

## **K(Q)ueer-Pop for Another World: Toward a Theorization of Gender and Sexuality in K-Pop**

JUNGMIN KWON<sup>1</sup>  
Portland State University, USA

This article argues that the K-pop space, which on one level appears to be homogeneously cishetpatriarchal, actually encompasses multiple configurations of gender and sexual identity. Nonetheless, academic discussions about gender and sexuality in K-pop have been significantly weighted toward the idea of “soft masculinity” regarding male performers, thereby muffling other possible interpretations. I suggest a new term, K(Q)ueerness. It means the aesthetics, imaginations, practices, performances, and ideas of K-pop players sublate binaristic identifications, including masculinity and femininity and heterosexual and homosexual—as well as Butler’s distinction between performance and performativity—to embrace the multifarious expressions of gender and sexuality surrounding K-pop. This article aims to highlight diverse modalities of K(Q)ueerness and increase queer sensibility within the K-pop studies discipline and K-pop fan communities.

*Keywords: K-pop, Korean music industry, queer, gender, sexuality, performance, performativity*

### **In a Dead End**

Since its initial transnational circulation across East Asia in the late 1990s, K-pop has adapted and adopted the triumphant formula of established genres of pop music, such as those from Japan and the United States, and developed its own strategies based on a meticulously managed idol system designed to appeal to Korean and transnational music consumers (Jin & Ryoo, 2014; Shim, 2006; Yoon, 2018). Over the past two decades, increasingly grounded in this hybrid approach, K-pop has “conquer[ed] the world” as one of the biggest music cultures across the globe and become “a multi-billion-dollar industry” that sells out stadiums in the world within minutes (“How did K-Pop,” 2019, para. 4). To survive in the competitive worldwide market, K-pop performers have at times diverged from general social stereotypes about gender and sexuality to respond to the diverse needs of fans (Oh & Oh, 2017; Putri, 2021; Zhao, 2021).

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Jungmin Kwon: jungmin.kwon@pdx.edu  
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Despite the augmenting diversity of nonnormative expressions in the K-pop space, academic discussions about nonconforming gender and sexuality matters in K-pop have been significantly weighted toward the idea of “soft masculinity” concerning male performers, thereby muffling other possible interpretations. Since Jung (2011) coined the term in the early 2010s, the notion has dominated the field for a decade. Although Jung did suggest other types of masculinity that the K-pop male body demonstrates—beast-like masculinity, metrosexual masculinity, and versatile masculinity—it was soft masculinity that received the most attention. Louie (2017)’s examination of Asian masculinity offers some insights into this. Building on Edward Said’s (1979) notion of Orientalism, Louie points out that the West was constructed as masculine and the East as feminine, and the discourse about soft masculinity, conceptualized as exhibiting conventional femininity, has been exploited to reinforce this binary. Furthermore, because of the proclivity of male body-oriented research, female and nonbinary bodies have been insufficiently explored by academics. The scant research that exists about female singers primarily concerns the excessive feminization and sexualization of their bodies and is driven by the presumption that this is designed to satisfy a cishet male gaze. In cases of nonconforming gender identities, there is a minimal volume of research usually orbiting around A-listers, such as Amber and G-Dragon, which celebrates their audacity (Laforgia & Howard, 2017; Laurie, 2016; Oh, 2015a, 2015b; Oh & Oh, 2017).

This article intends to refigure the current academic discussions about gender and sexuality in K-pop to incorporate more diverse voices and expressions, which requires a more complicated and inclusive lens. The current dichotomist paradigms of masculinity and femininity, and heterosexual and homosexual, cannot explain various performances of gender and sexuality within the genre. Moreover, the current terms describing the gender of K-pop singers—soft, beast-like, hybrid, or liminal—reproduce binary archetypes and consolidate K-pop’s cishetpatriarchy. We need new terms and approaches inclusive of a more varied spectrum of gender and sexual practices, and these new perspectives should be able to explain not only K-pop performers’ affects and actions but also those of fans. In short, they need to capture the unique aspects of K-pop (and Korea) regarding expressions of gender and sexuality and be able to be used to detect the diversely ranged, and even inconspicuous articulations of K-pop players that disrupt K-pop’s (and Korea’s) cishetpatriarchy and invite further transgressions of such. Furthermore, they can contribute to complicating the West-centric notion of queerness and, accordingly, to expanding the possibility and range of queerness in pop music (Jackson, 2011).

### **K(Q)ueerness**

I propose the term K(Q)ueerness, or K-pop queerness, through which I explore K-pop artists’ (and the industry’s) identities, performances, and desires, as well as those of fans, in terms of their gender and sexuality. Since its emergence around 1990, the term “queer” has repudiated any discursive attempt to rigidly define it, thereby “challeng[ing] the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects” (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005, p. 1). According to Taylor (2012), the term has been used in two primary ways: First, as an umbrella term to include all LGBT+ members and communities, and second, as an ironic term indicative of “resistance imbued with anti-assimilationist and deconstructionist rhetoric that aggressively opposes hegemonic identificatory and behavioural norms, including liberal lesbian and gay identity politics” (p. 14). The first usage is more common, but the second has been increasingly adopted in the field of queer studies. Some influential queer studies scholars, such

as Halberstam (2005), conceptualized queerness to refer to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (p. 6). Muñoz (2009) pushed the concept further, proclaiming that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for *another world*” (p. 1; emphasis added). In short, queerness is an approach, an aesthetic quality, a perspective, a practice, as well as identification and orientation, all of which challenge “normalizing mandates,” in pursuit of a better future (Taylor, 2012, pp. 14–15). Accordingly, the term is necessarily fluid, amorphous, indeterminate, and, above all, performative—indicating that it is not a manner of being but of doing (Muñoz, 2009). The Butlerian concept of performativity used here refers to “a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted” (Butler, 1993, p. 22). Thus, queerness is not inherent but rather a constructed effect of one’s repeated acts.

These theoretical conceptions are of course not specific to Korean culture—they are heavily steeped in the U.S. context. In that respect, I am cautious in importing the term to discuss Korean culture. Nonetheless, I believe the notion helps in transcending the hegemonic binary of masculinity and femininity, and heterosexual and homosexual, and proffers a new critical framework for recognizing, explaining, and embracing various nonnormative practices involving gender and sexuality in the K-pop scene. The basic premises and promises of queerness elaborated outside Korea, that is, a refusal of “normalizing mandates,” are fundamentally shared in this article.

In addition, the theoretical discourse about queerness in U.S. academia informs this article in the sense of abnegating the dualistic paradigms that underlie cishetpatriarchal norms in Korean society, and pursuing *another world* wherein, liberated from cishetpatriarchal shackles, one is granted the freedom to act, appreciate, identify, practice, and think as they want. Such a world is, as Muñoz (2009) put it, possible because of the performative power of doing. In terms of its potential validity in Korean society, I envision queer or queerness as indicating what the unruly, deviant, anti-hegemonic, disturbing, and/or fluid forging spaces are that allow a spectrum of variance in gender and sexuality. However, I want to revisit the notion of performativity because of the difficulty of translating it to K-pop’s gender and sexuality issues.

Equating performance with performativity, much research about K-pop’s queerness draws on Butler’s (1993) claim that some K-pop idols’ performances and expressions, such as cross-dressing, gender play, and campy theatricality, are queer in contrast to the normative mores of K-pop and thus can subvert Korea’s cishetpatriarchal system. I concur about the disruptive potential of such performances and expressions, but I want to make it clear that this potential exists not because such performances and expressions are performative but rather because they have their own defiant power in the context of K-pop. After noticing that performativity was wrongly used to discuss theatrical performances, Butler (1993) clarified the difference between performance and performativity:

Performance as bounded “act” is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice”; further, what is “performed” works to conceal, not to disavow, what remains opaque,

unconscious, un-performable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (p. 24)

In short, performativity, to Butler (1993), antecedes what a performer can choose to do. Therefore, in contrast to the existing research claiming queerness, I would assert that the performances and activities that K-pop stars carry out are not performative constituents of their identity but artistic or expressive enactments.

Yet I posit that such staged performances are still queer enough to achieve what queer performativity purports even though these performances are not in themselves examples of performativity. Korean society still stigmatizes coming out, whether it be about queer orientation, aesthetics, approaches, or practices. Therefore, the always already contestable matter of queer authenticity and the distinction “between authenticity and fabrication” (Laurie, 2016, p. 216) is even more muddled in Korean contexts. As such, it is very difficult to identify a performer’s queer identity. The lack of public discourse about queerness in Korea means it is incredibly open to interpretation, which is both a chance to construct a localized meaning and a pitfall, as it can be appropriated for commercial purposes (Lee, 2013). About this commercial appropriation, recently phrased as “queerbaiting,” there are a few cases of cishet-identified popular singers intentionally performing queerness, but such performances are mostly well calculated and based on the belief that their core fan following will not leave them (Kwon, 2019; Zhao, 2021). These cases are rare, and so I postulate that performing queerness, regardless of whether it matches a singer’s identity and intentionality, is a bold choice to make in the predominantly cishetpatriarchal K-pop world—and that this is true even when it is merely a one-off performance and not a truly Butlerian sense of performativity. On the macro level, the accumulation of such choices boosts the visibility of queerness, which K-pop is in need of, encourages more attempts to destroy the current hierarchy in the K-pop industry and market, and triggers more conversations about queerness in Korean popular culture and beyond (Kwon, 2019).

As with the way I approach queerness, I define K(Q)ueerness as the aesthetics, imaginations, practices, performances, and ideas of K-pop players, including performers, industry workers, and fans, that have the potential to disrupt the cishetpatriarchal structures of K-pop and create a liberatory space with their unruly, deviant, anti-hegemonic, disturbing, and fluid qualities. K(Q)ueerness sublates binary identifications, including masculinity and femininity and heterosexual and homosexual—as well as Butler’s distinction between performance and performativity—to embrace the multifarious expressions of gender and sexuality surrounding K-pop. This approach renders K(Q)ueerness a more comprehensive term than queerness in this context and constitutes a purposeful reconsideration of the local particularities grounded in the predominantly cishetpatriarchal Korean culture. Understanding K(Q)ueerness, like queerness, obviously requires an intersectional perspective encompassing the multiple facets of a K-pop player’s identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, physical ability, nationality, or religion. My discussion in this article, however, is limited to gender and sexuality to focalize their power to fracture the cishetpatriarchy threaded through the whole K-pop scene. Several scholars, such as Chuyun Oh (2015a, 2015b) and Layoung Shin (2018) have employed queerness to explicate K-pop’s nontraditional gender performances and expressions and have demonstrated the term’s usefulness in this context. However, they primarily applied the concept to Korean cases without enough critical contextualization, a shortcoming I aim to

redress. Their work inspired me to formulate the idea of K(Q)ueerness as a more elaborate, holistic, and multilayered framework that complicates U.S.-centric notions of queerness and acknowledges the local contexts of queerness in K-pop culture.

In the following section, this article examines specific cases in which K(Q)ueerness has achieved actualization within the K-pop scene. To collect these examples of K(Q)ueerness, I searched academic articles and media reports published by the Korean press that investigated K-pop artists' nonconforming practices and expressions. Reviewing them helped me select about 20 K-pop celebrities for research who demonstrated more perennial K(Q)ueerness and whose practices and performances were more talked about than those of others. Then, I analyzed the images and video clips of the chosen artists available in the media reports, search engines, and on YouTube to see how they showcase their K(Q)ueerness. To complement my arguments, I used existing academic and media materials about the stars that included an in-depth analysis of their K(Q)ueerness and interviews with them.

### **K(Q)ueerness Plays**

Despite acknowledging the paucity of K(Q)ueerness, this article claims that it is still important to keep searching for and conversing about it to foster its visibility. This section compiles and sheds light on manifestations of K(Q)ueerness in recent decades to begin to define it and understand what it looks like. Although most cases are contemporary, mainstream embodiments of K(Q)ueerness, I should make it clear that queerness has always existed in the premodern and modern cultures of the Korean peninsula and independent music scenes (Kim & Hahn, 2006). K(Q)ueerness is thus presented as a continuum, and this article divides its examples into three categories: Gender performance, theatrical performance, and ally performance.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Gender Performances of K(Q)ueerness***

The first category includes K-pop artists whose repeated gender performances onstage and off it may contain elements of Butler's performativity. Amber, a member of the group f(x), was ushered into the limelight on her debut because of her androgyny, which stands in contrast to standard female beauty norms in Korea (Laforgia & Howard, 2017; Laurie, 2016). Her gender-ambiguous physical appearance and styling stand out among other traditionally gendered singers. Amber's gender-defiant stage persona also bleeds into nontheatrical settings. She appears to have an easygoing and straightforward personality and does not present calculated gimmicks to look pretty, such as a coquettish *aegyo* manner, which young female singers are forced to display (G. Kim, 2018). In 2017, she posted a YouTube video, "Where Is My Chest?" (Liu, 2017), that is replete with sarcasm and humor in responding to hateful messages she has received about her gender-neutral fashion and body. This video is queer in terms of its content, which may challenge K-pop followers to revisit their biased thinking about gender and sexuality.

Laforgia and Howard (2017) pointed to Amber's foreign identity as a Taiwanese American as the reason why she was allowed her androgyny and nonconformity. However, past Korean singers have also

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<sup>2</sup>The first two are Butlerian concepts and the last one is my elaboration of her concept of performance.

embodied female androgyny, including Yang Hee-eun, Lee Sun Hee, and Lee Sang-Eun before the 2000s. They had short hair, minimal makeup, and possessed "sartorial androgyny that challenged male dominance in an era when most women wore skirts" (Lie, 2014, p. 71). Thus, there are genealogical roots that Amber has drawn from within the Korean music scene. At the same time, the most recent incarnation of female androgyny, Miya of Girls in the Park, confirms Laforgia and Howard's (2017) argument. Miya is Japanese and a self-proclaimed successor to Amber. She can be easily misgendered as a male K-pop singer despite using more makeup and feminine styling than Amber. Her foreignness indeed raises a question about whether Korean-born female singers are permitted androgyny in the contemporary Korean music field, in contrast to the situation a few decades ago.

Jo Kwon of 2AM is another figure famous for his explorations of gender ambiguity. Kwon has a small, slender body with a uniquely recognizable face and a thinner voice than his male peers who are idolized. For his first solo song, "Animal" released in 2012, he performed in high heels wearing a bizarre, campy, and extravagant costume in a music show, *Music Core* (MBCKpop, 2012). In 2014, Kwon played the role of a drag queen in the musical *Priscilla*, a move that caused a public questioning of his sexual orientation (Lee, 2020) More recently, Kwon's expedition into K(Q)ueerness has grown bolder. He has shared his love for high heels, performed waacking and voguing dances that originated in gay and trans subcultures, and played another drag queen role in *Jamie*, a musical about a real-life drag queen in the United Kingdom. In 2020, he declared that he fully embraced his identity as "genderless,"<sup>3</sup> departing from the dark period in which he was uneasy because of his own gender nonconformity (P. Kim, 2020). Since his debut in the late 2000s, Kwon has grown to become an open K(Q)ueer performer, and this article argues that his career trajectory epitomizes how K(Q)ueer performers can obtain visibility.

The last case of gender performance is G-Dragon of Big Bang, perhaps the most high-profile K-pop group before the emergence of BTS (Oh, 2015a). He is not only a singer-songwriter but also a fashionista working with global corporate brands. His K(Q)ueerness is most clearly displayed in his physical appearance and styling, which is gender ambiguous. Like Jo Kwon, G-Dragon is shorter and skinnier than other K-pop male singers. He revels in wearing female-targeted clothes and accessories, and paparazzi shots of him demonstrate that his sartorial collection expands beyond strict gender categories. He sometimes appears in a skirt, and although this can be considered gender nonconforming, it is something not unprecedented in Korean pop culture. The 1990s' superstar Kim Won Joon and 2000s' stars like Park Jin-young and Kim Jang-hoon, also wore skirts. The difference, however, is that their fashion choices were limited to stage performances while G-Dragon wears skirts both on- and offstage. Here I want to indicate the gap between K(Q)ueerness and queerness expressed by noncelebrity Koreans. For instance, the late nonbinary trans-identified activist Kim Gi-hong enjoyed wearing a skirt along with other feminine clothing, but frequent discrimination against their queerness led them to end their life at age 37 in 2021 (Lim, 2021). The discrepancy between K(Q)ueerness and queerness testifies to a contradicting assumption: Korean society is still queerphobic while the K-pop space may be more inclusive than broader society, allowing its artists to explore nonconforming gender expressions, as indicated by the example of a

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<sup>3</sup>The Korean media coined this term (genderless) and uses it to indicate a person's quality that transcends a boundary between traditional gender expressions and accordingly confuses others about the person's gender.

male artist such as G-Dragon wearing skirts. Oh (2015a) analyzed G-Dragon's visuals in music videos and discussed the multiple identities on display within the imagery (an unruly man, a drag, and a woman), multiple messages (resistance and power), and multiple qualities (conventional masculinity, effeminacy, and extravagance). Such campy crossovers can be easily found in various media images of G-Dragon and serve to augment his K(Q)ueerness. Some of these practices are what I consider to be theatrical performances of K(Q)ueerness.

### ***Theatrical Performance of K(Q)ueerness***

Despite the syntagmatic conservativeness of rules, norms, and standards when it comes to gender and sexuality, the expressive totality of K-pop is sometimes queerly shown (Oh, 2015b). K-pop's queer theatricality, or theatrical K(Q)ueerness, appears in onstage performances and, most conspicuously, in music videos. Many K-pop performances involve captivating, synchronized dance moves, a group of glamorous background dancers, avant-garde sets, eccentric props, vivid colors, lavish outfits, and/or masqueraded characters. Such theatricality was influenced by the 1990s' Japanese pop, so-called J-pop, but K-pop took it to another level and flaunts a far more meticulously managed performance (Oh, 2015a). K-pop theatricality featuring artifice, exaggeration, and excess is a mimicry of what Sontag (1964) has termed the "camp aesthetics" which are associated with queer subcultures. Unfortunately, these campy, queer influences in K-pop go largely unnoticed and unmentioned because of the lack of knowledge or sensibility about queer cultures in Korean society.

I want to point out two specific kinds of queer theatricality demonstrated by K-pop artists: Choreography and cross-dressing/drag. K-pop singers are famous for their intricate choreography and seamless dance skills (Yeung, 2021), but this article points to three idols known particularly for what could be considered as their K(Q)ueer performances: Taemin of SHINee, Kai of EXO, and Jimin of BTS. The dance skills of these three are widely celebrated for their combination of both powerful and refined motion (Noh, 2016). Taemin's music videos and onstage performances of his solo songs, including "Move" (SMTOWN, 2017) and "Criminal" (SMTOWN, 2020b), for instance, include curvy and delicate movements of the torso and limbs, alluding to the quality of eroticism. After debuting in 2008, the star was subjected to public antipathy surrounding his gender ambiguity because of which he attempted to project more masculinity, but after a decade of growing pains, like Jo Kwon, he now increasingly embraces his unique identity in the K-pop space, which in turn, seems to embrace what could be considered as his K(Q)ueerness (Lee, 2019a; Yang, 2017). In the "Mmmh" (SMTOWN, 2020a) music video, Kai uses explicitly campy styling: a turquoise, woolly crop-top sweater, red velvet pants, a long glittering headscarf, pink lip color, and blue manicured nails. His choreography is more powerful than Taemin's, but he also displays provocative motions of his torso and pelvis. The qualities of muscularity and strength displayed by Taemin and Kai are complemented by distinctive delicateness and grace, though of course not to the degree that they emasculate themselves. Theirs is an effective way to perform K(Q)ueerness, evasive of any potential accusation of excessive gender nonconformity in the conservative market.

Jimin has an androgynous face and a small, slender body. His dancing straddles a manner between powerful and sophisticated, presenting androgynous qualities as Taemin and Kai do. Celebrated creatives within the international community, such as Gus Van Sant and Sir Matthew Bourne, one of the

world's most famous choreographers, have acknowledged Jimin's talents and commented on his physical beauty (parkhaneul1013, 2020). The theatrically queer performances of these idols appear to fit into existing terms, such as Jung's (2011) idea of soft, hybrid, and versatile masculinities. However, I argue that the terms perpetuate fixed categories like masculinity and femininity. In contrast, the notion of K(Q)ueerness avoids such binary and emphasizes the anti-hegemonic possibilities of K-pop stars' androgyny as shown in the above cases. In brief, I would assert that their gender nonconforming activities should be categorized as examples of K(Q)ueerness because they showcase border-crossing gender expressions beyond the restrictive possibilities of current norms in Korean society.

The second type of theatrical performance of K(Q)ueerness is cross-dressing/drag. These practices, it should be emphasized, are not new to Korean culture. Oh and Oh (2017) compared K-pop idols' cross-dressing with *talnori*, Korea's traditional mask play, and Shin (2018) connected female fans' cross-dressing *fancos*, or fan cosplay, to *gukgeuk*, a female-only theatrical genre, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Characters in drag have consistently appeared in the modern history of Korean popular culture though they have unfortunately mostly been used as comic relief or as tragic characters (Seoul International Pride Film Festival, 2020). In the K-pop scene, several cross-dressing/drag plays have been attempted as a form of theatrical performance. Lee Hyori, mega K-pop star, in her "Going Crazy" (Stone Music Entertainment, 2013a) music video and three members of Mamamoo, consisting of four female singers, in the video for "Um Oh Ah Yeh" (Stone Music Entertainment, 2015) masqueraded as men. Cross-dressing male idols often perform girl group dances at the end-of-year music awards and special music festivals, which is these days considered to be "fan service" (Glasspool, 2012, p. 120; Oh & Oh, 2017). Such theatrical performances of K(Q)ueerness commonly aim for humor, and thus raise the concern that they are appropriating and caricaturing cross-dressing and drag cultures (Oh & Oh, 2017). Nonetheless, the feeling of absurdity and oddness that the K-pop cross-dressers and viewers may experience still holds subversive potential, as they are bucking gender norms in a humorous or parodic way, a common feature of queer camp practices (Cleto, 1999).

### ***Ally Performance of K(Q)ueerness***

Ally performance is discussed here as two types in this article. First, K-pop stars showcase queer performances in tandem with others whose roles or presence are crucial; second, K-pop celebrities explicitly or implicitly express their support toward gender and sexual minorities.

Within the first category is Lee Hyori's ally performance in the music video for "Miss Korea" (Stone Music Entertainment, 2013b), which appears on the same album as "Going Crazy." "Miss Korea" criticizes Korean society's obsession with women's physical beauty and consumerism and insists on the value of being true to oneself, which is a gesture of K(Q)ueerness, which challenges patriarchy and capitalism. Lee disguises herself as a Miss Korea contestant and sings with two female background dancers behind her. In some shots, the dancers are replaced with real-life drag show performers, suggesting a satirical message about beauty norms for the Korean female body. Lee is wearing large earrings that have the word "vogue" engraved on them.

While *Vogue* is of course a global fashion magazine, the term also refers to a queer subculture, like voguing (dance), “a queer mode[s] of Black social dance” (Defrantz, 2016, p. 68). K-pop singers are increasingly adopting voguing. For example, AOA, a female idol group, presented a provocative performance with a Korean voguing dance crew, Kardashiba, in 2019 for a survival TV show, *Queendom*. AOA performed powerful dance movements in black suits, presenting an image of female androgyny. In the bridge part of the song, the five trans dancers with high heels and revealing clothes appeared on stage and danced with the AOA members. The show was applauded for this collaboration and the Kardashiba crew was invited to another onstage performance a few weeks later (Kang & Park, 2020). Other than queer allyship, AOA’s performance embodied another aspect of K(Q)ueerness in terms of opposing the national patriarchy, through the assertion of a *ssen-unni* (strong sister) persona that showed “their courage to break with patriarchal values in style and content, forging a way to an acceptance and solidarity in diversity” (Lee & Yi, 2020, p. 26). The impact of the collaborative work between trans performers and cis female singers is meaningful, considering that both are marginalized in Korean society.

Before introducing the instances for the second type of ally performance, I will preface my discussion by noting that my examples are not exactly “performances,” in that their utterances and acts were not carefully planned for a specific purpose. However, the behavior I discuss does not fit into the notion of performativity either as it is hard to determine whether such practices are repeated enough to constitute a manifestation of the performers’ gender and sexual identities. In a sense, their K(Q)ueer allyship resides somewhere between performance and performativity.

My first example concerns Tiffany Young, a member of Girls’ Generation. During 2018’s LGBT Pride Month, she delivered a clear message in her letter to the LGBTQ community, which was published in *Billboard*, promising to “stand by you [the LGBTQ community] and celebrate you not only on this day but every day” (Young, 2018, para. 3). In 2021’s Pride Month, Tiffany appeared in a video on a YouTube channel by Neon Milk (NEON MILK, 2021), a group of queer artists, and reiterated her allyship and danced for Girls Generation’s song, “Into the New World,” which was selected as “an anthem” for the annual Queer Parade in Korea. Tiffany’s strong, visible, and repeated advocacy for queer communities is unusual in the K-pop world, making her allyship impactful. And, in this respect, there are other K-pop artists with more currency that publicly spoke about their queer endorsement: Yves of Loona, Moonbyul of Mamamoo, Vernon of Seventeen, and RM, leader of BTS (Rhie, 2021). In the “Speak Yourself” speech written by RM for the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, RM said: “No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin color, gender identity: speak yourself” (N. J. Kim, 2018, para. 18). In arguing for *another world* in which people can stand up for themselves against the forces of discrimination regardless of their identity markers RM’s (or the BTS team’s) support for people marginalized because of their race or gender attests to their K(Q)ueerness.

Another kind of allyship operates more subtly than the overt proclamations exemplified above. Kim Hee-chul of Super Junior, because of his “pretty” face, had been dogged for years by rumors about his sexual orientation since debuting in 2005, but he never denied the stories about his sexuality (La, 2020). Regarding the reason for not refuting the gay rumors, in a recent TV show, he explained that if he had denied the rumors and come out as straight, he may have hurt his non-straight fans (La, 2020). Some might consider this to be a mere appropriation of queerness to appease his queer fans. However, in the

heteronormative K-pop scene, his refusal to disavow being gay probably would have damaged his status as a male idol star to a greater degree. In this case, the advantage of the silence, that is, support from queer fans, did not benefit him enough for it to be a clear-cut case of appropriation. I would therefore argue that his longstanding implicit support for the queer community for more than 15 years, makes him a K(Q)ueer ally.

### **Fans Are K(Q)ueers Too!**

Some fans' queerness contributes to making K-pop K(Q)ueer-pop. In this section, I examine several discernible fan acts of K(Q)ueerness: The interpretation of K-pop texts, fan-produced media content, cosplay, dance covers, and fan activism. Since K-pop fans are scattered across the world, examples will include non-Korean fans as well as Koreans. I do not go into extreme detail about each instance because fans' K(Q)ueerness has been relatively well-covered within scholarly studies of K-pop fans and audiences, some of which are cited here.

A media text is open to a reader's interpretation regardless of a creator's intention (Hall, 2005). Doty (1993) has suggested that all texts can be read as queer: Gay camp culture is an exemplar of queer reinterpretation of popular culture. Likewise, some K-pop fans are queer readers. Lee (2019b) has discovered that BTS is a queer icon for some fans. After the transnational pop group announced its album *Love Yourself* (BTS, 2018), according to Lee's (2019b) interviews, LGBT+ fans all over the world believe that the "whole 'Love Yourself' theme allows fans to openly talk about their identity and self-acceptance, so the fan community becomes a safe haven for LGBT fans" (p. 4).

Common types of art created by fans include fan vids (videos), reaction videos, visual art, and fanfic. Some fans, regardless of their sexuality, relish encoding queer themes into their creations. My interviews (Kwon, 2019) with straight female Korean fans of K-pop bands led to the understanding that (nonstraight) fanfic, a genre about a male-male love story, is well-known to many K-pop fans who seek content about their idols to consume and imagine a nonnormative romance based on their own capturing gaze, something that a cishetpatriarchal text rarely offers. Fan videos offer fans a similar pleasure to fanfic. Oh (2015b) has investigated the vidding culture of female fans based in the United States, in which they compile existing images of K-pop male stars and generate erotic stories. In parallel, Swan (2018) has written about the transgressive potential of the reaction video created by Asian/American male YouTubers to the group Blackpink. It reveals that K-pop performances help the male vidders "playfully subvert the strict gendered divisions of the K-pop groups they love," and accordingly become "a bridge to another world" (Swan, 2018, pp. 556–557). These fan artifacts are transcultural, translingual, and transregional, bespeaking K(Q)ueer fans' aspirations for *another world* that enables them to materialize their fantasy (Kwon, 2021).

Fancos provide audiences with a space wherein they can experience a cross-gendered identification and a non-straight relationship. Shin (2018), for example, conducted a study on Korean fan cosplayers and discovered that some female cosplayers identifying with male singers arouse the queer desires of the cosplayers' own fans, and they often pursue non-straight relationships with other female cosplayers. Cross-dressing fans sometimes perform K-pop dance moves, a subject covered extensively by

Käng (2015, 2018). Käng (2015) interviewed Wonder Gays, a Thai dance team that covers K-pop girl group songs while wearing female attire. He argued that "participation in K-pop cover [dancing] demarcates a new social arena for effeminate Thai males to express themselves through the idiom of modern Korean female embodiment" (p. 301). Cover dancing is popular in Korea too. K. Kim (2020) analyzed cover dance videos by Korean bears, or gay men with large and/or hairy male bodies (which are nonnormative within the gay male popular media) and found that bear dancers enjoy performing girl group choreography without any pressure to project femininity or sexual desirability. In other words, the liberating force of K(Q)ueer-pop helps these men redefine who they are.

Combined with the male YouTubers vidding Blackpink, Wonder Gays, and bear cover dancers demonstrate how "young, docile female" idols embodying "an *episteme* of neoliberalism" can ironically drive anti-hegemonic ideas and the visibility of K(Q)ueerness in cishetpatriarchal cultures, however unexpectedly (G. Kim, 2018, pp. 188, 194). This suggests that transnational fans as "K-pop cosmopolitan[s]" construct and actualize K(Q)ueerness in the transnational K-pop scene in multiple ways (K. Kim, 2020, p. 127). I find fancos and dance covers particularly significant in that they attest to the local particularities of queer subcultures, especially how coming out is enacted in South East and East Asia. They provide an opportunity for nonconforming K-pop fans to disclose their marginalized identities collectively.

Lastly, fan activism calling for more diversity, or K(Q)ueer-pop, is especially on the rise. One case of fan activism involves sub-fan groups of K-pop bands consisting of queer fans who participate in an annual queer festival in Seoul named after their beloved singers. One interviewed fan said, "I feel supported to see the diverse fan groups of other K-pop artists" (J. Kim, 2019, para. 6). Although the festival is on the surface merely cultural practice, it is also politically impactful in that it serves to inform nonqueer citizens about the existence of queer people alongside them and promote their human rights in conservative Korean society. Thus, even participation in such an event can be considered a form of activism. In line with K(Q)ueer fan cosplayers and cover dancers, the fan attendees of this festival also took the opportunity to "come out" collectively as a group, exemplifying K(Q)ueer-pop's potential to encourage *another world* of social possibility.

More audience/fan research is necessary to fully account for how the K(Q)ueer practices of K-pop idols and fans have been accepted by non-K(Q)ueer fans, who likely constitute the major body of K-pop fandom, and by non-fans of K-pop. Yet, based on the growing appearance of K(Q)ueer performances and the increasing acceptance of queerness among younger generations of people in Korea and elsewhere, this article cautiously posits that K(Q)ueerness is gradually more visible and accepted, both inside and outside the music industry (Poushter & Kent, 2020; Rhie, 2021; Youn, 2018).

### **K(Q)ueerness and Its Debates**

Thus far, this article has chronicled the various and wide-reaching examples of K(Q)ueerness. Local queer contexts in which coming out is not a norm have determined dissimilar conditions of how queerness can be displayed in Korean society (and within K-pop) than in other spaces (Cho, 2012). Afraid of the pressure of the cishetpatriarchy and the possibility involved with politically sensitive debates about

minority groups in society, K(Q)ueer artists seem to be devoid of the conspicuous queer agency displayed by Lil Nas X or the queer relatability or authenticity achieved by Lady Gaga. Instead, K(Q)ueerness is to be noticed, discovered, and completed through the engagement of fans who are cognizant of their idols' "queer contextuality" (Ng, 2017, para. 1.3). Also, the cases of K(Q)ueerness examined in this article indicate that the enforced lack of a local queer discourse has ironically enabled K-pop artists and followers to come up with their own way to define queerness in the K-pop sphere and relatively liberated from political battles for identity-based representation within the mainstream media. This may offer the music industry and its consumers a chance to (re)visit the notion of queerness and the multiple ways in which it can be practiced in Korean contexts.

This article acknowledges two concerns regarding K(Q)ueerness: First, it operates within "the economies of visibility" and, second, the optimism for it may obliterate queer realities and struggles in Korean society, thereby failing to discuss "the politics of visibility" (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 55). K-pop is a business entangled with developmentalism, capital, and neoliberalism (G. Kim, 2018). The (K-pop) industry absorbs everything that looks commodifiable, meaning that the inspiring practices of K(Q)ueer celebrities can also be interpreted as appropriating and depoliticizing queerness (Kwon, 2016). Earlier, I explained why I believe commercial appropriation matters less in the Korean context, but I want to expand on this.

To the media industry that needs novelty to attract consumers, queerness may be one way of increasing demand, so the industry has tended to engage with queerness at a discreet distance by constantly monitoring consumer reaction, something which has also happened in the Korean film and TV industry (Kwon, 2019). After numerous trials, errors, and critical conversations, the audiovisual industry has been gradually incorporating more diverse, nuanced, or realistic representations of queerness, queer characters, and queer narratives, which has been cautiously embraced by queer readers (Kwon, 2019). Arguably this success is a demonstration that this can be a pathway that K-pop also pursues. In some cases, K(Q)ueer performances have been a form of queerbaiting, and at other times, they have offered relatable images of queerness. I argue, either way, that such explorations in media are not necessarily always detrimental because it is these attempts that result in public discourse (whether positive or negative) that help us get to know queerness and cultivate a queer sensibility to distinguish between relatable and biased depictions. It is critical to encourage more adventures into K(Q)ueerness to grasp what kinds of K(Q)ueerness can disrupt oppressive industrial practices. In that sense, "a new approach to commodification" (Ertman & Williams, 2005, p. 5) is needed, an approach that admits that consumers can sometimes enjoy the unexpected benefits of commercial engagement or appropriation, and therefore does not necessarily demonize the industry. I do not deny the risk of commercialization, exploitation, romanticization, and depoliticization of queerness. I rather pay more attention to the potential of what these acts can bring to the larger discussion.

Wonder Gays signed a contract with a mainstream entertainment company, which may have resulted in Thai citizens revisiting gender and sexuality norms (Käng, 2018). After collaborating with AOA, the Korean voguing group Kardashiba was offered other TV performances (Kang & Park, 2020). Subsequently, one of its dancers came out as trans to her mother (and audiences) during a reality TV show (Jeong, 2020). The ensuing appearances after the initial performance with AOA proved that this

experience built some positive attention for the group. It also showed that the TV industry and its audiences are less conservative than their counterparts in 2000, who ostracized Hong Seok-cheon on his coming out. Queer visibility in the media generally leads to more queer visibility in the media, and its parasocial effect is likely to lead to more queer visibility in other sectors of public life. This is why queer-identified people pursue media visibility despite the possible appropriation and objectification of their queerness (Kwon, 2019). They know that “we see our queer or heteronormative counterparts only when they have reached a level of mass visibility, and often visibility is the product of commodification” (Parahoo, 2020, p. 15). Even as a commodified form, K(Q)ueerness can be a political statement regardless of the specific K(Q)ueer performer’s intention. The collaborative performance between AOA and Kardashiba is a manifestation of the solidarity between cis women and trans people and, by extension, a message that rejects the stance of trans-exclusionary radical feminists. At the very least, such a performance forces cishetpatriarchal viewers to realize that there is a wide spectrum of gender and sexuality, thereby further heightening their K(Q)ueer sensibility to capture an expanding range of K(Q)ueerness.

Currently, regardless of their purpose, commercial forces in the Korean mainstream media are at the forefront of queer visibility, detecting the changing minds of local and transnational consumers and reading queer contextuality in K-pop while political sectors, unfortunately, stay far behind (Rhie, 2021). This article suggests that such a “right business move” should not be entrapped by the elitist, Western-oriented framework of the politics of visibility. Jackson (2011), the editor of *Queer Bangkok*, argues that markets and the media play an important role “in advancing LGBT rights and the emergence of spaces of queer cultural autonomy in Asia” (p. 10). In echoing this statement, I would argue it is most imperative to recognize the economies of visibility, analyze the impact of such with a critical lens, and encourage more K(Q)ueer discourse that may condition local queer contexts differently.

### Conclusion

In an endeavor to refigure research on gender and sexuality in the space of K-pop, this article proposed the term K(Q)ueerness to refer to new imaginations about gender and sexuality that go beyond the binaries of masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and performance/performativity. I resituated the Western concept of queerness in a way that argues against the necessity of queer performativity as the means to constitute queerness and suggested the legitimacy of queer performance as having a similar impact in the context of K-pop, in which queer performativity is subdued. This article considered not only individual K(Q)ueer acts but the holistic totality of these acts as one facet of K-pop, as I believe this constructed K(Q)ueer aspect is based on multiple un/consciously repeated performances of K(Q)ueerness, which eventually affect the identities of K-pop and its players. Many K-pop players, both idols and their followers, are young and are undergoing a process of identity exploration. K(Q)ueer-pop may offer an opportunity through which they can find out who they are and what they want, instanced by the acts of Jo Kwon, Taemin, fan cosplayers, and cover dancers. K-pop players with a K(Q)ueer sensibility un/consciously continue to test and territorialize a new space of expression and move closer to *another world* that is defined against the cishetpatriarchal hierarchy.

My discussion of K(Q)ueer-pop intends to highlight queerness in the K-pop sphere, broaden the spectrum of issues involving gender and sexuality within the genre, increase queer sensibility within the K-pop studies discipline and K-pop fan communities, and embrace the diversifying manifestations of in/visible queer K-pop activities. My hope is that this notion contributes to an understanding of both K-pop's uniqueness and universality, and the critical construction of K(Q)ueer-pop as a transformative social and cultural force. In addition, I would also like to optimistically consider that K(Q)ueerness could challenge the West-centric notion of queerness and reorient how queerness and queer performance can be comprehended in non-Western contexts. Consequently, I hope to see future studies on what queerness in the K-pop space is and how to further envision this space through a queer lens. In addition, more specific case studies that embody K(Q)ueerness are needed in the vein of Oh's (2015a, 2015b) works, which can more specifically dissect individual performers' K(Q)ueerness by deciphering their lyrics, audiovisual images, and mannerisms. Additionally, greater academic attention should be paid to K-pop fans' K(Q)ueerness, which in itself contributes to a reimagining of gender and sexuality in the genre (Hong, 2021). Lastly, I expect to see more studies on how K-pop players' race, ethnicity, age, class, religion, and/or physical ability intersect with gender and sexuality, and function to help each individual to push boundaries and to envision *another world*.

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