

Female middle-aged fandom and K-Pop in Malaysia

Sharmaine Loh & Callum Gilmour,
Monash University, Malaysia

Abstract:

Fan cultures have become increasingly transnationalised over the past 20 years, with digital technologies and social media facilitating globally interactive fanbases for pop cultural texts. Part of this globalization process has involved a surging interest in non-Western cultural phenomena, with the media texts of Asia in particular enjoying considerable global and geo-regional circulation. At the vanguard of this Asian pop cultural diffusion has been the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), a mixture of Korean-produced entertainment genres of which K-pop is the most prominent. A particularly vociferous market for K-pop has emerged in Malaysia, with the boy band *Big Bang* amongst the most popular imports. This paper examines the reception of *Big Bang* via a Malaysian socio-cultural context, with particular emphasis on the variables of gender and age. Hence prominence is assigned to the fandom of Malaysian middle-aged female fans (40 – 55 years old) and the unique contexts that distinguish their interaction with each other, younger fans and the band itself, within a fandom itself overwhelmingly characterised as youthful.

Keywords: fandom; older fans; pop culture; *Hallyu*; Malaysia

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the pop cultural phenomenon referred to as *Hallyu* (The Korean Wave), has attracted ever growing popular adoration and academic attention. Following on the heels of the nation's economic global expansion that witnessed national brands such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai assuming international status, South Korea's media output has enjoyed similar notoriety, first across other parts of East Asia and Southeast Asia, and later into previously untapped markets in the West and beyond. Hence, the diverse offerings of Korean popular culture, spanning critically acclaimed art-house cinema, melodramatic prime-time

television soap dramas, and the internationally hybridised pop music phenomenon K-pop have contributed significantly to a contemporary South Korean nation brand rooted in the cultural and creative industries.

The ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse Southeast Asian nation of Malaysia has long existed as a particularly fertile market for Korean popular culture (Cho, 2010; Foo, 2012). The geographical, and albeit loosely aligned socio-cultural proximities between East Asia and Southeast Asia have been offered as explanations for the geo-regional popularity of Korean wave texts in nations such as Malaysia (Straubhaar, 1991; Iwabuchi, 2003). The genesis of this geo-regional, geo-cultural consumption in Malaysia can be traced back to the airing of Korean television dramas in the early 2000s, with the phenomenal success of *Winter Sonata* in 2002, followed by *The Jewel in the Palace* in 2003 (Cho, 2010).

Perceptions of music fandom have been traditionally rooted in quite constrictive stereotypes revolving around age and gender. The youth-based fandoms associated with the consumption of K-pop across the wider Asian region have garnered significant academic attention (Ainslie & Lim, 2015; William & Ho, 2016; Oh, Mayasari & Kim, 2015, Oh, 2009; Hirata, 2008) and this is representative of a wider scholarly emphasis and association between pop music and young audiences. This prominence afforded the youthful fan cohorts of pop music is in part due to a perception that the more visual and expressive forms of fan behavior are acceptable, if not reflective, of youthful 'exuberance'. Lancaster (2015) celebrates the highly performative character of youthful female fan-bases, but also laments that this fandom is often devalued - demonstrating a pervasive sexism that negatively impacts upon the experiences of some fans. Conversely, similar intensive fan engagement practiced by older fan demographics is also subject to scrutiny, and therefore frequently represented as transgressive, perverse, or unbecoming, setting up a reductionist binary regarding accepted pop music fan practices and age. Alongside these quite ageist representations of pop music fan culture exist very outmoded and stereotypical gender binaries associated with pop fandom. Discourses and societal stereotypes surrounding masculine music consumption often situate male fans as sophisticated, intellectual, and adopting a critical ear to their fandom. Female fans on the other hand are positioned in a heteronormative fashion in which their 'desire' for the male performer is viewed as defining their fandom. Such representations serve to obfuscate the scope of female fan practices and ignore an entire canon of female led music criticism. In addition, this reductionist view of female adolescent fandom trivialises the important developmental role that pop star adoration can play in providing a 'secure environment' for the performance of emerging adolescent sexualities - positioning this desire as either inauthentic or even illegitimate. Hence, feminist academic Angela McRobbie (2000, p. 23) asserts that pop music endows these adolescent girls with a 'safe space' to engage with their emerging sexuality without having to deal with the constantly shifting 'boundaries' that define contemporary corporeal sexual politics:

Teenage girls are self-conscious about their 'sexual experience' because they are aware that 'going out with boys' invariably carries the possibility of being expected to kiss, or 'pet'. Hence, teenage girls often stay away from reality and they escape to the 'fantasy boys of pop' because the pop idols do not expect anything in return.

McRobbie (2000, p. 23) refers to this as 'bedroom culture', reiterating its personal value whereby teenage fans have 'pictures which adorn bedroom walls (and) invite these girls to look, and even stare at length, at male images'. This form of adolescent female fandom is performed within an environment that is safe and non-threatening, and therefore the medium of pop music performs a significant developmental role for this audience that transcends and diminishes reductional masculinist critiques. The extent and forms of this parasocial desire amongst older fans of youthful pop icons is less chronicled, not the least because of pervasive social norms, and therefore responses provided by participants in this study indicate a certain degree of internalised conflict in regard to the admission of such attraction.

Crucially to this study, Raviv, Bar-Tar, Raviv & Ben-Horin (1996, p. 631) posit that as fans mature, the act of idolising decreases. However, Generation X and beyond have demonstrated that an attachment to the pop culture of one's childhood and adolescence has become increasingly normalised throughout adult stages of life (Barbizon, 2005). Hence, there exists a progressively more conspicuous middle-aged pop culture fan base and, critically here, an increase in the visibility of mature fan bases engaging in pop culture primarily aimed at youths and adolescents.

These 'older' fan bases, whose affections revolve around twenty-something artists and youth centric narratives, have received little academic attention. This particularly 21st century phenomenon first achieved cultural prominence with the transnational consumption of the South Korean primetime television drama, *Winter Sonata* in 2002. *Winter Sonata*, which revolved around a love triangle between twenty-something urbanites in Seoul, attracted significant audiences across the region, attaining traction in the Japanese and Malaysian markets (Chae 2014; Cho, 2010). However, it was the demographic make-up of the Japanese *Winter Sonata* audience that drew widespread attention, with middle-aged Japanese women forming the most vociferous and, importantly here, visible faction of the fan base. Soon after, the release of the first *Twilight* young adult novel in 2005 and its subsequent filmic adaptation in 2008 garnered significant publicity due to its highly organized and conspicuous middle-aged female fans, dubbed 'Twilight Moms' (Paris, 2016). The emergence of British boy band One Direction also sparked a similar spate of middle-aged female devotees (Papadopoulos, 2010; Stevens, 2013).

However, these nascent phenomena have been far less examined via Asian circumstances. Within a Malaysian socio-cultural context, such proclivities among middle-aged women are unfortunately viewed as transgressive. Hence the highly conservative and patriarchal nature of Malaysian society limits the available spaces for women to engage in

autonomous modes of pleasure. Their independence therefore is constricted by dominant gender roles that serve 'to maintain the traditional perception of a woman' (Kalthom, Noor, & Wok, 2008, p. 454). This article then explores the experiences of middle-aged female Malaysian K-pop fans, a cohort who must negotiate their fandom within a socio-cultural terrain that dampens exuberant displays of devotion and affection.

Of particular interest to this research project are fan practices and behaviors performed by middle-aged Malaysian female K-pop fans, a particularly under-represented cohort within the wider academic literature. The case study representing this phenomenon here is the intersection between one of South Korea's most popular idol groups, Big Bang, and their female fans aged 40-55 years old, residing in Malaysia. The age scope of this demographic cohort, frequently referred to as Generation X remains contested, however for the purposes of this study, Generation X will refer to the commonly subscribed definition, encompassing people who were born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s (Fortune, 2015; Wallop, 2014; Henseler, 2014; Mauldin, 2016). Big Bang have far outgrown their South Korean origins, aggregating significant transnational audiences, with Malaysia in particular a fertile market for the group.

Background of study

In the late 1990s, the texts of the *Hallyu Wave* or Korean Wave began to emerge as genuine cultural phenomena consumed on an increasingly global scale. These pop cultural commodities, comprising television dramas, films, and popular music, followed the globalised paths trodden by national industrial giants such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, and engendered ever more transnational audiences. Following the popularity of Korean television dramas in Malaysia, the Malaysian public began to demonstrate interest in K-pop groups such as 2PM and Girls Generation (Lim, 2015). This audience for Korean Wave texts in Malaysia cuts across the diverse ethnoscape that comprises contemporary Malaysia, encompassing fans from different age groups, social classes, races, and religions, thus making the phenomenon part of the mainstream pop culture in many nations outside of South Korea.

The focus of fan adulation in this study is the Korean all-male idol group Big Bang. Big Bang launched their career in 2006 as a boy band shaped by Korean entertainment conglomerate YG Entertainment. The band were described by the *Hollywood Reporter* as 'the biggest boy band in the world' (Sun, 2015), are regularly referred to as the 'Kings of K-pop' (BMPlus, 2020), and were deemed by the *Washington Post* to be 'the biggest band in Asia' (Fifield, 2016). Since 2010, the band has actively courted an international fan base and in 2011 this global strategy was recognised when they were awarded with the Best Worldwide Act Award at the MTV Europe Music Awards (AllKpop, 2011). Throughout their career, the band has become synonymous with the eschewing of the stifling conventions that tend to govern both the boy band tradition and the K-pop industry, and by 2016 were earning a reputed

US\$44 million per year as well as headlining arenas across the world (Greenburg, 2016). Over the past decade, Big Bang has been a regular fixture on the Malaysian concert calendar.

Literature Review

Fandom studies are centred on the intersection between fans, celebrities and the pop cultural texts produced by these performers. In particular, the practices of fandom have become heavily influenced by technological change that has facilitated an intensive participatory culture in which fans engage with one another and, to a lesser extent, the objects of their affection, producing vibrant spaces characterised by interaction, criticism, and authorship. According to Sullivan (2013) fans differ from traditional media audiences due to the extensive manner in which they engage, critique, and analyse their favourite pop cultural texts. Hence, Henry Jenkins (2009, p. 8) advocates situating fandom via the prism of what he describes as participatory culture, the phenomena in which fans 'archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content'. Jenkins emphasises the youthful nature of much of this participatory culture, however this article seeks to explore the way older audiences use the same technologies to engage with other fans, as well as the youthful objects of their affection. Pop cultural fandom as a socio-cultural practice has traditionally incurred negative connotations, particularly in relation to the avid or engaged consumption of other texts, practices or cultural artefacts considered within the realm of 'high culture'. This negativity, or even condescension is reflected in the nomenclature regularly applied to the performance of fandom, such as pathology, deviance, and a general dismissiveness and cultural snobbery attached to terminology such as 'fans, fanatics, or fandom' (Jenkins, 1992; Ross & Nightingale, 2003; Sullivan, 2013; Cavicchi, 2014; Jensen, 1992). Seemingly then, the social acceptability of the vociferous consumption of popular culture is directly related to the age of the participants – with fandom often perceived as a 'stage' of adolescence and early adulthood. As such, the stereotype of the youthful screaming female fan has gained wide societal traction.

The presence of the Korean entertainment industries in Malaysia has escalated over the past decade. The Malaysian media and entertainment environment is now permeated by Korean pop culture events, performances, conventions, road shows, and other fan activities, with Korean celebrities increasingly utilised as brand ambassadors in Malaysia. Lim (2015) outlines the intensive participatory nature of much Malaysian *Hallyu* fandom, but also asserts that this fandom has little to no 'dampening' effect on Malaysian identities.

Considerable literature focuses on fandom as a predominantly youthful activity (Petersen, 2017; Harrington, Bielby & Bardo, 2011; Anderson, 2012). However, Harrington, Bielby & Bardo (2011, p. 584) indicate that this entrenched youthful archetype can cause internal conflicts amongst engaged older audiences:

Adult fans hold themselves and others accountable to age norms, they struggle to justify and maintain fan practices given normative life course restraints, they experience lingering shame and stigma surrounding fandom in ways unfamiliar to younger fans.

This suggests that adult fans face certain obstacles when they participate visibly in fan communities, more so when the fan culture in question has a primarily youthful fan base. Sontag (1972, cited in Petersen, 2017, p.2) describes a double standard in fandom whereby male and female fans are treated differently, where ‘growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men’. These damaging perceptions are outlined by Petersen (2017) in regard to the manner in which fifty-something female fans of the British television drama *Sherlock* are considered to be ‘fanatically obsessed’ and even ‘losers’, whilst similarly aged male fans of *Doctor Who*, remain largely unscathed from such dampening discourses.

What little attention has been focussed on age, fandom, and Korean pop culture revolves around the first globalised *Hallyu* text – the 2002 KBS (Korea’s public broadcaster) television drama serial, *Winter Sonata*. *Winter Sonata*’s narrative centred on the interlinking romantic lives of a group of twenty-something Koreans in Seoul – however the program’s enormous popularity in Japan was also conspicuous due to its pull with a predominantly middle-aged female audience. These middle-aged female fans were described (by Mōri, 2008, p. 30) as ‘cultural agents’, while Oh (2009, p. 426) situated them as ‘leading transnational consumers’. Part of the performance of this fandom included a significant element of pop cultural tourism, which has become increasingly popular in South Korea, and is indeed a key attribute of the nation’s and Seoul’s contemporary tourism campaigns. In this case, these middle-aged Japanese fans organised tours to South Korea inspired by their viewing of *Winter Sonata* (Oh, 2009; Oh, Mayasari & Kim, 2015; Hirata, 2008). This nascent touristic inclination demonstrated by Japanese *Winter Sonata* fans in the 2000s has given way to a heightened contemporary transcultural embrace of all things Korean by Malaysian *Hallyu* fans. As such, the consumption of Korean popular culture by Malaysians is increasingly complemented by an engagement with a raft of other South Korean cultural practices, from food, through language, and of course intensive travel to the core of this transnational affection, Seoul. While South Korea provides a moderate cultural affinity or proximity for Malaysian fans, it is also significantly ‘exotic’ or distinctive enough in the manner in which it packages its highly regimented and stage-managed pop music industry, to engender significant transnational curiosity and fervour from Malaysian fans. Korean pop music in general however, is enjoying a prolonged moment within the global zeitgeist, and hence as Chin and Morimoto (2013, p. 99) note, “fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are produced, but because they may recognise a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin”. Transcultural fans are then able to connect with the text despite cultural differences such as language or values (Chin & Morimoto, 2013),

and may even exert significant effort to overcome such differences via a somewhat superficial knowledge of cultural traditions from the core. In the case of this paper's middle-aged female Malaysian fan cohort, an enthusiastic embrace of minor cultural mimicry was evident in the responses of most of the participants. Of course this transnational consumption has been enabled and catalysed by access to digital platforms and content which opens up access to foreign cultural content in a manner never before experienced in the analogue media age (Morimoto, 2017).

This cross-generational fandom is also deeply rooted in nostalgia, which Oh (2009, pp. 436-7) describes as rediscovering an 'old piece of knowledge, acquired a long time ago'. Retrospective learning involves the process of reclaiming a more youthful perspective, and in this case, form of pleasure from activities performed in the past. Conversely, forward learning is the process of acquiring new knowledge based on 'economic and other tangible gain' (Oh, 2009, p. 436-7). In a similar vein, Kim (2015) describes the experiences of a 40-year-old Korean fan who dedicates much of her leisure time to her Big Bang fandom. As an older fan, she initially inferred a sense of apprehension in regards to the public expression of this fandom, but upon finding other fans from similar demographic backgrounds, she found acceptance, solidarity, and normalisation within a cadre of like-minded colleagues (Kim, 2015). Age it appears then, is increasingly losing its stigma in regards to pop culture fandom and in particular, the consumption by older fans of younger idol groups, and this increasingly active and vocal fan cohort warrants further academic investigation.

A number of studies have demonstrated a 'forward learning' tendency amongst some Indonesian and Chinese fans, with their fandom of Korean Wave texts driving a wider ambition to engage with other elements of Korean culture and language, while some Japanese *Hallyu* consumers display a nostalgic attraction to these texts that indicates a more retrospective engagement with their fandom (Oh, 2009; Oh, Mayasari & Kim, 2015). Stever (2011, p. 2) on the other hand is interested in correlations between fan behaviour and lifespan development theory in regards to differing levels of 'parasocial and social attachment to celebrities', based on age range. In this manner, Stever (2011) infers that middle-aged fans aged 30-65 years old sometimes engage with these pop cultural texts as an act of re-engagement with their past youths. This dovetails with Oh's (2009) retrospective learning concept and its links to nostalgic yearnings for youthful engagement. The retrospective and forward learning concept is not widely employed in other academic papers, but it is useful in this article as it appropriately frames the participant's experiences nostalgic yearning and new modes of middle-aged fan engagement. Additionally, Cho (2017, p. 2310) argues "that the metatextual presentation of K-pop on Korean television signals a complex, overdetermined relationship between popular culture and public culture as shaped by the commercial-public development of South Korea's media and culture industries". As such, a complexity exists between the commercial production of these media texts and the manner in which fans perceive them. Indeed Cho (2017) describes presented was the return 'comebacks' from infamy of two of Big Bang's members, G-Dragon and Daesung after they were placed on both

of them were on hiatus due to respective misconduct (marijuana use for G-Dragon and a fatal car accident involving Daesung. Cho (2017, p. 2309) then analysed the television appearance as a vehicle for both band members' chance for both of these idols "to facilitate reconciliation".

Parasocial interaction involves the 'seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer' (Horton & Wohl 2002, p. 42). Fans find pleasure, attachment, and 'closeness', via the mediated interaction with celebrities. According to Horton & Wohl (2002, p. 43), parasocial engagement is 'inevitably one-sided', hence the interactions with the idol are an illusion. However, this illusory function does not dampen the sense of connection felt by the participants of this study, all of which indicate a deep sense of attachment to their favourite members of Big Bang. Indeed, it is clear from the interviews conducted that the 'mediated' nature of engagement heightens the experience for the women interviewed here. In particular, the financial independence enjoyed by the participants has facilitated a transnational form of fandom - one that allows them a degree of physical proximity to band members, whether via international excursions, attendance at concerts, and the ritual of gift giving. In addition, the mediated nature of fan interaction has also drawn the participants closer to other fans, with some of the participants enjoying 'leadership' roles within the wider Malaysian Big Bang fandom.

Female pop culture fans have endured significant restraints on their activities based on entrenched societal narratives surrounding gender and age. These limiting norms are particularly potent within Asian societies. However pop cultural shifts over the past decade have witnessed increasingly visible middle-aged female fan bases for pop cultural texts such as *Winter Sonata*, *Twilight*, and One Direction. Hence an active and conspicuous middle-aged K-pop fan-base has emerged in Malaysia, albeit one that is still restrained by pervasive norms surrounding women, age, and gender within Asian societies – norms that operate to limit the social possibilities afforded this demographic based on ubiquitous conservative and patriarchal values. The following analysis demonstrates nascent fan practices surrounding middle-aged Malaysian women and also reveals the manner in which these women struggle with these internalised socio-cultural boundaries, sometimes providing responses that are conceivably motivated by a reticence to admit to non-conformity within the powerfully socialised gender norms of Malaysia. The ensuing study demonstrates the participants negotiating tensions between wider societal expectations alongside the quite restrictive domestic sphere experienced by many Malaysian women

Methodology, Results, and Discussion

This research employs a largely qualitative research mix. Fieldwork was undertaken via seven semi-structured interviews conducted with female Malaysian participants aged 40-55 years old. Two participants requested to be interviewed together, citing a greater level of comfort in the presence of each other. Another interview was conducted via telephone due to

scheduling and time constraints. In exception to these two cases, the other four interviews were conducted one-on-one in a cafe at the convenience of the participants. The coffee house setting provided a relaxed environment that made participants feel at ease during the hour-long interview. The participants were recruited via the aid of social media. The Call for Participants notice together with the explanatory statement were posted on Twitter, a platform particularly popular with the Malaysian Big Bang fandom. The snowball sampling method was utilised. Instagram public profiles were also used to source participants, and this involved inviting these participants to invite fellow fans that fell within the project’s remit to participate. This project specifically examines fans of a particular age group, and therefore snowball sampling was ideal (Babbie, 2014, p. 200; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014, p. 136).

All the participants are successful working women situated within the middle to upper middle classes. The responses received from the participants were grouped into recurring thematic topics. Ethical clearance was received before fieldwork was conducted. The following analysis is divided into three sections. The first section explores how this cohort of female middle-aged Malaysian Big Bang fans negotiate their identities within the predominantly youthful K-pop fan community. The second section addresses the parasocial interactions performed and experienced by this fan cohort. The final section tracks how life-stage dynamics impact upon their middle-aged fan experience.

The participants in this article are outlined below:

Participants	Age	Relationship status
Alice	46	Married
Beatrice	44	Single
Cathy	40	Married
Dolores	41	Married
Eliana	49	Married
Florence	55	Single
Gayle	52	Single

Table 1.

The seven participants commenced their Big Bang fandom at different stages in their lives, with the longest running engagement dating back to 2011, and the most recent fan joining the fray in 2016. All the participants indicated that it was musical appreciation that defined or motivated their fandom. Florence and Gayle expressed a particular fascination with the ‘live experience’ of K-pop concerts, which have become increasingly elaborate, interactive, and theatrical over the past decade. Another catalyst for these two participants’ entry into the Big Bang fan community was critical and industry accolades awarded to individual members and the band itself, which had driven some of the initial publicity for the band in Malaysia. In the case of Florence and Gayle, band member Taeyang’s multiple awards in 2014

inspired the pair to attend the performer's Malaysian concert appearance, despite little prior knowledge of his (and his band's) music. After enjoying the performance, the pair began a process of exploring the artist's history and discography, discovering his membership of the 'motherhood' band, Big Bang.

Florence linked her admiration of Taeyang's performance to her existing fandom of the late Western performer Michael Jackson: 'When I watch Taeyang, the dance moves, choreographies and all those, it reminds me of Michael Jackson; I am a really true Michael Jackson fan'. She then linked her enjoyment at Taeyang's performance to her historical enjoyment of the disco movement in the 1970s, stating that his performance 'took her back in time'. Here, her nostalgic reference to youthful musical memories resonates with Oh's retrospective learning framework, which focuses on memories reawakened via a process of 'reviewing old pieces of knowledge acquire(d) a long time ago' (Oh, 2009, p. 437). This effect is evident in the recollections of Alice and Beatrice who both link their fandom to nostalgic feelings redolent in youthful experiences. This is manifest in statements where they attribute their Big Bang fandom to a process of making them 'feel younger at heart'. Alice explains she is well aware that she is not a teenager and that she is not deluded. She added:

I feel like it's a healthy or fun side activity. It's my way of de-stressing and releasing stress; having my 'me-time' with my friends.

Alice views her active engagement in this fandom as a form of escapism and diversion from her working and family life. She chooses to invest her leisure time and disposable income on her fan practices, noting that her peers choose to spend similar discretionary income on holidays and other forms of consumption such as shopping.

Within East Asian pop fan cultures, a fan's 'bias' refers to the individual's favourite member of the group (Tucci 2016). For instance, Eliana identifies her bias as Taeyang. She explains, 'my love for Taeyang especially is like a mother supporting the career of her son'. Hence, she chooses to equate her fandom with that of an affectionate and supportive parent. This motherly affection narrative is reflected in the way she expresses pride in the successes of Big Bang. However, such responses are also perhaps indicative of the often restrictive and conservative gender roles middle-aged Malaysian women must negotiate. Hence the participants all must perform and describe their fandom within a restrictive set of social norms.

Eliana is acutely aware of the common criticisms levelled at her favourite member Taeyang, and adopts a protective or even 'maternal' discourse in response to these barbs, 'He's like a little baby still, although he puts up a front that he's very funny but he's very sensitive'. Eliana expresses a deep interest in the off-stage persona of her favourite member, insisting that a duality exists between on-stage performance and bravado, versus an off-stage insecurity, which she herself seems deeply protective of. This perception of a duality of personas, between the on-stage and off-stage self is also expressed by Alice, Dolores, and

Gayle whose bias is towards G-Dragon, the most famous band member, who they feel also experiences personal angst in his off-stage persona. Thus, Alice states:

So he's got two sides to him, the G-Dragon side and Kwon Ji Yong [G-Dragon's actual name] side is very different. The G-Dragon side is the confident, strong stage presence; the other part is very childlike, sometimes you can see [that] he's still very young.

Meanwhile, Dolores notes a dichotomy between what she sees as the public perception of G-Dragon as the 'ultimate bad boy', and her own impression of him as an 'actually very shy and humble' person. Gayle also indicates a perception of this duality in her reading of G-Dragon. Indeed G-Dragon's current notoriety means that he is the personal bias of four of the seven participants. The following figure addresses the Korean words utilised to address others respectfully based on their age. The following Table offers a short explanation of how these terms are used (Seoulistic, 2014).

Relationship	Term
Younger female addressing older male	Oppa 오빠
Younger male addressing older female	Noona 누나
Younger male addressing older male	Hyung 형
Younger female addressing older female	Unnie 언니
Older male or female addressing younger male or female	Dongsaeng 동생

Table 2.

For the purposes of this article, 'noona' or 'oppa' are the most relevant terms, as the sample group are fans older than Big Bang; therefore, technically Big Bang would address these fans as 'noona'. The 'noona' or 'hyung' would address the younger people by their names or 'dongsaeng'. In South Korea, these terms are common terminology used in everyday conversations between people who consider themselves close to one another. The use of these terms is particularly ubiquitous in South Korean television drama and variety shows, genres which are also popular amongst the participants of this project, and perhaps therefore partly responsible for their adoption of this terminology. The use of such terms is designed to display a sense of affinity and closeness with the objects of fandom. Additionally, the use of this terminology, 'noona' or 'oppa' draws the fans closer psychologically to the performers due to the personalisation, familiarity, and closeness connoted by this language. Hence the recurring themes of 'closeness' and maternalism are reflected in the subjects' responses, exemplified by Gayle's assertion that G-Dragon has a multi-generational appeal:

G-Dragon appeals to the young as an idol or a cute boy, to the middle-aged, he's a son you want, to a Grandma he's someone you can pamper.

A recurring discourse of familial sentiment and nurturing is particularly evident within this fandom. This is manifest in the way the respondents identified with band members via brother-sister, mother-son dynamics. This clearly demarcates these fans from their younger contemporaries and demonstrates the differing dynamics that drive fan attachment for this older demographic. The protective instinct so evident in many of the participant's responses defines the way these fans choose to describe their fandom and modes of attachment, and this perhaps explains their assertion that romantic and physical attraction are not a feature of their fandom. However, it is also possible that the 'maternal' narrative expressed by the participants reflects a desire to fit within acceptable societal expectations and gender norms placed upon middle-aged women within Malaysian society – hence the participants are possibly adhering to a socialised disciplinary regime. The participants then often appear extremely earnest in their assertions that their connections with their favourite band members are based on these maternal discourses – indicating a strong desire to 'justify' their fandom within what they feel are acceptable societal norms.

Subsequently, romantic attraction was not expressed by any of the participants as a feature of the 'pleasure' derived from their fandom. Instead, the interview subjects referred again to life-stage issues and responsibilities, such as marriages and socio-cultural expectations that apparently negated the possibility. The four married participants stressed the fact that they were 'happily married' and therefore they had no romantic links to Big Bang. The participants' rejection of any romantic attraction element to their fandoms was encapsulated in the following comments from Dolores, who was adamant in viewing this issue in her relationship with Big Bang:

I don't call them 'oppa'. I think because they are younger than I am. I guess maybe there is no sexual attraction, because you see them as a person, not a sexual object I guess. I will not go 'oppa' on them.

Cathy was also insistent in rejecting any romantic attraction towards Big Bang:

Oh, no, maybe because of the age (difference). They are much younger, they are like younger brothers, and you won't feel the special link.

Despite characterising her feelings towards the younger band members as that of younger brother/older sister relationship, she still asserted that she called them 'oppa', a term ubiquitous amongst the younger female fan base:

Yes, even though they are younger, I call them ‘oppa’. Follow the crowd, so many ‘oppa’, too many ‘oppa’ already; K-drama also got K-drama ‘oppa’.

Cathy still refers to Big Bang as ‘oppa(s)’ in concerts she asserts, because the rest of the crowd is doing it. Her response suggests a possible submission to group dynamics, or a desire to adhere to the norms of the wider communal experience, to which she remains largely an outsider, due to the hegemony of the youthful fan base. However, her use of the term is inconsistent with her earlier assertions regarding attraction, and therefore suggests a possible internal conflict between her own personal feelings and the need to maintain social ‘face’. Cathy then implies a careful negotiation of her presence as an older fan within a youth-dominated cultural landscape. Therefore, it appears this group of fans negotiates their presence in this pop cultural terrain in different ways. Alice elaborates on her experience in a similar situation as Cathy, but she has a different viewpoint on this matter:

When I go for the fan meetings and concerts, you hear all these young girls calling ‘Oppa, oppa’, then you’re like, ‘I can’t call them ‘oppa’ anymore because most of them [Big Bang] are your ‘dongsaeungs’.

Like the married interviewees, the single participants also rejected any possibility of romantic fantasies being a feature of their fandom, with Beatrice regarding such an interaction as being ‘not realistic’. Other studies regarding K-pop fandom have addressed the role of physical attraction in idol fan cultures. Williams & Ho (2016) stated that ‘sasaeng’ fans who obsessively stalk their idols, usually fall within the 12-22 age range. Redmond (2016) indicates that these fanatical fans are usually of a younger age range, and their distinctive, obsessive fan practices appear on the surface to hold little interest and relevance to the participants of this project. Stalking then was not symptomatic of the middle-aged fan experience outlined by most of these fans, with Cathy explaining that:

I think they are also humans, we should respect their freedom – after the hard work they need to rest. In their private time we must respect them, it’s like how they respect us as fans. We should respect them.

However, Alice admitted to stalking inclinations:

I’m not like those that go crazy, and want to marry them, stalk them. Yeah, I do stalk, but only when they are nearby. I don’t [go] all out to stalk them like some of them.

Again, there appears to be an internal struggle here between the actions of some of the participants and the rhetoric by which they attempt to describe their actions. Alice, it seems,

enjoys the same stalking inclinations as many of her younger contemporaries, but yet feels the need to distinguish herself from the romantic attachments that these younger fans display towards their idols.

A significant feature of East Asian pop culture is the duality of these performers' careers – they exist as members of successful idol groups, but also as solo artists operating at times independently of the 'mother' band. This dual commercial process is partly driven by the previously mentioned fan practice of bias, whereby fans passionately follow and promote their favourite band member. The participants of this project also applied East/West cultural binaries in regard to their Korean pop culture fandom – iterating that the cultural proximity afforded by East Asian pop artists made them more attractive than Western artists. This cultural proximity was linked by participants towards sometimes quite conservative and essentialist perspectives, verging on 'Asian values' discourse. In this manner, participants expressed a preference for K-pop as a form of East Asian cultural address based on a perception of conservatism and modesty they identified as 'Asian'.

Eliana emphasised this East/West, modest/decadent binary when she remarked:

Rather than me supporting the Americans or British, I might as well support the Asian artists and these artists are so 'clean'. Apart from G-Dragon and recently TOP's case. [...] Fans in K-pop concerts don't take drugs, or drink alcohol, or die while taking drugs, touch wood. So far [they] haven't. So, it's all-clean. I might as well support these kinds of people and they are Asians.

Such perspectives reflect wider stereotypes that still have great traction in many Asian societies surrounding East/West binaries. Hence, 'Asianess' here is a positive value, and one that Eliana invokes as an attractive and comfortable trait that informs her fandom. This assertion of a kind of collective 'Asianess', or 'Asian experience', has been reflected across the region in the past two decades with the popularisation of significant pop cultural consumption patterns across geo-regional, geo-linguistic, and geo-cultural markets. Eliana acknowledges in her response that Big Bang members G-Dragon and TOP had been exposed for drug use, but she chooses to view this as an aberration rather than a wider trend, thereby reinforcing her particular worldview. The participants then seem willing to situate the Korean band members as morally 'pure' in comparison to Western pop performers despite mentioning several instances where the K-pop band has been involved in drug possession. As such, some of these respondents appear to be adhering to a Western/Eastern dichotomy whereby their cultural bias overrides factual evidence that might link band members to illicit drug use in favour of their own worldviews in which Westerns stars are perceived as overly liberal and morally compromised.

Participatory Culture

These Malaysian middle-aged female K-pop fans spent considerable amounts of time interacting with their fandom, and each other, via social media and communications applications, such as *Line* and *Whatsapp*. Indeed, much of this online communication eventually facilitated significant face-to-face, or ‘live’ meet-ups amongst fans. Web-based resources were valued by participants as sites for information, news, and gossip related to Big Bang and its respective members. The offline social activity of this fan cohort involved the attending of events related to Big Bang in Malaysia, and the wider Southeast and East Asian region. The financial independence of many of the participants therefore afforded them a transnational experience beyond the possibilities of many of their younger contemporaries. Beyond the considerable expense of attending concerts and related activities and appearances, these Generation X fans also invested significantly in merchandise, purchasing everything from album releases, through official apparel, cosmetics, and concert paraphernalia such as light-sticks.

Alice for instance, takes pride in her tactile access to the band’s music catalogue, and related products, favouring the visual association that tangible products offer her, particularly in comparison to streaming and online media sources:

I buy a lot more of their DVDs, their concert DVDs. I buy but I am not willing to use it, I’ve got cups, tumblers, pencils, notebooks, and power banks. The only thing that I actually use is the t-shirts. I buy a lot of their shirts – I have a shrine in my cupboard.

Meanwhile Dolores, who joined the fandom in 2014, like Alice, revels in her collection of ‘physical copies’ of the bands musical output, perhaps betraying her generational origin in her preference for tangible music products.

Fan meetings, which are particularly characteristic of East-Asian pop culture, consist of activities and games occurring on-stage between fans and pop idols. Alice attempted to learn the Korean language in the hopes of conversing with the Big Bang members at such events. This dovetails with Oh’s (2009, p. 437) forward learning theory, whereby these fans are acquiring new skills that they perceive as enhancing their pop cultural experiences. In Alice’s case, her new-found language skills facilitated her selection at a fan event where she appeared on stage with the members of Big Bang. She recalled the event with great excitement and pride, in particular noting how her command of Korean greetings had enabled her interaction with the band’s most famous member, G-Dragon:

I turned to him [G-Dragon] and said ‘안녕하세요, 반갑습니다’ [Hello, nice to meet you]. When I said those words, his expression changed immediately. Upon hearing local Hangul [Korean] words expressed correctly, he started conversing in Korean to me, he thought I was Korean!

Here Alice expresses pride and vindication as her efforts to learn portions of Korean language result in an enhanced transcultural fan experience. In this instance, the level of fan/performer interaction shifted from the everyday online parasocial communication to physical social interaction with the idol. Such occurrences are considered to be a rare occasion for fans, and a site of enormous pride. As Alice elaborates:

Then he put his hands [on me]. I think the reason he did that was he knew I wasn't a teenybopper. I wasn't 18 or 20 [years old]. He had [to] be careful as well. So he looked at me and knew I was an Auntie fan, he put his arms around me, and the whole crowd screamed. I know the rules; you don't touch or invade their space unless they allow you to. So when he did that, I took my chance and squeezed him. I hugged him. I felt like I was in my own world.

This physical face-to-face interaction heightens the relationship between the idol and the fan. Redmond (2016, p. 239) explains that communication between the celebrity and fans will intensify 'through the activation of powerful emotions'. The back and forth interaction in this instance creates a connection that allows the fan to feel closer to the celebrity, and to claim greater agency within the wider fan community.

Participant Beatrice on the other hand describes her fandom as being fuelled by the concert experience. In 2012, she attended her first Big Bang concert in Malaysia. According to her, 'that's when my fandom [really took off]. Prior to that, it was just, 'Okay, they have a new song, it's not too bad'. After attending the concert, she says that her passion and enthusiasm for Big Bang intensified. Hence, social events such as concerts, fan-meetings, or even simply meeting up with fellow fans increase the camaraderie of being a part of the wider fan culture. The sense of community-building and interaction amongst this fan culture is evident, with six out of seven participants regularly engaged in fan practices in both online and offline environments. In fact, their age does not diminish or limit their fan experience, with this female middle-aged fan cohort engaged with both similarly aged fans, and younger fans. Prior to discovering fellow Generation X Big Bang fans via her involvement in this project, Dolores believed her fandom was something of an oddity, or at the very least, unusual, remarking, 'seriously I did not know [fans] around my age'. After the interview, she was thrilled to explore relationships with her fellow fans from the same age-bracket. Unlike Dolores, Alice, Beatrice, Cathy, Eliana, Florence and Gayle had been actively engaging with other Generation X fans and younger fans particularly on *WhatsApp* and social media such as Twitter. Eliana for instance is one of five administrators handling a Twitter account specifically for Taeyang's fans. As the administrator of this Twitter account (with over ten thousand members), she cites her role as a mother as influencing the manner in which she handles fan interactions on the platform, whereby she emphasises respect and manners as tenets for fans in their interactions with band members. This sense of responsibility was inspired by the controversial incident whereby members of K-pop boy band band, B1A4 hugged a Malay Muslim girl on

stage, causing significant controversy in Malaysia. The Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department investigated the female fans' under the Syariah Criminal Offence Act for indecent behavior in public places' (*Straits Times*, 2015). Eliana explained her mission as such:

Just before *RISE* [Taeyang's tour], there was an incident with another group, [whereby] they hugged a Malay girl on stage [referring to B1A4 controversy] [...] In support of IME, the organiser, we educate people [the public and religious authorities] that we are not like that [...] Also we remind Big Bang fans to behave themselves and not to cause trouble, so that's more of our role.

Eliana, together with the other administrators, also connect with other Big Bang fan accounts based in Malaysia to facilitate the donation of welcome gifts to Big Bang via the concert promoters:

We collaborate with other fan sites to welcome Big Bang or Taeyang whenever they are in Malaysia. In terms of support, food support, backstage support, [...] hotel support in case. Whenever they enter the room, and then they know we gave them the welcome gift you see, just to make them feel better.

This gift-giving exercise, regularly practiced by the participants, is so much a part of East Asian pop fandom. In this fashion, Alice and Eliana created a gift for G-Dragon during his tour stop in Kuala Lumpur. They were rewarded when the artist posted a picture of it on his personal Instagram account. This personal acknowledgement from G-Dragon intensifies the parasocial bonds between fan and artist, proffering a performative validation that is bolstered by its public affirmation.

Consumptive Agency via Demographic Advantage

While these middle-aged fans experience a degree of stigmatisation – sometimes from fellow fans, sometimes from family members – they also enjoy certain forms of agency linked to their lifespan development, advantages that enhance their fan experience, and even wider status amongst their fellow fans. Since all seven participants are employed women with stable incomes, their financial independence enhances their fan experiences and access to what inevitably remains a consumable product – a K-pop industry marked by its intensive commodification. The economic capital enjoyed by these participants extends their experiential fan activities beyond the borders of Malaysia. Consequently, Florence and Gayle attended a Big Bang concert tour in South Korea, which included appearing at multiple tour dates. The participants explained that this multi-date engagement allowed them to experience the concert from numerous vantage points on different nights, occupying mezzanine seats and multiple seating positions across the different nights. Consequently, the

pair attended multiple dates of concerts in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. Alice, Beatrice, and Cathy are also transnational concert attendees, having attended Big Bang, and Big Bang related concerts in South Korea and Malaysia, always making sure that they attend multiple nights in each venue.

In this fashion, Alice acknowledges that her increased consumptive power in relation to her younger counterparts enhances her fan experience:

I am lucky to have the money to chase stars. The tickets and merchandise are not cheap. My younger fan friends may be working, but they have to think twice [about making the financial commitment] required.

Hence there is an understanding amongst these fans that their middle-aged status, alongside their secure employment, actually provides them with an enhanced fan experience – one that eclipses that of their younger peers.

Conclusion

This study has sought to offer some insight into an audience that is largely under-represented within contemporary fan culture studies – middle-aged female fans of pop music in Asia, in this case, Malaysian fans of the Korean boy band Big Bang. Internationally, mature-aged female fans of pop cultural subjects such as the *Twilight* book/film series, ‘*Twilight* Moms’, the British Boy band ‘One Direction’, and in the early 2000s, Japanese fans of the Korean television series, *Winter Sonata*, have attracted academic attention. However, little research addresses Malaysian female mature fan-bases and contemporary pop culture. This particular fan-base is intriguing, in large part, due to the manner in which they engage with the fan culture. Financial independence for all the participants, who are working women, offers them an extended presence within what is an extremely commoditised fan culture. This access to economic capital facilitates significant travel opportunities for these fans, who regularly attend multiple concerts in international markets, as well as heightened access to the significant range of merchandise that the band and its affiliates produce. The experience these women have of their fandom is enhanced in comparison to the majority of younger fans who lack access to such significant levels of disposable income. Similarly, Oh (2009, p. 426) recognises similar advantages in the Japanese mature-age female fans of *Winter Sonata*, whom she deemed ‘leading transnational consumers’, indicating the heightened fan experience that access to capital provides. Hence the financial independence enjoyed by the respondents in this project heightens their fan experiences, particularly in regards to their younger cohorts.

Typically, experiences within commodity cultures are enhanced by access to capital. The emotional or para-social links outlined by these respondents in regards to their connections to the band members, were instead iterated as sister-brother, or even mother-son

relationships. As such, the discourse of 'love' for the band members reproduced by these fans revolves around familial bonds that perhaps resonate as 'appropriate' for these women – with maternal bonds in particular being stressed. Indeed, these fans must operate within a social environment whereby Malaysian women aged 40-55 years old are conventionally situated as housewives, working women, and mothers. As such, inferences of romantic attachment to band members are vigorously denied by these women, sometimes despite contradictory statements indicating otherwise. This perhaps betrays their adherence to a powerful socialised disciplinary regime, in which spaces for transgression are limited. This study therefore demonstrates the participants negotiating tensions between wider societal expectations alongside the quite restrictive domestic sphere experienced by many Malaysian women.

However, as demonstrated in this article, the older audience are also significant consumers of pop cultural products such as K-pop. This fan cohort contributes to breaking down these very traditional gender expectations, providing a wider scope of experience and indeed perception of the possibilities and pleasures that can be enjoyed by middle-aged women within Malaysian society.

Biographical notes:

Sharmaine Loh is currently a Senior Administrative Executive at the School of Arts and Social Sciences. Previously, she was a research assistant who worked on various interdisciplinary research projects. Her interests include fandom and media studies, active learning pedagogy, and social issues within the palm oil sector. Contact: sharmaineloh@hotmail.com.

Callum Gilmour lectured in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia from 2009 till 2021. Previously he was with the Institute for Culture and Society at WSU and the Cultural Institutions and Practices Research Centre (CIPS) at the University of Newcastle. Contact: callum.gilmour@gmail.com.

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