

'I don't like K-pop, only JYJ-pop': Disenchanted Pop Cosmopolitans in Transnational K-pop Online Fandom

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ABSTRACT

K-pop has gained considerable traction not only throughout East and Southeast Asia but also across European and American fandom, thereby integrating these audiences into what Henry Jenkins describes as "pop cosmopolitanism". Based on an online ethnographic study conducted in 2012 involving fourteen fans who regularly participated in JYJ3, a fan-operated website dedicated to the K-pop group JYJ, this paper investigates how fans construct their identities as part of a transnational modern community while simultaneously cultivating moral discernment. Drawing on Hannerz's concept of "cosmopolitan" and Jenkins's notion of "pop cosmopolitan," the analysis demonstrates how transnational fans leverage their exposure to diverse cultural and social contexts in their processes of self-fashioning, both culturally and morally. The findings indicate that fans' engagement with JYJ transcends mere aesthetics or eclectic preferences. Instead, their attachment is influenced by a reflexive awareness of the industry's "manufacturedness," JYJ's role as underdogs, and the moral and emotional responsibilities fans perceive toward the group. Through participation in JYJ3, fans negotiate the significance of caring for, protecting, or distancing themselves from idols and fandom, with these negotiations becoming central to their self-understanding as cosmopolitan subjects. These negotiations become central to how they understand themselves as cosmopolitan subjects. This study suggests that global pop culture fandom – within K-pop and beyond – is increasingly driven by moral work. It advocates for expanding analyses of pop cosmopolitanism to encompass the nuanced moral work through which fans navigate evolving expectations of care and responsibility within networked fan cultures.

Keywords: pop cosmopolitan; fandom; K-pop; moral work; online ethnography

INTRODUCTION

On the large screen, a young white woman appeared, singing in Korean. From her heavy accent, I could tell that she was still learning the language. The year was 2012, and I was attending the Thames Festival in London, where a K-Pop contest was held. The Thames Festival itself was an annual cultural event on the riverbanks marking the start of autumn in London. The K-pop contest was only a small part of the two-day 'All Eyes on Korea' section at the festival. At the time, I knew little about K-pop's growing global presence. A simple – and perhaps naive – question began forming in my mind: what about K-pop makes these people, many of whom do not share a

cultural background with Korea, so eager not only to appreciate but also to embody it through performances? Looking back, I realise that while I was watching those young Londoners sing and dance by the Thames, I was also witnessing, without quite realising it, a critical juncture in the globalisation of Korean pop culture – one supported by South Korea’s cultural diplomacy policies (Nye & Kim, 2019). My small encounter happened in sync with other K-pop-related events around the globe, revealing how transnational fandom, cultural policy, and media spectacle were beginning to converge across continents. As I would later see, this moment marked the early shape of what Jenkins (2006b) calls “pop cosmopolitanism”, a form of cultural openness mediated by popular media and, at that time, carried by K-pop.

Fourteen years later, K-pop’s global influence has expanded dramatically. Groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK headline international music festivals and brand campaigns. These examples illustrate how K-pop has become a powerful transnational commodity, embedding itself in everyday life across diverse cultural contexts. This global circulation exemplifies what Thussu (2006) terms “global contra-flows”; the reversal of traditional West-to-rest cultural movements. Jenkins’ (2006) notion of pop cosmopolitanism helps explain how fans engage with such flows: not merely consuming but actively embracing and reinterpreting foreign popular culture as a way of being part of the interconnected world. Yet, as Hannerz (1990) reminds us, cosmopolitanism entails both openness to and negotiation with the cultural “Other.” In practice, this negotiation is never purely celebratory. K-pop fans presently navigate a spectrum of diverse expectations, often imbued with moral considerations: urging idols to address, or at least acknowledge, social justice issues, and even organizing boycotts of brands. These fans now assess artists not solely on their artistic talent and aesthetic presentation, but also on their perceived moral stances.

A case that vividly illustrates these tensions is that of Seungri, a former member of the idol group Big Bang. He was accused and convicted of arranging prostitution and gambling through his business (France-Presse, 2021). Another, more-or-less similar, but older, case involved Park Yoochun, a former member of idol group JYJ and actor who was accused in 2016 of multiple sexual assaults and later convicted of methamphetamine use (Hyun-bin, 2019). Although the allegations and conviction ended both their careers in South Korea, some fans, particularly in Southeast Asia, Japan, and China, continued to express loyalty (Luu & Williams, 2024). For others, these cases became moments of moral reckoning: was continued support an act of compassion or complicity? International fans were divided not only over Seungri’s and Yoochun’s guilt but also over what it means to be a good fan. These conflicts show that fandom is not only a space of cultural openness but also one of moral discernment, where emotions, ethics, and identity intertwine.

Such moral contestations were not entirely new. In the case of JYJ, a K-pop idol group active between 2010 and 2016 whose fandom is examined in this paper, questions of loyalty, authenticity, and moral attachment had already emerged well before Yoochun's later scandals, shaped by the group's contested position within the K-pop industry. Drawing on a 2012 study of one JYJ-focused English-speaking online fandom, this paper asks: in what ways do transnational fans construct themselves as culturally open yet morally discerning subjects through their fandom practices? I argue that JYJ fandom serves as a space for self-fashioning across cultural, moral, and affective domains, as fans express their selective affinities based on what they perceive as morally correct. While this paper draws on an online study conducted 14 years ago, I view it as an important precursor to understanding how the articulation of moral values shapes K-pop and broader fandom practices today. I draw on the concept of pop cosmopolitanism to show how fandom becomes a space where global openness and moral judgement coexist in often uneasy tension.

Global Digital Fandom as Cosmopolitan Space

As media consumption becomes more transnational, scholars have turned attention to flows of East Asian popular culture – Korean dramas, Japanese idols, anime, and Hong Kong cinema – engaged by audiences outside their countries of origin (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Iwabuchi, 2005; Youna Kim, 2006; Mori, 2008). Thussu (2006) calls these “contra-flows” or subaltern flows, where ideas and goods move in the opposite direction of dominant, largely U.S.-led media circulations. While earlier contra-flows were often tied to diasporic audiences, contemporary East Asian popular culture reaches far beyond linguistic or cultural communities.

To understand how fans engage these flows, Jenkins (2006a) introduces the concept of media convergence, not merely a digital or technological shift, but a reconfiguration of relationships among media technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Convergence enables what he terms “grassroots convergence” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 155), wherein digitally literate audiences – particularly fans – actively produce, circulate, and interpret media. Yet, as Iwabuchi (2007) cautions, such agency is always mediated by corporate interests and global inequalities, echoing Jenkins's own notion of “corporate convergence”. Similarly, Thussu (2006) argues that the growing flow of non-Western media complicates cultural hegemony, rather than ending it.

Within this contested terrain, Jenkins (2006a) argues that the multidirectional flow of cultural goods allows for the proliferation of “pop cosmopolitanism,” in which people (particularly youths) seek alternatives to dominant cultural forms, drawing on the notion of ‘cosmopolitanism’. Writing against the growing tendency to view

globalisation as homogenisation, the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz views cosmopolitanism as both a perspective and an orientation, which “must entail relationships to a plurality of cultures understood as distinctive entities” (1990, p. 239). Cosmopolitanism involves not just a “willingness to engage with the Other”, but also to become competent in a “particular system of meanings and meaningful forms” (1990, p. 239). This means cosmopolitanism entails both mastery and surrender. Hannerz further argues that “the surrender to otherness of cosmopolitans is usually situational. There is no real commitment to any particular other culture, ..., as one always knows where the exit is” (2006, p. 7). These seemingly paradoxical characteristics will be important in my analysis later.

Jenkins (2006a) reworks the idea of cosmopolitanism to the sphere of popular culture. The figure of the “pop cosmopolitan” emerges as consumers cultivate “new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 156), made possible by transcultural flow of popular culture through global convergence of media and, more recently, the internet. While corporate convergence is perhaps the first instance of Western audiences encountering the ‘contra-flow’ (as in the case of Pokémon), grassroots convergences are at the heart of pop cosmopolitanism practices. Jenkins uses American-born otaku¹ to illustrate how grassroots intermediaries facilitated the circulation of Japanese comics and animation in “the West”.

While aware that an interest in pop culture from a foreign origin does not always equate to a desire to seek actual connection to the country of origin, Jenkins argues that it is important to see this engagement as the first foray towards whatever global consciousness means. In this paper, I treat K-pop fandom as a site of pop cosmopolitanism structured by both openness and withdrawal, where corporate, grassroots, and state-driven flows enable not only cultural competency but also moral positioning. In contrast to Jenkins’ original work, the fans in my study live in a social media and internet-heavy fandom ecology.

At the same time, however, I argue that Jenkins’ framing of pop cosmopolitan alone is insufficient. While Jenkins treats pop cosmopolitanism as an opening toward global consciousness, this framing tends to underplay how such engagements are also saturated with moral judgment, selective empathy, and boundary-making. As Hannerz (1990, 2006) points out, a cosmopolitan “knows where to exit”. The idea of “knowing where the exit is” remains largely unexamined in current accounts of pop cosmopolitanism, which this paper seeks to address investigate.

¹ The Japanese term used to mock pop culture fans, particularly those liking *anime* (animation), *manga* (comic books), and *aidoru* (idol groups).

Moral Work in (Online) K-pop Fandom

Prior works on K-pop fandom, as studies of fandom more broadly, have tended to portray fans as “active producers and manipulators of meaning” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). Aligning with Jenkins’ notion of participatory fan culture, Choi and Maliangkay (2014) posit that K-pop fans, particularly international fans, should not be understood through a simplistic model of consumption. Rather, they conceptualise fandom as a massive, loosely connected collective whose cultural practices traverse curatorial, redistributive, artistic, and consumption spheres. Fan immersion, in this sense, is agentive – a form of ‘swimming’, rather than ‘drowning’ (2014, p. 6). This has become even more so in the age of social media, where the K-pop ecosystem is centred nowadays (Jin & Yoon, 2016; King-O’Riain, 2021; Yoon, 2024).

Nonetheless, a growing body of research has explored how K-pop fandom also serves as a moral and political space, shaped by debates over responsibility, loyalty, authenticity, and collective action. One of the earliest and most cited examples of fan activism in K-pop involves JYJ, whose international fandom is the focus of this study. JYJ, a three-member male idol group formed in 2010, consists of former members of TVXQ. TVXQ was established as a five-member group in 2003 by SM Entertainment, one of South Korea's largest music agencies, and quickly became highly popular domestically (J.-O. Kim, 2014). As part of TVXQ, the three JYJ members achieved numerous milestones, including releasing four albums, topping charts in both South Korea and Japan, and receiving music awards over several years. The group also made history as the first Korean act to hold a concert at Tokyo Dome, Japan—an achievement for a non-Japanese group at the time. Within the industry, they were often called the ‘idol of current idols’. In 2009, three members—Jaejoong, Yoochun, and Junsu—filed a lawsuit against their former agency. Fans who supported them not only boycotted products endorsed by the remaining two TVXQ members but also passionately supported JYJ’s debut (S.-A. Lee, 2015).

Writing from the perspective of Korean fandom, Seung-Ah Lee (2015, p. 126) argues that these fans “underwent political empowerment as a collective” by bridging what she describes as the micropolitics of idol fandom with macropolitical struggles over power and fairness. In this process, fandom was reframed as a form of political commitment to social justice rather than mere cultural consumption. This mobilisation, she suggests, fostered collective generosity and heightened political participation among K-pop fans (2015, p. 109).

More recent work has examined how K-pop fans construct moral identities through fluid and situational positioning. Studies of the BTS fandom, for instance, show how fans often frame their practices as morally serious and socially responsible, mirroring

the group's emphasis on youth, care and compassion. This has translated into charitable initiatives and, in some contexts, engagement with local political issues (Andini & Akhni, 2021).

Other scholars have also focused on boundary-making through debates over *sasaengpaen* behaviour (Williams & Ho, 2016). *Sasaengpaen*, or *sasaeng fan*, are often described as fans who engage in invasive or stalker-like practices. Williams & Ho (2016) studied Singaporean fans who hired vans to follow K-pop idol groups as they came to Singapore for one public schedule after another. These mostly female fans were adamant in reclaiming an identity distinct from common media tropes of *sasaengpaen*. They emphasised that they were “not that crazy”, particularly in contrast to Korean *sasaengpaen*, while still asserting their commitment as genuinely loyal fans rather than merely passive consumers. This positioning illustrates how fans continually engage in facework in constructing their identities (Williams & Ho, 2016, p. 92).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate how fans distinguish themselves through diverse processes that situate fandom as a moral space. While William and Ho (2016) frame Singaporean K-pop fan practices through the concept of facework as a means of constructing an authentic fan self, I extend their framing by treating these practices as simultaneously moral work, through which fans calibrate care, accountability, and attachment within transnational fandom hierarchies. I use ‘moral work’ to refer to the everyday practices through which fans negotiate what counts as appropriate, loyal, or, in a broader sense, ‘good’ within the fandom.

Existing scholarship also shows that K-pop fandom operates as a moral space, structured by ongoing judgements about justice, loyalty, and rationality. Nonetheless, many of these prior works focus primarily on either domestic or national contexts. By contrast, this paper examines a transnational English-speaking fan site where fans engage with idols from a position of cultural and linguistic distance, and where participants (fans) themselves do not draw from a single parochial origin. As a transnational moral space, K-pop online fandom often foregrounds how fans navigate multiple, often competing, moral frameworks.

While building on earlier work on JYJ fandom, particularly what Lee (2015) calls “the JYJ republic”, this paper shifts attention to a transnational, English-speaking fan site operating outside the Korean media and linguistic context. This position, as I show later, shapes the way some fans distinguish themselves from Korean-only-speaking fans in their paths towards morally attuned forms of pop cosmopolitanism.

The following sections trace how these moral and affective negotiations unfold in the lived experiences of transnational JYJ fans, showing how efforts to become a “good

fan” can also be framed as a form of moral pop cosmopolitanism, while at other times, ethical self-positioning requires distancing oneself from dominant norms of fandom. Drawing on these prior works, this paper approaches moral work not as an outcome of fandom conflict but as a practice through which transnational fans fashion themselves as both culturally open and morally discerning subjects.

METHOD

This paper presents online ethnographic fieldwork carried out between May and September 2012, exploring how fans imagine their connections to K-pop idols and craft identities within a globalised pop culture landscape (Lazuardi, 2012). The study focuses on a website (or fan site) called JYJ3, launched in 2011 to support the group JYJ. The name JYJ is an acronym for the founding members (Jaejoong, Yoochun, Junsu), who filed a lawsuit and subsequently left their previous agency. At that time, JYJ fandom was distinctive for reasons noted by earlier scholarship. Following their departure from SM Entertainment, JYJ issued an English-language album and embarked on a ‘world tour’², potentially as a result of restrictions imposed by the domestic industry (S.-A. Lee, 2015)³. Their popularity outside South Korea and their unique place in the K-pop industry led to their English-speaking fandom being chosen for this study. Initially hosted at www.jyj3.net⁴, JYJ3 was created by a fan known as ‘Mia’, who established and managed it to share updates on the group’s legal dispute with their former agency with non-Korean-speaking fans.

JYJ3 is structured around various categories, such as news, info/trans, and social media, that are open to all visitors. The website is open to the public; therefore, it was difficult to determine how many visitors it receives daily. Registration is not required to browse content, but it is necessary to like, comment, or share posts; thereby allowing one to be a “lurker”⁵. The fan site officially shut down in 2018 for reasons not disclosed, only to re-emerged in 2021 on a different domain, and is now inactive following the passing of Mia, the founder.

² The reason I use an apostrophe in ‘world tour’ is because K-pop acts often use the term ‘world’ even when their tour is limited to specific countries. This includes JYJ, who in 2011-2012 mainly toured Japan, China, Thailand, Canada, the U.S., and a few countries in Europe and South America.

³ The group was active until 2016 when they released their second Korean album. Between 2018 and 2019, as explained in the Introduction, member Yoochun became the centre of numerous accusations – some of which were proven in court – resulting in his contract being terminated by JYJ’s agency (C-Jes). Following this, the remaining two members left C-Jes. In 2024, members Jaejoong and Junsu began performing under the name JX.

⁴ It was subsequently moved to <https://jyj3.wordpress.com/>

⁵ Lurker refers to those who just ‘lurk’ or observe and read all messages/posts on an internet forum, but do not participate. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lurker>)

While the term ‘social media ethnography’ was articulated after my fieldwork, my approach closely aligns with what Postill and Pink (2012) conceptualize as five overlapping sub-practices in social media ethnography⁶: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving. Of these, I engaged in four. I regularly caught up with new posts in JYJ3, explored the external sources linked in them, interacted with fans through “likes” and occasional comments, and engaged directly with several fans via email and messaging platforms. I manually archived my conversations and posts using a hard drive. I did not share their posts on any of my social media accounts⁷.

In June 2012, I posted a short message on one of JYJ3’s weekly open threads to introduce myself and invite participation in a brief online survey. The survey results were not analysed; rather, they were used to recruit participants for online interviews via their chosen platform. Of the eighteen fans who consented to participate, fourteen responded to my emails and engaged with me through electronic mail or social messaging during the course of my fieldwork platforms⁸. They range in age from 17 to 65, and all are identified as women. Of the 14 participants, half were American, four were Indonesian, and the remaining three were from the Philippines, Belgium, and Senegal, with the latter living in Canada at the time. In revisiting the data thirteen years later, I did not collect additional ethnographic material or recontact original participants. Instead, I contextualised the analysis through close engagement with JYJ3’s later iterations, more recent news surrounding JYJ, and broader developments in transnational K-pop fandom. The more-than-a-decade gap offers the benefit of hindsight, allowing me to situate JYJ fan practices within the landscape of contemporary K-pop (and broader pop culture) fandom, including what is now commonly referred to as ‘cancel culture’. In re-analysing the data, I trace how early forms of moral negotiation prefigure later developments in the increasingly intensified articulation of moral work within platformed K-pop fandom.

By the term ‘transnational fans’, I refer to JYJ fans from various countries who primarily engage in fandom practices through English-language platforms such as JYJ3. JYJ3 functioned as an intermediary between original Korean-language (and

⁶ While JYJ3 was not a social media platform in the narrow sense, its forum-based and networked structure aligns with what Postill and Pink (2012) conceptualise in social media ethnography.

⁷ I acknowledge that Postill and Pink (2012) originally conceptualised “sharing” as an essential element of digital sociality, which extends beyond merely reposting content to one’s own account to include engaging with other users’ shared content through actions such as ‘following’. Nonetheless, the nature of JYJ3 as a website and forum made it impossible to follow each user, thereby constraining this aspect of the practice.

⁸ I used Skype and Yahoo Messenger at the time.

sometimes Chinese and Japanese) sources and English-speaking fans. While my limited Korean proficiency might appear to be a limitation, it in fact mirrors the linguistic realities I encountered. JYJ3 operated in English, and all the fans I engaged with also mostly communicated in English⁹, with little or no understanding of Korean.

In doing a secondary analysis for this paper, I re-examine how fans imagine their relationship with JYJ and with one another through the combined lens of pop cosmopolitanism and moral work, while in earlier iterations of the project focus only on a rather limited analysis on articulation of pop cosmopolitanism among JYJ fans in JYJ3 (Lazuardi, 2012). Chat transcripts and emails were coded with particular attention to the articulation of tensions between fans' initial encounters with K-pop and their (moral) stance at that time fieldwork.

In presenting the data from this research, I chose not to anonymise the name of the fan site (JYJ3) for two reasons: first, it is a public-facing platform, and second, it is now inactive. All interlocutors are assigned pseudonyms to ensure their privacy is fully protected, even when most participants were known through their publicly used fan aliases¹⁰. This decision was made because the original research was not conducted with journal publication as its primary aim, and it prioritises ethical protection in retrospect.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before examining the intricacies of moral work that JYJ fans engaged in, I begin by outlining how the women I spoke with first entered K-pop and later JYJ fandom. I then analyse how they navigate different and often competing meanings of what it means to be a “good” pop cosmopolitan within the context of K-pop transnational fandom.

“I don’t have that limitation”:

Cultural Openness and the Making of Pop Cosmopolitan

Similar to many people in the world today, the fans I spoke to in my study lived in a convergence culture, which involves both top-down, corporate-driven content production and bottom-up, audience-driven content consumption. As Jenkins (2006b, 2006a) points out, convergence also involves diverse media platforms. This is true for my participants who first became interested not in K-pop, but other Korean or other East Asian cultural products. Katie, a Chinese American woman in her mid-20s, first became interested in Korean drama because, growing up in Los Angeles, she was

⁹ Except one interlocutor from Indonesia, who upon knowing I am Indonesian, told me she was not confident with her active English skill, and decided to talk to me in Indonesian.

¹⁰ Interview, emails and chat excerpts quoted here are edited for readability.

accustomed to digital TV channels that catered to specific Asian demographics, including those that broadcast Korean dramas. Chinese video stores also used to sell bootleg copies of Korean dramas. This was how her mother became interested, and Katie, who at the time was more enamoured with Japanese popular culture, eventually followed suit. Depending on where they were from, fans encountered K-pop through a wide array of media formats, including DVD rentals (both legal and bootleg), digital TV channels, local television broadcasts, and more, indicating their lives as part of the convergence culture.

For many of these fans, Asian popular culture, and subsequently K-pop, was perceived as more appealing (or ‘exotic’) than the dominant popular culture in their respective countries, for various reasons. Mimi, a woman in her mid-20s who moved from the U.S. to South Korea, expressed her disinterest in American pop music – not due to the music itself, but because of its excessive hype. At the same time, Korean popular culture presents a sense of recognizable foreignness – what Iwabuchi (2002, p. 15) calls a combination of “familiar difference” and “bizarre sameness”. For instance, Rose, a 65-year-old entrepreneur American, recounted how she became fascinated with the sound and flow of Korean lyrics. As a former lyricist, she often found it difficult to enjoy regular English songs when the lyrics did not meet her standards. In this context, the foreignness of the Korean language allowed her to attend to vocal qualities and musical style. As she wrote in one of her emails, *“I was really, really impressed with what I heard coming out of Korea. They have embraced pop R&B in a big, big way. That was also a favorite genre of mine.”* In her case, the familiarity of R&B as a musical genre combined with the unfamiliarity of the Korean language to produce what Iwabuchi terms a sense of “bizarre sameness”, which allows her to enjoy without full semantic comprehension.

This openness to Asian popular culture and K-pop illustrates how pop cosmopolitan practices take shape in everyday life. Phoebe, a Senegalese student in her twenties who was completing a master’s degree in Canada during my fieldwork, described this shift as a lifting of personal limits: *“I have friends who cannot watch a movie or listen to music that isn’t in English. I don’t have that limitation.”* Her emphasis on “not having that limitation” signals a cultivated openness; a willingness to engage cultural forms beyond one’s linguistic competency while still finding pleasure and meaning in them. Fans’ engagement with cultural products from outside their country of residence, and often, their country of origin opened new possibilities for self-expansion. As Choi and Maliangkay (2014, p. 6) observe, “K-pop fandom is as much about fans themselves as about K-pop.”

While they no longer viewed language as a barrier to enjoying popular culture, many fans also developed a keen interest in learning not only Korean but also Korean culture and politics. Amanda, a 22-year-old university student from the U.S., became a K-pop fan in high school and later decided to minor in Asian Studies. This allowed her to *“learn about the culture, history, economics, politics, etc., of many Asian countries”*. She also studied Korean using a computer-assisted learning platform to apply for a teaching position in South Korea.

Another fan, Mimi, had been living in South Korea for two years at the time of our interview; working as an English teacher. Her decision to relocate was not solely driven by her interest in Korean popular culture, though she acknowledged that it played a minor but meaningful role. She had developed a broader interest in Asian culture, and South Korea topped the list of countries she hoped to move to after college. Returning to Phoebe’s point about the lifting of personal limits, even for fans who were not directly studying or working in relation to Korea, their engagement with K-pop still fostered a sense of cultural openness. At the very least, it expanded their horizons and reshaped what they considered familiar or accessible.

These cases demonstrate that while pop cosmopolitanism may start with a curiosity for unfamiliar entertainment, this initial interest in K-pop (and other forms of Asian popular culture) allows fans to explore new linguistic landscapes, which in turn opens up fresh worlds of connection and even career opportunities. For many Asian-descendant Americans and other Asian fans in my study, their fascination with K-pop might reflect what Choi and Maliangkay describe as *“affinity-driven empathy”* (2014, p. 13). It is worth noting that many fans I met during this project were from either the United States or Indonesia, both of which maintain relatively ‘friendly’ political relations with South Korea. This supports Kim Youna’s argument that Korea’s historical role as a former colony – and the associated perception of victimhood – helps explain the global spread and acceptance of its cultural products. Such a framing makes Korean cultural exports seem politically harmless or ideologically neutral to international audiences, especially those from countries with neutral or friendly diplomatic ties to South Korea with South Korea.

However, as I will show in the following section, while an interest in K-pop initially enabled many of these fans to develop a sense of cultural openness, this engagement was not without limits. Contrary to the outdated media stereotype of gullible, hysterical fangirls, these fans became increasingly critical and reflexive in their practices over time. Many grew more sceptical of the K-pop industry’s relentless production of new acts and the highly manufactured nature of its idols. Those who ‘chose’ JYJ side in the aftermath of the lawsuit sought to cultivate what they

considered a more authentic and genuine mode of fan-idol engagement, thereby gradually distancing themselves from the broader structure of the K-pop industry. Rather than embracing Korean pop culture uncritically, these fans enacted forms of 'selective affinity', strategically choosing to support artists they regarded as more sincere and authentic.

"They all sound like the same sugar and sweet confections produced straight out of a factory": Disenchantment and Selective Affinity in JYJ3

As many observers note, K-pop is hardly just about music (JungBong Choi & Maliangkay, 2014; Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Shin, 2016). Industry-insiders often remark that K-pop idols are made, rather than born (Fuhr, 2016; Kang, 2014). Lee Soo-Man, one of the most influential producers and the founder of JYJ's former agency, is widely credited as the architect of the contemporary K-pop star system (JungBong Choi & Maliangkay, 2014; S.-A. Lee, 2015). Within this star system, nearly every aspect of an idol's public persona is planned, executed, and managed by their agencies, including their image (Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Kang, 2014; Yeran Kim, 2011; Shin, 2009). Dong-Yeun Lee (2020) also notes that idols are acutely aware of their status and must therefore regulate their behaviour and emotions accordingly. Yoon (2024), for instance, argues that through their intensive social media use since their debut years onwards, BTS successfully cultivated a highly relatable public persona – what might be described as a "boy-next-door" image; hence, positioning themselves as underdogs from a small agency. Fans in this study observed similar dynamics when they followed TVXQ and later JYJ.

This pseudo-intimacy enables what Yan and Fang (2021) call a parakin, in which fans co-cultivate idols and assume responsibilities for protecting and, at times, controlling idols, much as they would family members. This dynamic differs markedly from the relationship many participants described having with American musicians. Amanda noted a perceived emotional distance in American pop music that K-pop appeared to bridge: *"it makes fans like the individual members of groups, not just the music. For a lot of American bands, I really only like the music, but don't even know the members' names. But with K-pop, it is very easy to like the members too."* This "knowing the members" is built into the K-pop star system Lee Soo Man developed, in which trainees learn not only performance skills (not only singing) but also how to perform a particular persona (Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Shin, 2009) – a practice also found in the Japanese idol industry (Aoyagi, 2005; Galbraith, 2018).

JYJ belongs to what Jung (2015) identifies as the fourth wave of K-pop, in which social media plays a crucial role in expanding idols' reach beyond East and Southeast Asia. While JYJ did not use social media in the same way as BTS and newer K-pop idol

groups¹¹, the members were avid Twitter (now X) users, particularly after leaving SM Entertainment. This allowed fans to engage with them more directly and frequently, often through fan-translated content¹². As Rose put it, *“they stay in touch with their fans, too. I regularly compare Jaejoong to the perfect faraway-stationed boyfriend – so considerate, always tweeting little things, photos, etc.”* In addition to platforms like X and Instagram, Ono and Kwon (2013) note that YouTube has been central to what they term the “re-worlding” of K-pop. Beyond distributing music videos, YouTube’s interactive affordances enable the circulation of fan-made content, such as bootleg fan-subbed idol appearances on Korean variety shows. Hence, fans actively engage in this ‘knowing idols’ process beyond their on-stage personas by choosing content, translating, and sharing fan-subbed materials, further demonstrating the kind of grassroots convergence envisioned by Jenkins.

Rachel, a 27-year-old Chinese American accountant who grew up with Chinese music and drama, described this sense of closeness: *“... they [JYJ] give off a feeling of being a friend... they seem friendly and don’t isolate themselves. I don’t get the ‘I’m a star/diva’ feeling from them”*. While contemporary American pop stars may not always match the stereotypes Amanda and Rachel invoked, the perceived closeness and affordances of the K-pop media ecosystem – its mechanisms for “knowing” idols – were central to what drew these fans toward JYJ. Yet, many fans were simultaneously aware of the highly orchestrated nature of this ‘closeness’. As Amanda puts it: *“Even though they were a manufactured group, they really seemed like good friends”*.

This very perceived closeness also made the limits of the K-pop system more visible. Many fans had followed JYJ since their days as part of the five-member TVXQ under SM Entertainment. As they watched the group navigate their conflict and litigation, they became increasingly critical of the manufactured nature of idol personas. Referring to TVXQ’s reputation as one of K-pop’s most successful and polished acts (Jung, 2015), Amelia explained: *“As TVXQ, they were gods¹³. As JYJ, they’ve shed those images and made themselves accessible human beings.”* She felt that JYJ now appeared to be *“real people with real problems and real-life difficulties.”* Similarly, Nara said: *“I feel like*

¹¹ King-O-Riain (2021) discusses the importance of platforms like V Live in shaping newer generations of K-pop idols, including BTS, making them appear more “authentic” to their audiences fans. She attributes this to the sense of “liveness” these platforms afford, enabling more direct and “real-time” interactions between idols and fans. During JYJ’s active period, however, such live-streaming platforms were not yet available.

¹² An example of such fan translation is shown here: JYJ Twitter Catchup; So much fail, so little time. Translating social media posts made by idols is a common practice in K-pop transnational fandom, alongside ‘fansubbing’ (amateur subtitling by fans) of company-made contents (such as backstage videos), dramas, lyrics, or even their concerts.

¹³ The name TVXQ itself means *Rising Gods of the East*.

JYJ is being genuine. Right now, they are not pushed into a certain character concept like they were before... Jaejoong had the concept of being the quiet guy. It made him look cold, but in reality, he isn't." She then, however, added: "At least if I may believe everyone who talks about him".

Amelia and Nara's perspectives were not unique. Fans frequently emphasised that they knew idols were trained and managed, and that nobody could truly know what these performers were like in real life. Yet, they believed that, unlike other K-pop groups whose images were 'given' and tightly controlled, JYJ had shed some of these constraints after leaving their former agency. Many based this belief on comparisons between Jaejoong's TVXQ-era persona and his post-SM public self. By leaving SM Entertainment, fans felt that JYJ were freer to do what they wanted to do in ways that appeared more genuine.

Mimi articulated this ambiguity most clearly: "*with K-pop, it's all rather manufactured and fake. There is a very calculated effort to make singers seem real and make an emotional connection with fans... With JYJ, I've always felt like, even when they were with SME, that they were perhaps a bit more real than some of the others. Now, as JYJ, I find them to be more genuine than before, but it's still very controlled and is meant to give a certain calculated effect. However, I still enjoy them LOL. But I don't make the mistake of thinking I 'know' them.*"

Therefore, these fans understood that it was impossible to truly know the 'real' person behind any idol. Yet, by choosing to follow JYJ rather than the remaining members who continued with SM Entertainment (or other groups, for that matter), fans distinguished between perceived artificial forms of intimacy and inauthentic personalities and those considered more genuine. This differentiation laid the foundation for what I term 'selective affinity': rather than outright rejecting K-pop entirely, these supporters selected the version that conformed to their moral expectations. For them, JYJ came to represent the sincerity that the broader K-pop industry concealed.

This sense of sincerity and genuineness did not only come from how JYJ appeared offstage and from their perceived lack of 'fakeness', but also from a significant shift in their involvement in the music they released and the concerts they staged, compared to their time in TVXQ. During the 2011 American tour promoting their first (and only) English album, for example, Jaejoong served as stage director (Mee-yoo, 2011). The members were also heavily involved as lyricists, arrangers, and songwriters in both their English and Korean debut albums. Katie who became a fan only after the group became JYJ, said she respected that unlike other K-pop groups at the time, JYJ wrote their own music. Many other fans, whether they joined the fandom after JYJ's

formation or had followed the members since their TVXQ days, emphasized this point as well.

As noted earlier, K-pop entertainment companies typically operate as in-house production systems with export-oriented strategies (Shin, 2009, 2016). Companies not only recruit trainees into their “academy/star system” (Fuhr, 2016; Shin, 2009), but also employ the full range of staff needed to produce idols’ music. While newer groups like BTS are now popular for composing and writing their own materials, for JYJ fans at the time, the group’s creative involvement – undertaken out of necessity due to being blocked by SM Entertainment and effectively locked out of the Korean music industry (S.-A. Lee, 2015) – was interpreted as evidence of not only sincerity, but also of greater autonomy. This lack of autonomy in the broader idol system was not lost on the fans I spoke with. Nara who grew up in a small village in Belgium and became interested in JYJ through a Korean movie starring Jaejoong, put it this way: *“Sometimes I think the word ‘idol’ has a wrong connotation. They just do what their companies tell them to do. They show a concept their company has ordered them and a song that the company has given them.”*

Monica, a 29-year-old Korean American, expressed a similar sentiment. Although ethnically Korean, she could not enjoy other K-pop idol music because *“they sound like all the same sugar and sweet confections produced straight out of factory”*. Growing up in a multi-ethnic adopted family and in a multicultural community in the U.S., Monica developed an appreciation for a wide range of music genres, and musical artistry became particularly important for her. For her, while JYJ members are indeed physically attractive, they were *“above and beyond the idol pack”*. She explained: *“It seems idols are really good-looking people, (who) can kind of dance and kind of sing, but are mostly there to look pretty.”* Coming from a group trained in acapella, JYJ had long been known for their focus on vocals, especially during their Japanese activities as TVXQ (J.-O. Kim, 2014). This was another quality fans frequently cited as a reason for their attachment. Liking JYJ, thus, became a way for fans to distinguish themselves from other K-pop fans, whom they perceived as joining fandom for more superficial reason. Nadia summarized this succinctly: *“I don’t think JYJ belong to that idol category anymore. But now, they’re on their own league, different level, they’re not idol anymore, they’ve become true artists now”*.

These qualities that fans believed JYJ possessed – greater sincerity, stronger talent, and more authentic artistic goals – set the group apart from the rest of K-pop. Most JYJ fans I spoke to drew this line sharply. Rory, a 20-year-old Chinese American who had followed TVXQ since 2007, no longer actively followed K-pop and said she had *“become very disillusioned by the whole Korean entertainment sector”* after the JYJ fiasco.

She stated firmly: “*I don’t like Kpop, only JYJpop.*” These distinct qualities – whether real or perceived – are, in my view, expressed as a form of moral work through which fans actively build their fan-idol relationships.

Even after the Seoul Central District Court granted JYJ an injunction to void their exclusive contract in 2009, the group remained unable to perform on national television due to pressure from the newly formed organisation called Korean Popular Culture Industry Federation (KPCIF) – an organisation launched by SM Entertainment and other major companies – to broadcasting and music industry stakeholders (S.-A. Lee, 2015). Some fans I spoke with had followed JYJ since their TVXQ days, while others joined later and learnt about the conflict through online sources, primarily JYJ3. While this moment launched the second wave of Korean fan activism (S.-A. Lee, 2015), these hardships also shattered the illusion of the K-pop system for fans outside Korea. Websites such as JYJ3 played a crucial role in this process. Emerging from an older website called the JYJfiles, JYJ3 administrators made it their mission to inform fans – especially newer ones – about what had occurred to JYJ and to create a safe space where fans could discuss the group without fear of being attacked (metaphorically).

As I elaborate in the following section, the everyday discourse on JYJ3 – along with fans’ correspondence with me – did more than simply recount events. By emphasising the perceived differences between JYJ and other K-pop groups, fans engage in moral work by demonstrating that their attachment to JYJ is not only aesthetic or affective but also ethical: a way of aligning themselves with what they understand as sincerity in an industry they are increasingly viewing as manufactured.

Caring for the underdogs:

Contested Care and Moral Work in a Networked Fan Platform

For many fans, the sense of “manufacturedness” within K-pop industry did not simply produce aesthetic preferences; it also shaped how they understood their responsibilities toward the idols they followed. JYJ’s conflict with SM Entertainment, which resulted in them being shunned by the broader K-pop industry (S.-A. Lee, 2015), positioned the group as underdogs. Fans widely perceived the industry as exploitative and manipulative, and thus JYJ’s position as simultaneously braver and more vulnerable. While most of these transnational fans could not participate in the kinds of fan activism undertaken by Korean fans¹⁴, the fans I spoke with frequently engaged in forms of care that were both affective and moral.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of Korean fans’ advocacy during JYJ’s legal litigation, see Seung-ah Lee, 2015.

The disillusionment with the broader “K-pop machine” did not remain at the level of individual interpretation; it was collectively articulated, negotiated, and reinforced within fan spaces such as JYJ3. As a fan site¹⁵ JYJ3 served as a space where these affective and moral forms of care were enacted, articulated, and even controlled. Many fans visited the website daily. Despite being a public-facing platform, JYJ3 emphasised its identity as a fan community through a clearly defined set of rules¹⁶. Its homepage banner once declared “Republic of JYJ”, and its tagline read: “*Let’s have fun, build friendships, share news, and be happy in JYJ ^___^*”. While anyone could read posts on the website, only registered users could post, comment, or “like” content. The site’s structure also shaped participation. The only spaces where fans could initiate new posts, often unrelated to current JYJ news and sometimes not even related to JYJ, were the GAPP (General All-Purpose Post) and ODP (Open Discussion Post) sections.

As Monica explained, the all-purpose function allowed her to interact with people from “*a multitude of backgrounds*”. She elaborated: “*Where else can you find such a diverse international community? While all have JYJ in common, everything else could be completely different. I love getting people’s opinions on things happening in the world right now and I think it’s important for people to be aware, active, and interested in political and social issues of the world and not just their respective countries.*” Therefore, her engagement as a JYJ fan and her regular visits to fan sites such as JYJ3 are significant in fostering not only cultural openness but also enhancing sociopolitical and moral literacy. Her comment aligns with the kind of self-directedness in fandom described by scholars like Choi and Maliangkay (2014). The reason for joining (or remaining in) a fandom is often not directly related to the object of fandom itself. Instead, fandom becomes a site of self-fashioning, which for Monica and several other fans included moral discernment and cultivating awareness of broader social and humanitarian issues. Fans often cited JYJ’s involvement in social causes, such as serving as UNAIDS Regional Goodwill Ambassador in 2011 (UNAIDS, 2011), as an impetus for developing their own social consciousness. Thus, being part of JYJ3 (and frequently other forums) made these individual fans part of the fan culture in which socially organized activities (Hills, 2007) and shared moral commitments were central. Yet fans did not all engage in the same way.

The fan site’s rules and moderation also shaped participation and interaction in important ways. For my analysis, I focus on two JYJ3’s rules, which I argue emerged directly from affective attachment fans developed upon following JYJ’s hardships. JYJ’s journey compelled fans to not only admire and support but also to protect them.

¹⁵ Fan site, or fan site/ fan page, is a website created and maintained by fans.

¹⁶ These rules can still be accessed here: <https://jyj3.wordpress.com/2012/08/12/welcome-to-jyj3/>

The fan site's rules appeared to reflect this need. The first rule prohibited posting any content that insulted JYJ members, the JYJ3 team, or fellow fans. Phoebe, who participated in other J-pop and K-pop fandoms and joined JYJ3 since its inception, noted that because the website was created during a time of "chaos"¹⁷, *"the need to protect and defend the boys by all means bring out the ugly."* For her and several others, supporting JYJ did not mean hating the remaining two members of TVXQ.

Yet, they were aware that for many JYJ3 users, the rule effectively sanctioned negative talk about the "other side". As Phoebe put it: *"You do not need to bash HoMin¹⁸ or any other SM idols to make JYJ shine brighter, the boys don't need that they are already amazing."* She also believed that JYJ3 administrators permitted such behaviours: *"Admins could have only said it's only a site for JYJ, refrain yourself to spazz about others, but they permit the bashing."* By taking their 'responsibility' as JYJ fans seriously, some fans deliberately chose to stop supporting the other two members of TVXQ and even other artists under SM Entertainment, especially the new TVXQ duo, fueling further 'fan wars'. As a result, fans like Diana consciously separate what they discussed in JYJ3 from what they discussed elsewhere: *"there's something you can't discuss in JYJ3, esp. discussing about HoMin."*

This rule was also taken by many fans as a sign that only positive comments about JYJ were acceptable, including evaluations of their music or acting. This created another filter for participation, as some fans became reluctant to express critical opinions. Amanda, for instance, did not enjoy one of Yoochun's dramas, but the general consensus in JYJ3 was overwhelmingly positive, just as the responses to most – if not all – JYJ works (individual or collective). She explained that she would have to word her comment carefully because: *"There are a lot of JYJ3 readers who are very sensitive and may consider such a statement¹⁹ to be a personal insult against Yoochun."* Phoebe agreed: *"It's like because JYJ has so many problems (broadcast ban) that you cannot say ANYTHING about them anymore. Someone will say 'I don't like Junsu's hair for his solo' and someone will answer 'don't bash Junsu or refrain from commenting if you don't like. JYJ needs support right now'"*.

Mimi also struggled with the idea of sisterhood that JYJ3 users claimed to share. She felt that some users were detached from reality and would chase out anyone who did not align with the majority view. As she put it: *"(I) haven't been fond of some of the*

¹⁷ JYJ3 was founded only a few months following the three members' lawsuit against SM Entertainment.

¹⁸ Fans commonly refer to Yunho and Changmin as HoMin. They are the two remaining members of TVXQ who remain under SM Entertainment and continue to promote as TVXQ.

¹⁹ She was referring to our discussion about why she didn't mention her annoyance to Yoochun's 2011 drama, Miss Ripley.

directions JYJ has gone creatively (I think some choices have been cheap, unoriginal, and demeaning to women²⁰), for one. I wouldn't even be allowed to express that opinion at JYJ3 without getting killed." Far from being a safe space that it purported to be, JYJ3 increasingly functioned as a gatekeeper, enforcing a particular form of moral work that equated loyalty with uncritical support.

In acting as a gatekeeper, JYJ3 shaped not only what could be discussed but also what it meant to be a "good" JYJ fan. As a result, many fans – including those I spoke with – chose to remain as passive readers (or "lurkers") because they did not want to initiate a 'fan war' or felt they had nothing "constructive" to contribute. Katie explained: *"I feel like the commenters only leave posts that do extreme spazzing/ gushing²¹ over JYJ's achievements/superior talents/looks. Nothing too constructive or informative for me."*

It is important to note that fans such as Mimi and Katie, who displayed scepticism or ambivalence towards the fan practices permitted and promoted within JYJ3, originate from cultural and political backgrounds that underscore the value of individuality, or, in other words, embody more liberal principles. Consequently, their discomfort reflects not merely personal predilections but also a tension between conflicting moral expectations that circulate within the transnational fandom. In the JYJ3 community, this public display of loyalty and protectiveness towards JYJ conflicted with other fans' more liberal, rights-based perspectives, thereby creating friction not only regarding the definition of a "good" fan but also concerning a cosmopolitan subject who understands not just where to exit, but when to engage.

The second rule of JYJ3 prohibited sharing any pictures or videos of JYJ's private lives – essentially, content produced by *sasaeng*. Similar to the Singaporean fans in William and Ho's (2016) study, the fans I spoke with generally agreed that these individuals were not "fans". Rachel explained: *"those sasaeng fans creep me out!!! ... Breaking and entering or stealing is a crime no matter how young you are... There is no way in a million years they would ever become your 'oppa'²² or boyfriend, or anything actually. It will always be a fan and artist relationship."* In taking such a stance, JYJ3 users distanced themselves from the image of irrational and immoral fans, the Korean stalkers known as *sasaeng*.

²⁰ Mimi was referring to JYJ's 'world tour', particularly in the U.S., to promote their *The Beginning* album, as well as the album itself.

²¹ The terms "spazzing" and "gushing" appear here as part of fans' everyday talk, as illustrated in Katie's quote. While informal and, in the case of 'spazzing', potentially ableist, they are retained to reflect the emic language through which fans express affective intensity and enthusiastic praise.

²² A Korean term of endearment for older men.

In March 2012, only a couple of months before the start of my fieldwork, an audio clip of Jaejoong and Yoochun verbally and physically assaulting fans circulated widely in Korean and international media. The two members were heard swearing and hitting female fans (Soompi, 2012). It was later revealed that these were *sasaeng* fans who had followed JYJ for some time (Soompi, 2012). When the incident broke, fans were split. In JYJ3, the incident was also heatedly discussed²³. On one hand, many distanced themselves from *sasaeng* behaviour and, while disappointed, felt that members' reactions were understandable. As Monica put it: *"If it happened, so what? Someone gets in my face and invades my privacy; there's no question that I'd fight back."* She also criticised those who framed the incident as a gendered issue: *"Saying that it wasn't right because he's a guy and she's a girl is the very antithesis of feminism."*

Others, however, believed that moral judgement was necessary. Phoebe explained: *"When the sasaeng scandal broke, reactions from JYJ3 were 'not true, made by antis, do not talk about it or you are an anti yourself'. In my opinion, a site like JYJ3 needs to talk about it deeply, share all the material and let people form their own judgement."* Here, Phoebe highlights the importance of independent thinking and making informed decisions, rather than the affinity-driven collective protection that JYJ3 appeared to adopt at the time. By applying the rule indiscriminately, JYJ3 became a space where being a "good" and "authentic" fan was often equated with being uncritical, creating an uneasy tension with fans whose moral stances diverged.

This tension illustrates how moral work within fandom is not merely articulated collectively through boundary-making between JYJ fans and 'regular' K-pop fans. It is also actively negotiated through platform rules and communal norms. Fans such as Phoebe, Mimi, Amanda and Katie represent only a small number of users who continued to negotiate, often quietly, the moral expectations enacted and performed by JYJ3 and many of its active users.

It is crucial to note that these moral expectations circulating in the transnational online space, such as JYJ3, are never neutral or universal. As I explained earlier, these JYJ fans did not come from a single origin. Even if they came from the same country (such as the U.S., as many did), they did not share identical cultural or political backgrounds. Indeed, many drew on liberal moral frameworks – such as anti-exploitation, individual authenticity, and rights-based values – when evaluating industry practices. Yet, at the same time, these fans also mobilised protective, gendered, and sometimes conservative moral logics, particularly when defending JYJ in moments of 'crisis'

²³ For instance, JYJ3 provides a translation of JYJ members' interview with a Korean journalist, providing their side of the story. (Source: <https://jyj3.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/trans-jyj-assault-controversy-the-media-and-sasaeng-fans-violence/>)

(such as during the *sasaeng* case). Thus, rather than a clash between ‘local/parochial’ and ‘global’ moral values, the tensions in JYJ3 reflect competing global moral imaginaries: liberal, rights-based expectations on one hand, and the affective and collective moral economy of K-pop fandom on the other.

CONCLUSION

This paper asks how K-pop fans construct themselves as pop cosmopolitans while simultaneously engaging in moral work. Building on Jenkins’ notion of “pop cosmopolitanism”, my analysis of JYJ3 and the JYJ fandom shows that while these fans can be understood as “pop cosmopolitan”, their engagement with JYJ is not merely aesthetic or eclectic. As Hannerz suggests, being a cosmopolitan always entails “knowing where the exit is”. These fans knew “where the exit is”, approaching cultural attachment with a sense of reflexivity and distance.

By examining participation in JYJ3 and, by extension, the wider JYJ fandom, this paper has shown how fandom becomes a site of both cultural and moral self-fashioning. As Choi and Maliangkay (2014) argue, transnational K-pop fandom can be broadly categorised into *meta fandom* and *partisan fandom*, which are shaped by divergent orientations: ‘cultural correctness’ for the Cultural North (fans coming from the Global North) who are familiar with liberal diversity politics, and affinity-based solidarities tied to South-South identification on the other. These competing global moral imaginaries resonate with the tensions observed in JYJ3, where loyalty-based moral expectations exist simultaneously, and sometimes clash with liberal, rights-based moral expectations.

Within the context of JYJ3 (and the broader K-pop fandom), this “knowing where the exit is” carries significant moral implications, shaping when fans choose to withdraw support, suspend judgment, or modify their attachments. Such instances of moral work have been largely overlooked in previous studies of pop cosmopolitanism. The case of JYJ3 illustrates that global fandom increasingly functions as a moral community, where cosmopolitanism is practised not merely as cultural openness but also as a moral stance. Concurrently, the JYJ3 case challenges the presumption that transnational fandom entails a simple tension between local, parochial moral identities and global fan norms. Fans—viewed as global citizens—draw on moral repertoires that are increasingly hybrid and transnational. The notion of ‘knowing where to exit (and I add, when to exit), inspired by Hannerz, in this context, becomes part of how fans uphold their identity as morally competent individuals within an increasingly globalised cosmopolitan world.

As noted in the Introduction, post-2010s K-pop fandom has experienced considerable changes, including heightened forms of moral scrutiny frequently linked to cancel

culture. My fieldwork was completed before Yoochun's case and the broader high-profile K-pop cases. The temporal gap between my fieldwork and the writing of this paper affords an analytical advantage in identifying the antecedents of contemporary moralised (K-pop) fandom. Recent developments indicate a further intensification of moral work within fandom, emphasising the necessity for future research to explore how platformed and networked fan communities continue to navigate care, accountability, and attachment amid evolving moral frameworks.

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