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How to Make a K-Pop Boy Band

BORA KIM, KARIN KURODA AND SAMANTHA Y. SHAO (IMMABB: I'M MAKING A BOY BAND)

A creative collective, I'm Making A Boy Band (IMMABB) discuss the issues of postcolonialism and identity/gender politics surrounding the transnational circulation of K-pop by sharing their process of making a non-Korean K-pop idol group called EXP in New York in the form of an experimental "how-to" manual. They also talk about the possibilities of fandom in relation to feminism and sexuality by using an in-depth analysis of the K-pop industry as well as themselves whilst blurring the line between fine art and pop culture.

Dear Reader,
This manual serves as an excerpt of our journey, and some facets that make up our project known as I'm Making a Boy Band.

Prior to delving into this crazy world of learning about making a boy band, we wanted to preface our journey by letting you know a bit about us and how we started.

I'm Making a Boy Band is a project that started in the fall of 2014, when I was a second-year MFA student at Columbia University.

I decided to make a K-pop boy band but soon realized I could not do it by myself so I asked Karin Kuroda and Samantha Y. Shao to help me, and that is how IMMABB, a creative collective behind EXP, the first and only K-pop boy band in New York, has materialized into what it is today.

To give you some context to what I was thinking when I started this project, I was researching K-pop from a sociological vantage point. I was interested in how a postcolonial country like Korea successfully managed to develop and export their pop culture to other Asian countries and beyond. It is even more interesting when you take a look at the content of K-pop, because it is highly influenced by American pop – to be more specific, Western pop music through Japan. I was thinking about this cultural flow and how issues like originality, hybridity, and appropriation arise in K-pop. I thought I should just make a K-pop idol group of my own that was fundamentally different in a way, so it could start a productive and critical conversation in the public realm about how we consume entertainment.

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Another important inquiry of this project addresses Asian masculinity. K-pop boy bands engage with a totally different kind of gender performance when compared to American boy bands, and I think this has created a new type of representation of Asian male sexuality within global media. I believe this reveals a lot about both Korean and American society.

EXP has been performing in various art and nonart venues around New York; however, I am presently in Korea writing this because we are in the process of relocating the band to Korea, the birthplace and mecca of K-pop.

Joey Orr and Andy Ditzler asked I'm Making a Boy Band to contribute to the *Journal of American Studies* in 2015, by writing a how-to manual of sorts, saying, "We are looking for work that produces or participates in the kinds of culture it seeks to critically examine: Inhabiting Cultures." Although two out of the three IMMABB members are not native English-speakers, we decided to collectively draft a piece of writing, since the theme Orr and Ditzler presented us with could not be more relevant to what we are doing. And so here is what we have come up with.[1] We hope this will be a strange guide for strange people who would want to make a K-pop boy band in New York with no Korean members, just like us.

Bora Kim



Figure 1. EXP's first official video shoot in December 2014. Courtesy of IMMABB.

[1] This manual was finished in 2016 but some of the photos were updated in 2017.

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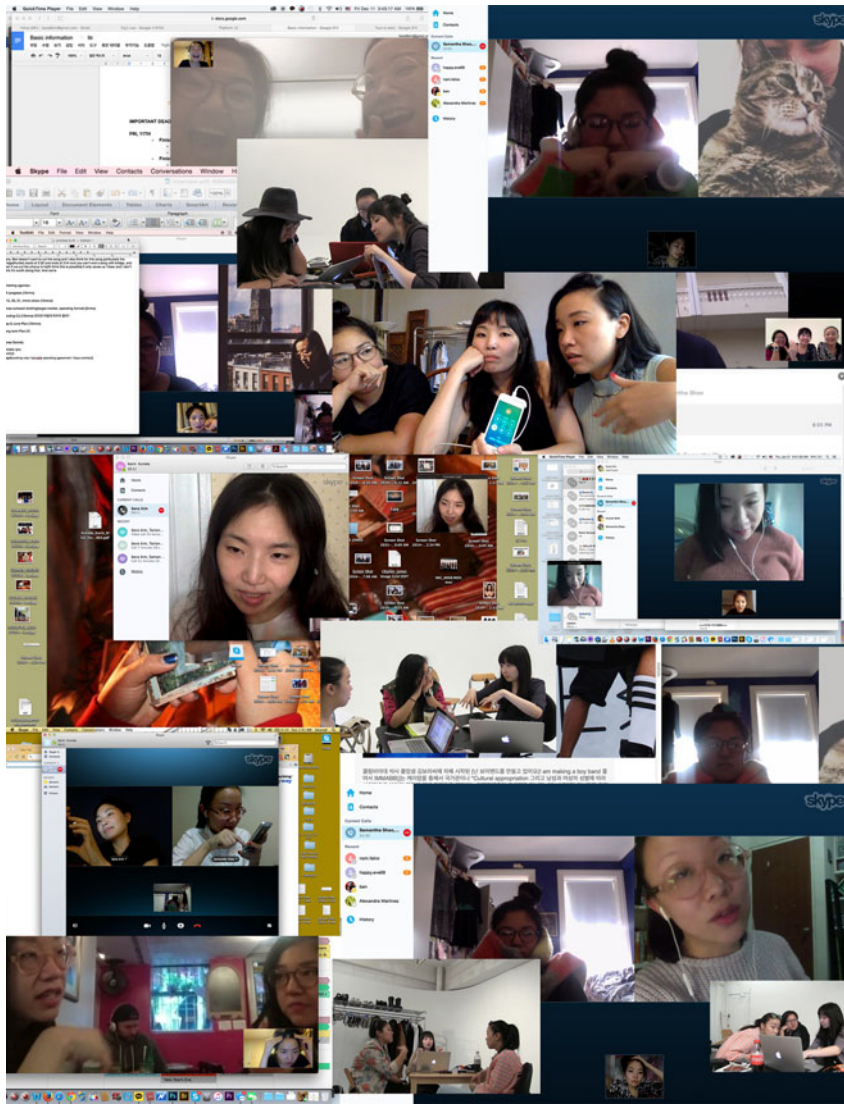


Figure 2. Composite image made from various screen recordings of Bora Kim, Karin Kuroda, and Samantha Y. Shao having meetings, 2014–16. Courtesy of IMMABB.

YOUR TO-DO LIST: IMPORTANT TERMS WHEN CROSSING OVER FROM ART TO POP WITH YOUR HANDMADE IDOL

Condensing

잘 구겨서 멀리 멀리 던진다

Condensation becomes a crucial step when shaping your inquiry into the form of entertainment. This requires leaving the most essential elements intact and

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trimming out anything ornamental in order to send out your idea as far as you can. This involves reshaping the idea so it becomes lighter without damaging the essence. Now your idea can be accepted more widely, allowing your audience to feel free to appropriate as they wish. Consuming, copying, remixing, and then uploading and sharing that altered outcome is what you want to promote.

If done delicately, after all the multiplying and transforming, it will generate interesting and productive conversation wherever it goes because it contains the right amount of information that can be attached to the endless feedback of your audience. It is vital to have the right amount of otherness 낯설음. It can be neither too uncomfortable nor too easy. It should be just slightly triggering and challenging to the status quo, so it is still fun to play with, but not so elitist that it will alienate the public.

Abstracting

모호해서 정치적인

If we see popular culture or "pop" as a form of abstraction, we can make some interesting conclusions. Pop is more about the packaging than about the message. And that is because pop has its purpose in pleasure. It cannot be pop otherwise. Packaging, or the form that can be perceived by the senses, becomes primary and significant, while the message, or the *content*, becomes secondary, and therefore less concrete. The form itself becomes the *content*. Or rather, the form engulfs the *content*.[2]

While trying to make EXP exist as a K-pop boy band in the real world, outside the fine-art world, we have learned, after failing many times by attempting to communicate with the language that we were used to in fine art, that one should not naively keep the same mode or voice when crossing over to pop.

Pop should not be judged using the same criteria as one would judge art. Pop should be and is always irresistible, and that is because it does not claim to be correct or virtuous. This does not mean that pop is not political. Pop, or successful pop, to be more accurate, is inevitably political because it reflects, subconsciously, the preoccupations of its society. Therefore, when you are

[2] It is interesting to see how the English word "content" (although the written form of the English pronunciation in Korean, 컨텐츠, sounds closer to "contents") infiltrated Korean media and government institutions (including the names of agency branches) rapidly in the early 2000s. It has now become an official way to comprehensively indicate pop-cultural products such as K-pop, K-drama, and television shows, that sell well abroad and are perceived as the "Korean Wave."

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looking at K-pop idols, you should be able to enjoy and accept the endless repetition with the slight variations that reveal so much about society. Pop is an uncertain compromise, by undergoing a mass-appeal filtering that vaguely, yet nakedly, displays society's subconscious. It is a system that is loaded with political identity, although people are quick to dismiss this.

Translating

권위

When you are making a "K-pop" band in New York, without any Korean members, and, being Korean, you are the only source of origin that the band members and coworkers have access to, you are bound to have the responsibility to translate.

That is, of course, because displacement creates unusual questions that call for lost context. It is actually the extent of translation that you really have to be concerned about. How much do you want to leave to the unknown, or how far do you want to invite your audience into your ideology?

Displacing

적籍을 만들지 말자



Figure 3. During EXP's performance at SVA MA CP Projects Space for Asia Contemporary Art Week in New York, shot by New Visual Collective, 2014. Courtesy of IMMABB.

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EXP was and still is displaced wherever it goes. Or, more accurately, EXP contains displacement inherently as a concept and will forever be displaced. EXP is a K-pop band that performs in a foreign language in New York and is a band of "foreigners" in Korea. EXP sings and dances to their pop music in New York City's small and judgmental "indie" live venues as well as highbrow museums and galleries. At the same time, EXP and the IMMABB team talk about the *art scene* and what they mean in *fine art* in pop music magazines. We have always had to prove ourselves in front of a surprised audience and we have been able to stay alert and flexible due to that. But that has also allowed us to be free, fresh, desultory, and up for anything.

Convincing

마모의 과정을 예측해서 소통을 시작한다

Convincing is essential for a product of pop culture. Start that communication process by calculating the abrasion, the abrasion that your product or information will go through while passing the time and space of people. To understand this idea, you have to accept that your initial intention will not be intact or in perfect condition when it arrives with your receiver in the entertainment world. It is because pop inevitably has to use mass-media institutions in order to reach a wider audience.

It is hard to grasp how the media system works until you actually get into that system and experience it yourself, and I have to say that this project has allowed IMMABB to observe and experience what the term "media beast" means. It needs a whole other how-to manual to delve into this subject but, to put it roughly, we understand that the abstract idea that people are indicating when using the term "media" is an intricate net of power that individuals hold who work in journalism, for example a magazine or news outlet. It is also a power dynamic between popularity that is expressed in numbers such as television show ratings and government policy. It is also about good old bribing and getting a guest segment at a talk show.

Since reaching a mass number of receivers is what makes pop *genuine* pop, you have to work with the system of media and try to convince your audience. And crudely ignoring all the professional studies in this field, I'll name this convincing process "marketing."

The marketing of a product tries to lead the customer into a clear understanding of a product, however false or true that understanding might be. Marketing leads people to a place in which they have an impression of understanding, of being convinced, which will generate a desire to purchase.

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Figure 4. Screenshots of IMMABB press coverage archive folder, 2014–16. Courtesy of IMMABB.

Materializing and dematerializing

물질화 혹은 물질주의

We discovered that a funny situation arose when trying to marry the art world and pop together with EXP. The more we successfully materialized our idea into something that could pass as a legitimate pop product, the more dematerialized our project became, because the materialized aspect would not pass as art. The better we became at mimicking the Korean entertainment industry, or the more money we were able to put into EXP, the more suspicious looks we

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received from the art world, trying to figure out where we stood. Therefore how we talked about EXP behind the scenes became the center of attention. At the beginning of the project, when our technique and resources were limited, this was hardly an issue. This naturally and evidently brought us to think about what art really is. It seems like we are in a time in which pop defines the territory of art, instead of the other way around. Although it is hardly productive to try and define what art is and what art cannot be, we try to fight for broadening the realm of what art can be. It is equally, if not more, interesting when you look at how the entertainment industry views this project and EXP. A friend of mine who is now a fashion designer but worked at a Korean modeling agency for a long time as a casting manager asked me one day what I do as an artist nowadays. I told her, "this EXP thing" is my work. She said it did not seem like an art project because "it can make money."

Materializing and materialism are both attached to how people think about art, and there's still not enough talk about it considering how fundamental and imperative it is.

Compromising

타협은 필수



Figure 5. Photoshoot with EXP, shot by HyunMo Yang. Courtesy of IMMABB.

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If you do not have money you have to spend time, and if you do not have time you have to spend money. If you do not have either you have to compromise. In other words, compromising is inevitable. You have to expect this fact if you want to make a K-pop boy band in New York, with no Korean members, using $30,000 Kickstarter money and your graduate school's filming gear as your seed money and resources. As with any other start-up, you just have to endure and hang in there.

But I do have to tell you, even when you hang in, you will always have to make compromises, and they are often bigger compromises. The important thing is to not give up. Someday you might not have to compromise, although I have not experienced it yet.

Debunking

허용되는 대화가 다가 아니다

If you're one of those people who just cannot stand the kind of conversation that has a prescribed range or scope that must follow rules of politeness and does not allow for the challenging of norms regarding certain subjects, you are a perfect candidate to make a K-pop boy band in New York. This type of attitude even has a name in sociology, and its pursuit is actually encouraged: it is called *debunking*. And yes, our goal with EXP is to successfully debunk countless myths around appropriation, cultural flow, race, gender performativity, and masculinity within K-pop and beyond. We highly recommend you do this as well.

Mixing: transcultural hybridity

"하이브리드화는 반 이국주의이다"[3]

Mix all and everything. K-pop can be defined as something that is "culturally mixed, contradictory, and strategically manufactured."[4] It shows how the Korean entertainment industry has used appropriation, both consciously and unconsciously, to develop its originality and cope with its postcolonial state since the 1990s. And we think now is the perfect time to make things even more complicated by throwing our culturally transformable band EXP into the K-pop world. As Guillaume Le Blanc argues so effectively and concisely in *Dedans, dehors: La condition d'étranger*, "Hybridization is anti-exoticism."[5] And finding that fine line will help the deeply stagnant discourse around cultural appropriation to move forward.

BORA KIM

[3] "Hybridization is anti-exoticism" (translation by the author). 기욤 르블랑, 안과 밖-외국인의 조건, translated by 박영옥 (서울: 글항아리, 2014).

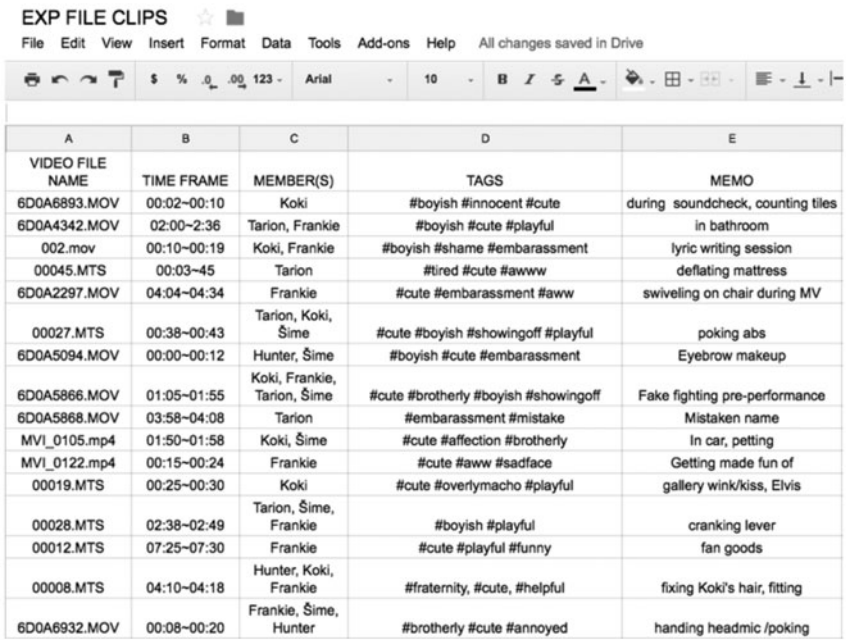
[4] Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

[5] Guillaume Le Blanc, *Dedans, dehors la condition d'étranger* (Paris: Du Seuil, 2010).

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HOW TO ENJOY YOUR BOYS AND HOW YOUR BOYS ARE ENJOYED: PROCESSING THE DOCUMENTATION AND MEDIA OF YOUR BOY BAND

Documentation of your process becomes an inevitable and very important factor in making your idol group. You mustn't forget that it serves two main purposes. One, most obviously, is that of archiving and organization in a sea of chaos. Logging and processing the experience will allow you to step back and provide a necessary sense of objectivity.



EXP FILE CLIPS

File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Add-ons Help All changes saved in Drive

A	B	C	D	E
VIDEO FILE NAME	TIME FRAME	MEMBER(S)	TAGS	MEMO
6D0A6893.MOV	00:02~00:10	Koki	#boyish #innocent #cute	during soundcheck, counting tiles
6D0A4342.MOV	02:00~2:36	Tarion, Frankie	#boyish #cute #playful	in bathroom
002.mov	00:10~00:19	Koki, Frankie	#boyish #shame #embarassment	lyric writing session
00045.MTS	00:03~45	Tarion	#tired #cute #awww	deflating mattress
6D0A2297.MOV	04:04~04:34	Frankie	#cute #embarassment #aww	swiveling on chair during MV
00027.MTS	00:38~00:43	Tarion, Koki, Šime	#cute #boyish #showingoff #playful	poking abs
6D0A5094.MOV	00:00~00:12	Hunter, Šime	#boyish #cute #embarassment	Eyebrow makeup
6D0A5866.MOV	01:05~01:55	Koki, Frankie, Tarion, Šime	#cute #brotherly #boyish #showingoff	Fake fighting pre-performance
6D0A5868.MOV	03:58~04:08	Tarion	#embarassment #mistake	Mistaken name
MVI_0105.mp4	01:50~01:58	Koki, Šime	#cute #affection #brotherly	In car, petting
MVI_0122.mp4	00:15~00:24	Frankie	#cute #aww #sadface	Getting made fun of
00019.MTS	00:25~00:30	Koki	#cute #overlymacho #playful	gallery wink/kiss, Elvis
00028.MTS	02:38~02:49	Tarion, Šime, Frankie	#boyish #playful	cranking lever
00012.MTS	07:25~07:30	Frankie	#cute #playful #funny	fan goods
00008.MTS	04:10~04:18	Hunter, Koki, Frankie	#fraternity, #cute, #helpful	fixing Koki's hair, fitting
6D0A6932.MOV	00:08~00:20	Frankie, Šime, Hunter	#brotherly #cute #annoyed	handing headmic /poking

Figure 6. Screenshot of EXP File Clips Spreadsheet Archive. Courtesy of IMMABB.

Two, your experience of documentation is a dualistic process that must be lived both as self and by viewing your idols as a product, learning how best to appeal to fans. Filming your idols places you in the same mind-set and literal frame, providing a greater grasp on how your idols will be perceived. You will endure a high range of emotions on a firsthand basis. And then perhaps, in due process, you will have to experience several more rounds of this while reviewing and reliving these moments in the footage of your idols.

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Aegyo (Korean: 애교, hanja: 愛嬌): "Complex performance of lovability and cuteness".[6]

While watching, you are searching and hoping for material that will help you show off your idol. This is necessary in every industry, even though people are convinced they are exempt from the business of selling personality. It is your job to help identify successful cute moments that will show off the boys' personalities; if there is soft power, this is like soft selling. These small moments can make or break someone (and you) into being a fan or anti-fan of your idols.

Viewing intimacy

Your idols have endured a very unusual and challenging training process together in order to arrive at where they are now. Hours of rehearsal, sweating together, experiencing bizarre opportunities and personalities and perhaps compromising situations build a tight bond that materializes through small gestures. These gestures between your boys show a lack of boundaries with each other and therefore a relationship that is private yet visible. An innocent and adolescent peek into how their idols act towards one another gives fans a sense of knowing their idols better while also the slight thrill of viewing something intimate.

Koki and Frankie are on screen doing a fitting, and they are comically singing NSYNC. Koki has a hat on backwards and several strands of his bangs are peeking out from under the rim. He has his arm schlepped playfully around Frankie's shoulder. Hunter is semi-off-frame meticulously assisting Koki with the hat and tucking the bangs in and out. They are simultaneously each other's brothers and dolls. ~playtime~

#boyish #innocent #cute #fraternity

The members of EXP are a few minutes from performing, but rather than preparing, are instead goofing off with one another. Koki and Frankie are showing off to the camera, as well as the other videographer present, that they are practicing "on-camera fight scenes." They repeat a routine of fake punches several times with glowing pride and are basking in the eyes focussed on them. Frankie and Koki lovingly hug each other while laughing and then joke about being able to go from "fighting" to hugging.

So fun~~~!

#cute #brotherly #boyish #showingoff

"At once divorced from and enabled by the political conditions of their photographic session … intimacies merely evoke the possibility of alternative

[6] Aljosa Puzar, "Asian Dolls and the Westernized Gaze: Notes on the Female Dollification in South Korea," *Asian Women*, 27, 2 (2011), 99 at www.academia.edu/22280147/Asian_Dolls_and_the_Westernized_Gaze_Notes_on_the_Female_Dollification_in_South_Korea.

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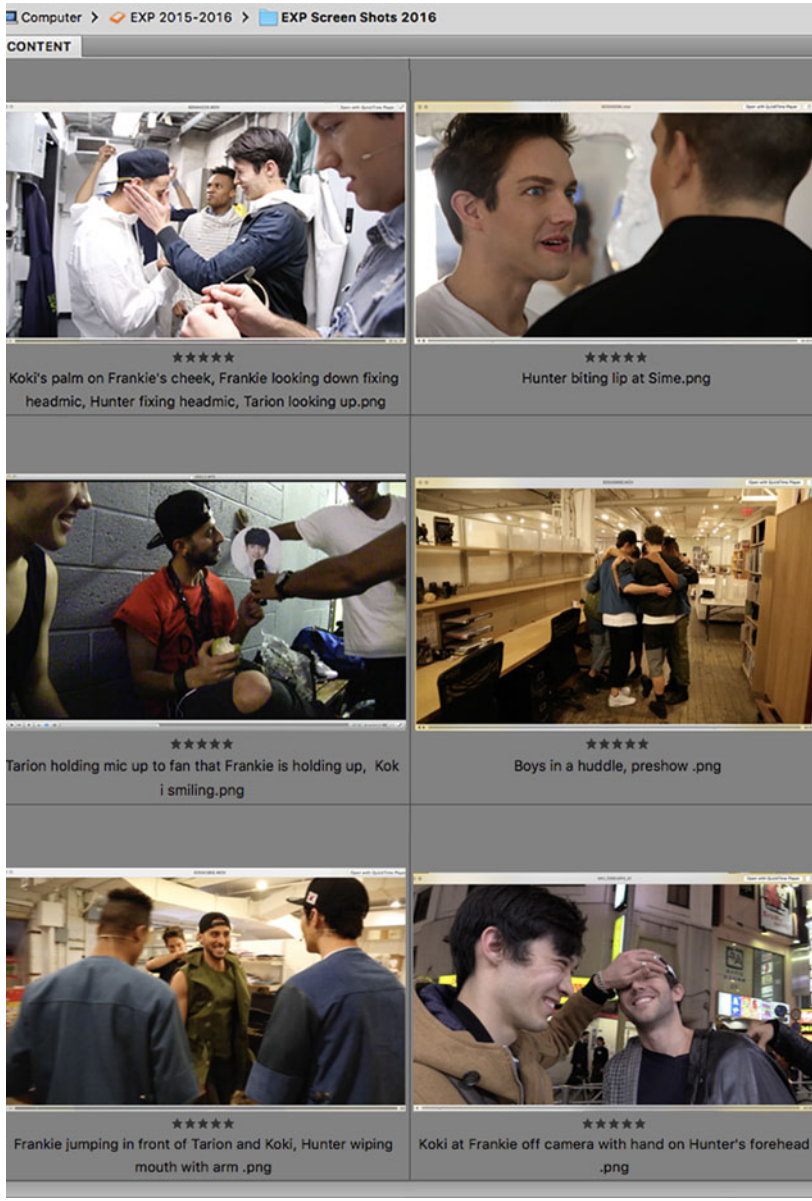


Figure 7. Screenshot of EXP cuteness moments 2015–16. Archive folder, renamed and organized. Courtesy of IMMABB.

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subjectivities as emblematic of their privilege within the broader structures of colonial and patriarchal order."[7]

Caretaking

"Stars! They're Just Like Us!" is a humanizing concept which convinces the public that celebrities are normal and humble individuals. Your K-pop idols, on the other hand, are already expected to be humble, so presenting them as humble is a given. When your idols are seen doing something embarrassing or feeling ashamed, not only does it increase the sense of normality, but it ignites the feeling of a fan's inner caretaker. Fans will want to let your idols know "Aww, it's okay!" if they do something embarrassing, and in fact that it is lovable when they do so.

EXP is on set doing a photoshoot, and the camera finds Hunter off to the side of the backdrop awaiting his turn to be photographed. Hunter is at first checking himself out in the mirror in an assured manner which quickly turns to shock when he realizes how dramatic his eyebrows look. He then exclaims and tugs on Sime to show him, and they are both laughing in the mirror to each other. They are whispering and giggling secretively until Hunter realizes the camera is filming him. He awkwardly reacts in contortion, by pursing his lips and raising his dramatically drawn eyebrows at the camera and then back to the mirror.

Like a boy caught stealing cookies!

#boyish #cute #embarassment

EXP is writing the lyrics to their first single, "Luv/Wrong" and Koki and Frankie are sitting next to each other. It is their first time writing and working collaboratively together. Koki has both feet tucked on the chair rung and is leaning forward on a music stand. He is resting on it like a tabletop and accidentally leans too far forward on his chair. He proceeds to try and catch himself in an oh-so-suave manner but fails. The camera is right in front of him and he is utterly embarrassed and covers his face with the lyric sheet.

So cuteeeee~!

#boyish #shame #embarrassment

"The truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to day-dreams."[8]

[7] Luke Gartlan, "Dandies on the Pyramids: Photography and German-Speaking Artists in Cairo," in Ali Behdad, ed., *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 129–52, 146.

[8] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 140.

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Perfect humility

Naturally, documentation of your boys will reveal those properties which are deemed childlike/silly. Fans enjoy coming across these in hopes of knowing that, though their idols are perfect in every way, they also have qualities that are adorably relatable. Knowing that their idols find joy in these silly acts of play adds dimension to their idols' being amazing, even at just being human.

In the dance studio, Koki and Frankie are found upside down and leaning against the mirrored wall doing a handstand competition while Hunter stands in the middle like a racecar flag girl. On the right side of the panel of mirrors on the wall, we see Tarion standing right-side up, but in tandem with Koki and Frankie he has both arms up while refereeing the competition. Meanwhile Hunter proceeds to jokingly evaluate their abilities by simultaneously patting each of their stomachs, which are exposed by the force of gravity on their T-shirts.

pat pat omg!

#teehee #showingoff #boyish

During a music video shoot, each of the boys is shooting their individual shots, which leaves the other boys to wander aimlessly around the set in the background. The cameraman zooms in on Frankie swiveling around on a desk chair, sitting backwards on it, reminiscent of grade-school-style rebellion. He is resting his chin and paw-like hands on the back of the chair watching enviously whichever member is on the set at the moment. The camera pans away from Frankie towards the shoot and then back to Frankie, and he is continuously swiveling with his arms held out like a ballerina and accidentally hits a gaffer passing him. He instantly shrivels in short-lived shame, but then just as quickly returns to his chair oscillation.

Hehehe!

#embarrassment #cute #aww

"Every idea is reducible to a cliché, and the function of a cliché is to castrate an idea."[9]

Sharing secrets

Occasionally, your idols look straight at the camera for a Brechtian means of escape from their current environment. Are they seeking refuge? Attention? Inclusivity? Creating an opportunity for a fan to feel that they are really invited into their idol's world means that they now share a special relationship. Just them and their idol, living in this secret moment in time.

EXP is coming down from the high of having just performed and is getting hair and makeup fixed to go back out and mingle with the crowd. The air in

[9] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1961), 147.

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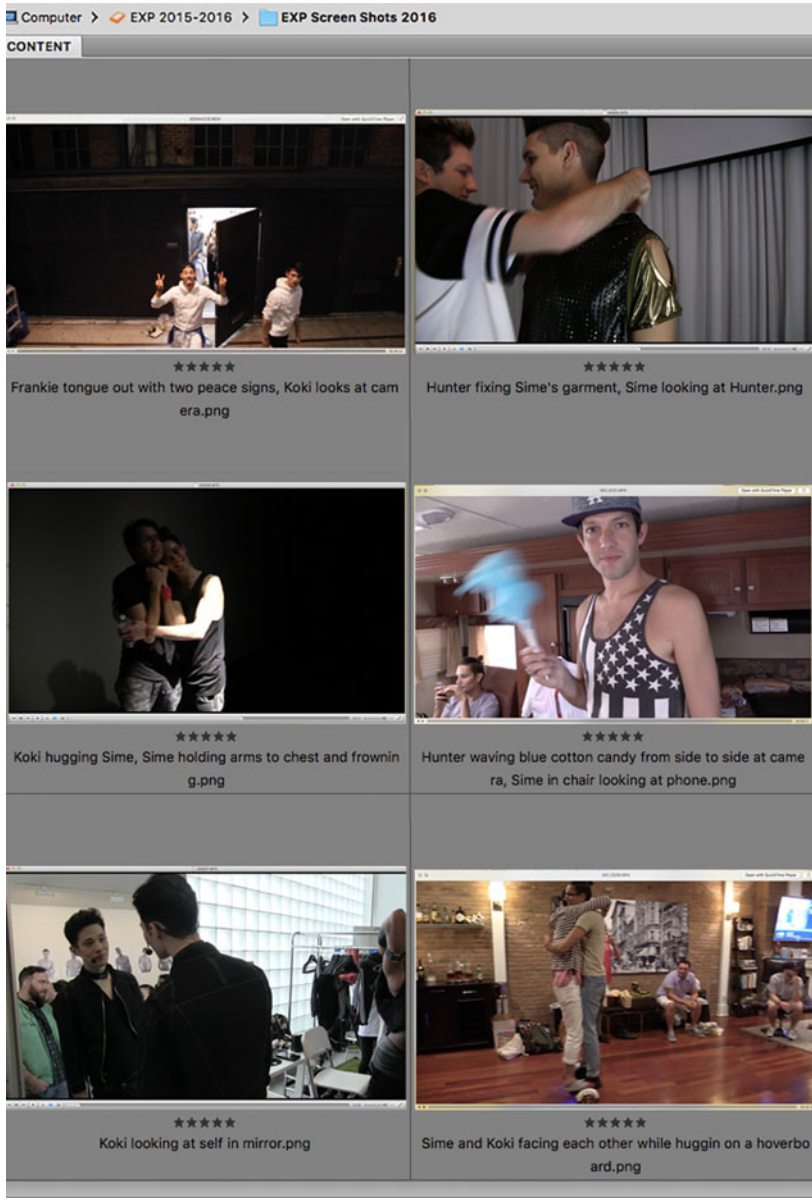


Figure 8. Screenshot of EXP cuteness moments 2015–16. Archive folder, renamed and organized. Courtesy of IMMABB.

the room is filled with excitement and accomplishment and somebody in the corner is saying goodbye to the members. Tarion, who is not in the frame, says "HEY Dan!" excitedly to the person who's leaving. The camera then pans to him as he composes a series of contorted faces (babies sucking lemons come to

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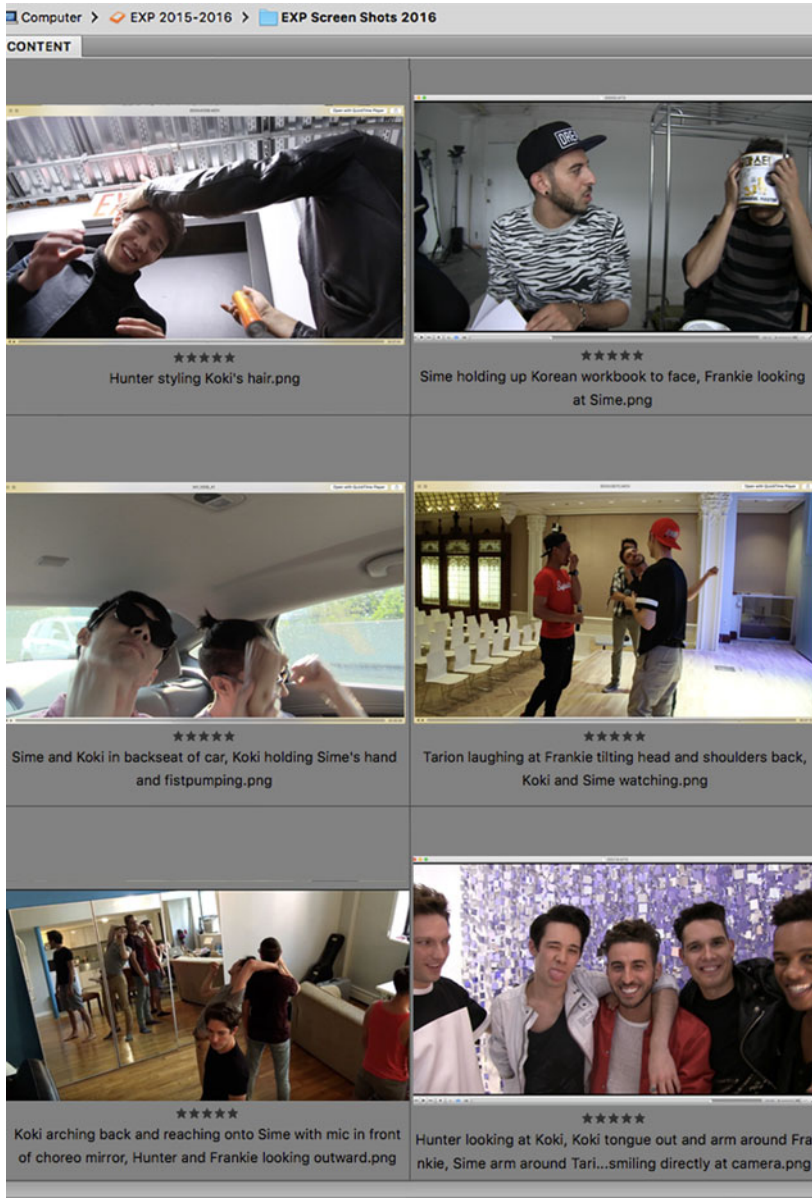


Figure 9. Screenshot of EXP cuteness moments 2015–16. Archive folder, renamed and organized. Courtesy of IMMABB.

mind) and comes up to the camera to whisper "… Don," realizing that he has made a small mistake and corrects himself by announcing loudly "THANKS DON!" and continues on to bite his lip while looking at his phone in slight embarrassment.

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Awww~~~

#embarrassment #cute #polite

During a dance rehearsal, the camera pans the gray studio, landing on Koki, whose back is found facing the camera. As the camera zooms out, Koki is taking a slow sip of water from his oversized plastic bottle and goes to put it down, and suddenly Koki turns around and waves, almost catching himself off-guard with a startle. Finding pride in his attempt to scare the camera, he grins and waves his limp hand happily.

waves :DDDD

#cute #boyish #playful #silly

Complexity of watching cuteness

To try and reel yourself back in every now and then, you may reflect on your current psychological status. Where are you? How do you feel? How much more documentation can you watch? (Probably an endless amount.) Are your idols lovable or overly performing? A mix of both, maybe? You are developing your relationship with your idols in this bizarre way. So lovable, so cute. They are your source material, your reflections and projections of many ideas and ideals. Get a little lost and have fun with your idols; they're important and important to you.

Viewing something as cute is something of a personal conviction that nobody else can have. Only after your own personal taste changes or develops might your opinion of cuteness change. This emotion, your reactions to cuteness, performed or otherwise, are not valued in society; that is why you need to hold on tight. Rationale and understanding are important, but cuteness carries an innate and raw value, and it is because of this that it is the most powerful and undervalued tool. To continue to highlight that which we deem fun, that which we deem cute, says much more than to denigrate it.

The complexity of watching performed cuteness is a mediation of attentive and enjoyable self-brainwashing. Enjoy~!

KARIN KURODA

HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR FANS: ANALYZING THE MEANING OF K-POP FANDOM

Our story

On 19 April 2015, IMMABB, the makers of EXP, experienced a ritual wash of K-pop fandom. It was a Sunday morning; it happened when we were still asleep. Many K-pop fans surged to EXP's Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts leaving endless comments to the point where we couldn't keep up. Then, one of the most famous K-pop YouTubers, JRE, made a video titled, "EXP? KPOP? REALLY NOW."

EXP became viral via social media overnight. And soon EXP was introduced to the public through various traditional media in the United States

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as well as Korea, Taiwan, and China, and these incidents had made it possible for EXP to go beyond the contemporary fine-art community in New York. In an interview we did with an art collective called Screen, we once responded, "We would like to create a healthier relationship between the producers and consumers of K-pop by acknowledging how *cultural technology*[10] could be used to disrupt the cycle of consumption by posing questions, rather than promoting mere product digestion."[11]

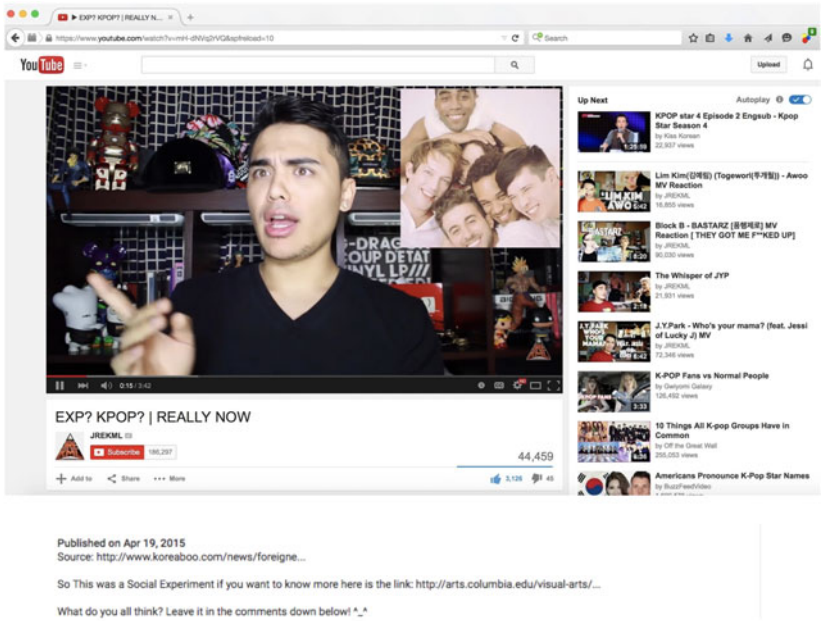


Figure 10. IMMABB. Screenshot of JREKML[12]'s YouTube page featuring his video "EXP? KPOP? REALLY NOW" published on 19 April 2015, as well as the information section of the video in which he includes a link to Bora Kim's Columbia University page. This video has since been taken down by JREKML. Courtesy of IMMABB.[13]

[10] "Cultural technology" is the term coined by SM Entertainment founder Lee Soo-man, who argues that cultural products could be packaged and marketed in certain ways to reach out to a mass audience internationally.

[11] Yu-chieh Li, Bora Kim, Karin Kuroda, and Samantha Y. Shao, "Making Waves: Bora, Karin and Sam Make a Boy Band," *Screen*/介面, 14 Nov. 2015, at http://www.onscreentoday.com/conversation/making-waves.

[12] JREKML1.EXP? KPOP? REALLY NOW. April 19, 2015. Accessed April 19, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH-dNVq2rVQ. JRE is a YouTuber based in Miami, he does K-pop related skits, reactions, and vlogs with his cousin KML. He has more than 500,000 followers and represents the English-speaking corner of the K-pop fan world.

[13] Omar López-Chahoud. Bora Kim, Karin Kuroda, and Samantha Y. Shao. "Bora Kim." Columbia University School of the Arts. April 20, 2015. https://arts.columbia.edu/profiles/bora-kim

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We were aware of our roles as producers (of a boy band) and consumers (of K-pop boy bands) from the beginning; however, the controversy that hit us on that Sunday morning was the very first time we met the fandom and took on our roles in a different light. We would talk about how we were in close proximity to the concept of fans due to the fact that our idols are handmade compared to other established K-pop entertainment companies. But looking back at that interview, we realized that we underestimated the power of fans. Rather than thinking of fans and producers as dichotomous, both are actually simultaneously working in tandem towards the success of an idol group. K-pop fans are, at some level, producers themselves already, not only as individuals, but also because they are a highly systemized collective which enables them to successfully communicate with K-pop labels. You should be aware that fans hold, and expect to some degree, the rights to negotiating power towards their idols and their labels. So in this section, we would like to talk about one of the most important parts of the K-pop industry besides the idols: the fans.

The hunt for perfection

The performance that K-pop idols create is a spectacle, yet there is no spectacle if there are no beholders. When researching and observing K-pop fans' activities, we realized that the common trait of being any type of fan is obsession. Obsession comes in many forms, but in the case of K-pop it is about the hunt for perfection.

In one of his recent videos reporting back from KCON NY, an annual multi-city convention focussing on K-pop and Korean culture, JRE aptly said, "I just love to watch *when it all comes together*." K-pop shows a spectacle that not everyone can achieve; every performance, every idol, every group requires a lot of capital and time.[14] And the K-pop industry built a world of pure perfection, every element working towards the moment of "*when it all comes together*." Most idols start as trainees in an entertainment company,[15] and train for years and years without a solid promise of debuting, and many trainees fail to debut, and eventually give up.

But for now, we watch idols dancing to the music flawlessly, providing us a few minutes of perfection at a time.

And to repay their idols' dedication, fans also dedicate their time, whilst enjoying every second of it. So when making a K-pop boy band, you need to consider *obsession* as one of the key points. We suggest that, by using *the*

[14] "HOW EPIC IS BTS? | KCON NY 2016 EXPERIENCE," 21 July 2016, accessed 30 July 2016, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=umg2t9Tdu6w.

[15] The most important production entity in K-pop. You can think of it as similar to the concept of a label and management agency in the United States, molded into one.

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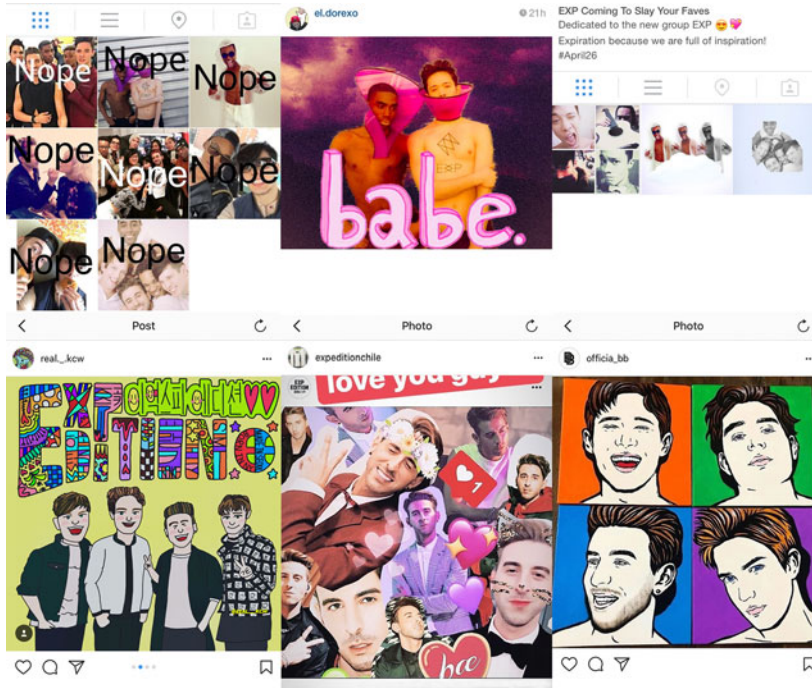


Figure 11. Composite image from screenshots of various EXP fan- and anti-fan-made social media accounts and posts. Courtesy of IMMABB.

law of diffusion of innovation, you can analyze obsession in relation to time in a little bit more depth.

The law of diffusion of innovation: fans as Innovators

The law of diffusion of innovation is a well-known communication theory.[16] In short, it proposes that regarding the spread of information, there are five types: (1) innovators, (2) early adopters, (3) early majority, (4) late majority, and (5) laggards. This theory is utilized to create effective marketing strategies to understand and categorize how different groups of people have different ways to receive and digest information. According to this theory, you need to win over at least 15 percent of the market in order to create mass-market success. This means that if innovators and early adopters are attracted to your work, then your early majority, and eventual late majority will follow.

We will be introducing stories that broadened our understanding of fans to also help you grasp how these types of audience exist in the real world of K-pop

[16] Thomas S. Robertson, "The Process of Innovation and the Diffusion of Innovation," *Journal of Marketing*, 31, 1 (1967), 14–19.

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fandom.[17] You can think of it as qualitative research that we conducted both consciously and unconsciously due to the fact that we became something that exists between participant-observation researchers and our own research subjects.

There are three main types of audience to which you can apply the *law of diffusion of innovation* analysis, which we'd like to point out: *late majority*, *early adopters* and *innovators*.

The *late majority* consume K-pop unintentionally, which many may argue is how people consume pop culture most easily. This group typically exists in a cultural environment that would naturally consume K-pop, such as Asian countries, or areas with a large Korean community or Asian diaspora, such as Los Angeles and New York, as seen with M, 28, who grew up in Flushing, NY and attended Japanese Weekend School:

> Growing up my mom would always tell me about new TV shows that she and the other moms were watching, the mom lowdown, if you will. I always assumed she was talking about Japanese shows but one day, around the time when I was in middle school, the TV show she was raving to me about was actually a new soap opera from Korea. I remember thinking, "Since when does my mom follow Korean culture?" It was from then on that I started to notice more about K-dramas or K-pop.

However, as mentioned previously, the most distinguished characteristics K-pop fans have is obsession. And the main difference between late majority and innovators is intentionality and the level of obsession. Late majority are exposed to K-pop but are passive consumers and do not actively engage in or dedicate their time to it.

Early adopters are more dedicated in their engagement with K-pop than the *late majority* and are the consumers who begin following K-pop before anyone in their own cultural environment. The fact that *early adopters* are often the only K-pop fans in their society increases the likelihood of their finding and creating tighter communities within the international K-pop fandom, for example through online forums. The effort that *early adopters* put in is revealed by the fact that prior to their engagement with K-pop, it was geographically unlikely for K-pop or Korean culture to be popular or relevant in their region. *Early adopters* go out of their way to find K-pop content, which hadn't been done before.

But the type of audience which I would like to discuss the most is *innovators*, because they not only consume but also produce measurable content.

[17] They are from the conversations that we had with K-pop fans who we became friends with through this project, and K-pop articles over the 2014–16 period, as well as some of our own personal anecdotes.

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A twenty-year-old university student major in anthropology, living in New York, L started learning Korean after becoming a fan of the K-pop idol group BTS in 2014 when they had just debuted. As with other early BTS fans, she would try to search for more material such as interviews or television appearances that were available outside Korea, but the number of translated videos did not satisfy her and she decided to begin learning Korean on her own. She told us that her Korean improved drastically after she started translating BTS's content from Korean to English with bilingual people she found through online fan cafes, whom she was consistently seeking out to help her improve her Korean. When we met her in early summer of 2016 she was telling us about a Korean Twitter account she found called "Publicizing BTS' Misogynistic Lyrics and Music Video Contents." L and other fans who engaged with the account felt that BTS's music video "Boy in Luv," as well as lyrics that the members of BTS wrote, were offensive. Followers of the Twitter account, including L, started to use certain hashtags to petition and pressure Big Hit Entertainment (BTS's entertainment company), asking for apology from them. A little over a month after their request, BigHit officially announced an apology.[18]

어린네이웃 (Eorinnae-ieut), the fan club of Chanyeol, a member of the idol group EXO, donated, in celebration of his twenty-fifth birthday, to WomenLink, a Korean feminist organization using the name of their fan club. In an interview, a member of 어린네이웃/Eorinnae-ieut said, "We want our star (Chanyeol) that we adore so much to be interested in the issues around feminism, and that is why we donated."[19]

Within K-pop fandom, though the hunt for perfection is sometimes one of pure adoration, it also materializes in the imposing of a standard on an idol, which is determined by the fans themselves. In this way, we should acknowledge how the collective voice of fans results in types of producer, regardless of its positive or negative outcome.

K in K-pop: national identity surrounding K-pop fandom

It is important for you to have an understanding of how your fans engage or reflect on K-pop given the context of transnational media circulation, especially in relation to national identity.

[18] R. Jun, "Fans Request Statement from BTS about Misogynistic Lyrics, BigHit Responds," *Soompi.com*, 6 July 2016, at www.soompi.com/2016/07/06/fans-request-statement-bts-misogynistic-lyrics-bighit-responds.

[19] Kwon Ji-Hye (권지혜). "EXO Chanyeol's Fan Club, Donates to Feminist Group 'WomenLink'" (엑소 찬열 팬클럽, 여성단체 '한국여성민우회' 기부)," *Wikitree.com*, 28 Nov. 2016, at www.wikitree.co.kr/main/news_view.php?id=283384.

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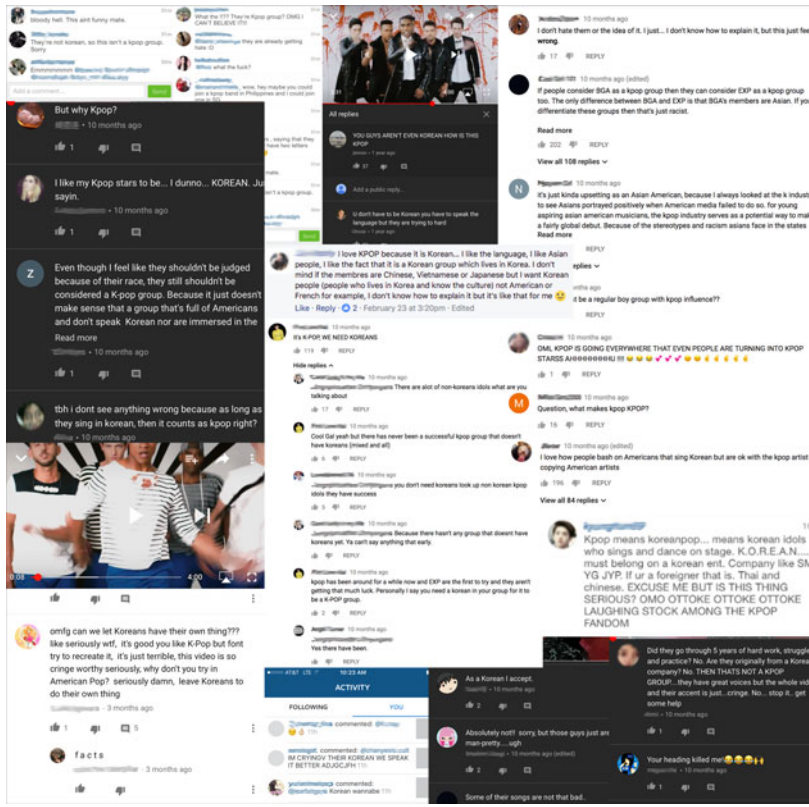


Figure 12. Composite image from screenshots of various EXP fan- and anti-fan-made social media accounts and posts. Courtesy of IMMABB.

In this regard it has to be noted that K-pop is being circulated as a text of nationalism and consumed in an orientalist way,[20] as Said termed it, more than almost any other kind of cultural product in the Western sector of the global audiovisual pop market in the age of new media. In addition, K-pop has become one of the most appropriate examples of "banal nationalism," the display and consumption or reproduction of nationalism in our everyday lives.[21]

K-pop is being consumed and enjoyed as an Otherness, as foreign-ness, and as the objectified. Of course it has largely to do with the fact that K-pop consists mainly of good-looking boys and girls designed to be objectified as "idols," as they are precisely named.

[20] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
[21] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

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And because all talent and content that people encounter are packaged as "K-pop," perfectly labeled and marketed, it is hard to separate Korea, the country, from K-pop. Although K-pop is just one kind of cultural product and does not necessarily contain all of what Korea is, for the targeted audience it is easily understood as something that is a distilled version of Korea. This is especially true in the case of audiences with less cultural proximity; here there is a higher chance that K-pop is being used as an introduction to Korean culture (as seen with early adopters). The degree of Korean a fan speaks (as seen in L's case) and the amount of Korean culture (food or beauty, for example) that a fan dedicates themselves to, are enacted metaphors for their devotion to their K-pop idol. In other words, the "K" in K-pop inevitably activates the national identity and herds the conversation on K-pop into an ethnic or national superiority that Koreans collectively have long desired as their national identity, or into the exoticized Other, which becomes the object of adoration/veneration because of their race.

However, because of this tie to nationhood, K-pop idols are used as an icon of Asian pride not only among Korean Americans but among Asian Americans as well, bringing together the younger generation, who have ethnic, national, or cultural ties to East Asia, as K-pop inhabits global new media more than ever. This can be examined in the same light as the newly formed possibility of "[d]ynamic and intriguing processes of inter-Asian cultural fusion and intertextual reworking" in East Asia.[22]

Lastly, we want to quote Karin's personal anecdote, which she shared in our panel discussion at the Korea Society in May 2016:[23]

> Upon viewing my first K-pop music video for the first time, "FIRE" by 2NE1,[24] I was instantly hooked and immediately, at any opportunity, trying to get other people to like it. I knew at the time that this was an inherent act of seeking white validation, "Like us! We're cool!" "Everything you thought about Asia is wrong!" In my self-reflexivity, I knew seeking this validation wasn't necessarily good but in my previous years of being a fangirl, which was always towards straight white male musicians, this was my first opportunity to idolize Asian, particularly women, in Asian media. So it was important to me on numerous levels that not only were they Asian females but also that they had Asian producers and thus weren't portraying a Western exoticization/characterization of Asia, as had previously been my only experience with Asian imagery in American media.

[22] Koichi Iwabuchi, "De-Westernization and the Governance of Global Cultural Connectivity a Dialogic Approach to East Asian Media Cultures," *Postcolonial Studies*, 13, 4 (2010), 403–19.

[23] Maud Lavin, Bora Kim, Karin Kuroda, and Samantha Y. Shao, "Re-mapping Identity Politics in K-pop," the Korea Society lecture, New York, 31 May 2016.

[24] A four-member female idol group.

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Understanding dedicated fans, aggressive fans, critical fans, and any in between is one of the most important challenges of making EXP.

The *Washington Post*, one of the news outlets that covered us after our Kickstarter campaign, headlined their article "Can a K-Pop Group Succeed with No Korean Members? Not Likely, Say Skeptical Fans."[25] After all, making a non-Korean K-pop band is in actuality an obsessive quest to understand what the "K" in K-pop signifies at the fan level, the national level, and beyond.

SAMANTHA Y. SHAO

NOW WHAT?

If you have come this far, you have probably accepted the fact that we had an ulterior motive in writing this manual. Of course we'd love for you to succeed in making a K-pop boy band of your own. But we wanted you to become a troublesome and productive menace more than anything. It doesn't even necessarily have to be a band that you make after reading this guidebook. We made it flexible and abstract enough so you can apply to other projects of your choice. As long as it gives you enjoyment of some sort and makes you willing to commit a part of your life, anything is fine, if it generates a creative stir within yourself and the people around you. In other words, do not settle for or accept the default. Always question anything and everything that comes along your way.

We want to end this guidebook by mentioning what Boris Groys said about entertainment in *Art Power*:

> Mass culture – or let's call it entertainment – has a dimension that is often overlooked but is extremely relevant to the problems of otherness or alienness … A pop concert or film screening creates communities of viewers. These communities are transitory: their members do not know one another; their composition is arbitrary; it remains unclear where all these people came from and where they are going; they have little or nothing to say to one another; they lack a shared identity …[26]

It is interesting how K-pop fandoms can show us different possibilities to this isolated and identity-less community in the realm of mass culture. K-pop fandoms are all about community and the tight alliance within that community. Fans bond over the most trivial aspect of their beloved band. And with that common ground, they become each other's closest allies. They

[25] Yanan Wang, "Can a K-Pop Group Succeed with No Korean Members? Not Likely, Say Skeptical Fans," *Washington Post*, 29 July 2015, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/29/can-a-k-pop-group-succeed-with-no-korean-members/?utm_term=.e4b629f99727.

[26] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 180.

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passionately fight for their band in order to protect their idols from rival groups. Their love for K-pop is highly associated with national and racial identity, both willingly and unwillingly, as well as both negatively and positively. It has also opened up abundant possibilities for distant global communities to communicate transnationally.

Our entertainment product, EXP, has created a space in pop culture to highlight the turn in the postcolonial cultural flow and question the complicated concept of cultural authorship, as well as Asian masculinity and feminism.

Now we are entering a new chapter of our project, being in Korea and preparing to launch EXP to the Korean public. We are excited that we will be exploring and tackling the issues around foreignness and otherness in a society that is (believed to be) ethnically homogeneous. Please follow our journey so we can be reminded not to accept the status quo, and always be critical.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bora Kim (Korea University, Korea, BA in sociology; Columbia University, US, MFA in visual arts) is an interdisciplinary artist born and raised in Seoul, Korea. Her process is based on cultural research revolving around the spectacle and performance of Asian femininity/masculinity, particularly in the context of global media. Kim's work addresses the public gaze and occupies the sphere of popular culture. Kim lives and works in New York and Seoul.

Karin Kuroda (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, US, BA in visual and critical studies, BFA in studio art, 2013) is a Japanese New Yorker whose work as a research consultant/writer and creative collaborator focusses on the intersectional narratives of minority politics, pop, and fashion. Kuroda lives and works in New York.

Samantha Y. Shao (Cheng Kung National University, Taiwan, BA in history, 2010; Maastricht University, Netherlands, MA in art management, 2013) is a writer, translator, and public-relations specialist. By connecting resources from private and public sectors, Shao's practice focusses on bridging the distance between artists and mass audience. Shao lives and works in New York and Taipei.

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