"Irene was my gay awakening": Queerness in K-pop fandom discussions

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Digitalisaation seurauksena internetin erilaiset yhteisöt nauttivat kasvavaa suosiota monenlaisten ihmisten keskuudessa. Nämä yhteisöt voivat olla erittäin tärkeitä esimerkiksi sateenkaarivähemmistöön kuuluville ihmisille, sillä anonyymi, turvallinen ja tukea tarjoava tila voi antaa heille mahdollisuuden olla oma itsensä. Faniyhteisö, joka kokoaa samasta kulttuuriaiheesta kiinnostuneet ihmiset yhteen, voi olla yksi näistä yhteisöistä. Queer-identiteetin tavoin fanina oleminen ja faniyhteisöön kuuluminen voivat olla tärkeänä osana omaa identiteettiä. Yhteisön sisällä käydään monenlaisia keskusteluita ja osa niistä yhdistää nämä kaksi identiteettiä.

Tämä tutkielma keskittyy tarkastelemaan sitä, millä tavoin queer-identiteetistä keskustellaan X -sosiaalisen median K-pop -faniyhteisön keskuudessa. Tutkielman data koostuu 19:sta julkaisusta, jotka valittiin hakemalla K-pop -yhtyeiden nimiä ja queer-identiteettiin liittyviä termejä sivuston oman hakutoiminnon avulla. Julkaisut jaoteltiin kuuteen eri kategoriaan ja analysoitiin käyttäen apuna diskurssianalyysiä.

Julkaisujen todettiin käsittelevän queer-identiteettiä seuraavin tavoin: yhtyeen liittolaisuus, yhtyeen queer-identiteetti, faniyhteisön queer-identiteetti, fanius ja viehätys, kriittinen keskustelu sekä muu. Lisäksi keskustelun huomattiin olevan sekä humoristista että vakavaa ja suhtautuvan positiivisesti erilaisiin queer-identiteetteihin.

Asiasanat – Keywords fandom, K-pop, queerness, sexuality, social media, discourse analysis
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX
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1   INTRODUCTION

In this increasingly digital, post-COVID-19 world, more and more people participate in various online communities. These communities can be places of temporary, lighthearted fun for many but for others they can also function as a safe place to escape from reality. The online space can be especially important for queer individuals as it may be one of the only places where they can unapologetically be themselves. According to Cooper (2010: p. 83), these communities can offer a place for queer people to question their identity, find a support system, and learn about life as a queer person.

One common type of online community is what Chandler and Munday (2011) describe as fandom: a dedicated community of fans surrounding a cultural phenomenon. Fandom is an imagined community as the fandom members may never meet each other in real life but they still share a bond through having similar interests, participate in online discourse regarding them, and think of the fandom as one whole (Hanmer, 2010: pp. 150-151). It is easy to see why this kind of community in particular may be attractive to queer people, especially if it is surrounding their favourite show, actor, or pop star.

In my thesis, I will be looking at the ways queerness is discussed in the K-pop fandom on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter). Online queer music fandom has been the subject of some studies (Brickman, 2016; Oh, 2015; Phillips, 2019; Pruett, 2020) but during my research I found none in particular that take a closer look at the discussions of queerness or even the language used in these spaces. I find that it is important to examine how these fandom communities behave and what discussions are had to better understand them and online culture in general.

2   BACKGROUND

This section of the thesis centres on exploring existing studies and literature to understand more about the focus of the study. First, fandom's function as a community, the stereotypes attached to it, and its possible parasocial nature are discussed. Second, the function of the online space as a place of peer support for queer individuals is explained. The last section focuses on how fandom and the queer community intersect.

2.1   Fandom

Duffet (2013: p. 18) defines a fan as someone who has a positive view and emotional connection towards their object of fandom and participates in different fannish practices such as repeated watching or listening, participating in fan discussions, or creating fan works. The word fan originally comes from the word fanatic which in turn comes from the Latin word fanaticus, meaning a devotee or a temple servant. Over time the word moved on from referencing religious belief to referring to particularly excessive or misplaced belief or enthusiasm of any kind. (Jenkins, 1992: p. 12). These negative connotations can sometimes still be seen today but generally "fan" has now become a neutral way to refer to pop culture enthusiasts, supporters of sports teams, or followers of actors, musicians, and TV-personalities alike.

As stated by Johnson (2014: p. 286), people partly understand themselves through the membership of different categories and social groups. For many, being a part of fandom is thus a part of one's identity (Duffett, 2013: p. 24). According to Tajfel (1972: p. 297, as cited in Johnson, 2014: p. 286), social identity is the knowledge that one is a member of certain groups, and they feel that the membership of the group has emotional and value significance to them. Identity can provide a sense of where an individual stands in the world through

their connection with others, what similarities they share, and what differences they have (Weeks, 1990: p. 88, as cited in Pullen, 2014: p. 9).

Jenkins (1992: p. 23) states that when fans are a part of a larger community, they have the ability to draw strength and courage from their identity as a member of the group. Being a part of a fandom is to be a part of a collective identity where fans have shared interests and issues and are able to speak for each other. This collective identity can create an "alliance" where fans support and defend each other simply on the basis of their shared tastes. This can be crucial as accepting the role of a fan does not only mean being a fan of something but also accepting an identity that is often looked down on and criticised by many cultural authorities and a large part of wider society. (Jenkins, 1992: p. 23).

Duffet (2013: p. 37) notes that fans are often othered by mainstream media, academia, and even each other. Stereotyping is one of the ways that it is done through. Jenkins (1992: pp. 9-10) describes a Saturday Night Live (SNL) -sketch where two Star Trek -fans or Trekkies discuss the show and their knowledge of it. In the sketch they are represented according to popular stereotypes: as devoting their lives to gathering useless information, as social outcasts, and intellectually and emotionally immature. They are feminised, desexualised and portrayed as consumers who buy anything and everything that is associated with their favourite show. (Jenkins, 1992: pp. 9-10). Brooker (2002: p. 3, as cited in Duffet, 2013: p. 46) additionally finds that the type of obsessive media fandom that is shown in the sketch can sometimes be seen as acceptable as long as the fans avoid the "social types of perpetually single misfit and homosexual". Duffet (2013: p. 40) acknowledges that stereotypes like these usually have some truth in them but that generalising that small amount on a larger scale leads to problems.

The above portrayal of fandom stereotypes focuses on male media fandom and while most of these stereotypes are also commonly applied to female (majority)

music fandom, others are not. Desexualisation is one of them as female fans of male musicians are often seen as promiscuous and wanting to "get with" the artist. Duffet (2013: p. 40) explains that this perception of female fandom was epitomised by the portrayal of groupies (female fans who aim to have a real romantic or sexual relationship with their idol) that started in the 1960s. Brickman (2016: p. 453) agrees that female fans are often either assumed to be heterosexual or completely desexualised and their potential queerness is erased in a way that ultimately harms the way we understand pop music, fandom, and girl culture. Pruett (2020) also states this "supposed heterosexuality of boy band fandom" completely ignores the existence of lesbian fans.

Jenkins (1992: p. 90, as cited in Duffet, 2013: p. 40) further explains fans do not just decide to be a fan of whatever is popular (or whoever they find attractive) at random but rather choose carefully who they want to follow and how they relate to them. Duffet (2013: p. 42) adds that fans are also very much aware of the fact that the image the object of their fandom portrays to the world is often not who they are in reality. Fans can realise and understand that this image and message are filtered by the industry that they are a part of but regardless enjoy being a fan and approach their idol almost as a fictional character.

Although fans indeed can have a healthy relationship towards their idols, they can also develop a parasocial relationship with them. Horton and Wohl (1956: p. 215) describe parasocial interaction as a type of interaction occurring between an audience and a performer that is one-sided, controlled by the performer, and has no potential for mutual development. The performer can talk and act in a way that feels as if they have a personal relationship with the members of the audience, but the relationship lacks any effort on the part of the spectator. The interaction creates an illusion that the audience knows and are interacting with the performer (Duffet, 2013, p. 89) which can lead to the audience developing a feeling of loyalty and thus feel obligated to support the performer (Horton & Wohl, 1976: p. 220) as they almost feel like a friend.

On the audience's side, Tutachinsky et al. (2020: p. 20) claim that parasocial relationships are born from needing to satisfy social needs. These relationships are often more intense for, for example, women as they more commonly form stronger interpersonal relationships in general and for people who have an anxious attachment style and cling to others because of that. Identifying strongly with the performer also increases the likelihood of developing a parasocial relationship with them. (Tutachinsky et al. 2020: p. 20).

2.2   Queerness online

Savin-Williams (1995: p. 166, as cited in Drushel, 2010: p. 62) defines sexual identity as the sense of self as a sexual being that takes into account the sexual attraction, behaviour, and fantasies of a person that fits into one of the culturally created categories. Additionally, "queer" is a reappropriated term meaning being other than cisgender and/or heterosexual (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Queer people often need to teach each other how to live as a part of the queer community and the wider society because many societal institutions and structures, such as schools, churches, and families, function with heteronormative expectations for their participants (Goodwin, 1989: p. xiv, as cited in Wuest, 2014: p. 20). Walters (2001: pp. 28–29, as cited in Wuest, 2014: p. 20) observes that as queer people are most often raised by straight parents, they need to discover their own identities and have to actively search for a community of others with similar identities. Because society does not value queerness, queer people can get discouraged from openly expressing their identity (Wuest, 2014: p. 21).

As social networking websites have become increasingly popular, they have begun to present a possibility of a queer-friendly, supportive environment that is not geographically restricted (Drushel, 2010: p. 62). Queer individuals no longer need to move to a specific neighbourhood to find others in similar situations but can instead join a chatroom or a dating site (Usher & Morrison, 2010: p. 280). As stated by Cooper & Dzara (2010: p. 106), joining a queer group online

can be the first time many individuals living in rural areas are able to interact with others like them. Through these groups and communities, they can explore their identity, learn about queer history, and find support for coming out. The online community can additionally help in developing a collective identity alongside an individual one. It can also help individuals feel less alone by giving them a place to belong to if they do not have that in real life, functioning as an alternative family or network of friends. (Cooper, 2010).

Anonymity is more easily provided by some social media than others, which is why sites such as Tumblr and Twitter can be favoured over more offline identity-bound social media such as Facebook, where one's real name is requested upon sign-up (Fox & Ralston, 2016: pp. 636-639). Although Facebook can also be used by queer people to find supportive communities, its generally public nature can make it stressful to use for queer people (Haimson et al., 2015). Cho's (2017) interviews with queer youth of colour reveal that this publicness had in several instances resulted in life-altering negative consequences for them and at least two of the people interviewed were disowned after being outed by Facebook. Platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr where the use of pseudonyms is commonplace have a higher sense of privacy and grants individuals access to others' experiences that they can then feel affirmed by and use to learn about their own personal identity (Byron et al., 2019: pp. 5-7). According to a survey by GLSEN (2013, as cited in Wuest, 2014: p. 49) queer people use the internet more often and have a lot more online friends compared to their non-queer peers. Separation from one's offline connections can allow for the building of new networks with people who are more accepting of different queer identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016: pp. 636-639).

2.3   Fandom and Queer Support

As stated by Wilkerson et al. (2017: pp. 358-359), young people rarely have control over who they interact with in their daily lives. The two places where they

have the most interactions with others, school and home, are not environments that they have a lot of control over. This leaves many young people belonging to sexual and gender minorities to live in environments where they regularly experience discrimination. Consequently, it is crucial to provide safe environments for youth belonging to minorities where they can receive peer support from people in similar situations. Offering these spaces can reduce their risk behaviours and improve their mental health. (Wilkerson et al., 2017: pp. 358-359). With the level of anonymity made possible by the internet, they can highlight their own identity in ways that would not have been possible before stepping into the online space. (Fox & Ralston, 2016: p. 636). Fandoms can act as peer support groups where the anonymity provided by the online platform lessens the fear of being recognized and the shared interest in the object of the fandom makes it easier to connect with other people.

Fandom can be as much of a space for identity discovery as it is a space for discussing the object of one's fandom (Lumby, 2007, as cited in Duffet, 2013: p. 196). It can offer a space where individuals are able to experiment with their gender (Duffet, 2013: p. 196) and construct personal readings of the source text. This can offer them a deeper understanding of their sexual and gender identity and self, possibly changing the way they view themselves in their everyday life. The fandom space can allow for people, queer or not, to experience and explore the queer community without fear of judgement. (Hanmer, 2010: p. 147).

Another reason for why fandoms can offer a sense of belonging is that they are communities of common interest (Jenkins, 1992: p. 23). Duffet (2013: p. 204) notes that groups such as the Gaylaxians (a North American organisation for queer sci-fi fans) see their own social niche as a better alternative to the wider queer community as they are more supportive of their nerdy interests. Ahmed (2004: p. 151, as cited in Byron et al. 2019: p. 10) agrees that queer individuals can feel pressured to present themselves in certain ways to be accepted as queer which is why not everyone finds comfort in queer spaces. A community of

people with similar interests can offer an escape from social and cultural isolation to many marginalised people (Jenkins, 2006: p. 41). The support of the community is not often the reason why people become involved in fan communities but for many it can become a reason for staying (Duffet, 2013: p. 250).

In addition to peer support, people belonging to sexual and gender minorities may also seek and find support from public figures. These figures can either belong to the queer community themselves or be otherwise known supporters of the community. (Fox & Ralston, 2016: p. 638). As pointed out by Duffet (2013; p. 200), in a time where queer characters were reduced into stereotypes and only used for comedic purposes, gay audiences had very few celebrities to relate to. As a result, they tended to latch onto individuals who showed even the smallest hints that they could identify with, bestowing them with the status of an "icon". Phillips (2019: p. 27) explains that when public figures show support for minority groups (for example through donations to charity) fans feel that they are seen and represented. Queer people value these representations of queerness highly as they can help understand their own "other"-ness and identity (Wuest, 2014: p. 22).

Regarding the sexual and gender identities of celebrities, Brickman (2016: p. 444) notes that male pop stars have always been thought of as queer and outside of the norm as they commonly play with androgyny and traditional heterosexuality. She brings up Western artists such as Justin Bieber, Elvis Presley, and Sean Cassidy as examples of this type of expression. Flamboyant clothing, high voices, makeup, and exaggerated motions are all things that are often associated with gay men which is why individuals associated with these traits can be seen as incompatible with heteronormative masculinity (Oh, 2015: p. 65).

Expressing one's gender and sexuality in this queer way is also very common in K-pop. Kkonminam (꽃미남: kkot/n: flower, minam: handsome man) or "flower boys" is the label given to men whose ambiguous gender expression differs

from the typical masculine look (Jung, 2010, as cited in Shin, 2018: p. 90). This non-normative expression can present different types of masculinity and femininity that others can then make their own as is exemplified in Kang (2014) and Sinnott (2012, as cited in Shin, 2018: p. 92) with queer men and women in Thailand modelling their expression after that of K-pop stars'. Yi (2005, as cited in Shin 2018: p. 92) also notes of the same happening in Korea as young women are able to explore sexuality in a way that was not formerly seen as normal. The emergence of this softer version of masculinity can offer more flexibility for queer women's identities compared to the strict, traditional version of masculine expression (Shin, 2018: p. 92). While there are doubts if these varied expressions of femininity and masculinity have yet had any positive effects on Korean queer politics, many agree that this change at least has the potential to influence and possibly overcome traditional binary views on gender and sexuality (Shin, 2018: p. 90).

3   PRESENT STUDY

In this section the aim and the research questions of this research are briefly stated. The type of data, why it was chosen, and how it was gathered is explained. The method of analysis and why it is fitting for this study is presented.

3.1   Aim and research question

The aim of this thesis is to explore the different ways queerness is discussed in the context of the K-pop -fandom on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter).

The research question this thesis attempts to answer is "How is queerness discussed in the K-pop fandom?".

3.2   Data

The data for this thesis consists of social media posts from the platform X. Originally 29 posts were chosen to be used as data but as some of them have been deleted since only 19 of them remain. The posts chosen include discussions of sexuality or queerness in some form and additionally are linked to the K-pop fandom by, for example, mentioning the name of the genre or the name of a specific artist. These requirements for the material were chosen because the mentioning of specific words makes it easy to gather the material from the website and the connection to these topics can be proven. Additionally, I limited the data to discussions of queerness in the sense of sexuality rather than both sexuality and gender as these topics can be discussed in very different ways and I needed to keep the scope of the study small. Sexuality was chosen out of the two as it seems to be discussed more commonly and I have more knowledge in the area.

X was chosen as the social media platform to focus on because, anecdotally, it seems that the K-pop fandom is more prevalent and active on X than any other platform and thus there should be the most data available to use. The platform is also text-based and has a well-functioning search function. In addition, as mentioned in the theoretical framework-section, there are different levels of anonymity on different social media platforms and X is one where users can be relatively anonymous and thus more willing to discuss sensitive and personal topics such as sexuality.

The data for this study was collected using X's built-in search function. Using the function, a mix of keywords was searched for by combining the word *Kpop* or names of specific K-pop artists, such as *BTS, Red Velvet, Loona*, *Mamamoo* and *Twice*, and the words gay, lesbian, and queer. After making a search, I looked at the "top" posts as that is what the function shows as a default. Screenshots were taken of posts that seemed suitable for the purposes of this study.

By gathering the data this way, I had the option to adjust my aim or research question later and still be able to use it as the material is not too specific. By using my judgement to pick specific posts instead of, for example, taking the first five that appear in any given search I limited repeats and made sure the content of the post was relevant to my research. In addition, taking screenshots of the posts allowed me to view the content in its original context. Instead of only being able to see the text, the screenshots also included profile pictures of the users, pictures included in the posts, and any engagement that the post had.

3.3   Method

As my method of analysis, I will be using discourse analysis. According to Brown & Yule (1983: p. viii-1), discourse analysis, or the analysis of language in use, is a term that is used to refer to a large number of different approaches to the analysis of discourse, with each looking at discourse from a different angle.

Language and its speakers as well as culture and society at large are all topics that can be studied using discourse analysis. What these studies have in common is that they all examine texts with close attention and systemically look at different features or topics occurring in them. (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024: p. xiii).

3.4   Ethical issues

Social media research always comes with potential ethical issues such as the privacy and consent of the authors of social media content. As discussed in Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (2021), it can be difficult to distinguish between what is public space and what is private space when online communication often happens in both public (e.g., open social media) and private (e.g., one's own bedroom) simultaneously. However, when it is reasonable to assume that privacy is not expected it can be justifiable to use data without obtaining valid consent (Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research, 2021).

Woodfield (2018: 86) states that X is seen as a more public space compared to other platforms such as Facebook, largely due to the public availability of its content and data through search engines such as Google. In addition, X's Privacy Policy (2022) states that content from X is available to the public even without an account. Due to these factors, it was felt that there is no expectation of privacy from users of X. Additionally, the data for this thesis largely consists of posts made by accounts using pseudonyms and with profile pictures that do not depict the poster, as is typical in fandom spaces. This already makes the data fairly anonymous and identifying the person behind the account difficult. These are the reasons for why valid consent was not obtained from the authors of the posts discussed in this study.

4   ANALYSIS

The material has been divided into six different categories based on the topics and the way queerness is discussed in the posts: group's allyship, group's queerness, fandom's queerness, being a fan and attraction, critical discussions, and other. The division of the posts into the categories above was done with the original 29 posts.

4.1   Group's allyship

The posts in this category discuss how a K-pop group is an ally to the queer community.

> *Red Velvet always had queer feminist themes in their music videos. Why are people surprised that Monster is gay? It's a gay storyline. These girls also have a huge lgbt+ fanbase. If you were a fan you wouldn't be surprised that it's gay. It's always been gay.*
>
> *July 7th 2020*

This poster is confused about how people can be surprised that girl group Red Velvet has a queer storyline in their music video. They argue that the group has always had progressive themes in their music which real fans would know. The post below also focuses on a group that has touched on queer themes in their content.

> *i think we as a society need to acknowledge what onlyoneof did to kpop because not only they have touched topics other groups could only dream about touching - such as queer relationships and the development of them, homophobia and acceptance, they have touched so much +*
>
> *January 16th 2023*

This post explains what kind of queer topics boy group OnlyOneOf has showcased in their music and other content. The poster is additionally arguing that they are one of the rare groups that touch on these topics and that people should acknowledge that more often. Shin (2018: p. 89) notes that many non-Korean fans see K-pop as "queer resources" and, at least in this case, it is easy to see why queer people may be drawn to these groups and build queer-friendly fandoms around them.

However, some posts discussing allyship are not as serious in their tone as the ones discussed above.

> *bts lesbian protectors* [screenshot of BTS dancing in front of a lesbian-flag colored background]
>
> *May 28th 2021*

This type of post is quite common in fandom spaces on X. The poster claims that boy group BTS are protectors of lesbians solely based on them dancing in front of a background that can be interpreted as being the colours of the lesbian pride flag. Although techniques such as "bisexual lighting" are sometimes used to communicate identity or show support for a cause in audiovisual media, it is unlikely that that was the intent in this particular case. The humour of the post comes from exaggeration and not completely knowing if the poster is serious or not.

4.2 Group's queerness

The posts discussed in this section contain discussions of idols being queer.

The first post reads:

> *bts gay line:* [picture of BTS]
>
> *January 18th 2023*

This type of post is also common in fandom circles. The post can be meant to be taken as either serious or humorous but typically it includes only a few of the group's members. This post is made humorous because of the exaggeration of the expected format. However, the overall acceptability of calling idols queer in this manner is a debated topic in the community.

> *bh editors successfully squeezing "bro" "brother" in subs after every gay bts moments*
>
> *January 19th 2023*

This user implies that in an attempt to make moments that can possibly be read as queer seem more platonic, the translators of BTS's content choose to translate the Korean honorific 형 (hyeong, often romanised as hyung, literally meaning "older brother") as brother. The word can be translated and subtitled this way but often subtitles only use the person's name instead or ignore it completely. Additionally, in English "brother" and "bro" have a platonic connotation but in Korean the word "hyung" can be used to refer to any older close male figure from a friend to a romantic partner. Thus, using the cultural connotations of the English word the translators can potentially influence the way people see the interaction taking place on screen.

> *I have to say, back in 2017 when I first got into Mamamoo, Moonbyul basically single-handedly changed my entire view of kpop just by existing. I had no idea that a woman could be so outwardly queer (albeit not "openly") in that world, and it was, and still is, awesome to see.*
>
> *January 5th 2023*

The tone of this post is more serious than the previous two. The poster expresses their admiration towards Moonbyul of the girl group Mamamoo as they explain that her expression of queerness has changed their view of K-pop as a whole. This post exemplifies how important it is to have representation of

queerness in the media, as it can change the way people view queerness itself and the public space where queerness is expressed. As discussed in section 2.3., celebrities' display of their own identities has the ability to show others different ways of expressing themselves. Moonbyul's queer expression can be especially useful and meaningful in spaces like K-pop and countries like South Korea where public displays of genuine queerness (in favour of "fan service", which is discussed later) can be rare.

4.3   Fandom's queerness

The posts in this category contain discussions of artists' fandoms being queer.

> *say "i like kpop" and no one bats an eye, say "im a moa" and society calls you gay* [confused emoji]
>
> *January 10th 2023*

This poster seems to identify as a MOA, a fan of boy group Tomorrow X Together, and implies that MOA's in particular get a reputation for being more queer than the general K-pop fandom. This post again references a popular meme format that originates from the early 2010's, giving the post a clearly humorous tone.

> *bts pls come back the mentally ill queers (me) need u*
>
> *January 21st 2023*

This post gives the impression that, at least according to this poster, many of BTS's fans are queer people with mental health issues, including the poster themselves, and they find enjoyment, comfort, or entertainment in them and their music. The word "need" may be used as an exaggeration but also seriously as many can find a kind of escape from reality in being a fan.

chuu is always so excited to see gay people she would have had a blast at the loona world tour

January 22ⁿᵈ 2023

Similarly to the previous posts in the category, this one also implies that fans of girl group Loona are queer. As simplified in the post, Chuu, a member of the group, is known to be friends with a lot of queer people and "is always so excited" to see them. She was unfortunately unable to participate in the group's tour and thus missed the chance to see her fans.

4.4 Being a fan and attraction

In these posts the posters express their interest in an idol or a group and how their interest in them is either connected or not connected to their attraction.

One poster writes:

> *irene was my gay awakening and i didn't even stan red velvet* [two women kissing emoji]
>
> *January 18ᵗʰ 2023*

This "gay awakening" is also present in the post below.

> *nobody warned me that getting into TWICE would make me gay oh my god*
>
> *January 15ᵗʰ 2023*

As discussed earlier in the thesis, queer people often need to discover their identity and fandom can be a helpful and supportive environment to do that in. Both of the above posts express discovering their identity after becoming fans of female idols and having a moment of "gay awakening" or "being made gay" by them. The first post discusses an awakening that happened without deeper knowledge of the idol ("*i didn't even stan*"), possibly on the basis of looks only,

but the latter implies that the same happened later after "getting into" the group and having deeper knowledge of them and their personalities.

One user writes

> *but i love that man (i'm a lesbian) like nobody can (he's a bts member)* [video of BTS member Suga]
>
> *January 21ˢᵗ 2023*

in the format of a popular meme referencing lyrics of *How to disappear* by Lana Del Rey. In this post they are expressing that despite them not being interested in men and Suga being a part of a famous group with millions of fans they love and care for him and his work and feel that they have a special connection with him. The tone of the post is humorous due to the use of a meme format and the juxtaposition of the lyrics with the reality of the situation. Pruett (2020) notes that the presence of lesbian fans in boy band fandom and their ability to take material that is often made (e.g. by the use of pronouns) or marketed (e.g. by showing a straight couple in a music video) as heterosexual and rework and build community through them is in opposition to the popular belief of boy bands being a heterosexual phenomenon.

Another poster states:

> *a lesbian's relationship with gender and bts can be so personal*
>
> *January 17ᵗʰ 2023*

As touched on in section 2.3, the non-normative gender expression of idols labelled as "flower boys" (BTS's Jimin being a common example) can exemplify different ways of expression to others. Additionally, Pruett (2020) notes that male idols have strong lesbian aesthetic and sexual appeal when they showcase a more youthful and androgynous look. They are stated to also allow homoerotic interactions to take place between female fans due to this "sign of female

masculinity and lesbian erotic potential" that they showcase (Brickman, 2014: p. 444, as cited in Pruett 2020).

It can be seen in these posts that fans can be interested in and have connections to their idols also when attraction is not a factor. This is important to note as many outsiders stereotype these fans' enjoyment of their idols as them only being interested in their looks or dating them.

4.5 Critical discussions

This category includes posts that contain critical discussion of how the fandom or the K-pop industry discuss or exploit queerness.

> *even as a queer kpop stan i hate when ppl literally just call idols gay to the point*
> *they genuinely believe it like.... i do it sometimes too but obviously i dont think*
> *that however. some ppl do way too much*
>
> *January 15th 2023*

As seen in some of the posts featured in earlier sections, fans sometimes discuss the possibilities of their idols being queer. The discussion can be done in a joking manner but sometimes also seriously, and this particular poster thinks fans who genuinely think an idol is queer are taking it too far. The poster defends their stance by stating that they are queer themselves, with the implication that they have authority to speak on the topic.

The speculation of idols' sexualities is a debated topic in the fandom as some feel that any speculation is wrong, some think that joking about it is alright as long as it does not go further than that, and some have serious discussions on the possibility of idols' queerness based on possible evidence. The arguments are often centred around privacy, South Korea's conservative society, and the erasure of queer people.

their gay storylines arent a "concept". if a kpop grp released a mv with a straight love story u wouldnt call it a straight concept but for some reason ppl view queer people as existing purely for entertainment purposes and therefore we have the "[OnlyOneOf] has a bl concept" argument [screenshot of a TikTok comment asking "Im confused is this bl or kpop group" and an answer saying "They are a kpop group just the concept for their come back is bl this time"]

December 10th 2022

In K-pop, a concept is the aesthetic and sound that a song, an album, or a group is designed around. Popular concepts include things such as cute, dark, and retro. On the other hand, Boys' Love or BL is a genre of entertainment centred on gay relationships. The poster is angry that the person in the screenshot is calling the comeback (= releasing music and promoting it, does not imply a hiatus like in the West) concept BL as that feels very superficial and like it is done purely for the entertainment of fans without any thought behind it.

4.6   Other

This category includes posts that did not fit in any of the previous categories.

I would guess that the reason why kpop resonates so much with queer people (as a queer person) is that so much of the lyrics are without gendered pronouns and you can imagine singing "if you want me to stay for the rest of my life, you got me" to any person [praying hands emoji]

January 22nd 2023

In this post the poster expresses their opinion on why K-pop has such a large queer fanbase. Although some K-pop -lyrics do include words that may reveal the gender of the love interest, such as honorifics or "girl/-friend/boy/-friend", Korean does not typically use gendered third person pronouns like English does. As the poster states, this results in the lyrics mostly being genderless and more appealing to a queer audience.

kpop literally capitalizes on queer bait fan service and yet there are people like "you ship members?? you're so weird" like am I supposed to take that as an insult when this is clearly fictitious ??

<div align="right">

September 6th 2020

</div>

This user seems to be annoyed that some people in the K-pop fandom are against shipping culture when idols themselves take part in "queer bait fan service". This refers to idols acting in a way that can be read as queer to please fans without confirming anything. Shipping (wanting characters or celebrities to be in a romantic relationship together) real people has also been a topic of debate for a long time, inside and outside of the K-pop fandom. The user additionally defends their shipping by saying that they do not really think that the idols are together, implying that it is more like fiction to them with the idols as characters.

looking for lesbian and tbh any queer armys i am lesbian i love bts and girl groups pls follow me [broken heart emoji] [hand heart emoji] *#bts #followmepls* [GIF of pictures of BTS turning into the lesbian pride flag]

<div align="right">

January 18th 2023

</div>

In this post the identification of oneself as a queer person and a fan of K-pop are the main purposes of the post. This is done to disclose the poster's interests and other information people might find relevant when trying to find new friends or a partner. They are seeking to find a community of like-minded people like many other queer individuals, as discussed earlier in the thesis. This user is also trying to maximise their reach by using hashtags and using a GIF to stand out more and easily communicate their interests and identity to someone scrolling by.

5   CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the ways that queerness is discussed in the parts of the K-pop fandom focused on the social media platform X. The material for the study was selected by searching for specific keywords using the internal search engine on X. It was found that the discussions in the material could mostly be divided into categories of group's allyship, group's queerness, fandom's queerness, being a fan and attraction, and critical discussion. Additionally, there were posts that did not fit any of the above categories that focused on topics such as identifying oneself as a queer fan to find friends. Discussions were also found to be both humorous and serious, referencing various meme formats and issues within the fandom and in the real world respectively. Overall, queerness was approached from a positive standpoint.

As Jenkins (1992: p. 7) describes, there is a feeling of great responsibility to the community when studying fandom as a fan. As a consequence of this closeness with the object of the research, there is a greater likelihood for the research to become too subjective and biassed. However, Duffet (2013: p. 268) states that being invested in a cause does not make someone incapable of rational thought. Although much of this study is based on my own analysis that is limited by my knowledge and based on my subjective view of the material, I feel that I was able to look at the material objectively when needed. Additionally, many of the examples discussed required good knowledge of internet culture, current fandom events, and/or the objects of the fandom. Taking this into account, my connections to the fandom were of great benefit as my understanding in these areas would have been greatly hindered otherwise.

The limited scope of the study is another factor that may have influenced the results of the research. The original number of posts that were divided into categories was 29 and the final analysis was done on 19 posts. As a result of having this little data, it is likely that other categories would have formed had more

posts been included in the analysis. Additionally, as the data was gathered from the "top" results using X's search engine, there may have been types of content that are either less popular or repressed by the algorithm deciding what "top" is, leading them to not be included in the study. This could have been circumvented by instead looking at the "latest" results or gathering posts with another search engine in addition to X's own. However, as the discussions have taken place over many years and across thousands of posts it is very difficult to truly define all of the ways in which queerness has been and continues to be discussed.

The information obtained in this thesis could benefit scholars studying fandoms, sexuality, or social media behaviour. Topics of interest for future research could include inspecting another fandom's discussions of queerness and seeing how they differ from or are similar to the results of this thesis. The fandom could, for example, be a different music fandom, perhaps one surrounding a Western or an openly queer artist, or fandom of a fictional work. As this thesis mostly focused on queerness in the field of sexuality, another possible future topic could be to focus on discussions of queerness of gender in the same fandom space. Additionally, one could look more in depth into one of the categories of discussion that were found in this study.

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