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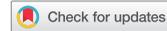Published online: 09 Nov 2020.

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Performance, Fantasy, or Narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American Identity through Kpop Media and Fandom

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ Asian Americans experience intersecting forms of oppression, and due to the limited research on this underserved population, it is important to understand their lived experiences and the factors that enhance and endanger their health. The absence of positive representations of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans in the media upholds stereotypes and feelings of invisibility that have harmful effects. Studying LGBTQ+ Asian Americans using Kpop media offers a new and timely way to understand these identities and outcomes of well-being. This study qualitatively explored how 16 college-aged LGBTQ+ Asian Americans identify with Kpop and reconstruct representations to protect themselves from negative influences surrounding their identities. Using grounded theory methodology, this study found that Kpop functions as a source of representation and social connection that supports LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. Findings also illustrate how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans engage in Kpop fan labor to create narratives that can mitigate the harmful effects of marginalization.

Introduction

Drawing from minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), LGBTQ+ Asian Americans experience unique and intersecting forms of oppression that increase risks for stress, trauma, and negative mental health (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman, 2009; Han, 2006; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). In addition to general heterosexist and racist stressors associated with being a LGBTQ+ person and a person of color, Asian American LGBTQ+ persons may experience additional stress resulting from heterosexism within the Asian American community and racism within the LGBTQ+ community (Han, 2006; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). Findings regarding these challenges support that LGBTQ+ Asian Americans would benefit from research addressing how they manage experiences of marginalization.

One avenue that may affect the marginalization of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans is media representation. Studies show that feelings of invisibility

stemming from a lack of positive and accurate media representation have harmful psychological effects on LGBTQ+ individuals (Collins, 2011; Comer, Bower, & Sparkman, 2015). In a study examining gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities, media representation was greatly influential in providing role models and inspiration for coming out and self-realization (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Mixer, 2018). However, whiteness is prevalently represented as normative to the LGBTQ+ experience, to the detriment of LGBTQ+ people of color who report invisibility in both racial and LGBTQ+ spaces (Logie & Rwigema, 2014). Supportive media portrayals of LGBTQ+ people of color are rare (McInroy & Craig, 2017), and representation of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans can be even more so.

Sourced from a western culture of superiority over the East, media treatment of Asian Americans is intertwined with gender and sexuality oppression. In the discourse of domination, Asian American women are stereotyped as subservient and hypersexualized whereas men are portrayed as asexual or effeminate (Fong-Torres, 1995; Zhang, 2010). Given that whiteness and masculinity are valued as images of power, gay Asian American men are represented as feminine and passive in relation to gay white men (Han, 2006). These depictions perpetuate negative stereotypes surrounding Asian American sexuality and gender identities, which strengthens racist beliefs (Ramasubramanian, 2011). While scholarship has discussed how intersectional power relations appear in the media, few studies have attended to the LGBTQ+ Asian American community regarding how the representation–audience relationship translates to experiences of marginalization. Due to limited research on the effects of media culture with this specific racialized, gendered, and sexualized subject, studying the representation of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans and its reception serves as a way to further understand identity development, risk factors, and protective mechanisms.

Given that media representation is a prevalent way people understand themselves and others through shaping socially constructed identities and cultural imaginations (Driver, 2007; Hall, 1981), racial identity theory (Parham, 1989) and resilience theory (Rutter, 1987) help necessitate this study and inform the research question. Resilience has been demonstrated as a way for LGBT populations to address adverse circumstances (Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008), and media can serve as a catalyst for resilience strategies such as fostering community and proactively responding to negative messaging (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015).

Kpop

Studying LGBTQ+ Asian Americans through Kpop (Korean popular music) offers a new and timely way to understand how they navigate specific vulnerabilities. Kpop is a musical genre-turned cultural phenomenon known for its catchy rhythms, slick choreography, and expansive, dedicated fanbase. Korean

pop culture, such as music and television dramas, has steadily been rising in popularity since the 1990s internationally and in the United States through online platforms, reaching record-breaking levels of recognition (Hollingsworth & Jeong, 2019; Lee, 2008). The recent rise of Kpop media and fan culture on the global scale invites academic attention to study and document this phenomenon and its effects on the people who access it (Jung, 2009), such as LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, especially as Kpop offers a distinctive meaning-making platform for Asian, Asian American, and LGBTQ+ identities. This present study explores the following two research questions through semi-structured interviews: How do college-aged LGBTQ+ Asian Americans identify and interact with Kpop media, and does Kpop serve as a source of support against their marginalized identities? And, how do LGBTQ+ Asian Americans use fan labor to reconstruct representations of Asian identity and queerness to protect against further marginalization?

Kpop and Asian American identity

Current literature shows that Kpop serves as a form of media that functions in ethnic cohesion, cultural maintenance, and cultural integration for Asian Americans. By providing relevant cultural content, Shi (2005) shows that consuming Asian media helps members of the Chinese-American diaspora connect to the extended ethnic community and develop coherent narratives of their ethnic identities. Consuming Kpop and Korean media helps Asian Americans take care of their inner emotions and enriches cultural dialogs on multiple levels of identity, culture, and community (Ju & Lee, 2015). Further research shows that Asian Americans seek cultural closeness through the "hybridity" of Kpop, which is the weaving of American pop culture with Asian values (Kim, 2017; Ryoo, 2009). Kpop, like Asian Americans, occupies a liminal space between Asian ethnic and Americanized values that could disclose critical ways Asian Americans negotiate and identify themselves.

As Espiritu (1992) points out, identity formation for Asian Americans reflects more of common experiences found within the United States and western borders than the histories and cultures of their homelands. While acknowledging the dissonance between media sourced from western culture and directly from Asian producers, Kpop has the potential to function as a unique representation for Asian Americans because it can portray Asian identity in ways beyond the stereotypes that arise from the marginalized experiences of Asians in the United States. This opportunity is compounded by how Kpop is positioned as a mainstream genre in the US popular scene, granting it a particular level of cultural awareness. Part of Kpop's global popularity can be attributed to how accessible it is for both Korean and international fans to enjoy. Kpop's hybrid nature of western and Asian influences can create a commodified pseudo-Koreanness as a marketing ploy

for global consumption, removed from actual histories, experiences, and interests of the Korean people (Kim, 2017). Kpop exists at the intersection of Asian, Asian American, and American identities that reflect dynamics that can further inform the identity development of Asian diasporic youth in the United States.

Kpop and LGBTQ+ Asian American identity

In addition to Kpop functioning as a reflection of Asian American identity, it also serves as a space where LGBTQ+ Asian Americans may observe and relate to portrayals of queer identity. Queerness not only designates gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and so on, but can broadly describe genders and sexualities outside of the norm, and challenges such norms as a politic (Morris, 1998). The popularity of Kpop boy bands is largely attributed to the construction of a superficial and heteronormative celebrity persona (Lee, 2019), as their existence becomes a platform for fans to project hetero-couple fantasies onto. However, these celebrities simultaneously perform queerness through their persona, behavior, and media content. Studies have explored how Kpop is a unique source of Asian queerness that destabilizes western gender and sexual norms (Oh, 2015; Oh & Oh, 2017). Research on male Kpop idols has revealed that they perform gender by challenging western gender binaries of homosexuality/heterosexuality, masculine/feminine bodies, and masculinized gaze directed on the feminized object (Oh, 2015). Effeminate appearances or behaviors of male Kpop idols are accepted as masculine, a contrast to how this androgyny would be perceived as homosexuality in the West (Oh & Oh, 2017). Male Kpop stars often have soft and pretty faces, wear makeup, wear flowy and sparkly outfits or even women's clothing, maintain a slender body structure, and are more physically affectionate with other men. This feminized Kpop masculinity could be perceived as reinforcing the stereotypes of emasculated and asexual Asian men perpetuated by western media. However, male Kpop idols represent Asian men who are sexual, who are desired for their "femininity" and not despite of it (Jung, 2011).

Given the "deviant" nature of Kpop masculinity, LGBTQ+ Asian Americans can potentially redefine their roles and power dynamics when interacting with Kpop (Oh, 2015), and identify with these distinctive portrayals that remix gender and sexuality in an empowering way. These mechanisms can reflect how young queer girls have leveraged popular culture to trouble heternormative values and reconfigure alternatives, a cultural process of welcoming or rejecting representations (Driver, 2007). de Certeau's concept of bricolage also describes how marginalized people creatively piece together and fill in the blanks of media from the dominant culture (1984). While it is possible that

LGBTQ+ Asian Americans can, therefore, imagine and explore potentials when fantasizing about these idols, no studies have yet examined the extent to which engaging with Kpop relates to their lived experiences regarding identity and relationships.

The images of queerness in Kpop should also be observed by understanding the societal norms that regulate this medium. Much of the existing research surrounding queerness in Kpop is mostly focused on male Kpop idols. This could be because under a patriarchal society, women Kpop stars are under more pressure to enact traditional heteronormative femininity (Oh, 2015), or because a large amount of Kpop fans are women, a population that can fetishize queer male relationships. Because Kpop thus may not offer authentic or relevant LGBTQ+ representation, it is unclear whether LGBTQ+ Asian Americans may benefit from accessing it. It is then even more important to study how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans may identify or disidentify themselves with Kpop, to see whether or not this form of media may serve as a space for positive representation and connection. While Kpop itself cannot inherently be a particular queer, feminist, progressive space, it can provide openings for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans to explore desires and identities as they process and reconstruct these forms of media in a transformative way. Studying fandom as a critical constituent of Kpop offers a new and meaningful way to understand the interactions between LGBTQ+ populations and popular media to potentially reveal mechanisms and motivations of queer representation in media as well as the agency of LGBTQ+ fans over narratives of themselves.

Fan labor

Jenkins' work discusses the participatory culture of fandom, in which fans "poach" original material, and inscribe their own meanings onto it as an act of resistance to official or commercial media (2012). Fan labor refers to productive creative activities engaged in by fans, including but not limited to writing fanfiction, creating fan-art, learning, or creating choreography, editing videos, covering songs, and cosplaying. Penny (2014) argues that fanfiction, as a new way of storytelling, is a form of "cultural myth-making" that centers marginalized communities who are not often given avenues for self-expression and artistic creation. These fannish productions can also extend beyond films and literature to real people, such as writing down fantasies about a favorite pop star or actor through RPF (real person fiction). The moral dubiousness of writing about a real person's life is addressed by how celebrities are viewed as a persona that is constructed by the various means they are revealed to the public, so the fictionalization happens to the "character" rather than the person beneath. A common theme in media fanfiction as well as RPF is shipping, in which fans ``ship" people or characters in a romantic relationship that does not exist in the media "canon," or reality. A popular subset of

shipping is slashed, which is shipping an LGBTQ+ relationship, mostly between two men. Slash often happens when the people or characters are not actually LGBTQ+.

Fandom and fan labor can act as subversive and political forces by providing marginalized populations with avenues to challenge dominant heteropatriarchal norms. In the void of helpful LGBTQ+ representation in media, queer fans have engaged with source texts in a more relevant way and created their own representation through fanfiction by rewriting characters as gay or transgender (Warwood, 2015). As fans who identify as women and queer are prevalent populations that write slash, studies have theorized that slash in fanfiction is a space of queer female empowerment (Hagen, 2015; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007). Scholars Bacon-Smith (1992), Penley (1997), and Hellekson (2009) explored the intersection of fandom and feminist theory, revealing how fandom is built on communities of intimacy and the nurturing of relationships. Through slash and writing fanfiction, women and queer people express diverse sexualities, desires, and explore erotic fantasies that challenge patriarchal power structures (Fazekas, 2014). These creative fan narratives provide LGBTQ+ people the opportunity to learn about themselves and explore their diverse sexualities in ways that are critical to identity formation, such as being introduced to romantic and sexual situations that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to learn about (Mixer, 2018).

Western fandom is characterized as overwhelmingly white and researchers have identified slash spaces as mostly middle-class, educated, liberal white women (Lothian et al., 2007). While functioning as a queer feminist space, fandom also perpetuates hegemonic ideas of white supremacy and the universalization of the white queer experience (Fazekas, 2014). Fandom is rooted in the lived experiences of fans learning and unlearning systems of oppression and internalized prejudices. For example, there are problems with fetishizing LGBTQ+ relationships and disparaging or erasing women characters in fanfiction (Scodari, 2003) that reflect back on larger societal issues. Fandom and fan labor offers people the opportunity to diversify characters, address injustices, and build fantasy worlds but more research is needed to understand its relationship with queer fandoms of color.

The Kpop fandom is known for being highly involved and intense, with fan labor as a driving force of the fandom. A study about queer Filipinx teenagers showed that Kpop dance cover groups provide LGBTQ+ youth with opportunities to interact with and perform their sexuality while being supported and accepted by their peers in Kpop fandom communities (Guevarra, 2015). Research also shows that Asian American fans of Kpop started online fandom activities to "feel less alone" and empower themselves by building a space to express their identity through fan productions (Choi, 2014). Another study on young Asian Canadian Kpop fans showed that they were empowered through positively redefining racial meanings attached to Kpop (Yoon, 2017). Despite

this burgeoning research area, no studies have yet used intensive qualitative methodology to examine how Kpop relates to the lived experiences of LGBTQ + Asian Americans.

Materials and methods

Participants and procedure

Potential participants were identified using criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2002), such that participants had to: 1) identify as Asian American, 2) identify as LGBTQ+, 3) be between 18 and 23 years of age, and 4) self-identified as at least familiar with Kpop on a scale of 1 to 5 from not familiar at all to extremely familiar. Participants were students or recent alumni from a public research university on the east coast. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Participants took an online survey to assess eligibility and gather information about their identities and engagement in Kpop to personalize a few interview questions. Participants were recruited via flyers posted in academic buildings on campus and through e-mail to university networks. Eligible participants were compensated 10 USD for the interview, which was conducted either in person or over the phone (see Appendix for interview questions; see Table 1 for demographics). The semi-structured interview environment gives space for flexible, spontaneous responses; follow-up questions and dialogue encourage the interview to reflect meaningful expression for each participant. All interviews were recorded using a secure audio recording device and transcribed verbatim. All identifying

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender
1.	Angel	Korean American	Pansexual	Woman
2.	Kelly	Vietnamese American	Bisexual	Woman
3.	Robin	Filipinx American	Gay	Genderqueer
4.	Kirby	Vietnamese American	Gay	Man
5	Morgan	Parsi American and white	Panromantic Asexual	Agender
6.	Taylor	Singaporean Chinese American and white	Bisexual	Nonbinary
7.	Alexis	Chinese American	Pansexual	Agender
8	William	Chinese American	Gay	Man
9.	Coco	Chinese and Taiwanese American	Bisexual	Woman
10.	Gwen	Chinese American	Bisexual	Woman
11.	Holly	Chinese American	Demisexual Panromantic	Woman
12.	Sam	Chinese American	Pansexual	Non-binary Transmasculine
13.	Aria	Chinese American and white	Bisexual	Woman
14.	Max	Vietnamese American	Queer	Transgender Genderqueer
15.	Jay	Vietnamese and Chinese American	Bisexual	Non-binary
16.	Melinda	Korean American	Demisexual Panromantic	Woman

information about the participants were deleted from the transcripts. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted between May 2018 and September 2018.

Research team

In grounded theory, it is important to consider the research team's social positions and privileges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The primary investigator is a queer, Chinese Taiwanese American, cisgender female undergraduate student in public health science and American Studies. She was responsible for participant recruitment and scheduling, conducting interviews, and data transcription and analysis. The second, third, and fourth authors are undergraduate psychology students who participated in data transcription and analysis. The second team member is a lesbian, Latina, cisgender woman; the third member is a queer, Black, cisgender woman; and the fourth member is a queer, biracial Japanese Brazilian non-binary or trans person. The final member is a gay, Vietnamese American, cisgender male doctoral student in a counseling psychology program who also served as an expert auditor. Every member of the research team identifies as an LGBTQ+ person of color, and three are LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. Members of this team are committed to centering the voices of marginalized identities in research and were able to contribute relevant insights on participants' experiences as informed by their own identities as queer people of color. This was helpful in locating the shared underlying feelings that were present as participants expressed facing challenges in coming out as LGBTQ+ or experiencing racism.

Grounded theory data analysis

Grounded theory data analysis was conducted using methods outlined by Glaser and Straus (1967). Members of the research team first conducted *open coding*, in which the interview transcripts were read line by line and were analytically constructed into units of meaning, which were then collaboratively clarified into concise, accurate statements to develop the codes. Throughout the coding process, these units were thoroughly analyzed for alternative interpretations and situational circumstances. The first seven transcripts were coded by the whole research team; the remaining transcripts were coded independently by each member as well as the first author. The codes were then organized using *axial coding*, which led to the development of broad categorial themes and connections based on shared meaning. In the final *selective coding* stage, clear themes and relationships in the data were visualized and a coherent theoretical understanding of the phenomenon was formed, through the core theme of fandom negotiation and capacity. Quotes from participants remain centered throughout the process to ensure that the theory remains grounded in their experiences. Data saturation was reached

after 16 interviews, as shown in the repetitiveness of responses and the validation of categories and relationships when no new data or insights were being received from the participants regarding the research question (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Reflexivity

The researchers maintained reflexivity by taking notes and memo-writing, which was an ongoing way to record ideas and feelings that emerge as the theory was developed (Fassinger, 2005). We also maintained an audit trail that was a collaborative living document throughout the data analysis process to record personal feelings and expectations. The audit trail was updated weekly during this process to facilitate engagement and open discussion surrounding personal assumptions and biases. As the team became more familiar with the content over time, we were able to identify themes with greater nuance and apply our growth to the sample as a whole.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established in the study by the peer debriefing method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Every transcript was coded by at least two people. Consensus was reached in every step of data analysis where all members of the research team examined the data and engaged in discussion if there was a disagreement or inconsistency. To ensure that the primary investigator was not solely determining data analysis, members of the research team contributed interpretations the first author had not considered, and all members were mindful about recognizing and openly discussing any biases and expectations.

Results

There are four major interacting themes that emerged from axial coding: (a) representation, (b) social support, (c) problematic (re)presentations, and (d) fan labor as agency. From selective coding, the core theme of fandom negotiation and capacity building emerged. First, the data illustrates how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans experience invalidation and invisibility through the media and in their families, as well as how Kpop relates to this issue as sources of social support and representation. Then, the problematic (re)presentations section describes limitations of these functions of Kpop, followed by the fan labor as agency section, which shows how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans can be empowered to address these limitations. Finally, responses highlight a model of how fans employ intention and strategies when interacting with Kpop to support their intersecting marginalized identities.

Representation

A key finding is that LGBTQ+ Asian Americans face difficulties surrounding a lack of validation and visibility in their families, social groups, and the media. Many participants (*n* = 10) cited the difficulties for LGBTQ+ identities to be supported in Asian American families because of conservative or traditional family culture. Participants revealed how difficult it is for them to express their full identity as LGBTQ+ Asian Americans because of family or social culture, emphasizing the need for intersectional support. Max, who is a queer, transgender, genderqueer Vietnamese American, commented that:

> Right now I am really proud of who I am, although I can't really, I guess find the courage to be more open because I've been closeted for a lot of my life. Like mostly because I've had to hide stuff from family who are the kind of typical homophobic Asian.

According to all participants (*n* = 16), issues with LGBTQ+ Asian American representation include lack of representation in general, whitewashing, queerbaiting, and stereotypical portrayals of these identities. Representation is important in supporting LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, as positive and accurate media representation contributes to providing role models and challenging harmful stereotypes. Participants want representation, perhaps to feel seen or acknowledged surrounding their marginalized identities, and thus they acknowledge limitations of current available representation. Coco, a bisexual Chinese Taiwanese American woman, expressed:

> That's always a big problem. I mean having no representation in the media, as an Asian American much less a LGBT Asian American. Yeah you do feel like … I'm not being represented.

Max also articulates:

> For LGBT people I feel like there is surface level representation. We have these gay characters who are killed off in the next episode … Like in the past from what I've seen, it is mostly Asian characters who are overly sexualized and very stereotypical.

Many participants (*n* = 11) reported that engaging with Kpop can help them feel closer to their Asian American identity through their pan-Asian identification. Even though Kpop is a Korean ethnic media, Asian Americans can find a sense of belonging and representation in it because they identify with the larger Asian American population in addition to their specific ethnicity. Espiritu (1992) explains that panethnicity is a political and social construction that emerges from oppression of racial minorities, and develops as a center of identity. Gwen, a bisexual Chinese American woman, stated:

> I relate to Kpop sometimes because we're all Asian so I really enjoy seeing their culture and how I relate but not really relate because they're Korean and I'm Chinese but you know, there's some little things here and there that make sense … The idea that we are all from Asia so there's some ways we can all relate, so I enjoy it.

Participants also describe their relationship with Kpop as an escape into fantasy or celebrity idolization ($n = 7$), a place of inspiration for esthetics or work ethic ($n = 4$), and a source of celebrity representation that is not available in western media ($n = 8$). Alexis, a pansexual, agender, Chinese American revealed:

> Growing up, I was never really into American music so Kpop was the first time I had like singers and artists I looked up to.

Participants ($n = 9$) enjoy the high production value of Kpop media as well as the personalities of the idols and the friendships between them, which are shown through reality shows and behind the scenes materials. Participants ($n = 5$) also commented on how they could relate more to, or see themselves more, in Kpop stars than in western artists, citing some cultural aspects of that identification such as valuing the work ethic and unity demonstrated through the teamwork of Kpop group members. Jay, a nonbinary, bisexual, Vietnamese Chinese American shared:

> I'm not gonna watch Scrubs or Grey's Anatomy and be inspired. Even American reality TV, they're for entertainment and those are zooming into people's insecurities like Hoarders. But for Kpop, at least the ones I watched, Korean reality TV shows, it was about humanizing them and making fans feel closer to them and like they could understand them.

Kirby, a gay Vietnamese American man, expressed that:

> I admire how they work really really hard, they train so hard, it inspires me to keep working harder even though I'm not working to be a singer or dancer, I can still say, what will my bias [favorite idol] do, what will my bias say if I'm like I'm dropping out of school. Those types of thoughts influence me to do better in real life.

This function of Kpop as representation and inspiration is valuable because it serves as an alternative to the model minority myth to encourage Asian American success in a more positive or personal way. Asian American students face stereotypes and pressure to be academically successful, and Kpop can provide motivation to do well in school and other activities outside of American racial constructs like the model minority myth that marginalizes Asian Americans. Participants ($n = 3$) also revealed how empowering it is to see Asian success in the entertainment industry, which is lacking in Asian American representation. Kpop as representation for Asian Americans is powerful because it defies American stereotypes such as Asians are unattractive nerds. Participants ($n = 8$) find value in having celebrity representation of positive and successful role models as well as in representation of Asian beauty outside of western norms, such as how to do make-up on monolid eyes ($n = 2$). Taylor, a bisexual, nonbinary, white and Singaporean Chinese American expressed:

> In terms of Asian American identity, it's a thing that brings us together. A lot of Asian Americans listen to Kpop and involve themselves in that community. Partly because they see themselves in it like Asians being cool as opposed to western media Asians being nerds.

Participants (*n* = 13) reported that representations of queerness in Kpop include music video content, expressions of LGBTQ+ support from idols, gender neutral lyrics, Holland as an openly gay idol, and Amber as an androgynous presenting woman. There is not much actual representation, mostly just context. Seeing forms of LGBTQ+ representation was valuable and validated participants' identities, especially when they already look toward Kpop as celebrities they love and as representation for their Asian identities. Jay disclosed:

> So because I could see [Amber] do that, there was no other person I could see in America or Asian American artist, who looked like me and looked like who I wanted to look like and act like how I wanted to act. I latched onto her even though she was performing in Korea and Asian Americans, Americans didn't know about her. I saw her and I was like it's okay to be who I want to be.

Androgyny and unique gender boundaries exist in Kpop for male idols who have a more feminine presentation, such as wearing blouses and practicing acting cute, which makes androgynous style and identity more accessible for genderqueer or nonbinary participants (*n* = 7). Although such characteristics are considered distinctly feminine in western representations, they are an accepted facet of male idols in the Kpop media environment, as these idols successfully perform and gain popularity. These common elements of Kpop are empowering representations for gender non-conforming participants because they can affirm their identities by wanting to look like a Kpop idol, who are seen as attractive and popular because of their gender presentation and not despite of it. Robin, a genderqueer, gay Filipinx American expressed:

> I would paint my nails, I would wear makeup. I just want to be a Kpop star, you know. And I would get compliments from people, like you look like you're a Kpop star, like good I was trying! It made me feel more comfortable with my sexuality. Not like Kpop made me gay, but Kpop opened the door to my style.

Taylor also comments that:

> Male Kpop stars are more allowed to be feminine and that's why it felt more accessible for me to take on that appearance.

Kpop idols also provided representation of people that participants (*n* = 8) could experience attraction to. Kpop stars are widely accepted as attractive and popular, which makes it easier for LGBTQ+ participants to express attraction to them and be able to have that experience of celebrity crushes and fantasizations that are helpful in developing sexuality, self-expression, and exploring

ideals. This finding relates to how not-straight fans creatively appropriate icons for their own identity work (Young, 2012). Drawing from self-psychology, Young (2012) suggests that this relationship can help consolidate vulnerable identities that historically lack support and role models, which allows for greater genuine connection with others.

Robin disclosed:

> My husband from BTS … I'll be like that's my husband. It allowed me to like men, it allowed me to explore my sexuality and be okay with liking boys and idolizing boys.

Another function of Kpop as representation for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans is through alternative gender interactions. According to responses, in many Asian countries, people of the same gender are more affectionate with each other, representing a different model of gender behaviors than in the west. Even though this "skinship" is not explicitly LGBTQ+ behavior, participants ($n = 7$) explain that it normalizes same gender affection and challenges western gender norms. A common element in Kpop, "skinship" is expressing affection through touching and physical closeness. Angel shared:

> Intimacy between people of the same gender in Kpop is beautiful to see because it shows that kind of possibility of what intimacy could look like when we can so rarely see that in America.

Social support

Another key finding is that engagement in Kpop functions as social support and community building for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. Kpop can be an avenue for social connection, which may be important given how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans experience social isolation. Participants ($n = 9$) expressed happiness and belonging for finding friendships through engaging in Kpop that are supportive to their identities. Kelly, a bisexual Vietnamese American woman, revealed:

> Even now the friend I told you about, she's the only person I act super gay with like fangirl about other Kpop idols and stuff like that I don't really do that with anyone else.

Her comment connects acting "gay" with fangirling, and positions her Kpop friendship as a platform for expression. Participants ($n = 7$) agree that Kpop facilitates connections with other Asian Americans and offers a common point to relate to, encouraging friendships and making the Asian American community more accessible. Morgan, an aromantic asexual, agender, white and Parsi American, stated:*-

> I don't feel like I quite fit in with the Asian American community because I am white passing … it just so happened that the friends that I made who are into Kpop, a lot of them are Asian American. Until then, I've never really been in the Asian American community.

Participants (*n* = 13) said that community and connection is one of the most important aspects of being a Kpop fan. The presence of LGBTQ+ fans in Kpop made it a comfortable space and encouraged participants' (*n* = 6) development of sexuality and understanding of identity. Kelly elaborated:

> Most of the fans I was friends with, they were LGBT too so their experiences, when I talked to them, made me think back on mine and it started to become more accepting of myself like this is me, I'm attracted to girls, I don't have to fight it.

Taylor also expressed:

> People in [the Kpop dance group], everyone else was different in their own way so I became more comfortable in my differences and being gay together.

Participants (*n* = 5) cited connections between being LGBTQ+ and being a fan of anime or Kpop as marginalized Asian communities or subcultures, especially in middle school and high school. These communities are highly expressed online, where many fandom activities take place. The internet or related spaces could be safe spaces for self-exploration or connection to others with similar marginalized identities; as Kpop is mostly accessed online, it can function as an avenue for finding social support for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. Responses from participants (*n* = 14) included experiences of stress in determining situations where they would be comfortable showing their LGBTQ+ identities, but engaging with online Kpop fandoms can offer a flexible space for both public and private expressions of race, gender, sexuality, and identity. Holly, a demisexual, panromantic, Chinese American woman revealed:

> I will say that the reason I cared or even thought about my LGBT identity is because I was in Kpop and anime like those two communities really opened my eyes.

Angel also shared:

> I feel like queer people, and people of color, and queer people of color spend a lot of time online because it's like a place of refuge … I think yeah, Kpop is a place of escape, it makes a lot of sense the people will access that through the internet, which is a place of its own escape.

Problematic (re)presentations

Although there were many helpful functions of Kpop in the experiences of young adult LGBTQ+ Asian Americans, participants (*n* = 8) also raise concerns on issues surrounding identity and representation. These participants stated that Kpop's connection to Asian American identity can be questioned because as Kpop is depersonalized for easy consumption, it is difficult to distinguish which elements are genuine and which are for marketability. Kpop is still an Asian and Korean media, not Asian American, which invites

spaces of tension. Cultural appropriation in Kpop also complicates its meaning for Asian Americans, who are more aware of social and racial implications as opposed to an Asian homogenous society in Korea. Participants ($n = 4$) also brought up how Kpop invites fetishization of Korean and Asian people, and makes Asian Americans vulnerable to criticisms from those who connect Kpop to Asian Americans. Melinda, a demisexual panromantic, Korean American woman, stated:

> I'm just always tired of people who idolize Kpop, but will completely tear apart Korean culture.

Alexis also revealed:

> When someone looks at me and I tell them I like Kpop, they're like 'oh my god you're so Asian' ... I guess I just feel like I appear more Asian because I like Kpop. So I feel like it's an obligation for being more Asian.

These reactions from participants illustrate the unique and vulnerable position of Asian Americans and the need for protective mechanisms in regards to identity and media. Participants critically engage with the factors of authenticity, mainstreaming, and marketability. The hybridized and depersonalized nature of Kpop can be what makes it more accessible to Asian Americans in the first place, and positions it in the realm of popular culture (Kim, 2017) Participants ($n = 11$) also discussed how presentations of queerness in Kpop can be problematic and disingenuous because it is not real representation. In addition to issues of queerbaiting, contexts of queerness can be exploitative and fetishistic for the consumption of a straight audience, and portrays LGBTQ+ identity as a trend or behavior adapted for performance and not a real lived experience. Taylor expressed:

> [Shipping] also has potential to be badly intentioned, not necessarily because it is between two guys but it sort of makes a spectacle of it ... I don't think it's necessarily positive representation, because if they're not actually queer it's not accurate or productive to be exploring that.

Aria, a bisexual, white and Chinese American woman, also elaborated:

> [False representation] contributes to the narrative that you know homosexuality is a choice and I think that's perhaps most damaging to the community that you know these are just behaviors that you just adopt for performance.

There are concerns that queer performance and representation is dishonest to the idol's identity, and seems like an industry media ploy to increase popularity and sales. Participants ($n = 9$) commented that Korea is still a generally homophobic society so LGBTQ+ presence in Kpop is limited. Participants perceive queer fan interpretations and shipping in Kpop to be disrespectful for LGBTQ+ people or idols in Korea who are marginalized because they are

limited in expressing queerness and their struggles can be erased in the fantasy of fans. These responses and concerns from participants reveal that they are very grounded in the reality of how Asian Americans and LGBTQ+ communities are marginalized and feel the need for tangible support. Kirby disclosed:

> I know companies nowadays tend to force interactions between members, which of course when I see moments like that I try not to think about it because it gets a little hairy. I want to think that they don't do it to be malicious, they do it because fangirls live for that stuff, but I don't want gayness to be used as a tool.

Fan labor as agency

Another key finding is that fan labor can be leveraged to mitigate the harmful effects of problematic representations of LGBTQ+ Asian American identities through negotiated readings that are made possible with the semiotic openings of Kpop. Many participants ($n = 11$) agreed that queer representation in Kpop manifests in fan interpretations from source media such as variety shows, music videos, and fan-cams. Fans interpret skinship and context in Kpop such as cross-dressing and close friendships between idols as a form of LGBTQ+ representation. Holly revealed:

> The two actual products like Kpop and anime are very cishet mainstream kind of thing but it's the fandom that takes it and like yeah these two would look good together, like shipping and she's really cute, it's definitely the fandom that made me realize it's okay to do all this.

As a major aspect of Kpop fan culture, participants ($n = 14$) reveal how shipping, similar to seeing "skinship," can function as a normalization of same gender intimacy and an introduction to LGBTQ+ relationships, which helps to realize or develop sexuality. Shipping fan labor is a form of creating queer representation, queer art, and a source of fantasy and escapism. Kelly shared:

> I was a freshman in high school so I was watching those shipping videos, and shipping fanfiction. And I can't really describe it, it made me realize I have a big attraction towards girls

William disclosed:

> I probably wouldn't have been as exposed to LGBT related things if I wasn't in the fan culture. Mainly through the whole shipping thing and all the fanfic. Because before that, I never had any sort of exposure to anything that was queer related . . . I think fanfiction for me, that was the first exposure I've had to relationships in general . . . I feel like I would still be in that mindset of oh being with a girl, the social norm, and that's what I should do especially since during that time I didn't have any experience with anyone. So the whole fanfic gave me, I don't want to say experience, but in a way you've experienced it.

However, participants (*n* = 11) also maintained that shipping can be problematic because it does not necessarily translate to support for LGBTQ+ community, and that LGBTQ+ relationships are fetishized and made into a spectacle. The taboo nature of shipping can also make LGBTQ+ people and relationships seem like a guilty pleasure. It can be disrespectful to ship real people who have their own lives and relationships. Many participants saw both the harmful and beneficial sides of shipping. Robin stated:

> Shipping without supporting LGBT people is a fantasy that doesn't represent caring or advocating for the community.

Participants (*n* = 6) expressed that shipping usually does not pose a problem if it is discreet and respectful, and that fans are mindful that their fantasy version of an idol does not necessarily match up to reality. The divide between the idol themselves and the fantasy version is complicated because of the superficial pop star identity that is presented, which may encourage more space for fan speculation and a desire to unveil a "true personality." It is also this space that allows participants to look for validation and dream up platforms for self-expression from these celebrities by themselves without relying on the source media. Jay described:

> Because it's not visible and outright, there's not a lot of idols that are unapologetic and out, it helps to feel the fantasies of the projections of fans to create their own queer content.

Participants (*n* = 8) appreciated how Kpop idols and their fans have an especially close connection. There is a sense of intimacy cultivated throughout the industry which makes Kpop appealing and gives more meaning to these celebrities and their work. Participants (*n* = 6) expressed valuing idols' personalities and being able to see a genuine side of them. All participants, regardless of whether or not they support shipping, make sure to express their love for their idols.

Participants (*n* = 16) reported engaging in fan labor and fandom by participating in fan projects, writing fanfiction, making fan art, editing shipping videos, singing or dancing to Kpop, following and consuming fan labor on social media, dancing or choreographing, cosplaying another character from a fanfiction, and one participant even auditioned to be a Kpop idol. Fan labor illustrates how influential Kpop is and how strongly the fandom is devoted to Kpop. Participants (*n* = 4) revealed that fan labor is a way to materialize and express their love to others and celebrate being a fan. Participants (*n* = 6) also expressed that engaging in fan labor also encourages creative expression through video editing, writing, dancing, and other arts activities.

Fan labor is helpful for fans to dream, materialize or legitimize their fantasies, create queer content, live vicariously and explore desires and

imaginations. Writing fanfiction helps participants (*n* = 11) explore what they want in a relationship and engaging in fan labor provides a space to encounter LGBTQ+ stories and normalize these narratives. Participants (*n* = 2) also shared that they could choreograph same gender Kpop dances and explore gender through dancing and performance. A majority of the participants (*n* = 10) expressed that fan labor and fanfiction can be empowering for LGBTQ+ people who leverage it to gain agency over a narrative, as well as create spaces to share and create their own stories in resistance to problematic media representations and a society that erases their identities. Connecting fan labor to art-making, identity expression, and internet spaces, Coco shared:

> Fanfiction is a way for fans to express queerness, a lot of queer people express themselves through drawing or fanfiction because it's hard to express themselves in real life so they turn to the internet.

Holly voiced:

> I can read as much queer media as I want because there isn't that much available. I really like reading queer media and a lot of the writers are queer so that's also cool to me. It's fun to add our own twist to source material because it gives people control over their lives which is what LGBT people don't have a lot because we're such a minority and are so discriminated against.

Many of the material working conditions of Kpop idols contribute to creating opportunities for fan labor to address these conditions in an empowering way for fans, but do not actively help idols themselves. For example, idols can be restricted from dating, which keeps them in a perpetually single image so fans can imagine them in relationships with little alteration to canon. However, perhaps because LGBTQ+ Asian Americans are familiar with experiences of oppression, they are concerned about substantial support, such as being conscious of queer writers as well as queer stories like Holly, or advocating for shipping fandom to actually care about LGBTQ+ people like Robin.

Core theme: Fandom negotiation and capacity

While fan labor can mitigate tensions between Kpop media and fandom, it is not a reactive, linear process. A substantive theme of fandom negotiation and capacity subsumes and integrates the four other themes. Participants demonstrated a complex level of regulation strategies for accessing and interacting with Kpop while being LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. They reported holding deep stakes in this media, which was often the catalyst for identity development, and can adapt to using different openings to maximize positive outcomes. Parham's (1989) lifespan theory of racial identity development asserts that there is a unique process of self-actualization for each person, which in this case, manifested in finding support in various avenues of direct or

transformed media. According to variable-centered resilience theory, it is important to consider factors that may promote healthy development, such as social community, despite the stress factors involved, such as disingenuous LGBTQ+ representation (Rutter, 1987). Participants (*n* = 4) who disagreed with the ethics of shipping also derive support from the social connection aspect of the fandom and vice versa. Reflecting how LGBTQ+ Asian Americans experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, their multifaceted approaches to Kpop are flexible when identities both align and conflict.

Participants practiced systemic critique and awareness. Participants (*n* = 4) were conscious of the substantial LGBTQ+ Asian American presence in the fandom, and have expressed interest about this development given the scarcity of actual queerness in Kpop canon, though this true prevalence has not yet been studied. Out of those who expressed concerns over problematic representations or fan behaviors regarding LGBTQ+ identity, many acknowledged that they understand how it could be helpful for others and when it is regulated with boundaries (*n* = 5). According to the participants, such strategies include sharing shipping content within affinity communities, using comprehensive tags, being mindful that fantasy is not reality, appreciating queer representation but not explicitly expecting any, and not bringing up ships to idols themselves. Participants advocated for these practices to be adopted more, demonstrating how fandom community norms are being developed and negotiated to build more capacity to process marginalization and multiplicity. Indeed, Lopez (2016) reminds us that Asian American media activism chases after a "moving target" that does not adhere to a universal set of demands.

Discussion

This study found that Kpop can function as a form of LGBTQ+ Asian American representation, in part through fan participation and imagination, that provides alternative narratives of sexuality, gender, and Asian identity that are supportive to young adult LGBTQ+ Asian Americans who lack sources of visibility and validation from their families and western media. Another main finding is that engaging in Kpop provides LGBTQ+ Asian Americans with social connections and community building. Despite the problematic aspects of Kpop as representation regarding LGBTQ+ Asian American identities, participants reported gaining agency from engaging in fan labor to create queer content of their own which partly mitigated issues of disingenuous LGBTQ+ representation. Operating from a participatory fan culture (Jenkins, 2012), participants engage in regulation strategies that reinforce resilience and individual self-actualization in regards to their marginalized identities, which addresses the tension between problematic (re)

presentations and the efforts to rehabilitate them through fan agency. Responses from participants did not indicate a significant relationship between engaging in fan labor and Asian American identity, other than encouraging social connections.

Although there were diverse genders, sexualities, and ethnicities within our participants, an important limitation is that the sample may not be representative of the entire targeted population, especially for the wider national demographic. The generalizability of the findings is limited due to the small sample size, lack of South and Southeast Asians, and that participants were all recruited from a selective university. Future research can broaden the scope of this topic for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans and LGBTQ+ fans of color by gathering data from participants with a wider range of identities as Kpop grows as a global phenomenon.

A strength of this study lies in the methodology of grounded theory analysis. The results generated are effectively "grounded" in the life experiences of participants. The population of college-aged LGBTQ+ Asian Americans who regularly engage in Kpop is hard to find, but there were 16 diverse participants who shared their experiences and gave this study richness and clarity. This study extricates complex narratives and connections that from life experiences that participants said they rarely have the opportunity to articulate and share. This comprehensive structure of qualitative research lends legitimacy and support for this initial study on the intersections of Kpop, fandom, and young LGBTQ+ Asian Americans.

The rise of Kpop and the Kpop fandom is a recent phenomenon, and this timely study can serve to document this development at an important stage in the lives of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. Kpop started gaining global attention when most of these participants were in middle school or high school, so this study can demonstrate the effect of engagement with Kpop during formative years of growth, identity development, and learning. For example, Kelly shared that she watched shipping videos as a high school freshman which helped her realize her attraction to girls. While this data depends on the participant's recollection and interpretation, which may mask unacknowledged secondary revision of memory, it also offers participants more space to reflect and articulate the connections between the past and present.

Even though mental health symptomatology was not explicitly measured in this study, the role of Kpop in facilitating interpersonal relationships and providing sources of inspiration and role models can be recognized as potential coping mechanisms that improve self-concepts and buffer the negative relationship between mental health and minority stressors (Meyer, 2003; Ochman, 1996). This study also reinforces support for creative fan activities, storytelling, and content management as protective mechanisms for marginalized communities when faced with harmful representations of their identities. There is potential for engagement in fan labor to grow as a space of

resistance against hegemonic white heterosexual media spaces, perhaps as an opportunity to explore dreams and intimacies outside the norm. This study suggests that engaging in Kpop fandom and labor may support well-being and identity development for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans through facilitating creativity, building social relationships, validating a need of belonging, and encouraging authentic expression.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

(1) How would you describe your LGBTQ+ identity?
(2) Could you please describe the development of your LGBTQ+ identity?
(3) How would you describe your current relationship with your LGBTQ+ identity?
(4) How freely do you feel like you can express your LGBTQ+ identity and be accepted?
(5) How do you think your LGBTQ+ identity affects your mental health, if it does?
(6) On the survey you filled out you indicated that you identify as Asian American, could you please describe what that means to you?
(7) How do you feel about the representation or lack of representation of Asian American and LGBTQ+ people in the media?
(8) How would you define KPop? What are some of your general thoughts on this topic?
(9) How would you describe the development of your relationship with Kpop over time starting from how you were first introduced to it?
(10) What does Kpop mean to you currently? What is your relationship with it now?
(11) Could you please describe how Kpop makes you feel in regards to your Asian American identity?
(12) Do you feel like your sexuality relates to how you engage in KPop? -If so, could you please describe how Kpop makes you feel in regards to your sexuality?
(13) How does your identities as a LGBTQ+ Asian American affect how you engage in Kpop?
(14) Do you think there are representations of queerness in Kpop? If so, how do you feel about them?
(15) Fan labor refers to the productive creative activities engaged in by fans, including but not limited to writing fanfiction, creating fan-art, learning or creating choreography, editing videos, covering songs, and cosplaying. Based on the survey you filled it out, it said that you engage in X. Could you please speak about what creative fan labor in general means to you?
(16) Could you please describe your relationship with fan labor?
(17) Could you please describe your relationship with fan labor in the Kpop community?
(18) What makes you want to engage in creative fan labor in the Kpop field? What are some feelings you experience when you engage in fan labor?
(19) How does engaging in Kpop fan labor affect your relationship with your sexuality and/or Asian American identity?
(20) We talked before about how your sexuality could affect your mental health, how do you think kpop factors into that, if it does?
(21) Reflecting on this interview today, did you learn anything new about yourself or this topic?