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In Search of K-Drama: Spotting Film Locations Online

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Abstract

Location blogging is the online fan activity of relating film and television scenes to concrete geographical locations. In the case of South Korean television dramas ('K-drama'), directions to film locations are found with online mapping services and posted on blogs and social media within days of the drama's airing. We examine this transcultural fan practice through interviews with authors of K-drama location blogs across East and Southeast Asia. We characterise the bloggers' approach to this type of individualised digital fan work as 'fan professionalism', highlighting their active choice to celebrate a transnational media product in a manner that fits with sensibilities of a professional class. We argue that through location blogging these fans engage with specific places without necessarily visiting them and expand our understanding of online self-performance with locative media.

Keywords: Fan production, Travel blogging, K-drama, Television, Media tourism, Locative media

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Introduction

> That time was the most memorable; I was so excited when I found it. It was the first time I found [a location], that I located it myself. […] Before that, usually someone else had found the location, and I just followed them. That's the first time I found it by myself, and I felt, wow, [that's] so terrific. […] After that time, that's when I started doing something so pointless. (Interview, Carol)[1]

A keen fan of South Korean television drama ('K-drama'), Carol recounts her first experience of seeing a place on television, finding out where the location is, and subsequently visiting it in person. This experience was not one-off: Carol runs a K-drama location blog with information on 189 film locations of twenty-five dramas and continues to add to the blog. The quote from Carol does not just illustrate the intense satisfaction one can derive from film location tracing; it also reveals a conflicting attitude that even an adept 'location tracer' such as Carol holds towards tracing and visiting film locations. Tracing and visiting K-drama locations evoked something resembling euphoria in Carol, yet she also immediately chastised the practice as 'pointless'. What is it about this 'pointless' practice that makes Carol keep on doing it? And for whom? Relying on interviews with location bloggers like Carol, who spend much of their leisure time finding, organising and presenting information on K-drama film locations, this article examines location blogging as a type of digital work in which fans make use of online mapping services and social media to be productive in a quasi-professional and individualised manner.

Journeys to locations made known and meaningful through popular films, television, books and music are not new. A burgeoning field of study (Connell, 2012; Lexhagen et al., 2022) has directed attention to tourism to media-related places under headings such as 'media tourism' (Reijnders, 2011), 'film(-induced) tourism' (Beeton, 2016), 'screen tourism' (Connell and Meyer, 2009) and 'popular culture tourism' (Lundberg and Ziakas, 2018). Notwithstanding the growing number of studies dedicated to the phenomenon of media tourism, little is known about the role of fans in 'discovering' and sharing media-related places through new media. Existing work on media tourism still has a strong Anglophone bias, with limited attention to the new centres of media production elsewhere in the world (see however Kim and Long, 2012; Jang, 2021; Nanjangud and Reijnders, 2022; Povoa, 2023). Beginning with the popularity of K-drama in East Asia in the 1990s (Shim, 2006; Huat and Iwabuchi, 2008), by the early 2020s South Korean media content and popular culture have attracted (fan) audiences globally, including in media centres in US and Europe (Jin, 2016; Lee, 2018). By focusing on K-drama location blogs in this paper, we join existing research on media, place and tourism in South Korea (Oh, 2018, 2022), and on new ways of engagement with television in East Asia in a transnational, online context (Tse, 2014; Ju, 2020).

[1] All respondents but one have been given pseudonyms at their request. Manager Hyung wishes to be mentioned by the title of her blog (http://managerhyung.blogspot.com).

The spatial self and the online tourist encounter

Empirical research on media tourism often focuses on analyses of media texts or tourist experiences on site, rather than (online) tourist practices during and beyond embodied travel. From a tourism studies perspective however, and for industry practitioners, who often attest to the influence of 'SNS' (social networking services) on tourist flows, understanding the production practices behind social media posts on touristic places is imperative. Emerging media technologies such as satellite and street-view mapping services and geo-locative mobile applications have enabled new digital practices in relation to tourism that are geographically grounded and take shape in culturally specific ways (e.g., Brodie [2023], on film location spotting with Microsoft Flight Simulator). Schwartz and Halegoua's (2014: 1644) concept of the 'spatial self', 'where individuals document, archive and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others', has been used in scholarship on locative media and consumer culture to examine the role of location-based social networks like Foursquare (Saker, 2016) and Facebook location services (Costa, 2019) in the online performance of specific identities or 'spatial selves'. The user-generation content on these platforms is an important source of information about places that can be valuable for geographic information science (Ballatore and De Sabbata, 2020). K-drama location bloggers offer a tangential case of the concept of the 'spatial self': we argue that they perform a fan professional identity through their experience and mobility connected to South Korea, specifically television drama filming locations.

Importantly, their experience and mobility are not necessarily *within* space and place, being geographically grounded but not premised on bodily presence on location. Instead, the bloggers have accrued substantial spatial knowledge of K-drama productions with the help of online resources, which they put to use alongside their familiarity with markers available in a television series to produce geo-coded content valuable to fellow K-drama fans and prospective tourists. Their practice presents a novel use of mapping services like Google Maps 'as a foundational resource' (McQuire, 2019: 150), participating in a process of fan geographical knowledge that allows us to exemplify the approach of Crouch (2006: 45) to 'reposition the individual … into the making of tourism'. More structured than the touristic lay geographies of Crouch (2006) and less bounded to single media texts than the cult geographies of Hills (2002), this fan geography is rooted in virtual encounters that approximate embodied qualities, thanks to the immersive (albeit exclusively visual) nature of street-view navigation of online mapping services.

Media tourism, new media, fandom and professionalism

The straddling of embodiment and immersion makes the practice of location blogging – defined here as the online posting of user-generated content about locations known from the media - a curious instance of media tourism, as existing studies of fandom emphasise the value of physical (co-)presence and multi-sensory experience in establishing personal connection to the media text (Waysdorf, 2021; Williams, 2020). Work from fandom studies have refined upon theories from classic works on tourism and the media, notably Urry's (1990) concept of the tourist gaze and Couldry's (2003) contention that fan pilgrimages are forms of ritualistic behaviour in which the distance between ordinary and media worlds is

enacted. The rise of spreadable social media has destabilised the symbolic divide between inside and outside the media, (Jansson, 2018) but there has been little research done on the role and significance of new media in the phenomenon of media tourism (but see: Connel et al., 2021; Jones, 2024). A key exception is Schulze (2017), who shows that fan engagement with media-related places is not restricted to physical journeys, 'visiting' and verifying filming locations with photos from online mapping services and social media. Schulze (2017: 124) characterises the work of bloggers as 'collaborative (by fans for fans) knowledge production'. However, how collaborative is the practice of location bloggers? We aim to answer this question with interview data.

While existing studies on (online) Asian television fandom have generally pointed to a culture of 'self-help and sharing' (Hu, 2005: 173; also Lee, 2011), and collaborative work is crucial to maintaining a transcultural fandom (Chin and Morimoto, 2013) such as that of Asian television, it would be presumptive to assume that the spirit of collaboration always reigns in the fan community. We adopt a critical attitude to claims of collaborative fan work in the case of K-drama location blogging and attempt to open up the question of how fans find a right level of engagement with other fans to suit their own disposition.

We use 'fan professionalism' to characterise the individualised digital fan work undertaken by location bloggers. The term is inspired by Baym and Burnett's (2009: 434) account of Swedish indie music fans, who work as 'amateur experts' to 'sift, sort, label, translate, rate and annotate a large, disorganized, and geographically remote set of cultural materials for international consumption'. This description fits K-drama location bloggers well. The phrasing 'fan professionalism' foregrounds amateur expert fans' collective aspect (as a profession), while leaving room for both collaborative and individualised variants of increasingly sophisticated fan work (as professionals), as well as more commercial activities undertaken by 'fantrepeneurs' (Scott, 2015). As such, fan professionalisation does not only occur in industries where the distance between fans/amateurs and professionals is small, such as Swedish indie music (Baym and Burnett, 2009), global comic-cons (Hills, 2024), and Japanese fan manga (Pun, 2021), and in close-knit fan communities such as Viki subtitles segmenters (Henthorn, 2018), but also among loose networks of labouring fans who prize their autonomy and independent judgement, placing high value on productivity and polite social interaction in accordance with sensibilities of a professional (middle) class. This latter characterisation will help us explain how K-drama location bloggers set to work.

Data and method for investigating K-drama location blogging

This paper draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with sixteen fans, tourists, tour operators and public officials involved with touristic visits to K-drama locations. The interviews were conducted by the first author face-to-face, through Skype call, or Facebook chat in 2017 and 2018. We chose to focus on location bloggers in this paper, to substantiate the overwhelming importance given to 'social media' or 'the Internet' in these interviews with K-drama tourists and public officials on decision-making processes before and during travel. To recruit location bloggers as respondents, a list of Chinese- and English-language location

blogs was compiled by searching for recent popular drama titles[2] in conjunction with 'filming location' on Google, Baidu and Yahoo Taiwan, then excluding travel and news sites, and blogs with only isolated posts, which have no specific focus on K-drama. The blog posts are reviewed to generate parts of the interview questions. The mean duration of audio-recorded interviews was seventy-eight minutes, and the text-based interviews averaged 3,880 words. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts closely read and coded for recurring themes. Together with the respondents it was decided to only use their first names during the reporting of the data. The location bloggers interviewed turned out to be all women in white-collar jobs at the time of the interview. The gender skew is unsurprising, echoing previous quantitative (Yang, 2012) and qualitative (Yang, 2008; Chan and Wang, 2011) studies of K-drama audiences in East Asia. They were based in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. We decided against including Korean-language location blogs to focus on the transnational K-drama fandom, which we assume would work quite differently compared with Korean fans. As a result of only including Chinese- and English-language blogs and excluding blogs with only isolated posts on K-drama locations, the number of respondents is relatively small. We recognise the limited scale of our study, but we believe that location blogging should be studied as a distinct, nascent online practice.

In order to find out what the practice of location blogging is, we started with asking respondents basic questions like how they wrote blog posts, and how they had started watching K-drama and blogging. Additionally, we formulated more in-depth questions around the motives and values that drive the practice of location blogging to get at questions on sociality and media participation. Bloggers were asked, for example, how they selected drama scenes to be traced, with reference to specific pre-selected blog posts. They were also asked about what they liked about running the blog, and how they interacted with their readers and fellow bloggers. While some bias (e.g., social desirability) in the interview data cannot be eliminated, these risks are mitigated by cross-referencing to published materials, reducing social distance by sharing personal details and experiences, and through interpretative strategies in the data analysis.

The practice of location blogging

The active K-drama location bloggers we have interviewed are all working women based in East and Southeast Asia. Most have started watching K-dramas in the 2000s while still in school, placing them in their twenties or thirties. Their employment suggests a high education level, and some have worked as marketing or communications professionals. Frequency of leisure travel varies greatly, ranging from no international travel experience to more than five trips a year. All of them speak two or more languages, but none considers herself fluent in Korean. Their cultural tastes are broad. Most report watching British and US television besides K-drama, while Taiwanese and Japanese dramas come as close runners-up; their fandom for K-drama also often extends to South Korean reality entertainment ('K-variety'), as well as popular music ('K-pop'). This seeps into their blogs: one would post about sightings of pop singers; another may write about K-variety as well as K-drama locations. Some of them

[2] The drama titles were: *Descendants of the Sun* (KBS, 2016), *The Lonely and Great God – Goblin* (tvN, 2016-2017), *Legend of the Blue Sea* (SBS, 2016-2017), *On the Way to the Airport* (KBS2, 2016), and *My Love from the Star* (SBS, 2013-2014).

receive a small web advertising income from their blogs, and sometimes sponsored perks, but the monetary rewards are meagre relative to the time investment. Most maintain that location blogging is a '*hobby*' (Interview, Carol), but also have made entrepreneurial attempts to monetise their blogs. One has published travel books based on filming locations. There is a resigned consensus that making a living from this '*niche*' (Interview, Rosita) hobby is not possible, and trading the hobby for 'work' would bring too much obligation and risk that cannot be combined with their '*real life*' (Interview, Manager Hyung), i.e., paid employment and family life. While this may seem obvious, the bloggers are also active on social media platforms other than their own blogs. Some are complementary to their location blogs, such as an Instagram account with travel pictures, or a YouTube channel with videos of them on location. Others are personal social media accounts kept separate from their online persona as location bloggers. It is then important to bear in mind that location blogging, which we focus on below, is only one facet of the bloggers' fandom and online practices.

Thus, these K-drama location bloggers are a rather diverse group (nationality, languages, economic capital, travel experience) with some common characteristics (gender, employment, multilingual, cultural tastes), unified primarily by their practice of location blogging. 'Location blogging' is best understood by looking at 'tracing' and 'blogging' in turn, as two intertwined steps.

We use 'tracing' to refer to the act of finding out where a location seen on television or film is in the physical world. In the case of K-drama, which is often shot on location rather than in studio, this entails finding out where the filming had taken place. Earlier studies of media pilgrimages indicate that fans rely on organised tours, local taxi drivers and film stills to trace film or television locations (Hills, 2002; Reijnders, 2010). K-drama location bloggers, by contrast, do not require physical visits to authenticate the location. Schulze (2017) describes in great detail some of the techniques used to find locations. When tracing, fans use (South Korean) search engines and online mapping services akin to Google Street View to investigate clues they have spotted in the drama. Addresses of corporate sponsors in end credits are looked up; street signage and distinctive architecture in shot are located through web, map or (reverse) image search. As one can imagine, this can be time-consuming and mind-boggling:

> Finding one place can take more than an hour, not counting the writing. Like really on the street, looking and searching. Like on Google map […] You're looking at it, turning, walking on the street, turning left, turning right, turning until you see the place. Sometimes it gets quite crazy. [laughs] (Interview, Carol)

It comes thus as little surprise that bloggers also use other ways to trace locations. Instagram is often named as an important resource, as are blogs on Korean web portals like Naver and Daum. These social media platforms allow bloggers to find a great deal of photos with a few keywords, even if their command of Korean is limited:

> For filming locations, I start off with Google. Usually there won't be any results for the weird places I want to visit. So, I will go on the Korea search engines [like] Line [and] Naver to do a search. I will have to use Korean words in doing the search (I'm level 1 Korean which is pretty useless but I guess I know how to use Google Translate which helps a lot). (Interview, Yue-ting)

Having found the location with satisfactory veracity, the bloggers can then share it on their blogs. The 'blogging' in 'location blogging' refers to the posting of user-generated content about locations known from the media. As such, it does not exclusively result in blogs, and bloggers usually publish their content across various social media platforms as well. The abundance of online materials, whether geo-coded in mapping services or interpreted through clues and markers spotted by the bloggers themselves, provide sufficient resources to authenticate and showcase filming locations, without having visited the place themselves. The resulting content produced by the bloggers engages with the specific locations, as well as the broader geography of South Korean television dramas, with a focus on urban streetscapes of Seoul alongside natural seaside or mountain landscapes.

While Schulze (2017: 126) emphasises the process of verification in matching fictive reality with 'actual reality', she leaves out location bloggers' less visible work of picking particular locations out as worthy of touristic visit. The actual travel undertaken by bloggers and readers to the filming locations was also not considered. As we shall see in the coming sections, the prospect of actual travel forms a key part of initial reasons to begin location blogging. Furthermore, feedback from readers who have followed directions on location blogs to filming locations is an important motivation for bloggers to keep on blogging.

Location blogging as personal project

When asked why and how they started blogging about K-drama locations, most cite personal motivation as a first explanation. Manager Hyung, for instance, states that her location blog '*started actually as a dreamboard*'. She explains further that:

> So basically, I thought of coming up with a blog (since I used to be a content writer for a website) which will remind me constantly that I have to go to South Korea and these are the places I really want to go to […] Yes, it started like that. Like it's originally my personal plan but it ended up getting attention because it turns out, I wasn't the only one thinking of going there just to be in places where my favorite actors were. (Interview, Manager Hyung)

Similar responses from others suggest that location blogging is a kind of travel planning, but a rather particular kind. The goal of this planning is not to sort out logistical arrangements of transport or accommodation, but motivational: to collate a visualised collection of one's desired destinations. The temporality of this planning, likewise, is not governed by the imminence of an actual planned trip, but rather by the continuous flow of television broadcasts. Future travel is desired, imagined and engaged through exploring concrete details of various possibilities one might encounter and realise when one gets there.

The practice of location blogging brings another specificity to this kind of planning. Because the tracing of K-drama locations requires the constant comparison of drama shots and geographical space, bloggers would have to watch segments of the drama in which they see characters walk through the location, as they themselves navigate online mapping services from both bird's-eye and first-person points of view.

It is plausible to argue that the sensory experience of location blogging is comparable to the kind of 'virtual tourism' through cinematic consumption as described by Tzanelli (2004:

27), in which Frodo and Sam, as 'virtual tourists with whom the viewer is invited to identify', enable *Lord of the Rings* viewers to 'enjoy the whole tourist experience: not just to see, but also to taste, touch, smell and actively partake in adventure'. Bloggers' visit to a film location may then be three-fold: through televisual consumption, location tracing, and embodied visit. The different layers of visits overlap in the bloggers' experience of the place, producing an effect of amazement:

> Sometimes those [locations] that I've spent a lot of time finding, they're [lodged] in my brain. Like, the virtual landscape is still in my brain, those streets I've rambled through. Then when I get there, I'd think, wow, this is a scene I've seen virtually, and it's appearing right here. (Interview, Carol)

In a way, this déjà vu-like experience described by Carol is the inverse of virtual tourism as discussed by Tzanelli. The virtual tourist is a viewer whose experience of place has extended from audio-visual stimuli to a full range of senses. The location blogger on an embodied visit, conversely, receives a full range of sensory stimuli, but her experience of the place is coloured by her work of location tracing, leading her to pay particular notice to landscape 'clues' that identify the geographical location as the same one represented in the fictional narrative. We argue that location bloggers have shown us a new kind of media-inflected tourist experience, where the 'media' in question are not simply narrative audiovisual media texts (films, television, etc.), as many existing studies of media tourism have noted. In this case, the 'media' are also digital representations of the destination space, which the bloggers access through online mapping services, and in which they immerse themselves during the extensive time they devote to their fan work.

Location blogging as (fan) professional engagement

Personal motivations and experiences detailed above do not explain why 'location tracers' choose to share their knowledge with others. As to be expected, location blogs are also important because they provide opportunities for recognition and engagement with other people. We examine the location bloggers' social motivations in two sub-sections, as audience engagement through platform metrics, and more ambivalently, as interpersonal contact with blog readers.

Audience engagement

Many bloggers remember clearly one or a series of '*viral*' posts that mark an important moment that encouraged them to continue with their work of K-drama location blogging, giving them '*purpose*'. The 'viral post' is a source of intense pride and satisfaction:

> I kind of blog with a purpose now
> cause *Goblin* [a 2016 hit K-drama] was such a big deal to me
> it got so viral - that I just had to be the first one to blog
> […]
> like its #1 on Google
> I blogged even before KTO [Korea Tourism Organisation]

> […]
> in fact it is still my #1 performing post
> even today
> based on daily page views (Interview on Facebook messenger, Yue-ting)

It is worth taking a closer look at how Yue-ting gives value to her '*viral*' post on *Goblin* film locations in the quote above. Being '*the first one to blog*' in English, '*even before KTO*', the official body tasked with promoting tourism to South Korea, Yue-ting registers the speediness of her productivity. More importantly, Yue-ting evaluates the viral post with two ordinal measures of the post's own productivity: its '*#1*' position on the list of Google web search results, ahead of other blogs, travel sites and K-drama fan portals; and its '*#1*' performance '*based on daily page views*', as compared to all other posts on Yue-ting's own blog.

The 'viral post' features prominently in how location bloggers explain the social recognition and satisfaction they derive from their blogs. This suggests that audience metrics hold much sway over how location bloggers understand the social value of their blogs, probably even more than acknowledgement through interactions with readers and other fans. These audience metrics range from a simple JavaScript visitor hit counter, through analytics offered up by social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, to results of famously opaque search algorithms of search engines like Google. They play a significant role in validating location bloggers' work, as well as in guiding how they work. These findings resonate with wider discussions about 'data fandom', and the ways how fans increasingly 'seek to intervene and to influence data as part of their everyday fan activities' (Zhang and Negus, 2020).

For instance, audience metrics inform bloggers' strategies for navigating the many online platforms they use. In addition to maintaining multiple versions of their blogs across a range of online platforms such as WordPress, BlogSpot, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as blog authors, the bloggers also hold active accounts as individuals or fans on the aforementioned platforms as well as other region- or fandom-specific social media and portal sites like Plurk, Weibo, Soompi and Chuutalk. The below quote from Yue-ting suggests that she applies audience metrics as evaluative criteria to platforms just as she does to individual blog posts:

> I started [my Facebook page] in back in 2014 and the plan was to create my own travel community in the social media environment. Sadly, it didn't progress much and I didn't want to use "likes" as a gauge of success but.. it's hard to grow on Facebook since I don't update as often as I wish to. Facebook doesn't have much value or purpose to me to be honest. I don't have a lot of likes and they don't pay me for ads or anything. (Interview, Yue-ting)

When evaluating her Facebook page, Yue-ting employs the audience metric of 'likes' and financial remuneration, both market-logic measures, to dismiss the value of her Facebook page and Facebook as a platform relative to other sites on which her blog is present.

The bloggers' use of audience metrics is also reflexive, in the sense that they try to gain knowledge about how the metrics are produced ('*the algorithm*') and can be manipulated to their own advantage. They adjust their behaviour based on this knowledge to achieve a larger readership for their posts. This expertise is sought after and seen as part of 'being a

professional', and actualised in the form of techniques to be applied to their online activity, as Rosita explains here:

> With Instagram, you have to have a theme. […] Like… there should be a standard filter for all the pictures. So that it will be pleasing. And for Facebook, it's random. For Facebook, I'm trying to learn the algorithm of Facebook. Because there's a certain time when you need to post, and there's a certain time when most of my followers are online, so that's when I have to post. (Interview, Rosita)

It is notable that bloggers say little about (mediated) human-to-human interactions with particular readers when asked about how their readers motivate their continued blogging, and speak instead mostly about audience metrics. While it is possible that our method introduced a bias (as we constructed the list of location blogs by means of web searches), we argue that privileging audience metrics over reader interactions offers bloggers a relatively simple goal of maximisation that guides their blogging. Accordingly, bloggers can cultivate a repository of techniques to strategically play the metrics game. With a clear goal that makes success quantifiable, location bloggers can be 'amateur experts' not only in tracing film locations and composing blog content, but also in posting and sharing in a way that 'works', i.e., with greater potential to reach a large audience.

Studies on other types of fan work support this line of explanation for this privileging of rankings and numbers over reader interactions. Henthorn's (2018: 530) recent work on fan subtitlers suggests that fans 'have internalized market strategies and identify as amateur professionals, even when they are not working'. In the case of fan subtitling communities, 'members adopt professional networking strategies to an online volunteer context' (Henthorn, 2018: 530). An interesting parallel can be drawn with the case of location bloggers, who work mostly individually. Rather than networking with established mentors in the community like workers in organisations, location bloggers, some of whom are communications professionals in their day jobs, could be seen as adopting a professional, entrepreneurial stance, readily applying market-logic evaluative devices and discourse from a business context to establish the value of their fan work online. The rankings and numbers of audience metrics, then, offer authoritative justifications of value that the appreciation of other fans cannot provide for the bloggers. It is tempting to contrast these professional market strategies among contemporary bloggers with the presumed 'gift economy' of traditional fan economies (Hellekson, 2009).

Interpersonal contacts

While audience metrics may be the main way how location bloggers justify the social value of their blogs, the audience is clearly not (just) a metric. Location blogs, especially versions on social media platforms, invite feedback and interaction from readers. A full reign of market logic in fan work would suggest that location bloggers should be working like social media 'community managers' to drive reach and engagement metrics of their blogs, with, for example, professional courtesy and short, timely responses. On the other hand, a 'communitarian' view of online fandom would see bloggers and readers cultivating lasting meaningful relationships and fostering a sense of togetherness.

Neither of the above quite captures the cautious attitude that location bloggers have towards reader interactions. There are friendly interactions on the location blogs, but the relationships bloggers build up with their readers do not quite reach the bar for friendship. Instead, the blogs are more often an extra channel of communication with friends who the bloggers have met through other social media platforms:

> [*Interviewer*:] did you also get to know some of your readers a bit better? Or is it a lot of different people that you were getting reactions from?
>
> if we're talking about people I actually met through the blog, I don't think I reached that point. But then most of my followers were already following my K-pop related Twitter account... and if we're gonna include that, well yes, I'm still friends with some of them. (Interview on Facebook messenger, Manager Hyung)

In fact, Carol is able to provide a rather precise gradation for the extent how far the friendships she made through her blog extend to:

> There are some people who'd chat with me through inbox [messages]. But then, for now we're not really good friends yet. Like, we're not such [good] friends to the point that… Like I wouldn't mind sharing a meal with them, but I can't go travelling together with them. (Interview, Carol)

Interactions with readers seem to be generally more distanced, comparable to initial contacts with a stranger. Politeness and 'manners' are important in making such encounters positive, whereas interactions consisting of unsolicited demands are undesirable:

> Some [readers] are really well-mannered, they ask you some questions, then that's OK. Some people are really nice, they aren't really asking anything, they've just visited a location and sent some photos to me, that has happened before. […] But then, some are like, they come to ask about really idiotic things, like, obviously they haven't read [the blog], like, 'Oh, I'm going to Korea, what are good places to visit?' Some are like that. I just want to punch them. Talking about where to go, huh. (Interview, Carol)

The latter half of this quote suggests that a worthy reader interaction for Carol is also predicated on some basic familiarity with the material publicly available on the blog or in the wider fandom. In addition to showing common courtesy, a good reader must prove her worthiness through demonstrating her knowledge, and thereby her fan commitment.

It is important to stress that the relatively casual nature of connections through the blogs does not devalue them. The previous quote demonstrates that casual interactions with readers can be highly rewarding. Nonetheless, the attitude of bloggers to one-on-one interactions with readers is rather ambivalent:

> honestly, it was a good and bad thing that the blog got attention
>
> [*Interviewer*:] why is that?

> the good things were I get to discover more dramas because people are starting to send me requests, like please find this for me, or please watch this drama so you can also ID the locations, and stuff
> plus I actually got to push myself more.
> especially in learning the Korean language
> the problem is I began to drift away from the original idea of this being my own personal dreamboard
> suddenly, it was like a by-request blog and it turned out a little burdensome honestly […]
>
> [*Interviewer*:] how was it like to get all those requests from your readers?
>
> it was fun reading the messages and requests from readers because that proves I'm actually making sense with what I do
> and I think feeling burdened was something I have implicated on myself because my followers were never nagging. (Interview on Facebook messenger, Manager Hyung)

Interactions that involve a demand for (asymmetrical) reciprocity can add up, and a large volume of requests and the spectre of '*nagging*' readers have led to a sense of burden and loss of purpose for Manager Hyung.

In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that location bloggers are not perturbed by relatively weak interpersonal contacts with readers. Instead, they may be more concerned with keeping such relationships casual so as to limit their obligations to their readers. Carol employs the discourse of leisure to this effect:

> Like there are some silly people… like they inbox [message] me all the time, asking, 'hey, where was this drama shot,' 'I want to ask, where is this place,' I'd just say, 'I haven't been watching, I don't have time.' Like I feel, really, the ones I look for are… The difficult ones are really difficult to find, so I wouldn't do it for… Yeah, I feel, this is a hobby, [laughs] like, it's not, I don't make any money from it. So why would I find [those locations on request]. Right. (Interview, Carol)

Through examining the reasons driving location blogging, we have seen that bloggers consider their work both as a personal project and engagement with a wider public. Given the strong emphasis on audience engagement, evaluated with market-logic metrics, and relatively weak interpersonal relationships with readers, we suggest that location bloggers take on a quasi-professional stance in performing their individualised fan work. In line with Miller (2016: 98), location blogs are a kind of social media where the presence of strangers is valued for the affirmation of the quality of bloggers' work, rather than one where intimate relationships are sought. The fact that this is *fan* work, and not 'proper' work, allows bloggers to employ the discourse of leisure to refuse unwelcome demands from readers.

Location bloggers employ professional methods for personal, non-professional goals. They prize their autonomy and their control over their blogs' content and style. Their professional mentality and ways of working, however, lead them to a balancing act between

personal preferences and the perceived wishes of their audience. As social media platforms become increasingly populated by 'proper' professionals, the bloggers' quasi-professional stance does not always match up with the expectations of some readers. Faced with this ambiguity, the fan professionalism adopted by bloggers thus requires them to assert, e.g., with the discourse of leisure, the flexibility that is commensurate with the generally unremunerated yet (leisure) time-consuming nature of the fan work they perform. The case of location bloggers show that fan labour is not necessarily performed for the fandom as a community, instead underlining the individual agency that fans have in determining the terms of their work. The fandom community benefits from their work, as do the K-drama tourism circuit and the platform companies involved, but ultimately the bloggers are performing fan labour on their own terms.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the nascent media-related practice of K-drama location blogging, where a small group of dedicated, mostly female fans identify and share filming locations of South Korean television dramas online. Their practice of location blogging differs from earlier empirical studies of media tourism in that physical visits are no longer required to authenticate locations featured in fictional narratives. Instead, online mapping services and social media are used by bloggers to find and verify media-related places. As such, the practice of location blogging broadens our understanding of the role of locative media in the online presentation of 'spatial selves' (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2014). Bloggers maintain an engagement *with* specific spaces and places, while not necessarily being *within* them, as the abundance of online materials provide sufficient resources to verify and represent locations without them being physically present.

Location bloggers often describe the beginnings of their blog as a personal project, some kind of motivational travel planning. We suggest that the work of location blogging expands the temporality of engagement with media-related places beyond embodied travel into bloggers' everyday routine, while also transforming the experience of a physical visit. Online images encountered in the process of tracing a location are carried over into the sensory experience of an embodied visit, as Carol's description of her experience of visiting one of the hard-won filming locations shows. We argue that this is a new type of media-inflected tourist experience that expands our understanding of media tourism, involving not only narrative media content but also meta-content such as digital representations of destination space.

Regarding the social dimension of motivations for location blogging, audience metrics seem to have more importance for bloggers than personal interactions with other fans. Bloggers prize social media analytics and web search results as authoritative justifications of value of their digital labour, and use these metrics to guide their way of working. In contrast, they keep a cautious distance to direct interactions with readers. Polite casual attention is preferred to more involved, potentially demanding engagements. We try to capture this stance adopted by location bloggers in the term 'fan professionalism': they take pride in their autonomy and productivity, and readily apply market-logic evaluative devices and business discourse to their digital fan work. While existing research has pointed to the professionalisation of Asian television fans (Henthorn, 2018), few studies of fandom devote attention to individualised fan work. The case of K-drama location bloggers provides one such

instance, and contributes to the reevaluation of claims to 'community' in online (Asian television) fandom. Rewarding feelings of recognition, an important driver of online fan communities, do not only come from the sense of co-presence on active online forums or the concrete cooperation of fan-subtitling, but also from the ostensibly more polite, sometimes distanced, interactions between fan content producers like location bloggers and their readers. This highlights that fan labour can also be a personal practice. While many actors (the K-drama fandom community, tourism industry, platform companies) benefit from this work, location bloggers retain the power of setting the terms of their labour.

In closing, we would like to return to the specter of 'pointlessness' raised in the opening quote of this paper. While location blogs are tucked away in just one corner of the online K-drama fandom, the blogs are read by thousands, and their role as a primary source of information that facilitates media tourism is acknowledged by public officials and tourists alike. A sense of 'pointlessness' on the part of bloggers may have to do with the prevalent disparaging view of (mostly female) television fans, as well as the undercompensated nature of fan work despite its economic value. Prior studies have shown how female fan production in particular often remains unacknowledged and uncompensated (Scott, 2015). At the same time, one could argue that this 'pointless' character of location blogging is exactly what makes it a form of *fan* professionalism and affords the bloggers the autonomy in setting the terms of their work. In the end, location blogging is not about making money or being professional; it is about playing with the etiquettes of professionalism in an era of meritocracy – and playing is something that fans are keen to do.

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