dylan Jacob likes all of the members, he clearly articulates a bias. Reacting to Taeyeon's "I," he said, "Taeyeon is my ultimate favorite performer, she's my bias, she's my favorite singer, she's my favorite person, she's my favorite everything. I love Taeyeon." For John Norman, his bias is another member of Girls' Generation. He said, "Sunny, you are my favorite, so I'm going to judge you a little bit more harshly than the others, but know that it comes from a place of love." For kpopsteve, his bias group is Big Bang. He said, "As you know, I like Big Bang. I absolutely adore them. I paid \$100 to see them. I absolutely adore them. I love all the members, yeah." What is interesting is not only his literal investment in the group, but that he declares his favorite group publicly for other members of the community to know as a ritual of self-disclosure that demonstrates belonging.

For fans, their biases sometimes transform into deep admiration and feelings of love. This is because fans invest deep affective ties to the objects of their interest (Grossberg, 1992). In K-pop reaction videos, admiration is most commonly expressed by elevating K-pop stars for their attractiveness and talent. This was evident in reactions to Taeyeon's "I." Hannah May said,

I can't stop thinking about how beautiful she looks. Those high notes sound so easy for her. . . . I love that. Oh, Taeyeon, I know I keep saying I love Taeyeon so much, but I really do. Taeyeon's my life.

The level of affective connection and humility differentiates admiration from the more typical comments in which YouTubers simply said the idol groups were "gorgeous," "pretty," "talented," or "great dancers." For instance, 4maybeso implicitly humbled herself when saying, "Let's face it. Taeyeon is the queen, and her voice is amazing." At the end of the video, 4maybeso, in the only instance I observed, addressed the camera to try to speak directly to Taeyeon to publicly declare her affections:

Taeyeon, you're probably not watching this, but if you're watching this, I just wanted to say that I really love you, you're an amazing artist, amazing singer, amazing friend, and a really lovely human being, and I just really appreciate everything you do for your fans.

Self-humbling was also evident in Dylan Jacob's reaction to EXO's "Call Me Baby" when he silences himself as he talked through the opening shots of the video. He said, "Shut up, Dylan. Just watch the glory."

By humbling themselves in front of their favored idols, by actively interpreting and seeking meaning, and by playfully imagining themselves in the fan texts, YouTube fan-celebrities construct a normative position for fandom that is located in hybridity. Not only are identities constructed in the middle space between the global and local, the standpoint in which the Other is encountered is admiration, pleasure, longing, and humility. Celebrity-fans construct a space in which the Korean Other is not consumed simply for White pleasure, but in ways that transform White fans. However, one end of the hybrid space for White fans, in particular, is aligned with culturally imperialistic discourse to the extent that they embody dominant racial logics that privilege Whiteness and White standpoints at home. Their readings and their enjoyment of a text are situated in whether it can be read as resonant to their local experience. As Korean Wave scholars note, transnational fans interpret Korean cultural texts through their own local cultural prism (Jung, 2011; Siriyuvasak & Shin, 2007).

### Gender Differences in Fandom

Consistent with performative understandings of gender (Butler, 1999; Gauntlett, 2002), YouTubers' reaction videos reveal subtle gender differences in their participation and meanings in the genre. This matters as it reveals the ways in which local understandings are manifest in the reaction videos they create, revealing the hybridity of the texts. One visible difference is that none of the most popular male YouTubers perform in groups, whereas, roughly half of the women do. This could simply be because there are more K-pop fans who are women (Schulze, 2013). It could also be because women seek relationship-building through their fan interests and activities online, whereas men seek status and domination (Darling-Wolf, 2004).

Also notable are articulations of attraction. Women YouTubers, as mentioned earlier, express a straightforward, unambiguous heterosexuality. For male YouTubers, however, they simply state that female performers are "pretty" in much the same way as the female YouTubers do. In the only clear example of a man's heterosexual attraction, kpopsteve said, "My bias is Hyuna. I'm in love with her." So, the expression of heterosexual interest tends to not be voiced or understated in the rare occasions when it is. What is much more common are expressions of queer desire. Jung and Hirata (2012) found that whereas female K-pop fans prefer traditional gender expression, male fans "transgress sexual boundaries through cross-dressing and mimicking feminized dance moves and gestures" (p. 9). It is perhaps because of the construction of what Jung (2011) calls transcultural masculinity, a hybrid form of Korean masculinities that blend masculinity based on the Confucian scholar-official, metrosexuality, and cute masculinity. Through rigorous training, K-pop idol men perform flexible masculinities that allow for queer readings in the West (Jung, 2011).

For Dylan Jacob, John Norman, and Awkward Luc, embracing a masculinity that does not conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity provides symbolic empowerment. Indeed, in Q&As, Dylan Jacob and Awkward Luc both point out that K-pop empowered them as they felt largely marginalized in their small towns. Although they do not point to the reasons, their performance of a feminized masculinity in their reactions point to a queer gender identity even as their sexuality is not discussed. Even for kpopsteve, who clearly identifies as heterosexual by pointing only to women when answering what his ideal type is during a Q&A, he also expressed queer sensibilities. In his reaction to EXO's "Call Me Baby," he said, "The lighting and the make-up made the boys look so pretty, so I'm not complaining there." In a Q&A, Ronnie Icon clarified his earlier obfuscation of a question about his ideal type, revealing that his biases are all men, showing pictures of eight idols, adding "if you know what I mean," strongly implying that he identifies as gay. When he reacted to BTS's "Run," he said, "Jimin is so good-looking. My BTS bias." Given the context, it is likely that his reaction is based in homosexual attraction, but for viewers who are unaware, it would be much more ambiguous, indicating that whereas queer masculinity and appreciation are the norm, expressing overt homosexual desire is only partially accepted. The queering of the male performers, then, is consistent with their local gendered meanings that are superimposed on their reading of K-pop men rather than Korean constructions of masculinity. This is clearly a hybrid construction, yet it is articulated to favor Western meanings of gender.

Another difference is the greater extent to which women YouTube fans perform linguistic hybridity. A number of studies indicate that women acculturate more quickly because they have fewer concerns about cultural preservation (Lou, Lalonde, & Wong, 2015). If macro-level motivations exist, women also tend to be more willing to adopt another language as a way of fitting into a different culture (Aikio, 1992). In second-language learning, which is shaped less directly by macro-level forces, women are more motivated to learn for interpersonal reasons (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000) and are found to value self–other interpersonal relationships more strongly than men (Henry & Cliffordson, 2013).

The reasons for gendered linguistic differences for K-pop YouTube fans are not knowable through the videos, but, nonetheless, women produce texts that engage in more substantive uses of Korean. This is not uniformly true as some men like kpopsteve and MW Kpop have taken coursework in Korean, but, generally, more women than men YouTubers are invested in learning Korean, and they integrate it into their reactions. For instance, Katy 케이티 and Vera 베라 include Koreanized versions of their screen names, and Gwiyomi Galaxy and Hallyu Doing both blend English and Korean into a linguistic hybrid. Gizibes also transliterates a word roughly translated as “bad girls.” None of the men do this. In fact, none of the 52 White men YouTubers that I identified who post reaction videos have screen names that include Korean in transliterated or original forms. At most, men occasionally code switch when referring to very well-known terms in the K-pop fan community such as *sasaeng* fans and *oppa*, when making a simple greeting—*ahnnyeong*, which was only observed in the most informal form, and when singing some lyrical hooks like kpopsteve’s singing of “미친 것 처럼. 미친 것 처럼 (Like [I’m] going crazy. Like [I’m] going crazy).” Not only do some women such as 4maybeso and Katy 케이티 code switch more frequently, they occasionally speak in full sentences. Katy 케이티 will open her videos with basic greetings in Korean, using the informal honorific form, and 4maybeso has committed to memory what appears to be a modified version of a chant by Girls’ Generation’s fan club, Sowon. To end her reaction of “Lion Heart,” she chanted, “소녀시대 짱! 소녀시대 fighting! 지금도 소녀시대! 앞으로도 소녀시대! 영원히 소녀시대! 소녀시대 사랑해 (Girls’ Generation is the best! Girl’s Generation fighting! Girls’ Generation now! Girls’ Generation in the future! Girls’ Generation forever! I love you, Girls’ Generation)!” Thus, local meanings about gender are drawn into their hybrid interaction with K-pop texts and represented through their fan production as YouTube reaction video producers.

### Conclusion

Kraidy’s (2005) work on critical transculturalism is a necessary intervention in bringing together the cynical powerlessness of the audience in cultural imperialism and the optimistic hopefulness in Bhabha’s (1994) conception of hybridity. As Kraidy argues, hybridity’s potential is constrained by uneven flows of global power and discourse in transnational spaces. What is less clear is how critical transculturalism operates within the tension between cultural domination and hybrid liberation. The case of White YouTubers as celebrity-fans provides insight into one of the mechanisms of critical transculturalism that I call hybrid potentialities. This is to say that within the critical hybrid space, there is the potential to move toward articulating discourses that are globally privileged, and there is the potential to move toward identification within “third spaces,” or perhaps, better stated, in-between spaces. Moves are facilitated by the availability of structured discursive and material raw materials and motivated by affective ties. In cases that reify global advantage, it could be affective investments in Whiteness (Lipsitz,

1998), beliefs in Western supremacy (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 1994), and/or neoliberal capitalism. In contrast, affective investments formed in transnational interest and fandom are counterhegemonic in expression and identification. As this case demonstrates, Koreanness is valorized, constructions of Asia as a racial monolith are complicated, Asian/Korean masculinity is desired, nationalism is ambivalently displaced, the West is decentered, Korean stars are admired, and Western/White subjectivities are humbled. To the extent that K-pop reaction videos are broadcast and received by White fans, they signal a potentiality closer to the liberatory hopes of hybridity.

That hope, however, cannot be fully realized within the shape of this current historical moment. Even if White YouTubers and fans express hybrid identifications, this is contingent on White fans maintaining their affective investments. As such, White fans have relatively more power to determine their position within hybridity, and K-pop industries are required to maintain global interest for hybridity to continue to be negotiated. Furthermore, because local contexts matter in audience reception of K-pop (Siriyuvasak & Shin, 2007), White audiences have uneven discursive power to fetishize K-pop or to be dismissive of it. Certainly, the latter is an experience that many White K-pop fans experience from their peers and family, as they point out in their Q&As. Specific to the celebrity-fan, it is the fan that embraces hybridity, but it is the celebrity that engages K-pop fandom for her own purposes. As Kim (2015) argues, the more popular YouTubers become, the more they abandon the objects of their own fan interests to become the objects of their followers' interests and fandom, reversing the potential charge toward claiming discourses that culturally dominate while losing grasp of affective investments that construct hybridity. In coming years, as the Korean Wave ebbs and flows, the more important question is not so much how to sustain the wave, but rather how the movement of K-pop across global circuits can contribute to hybrid potentialities closer to the promise of hybridity as Bhabha (1996) theorized, an escape from fixed identities that helps to level global power.

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