Map of the Soul: Data-based Body Play Across Media in K-Pop

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Abstract

Throughout the past decade, Hallyu, the "Korean Wave", has taken the global pop music scene by storm. Credits are due in part to international fans who, by word of mouth and abundant engaging derivative works, helped spread idol groups' popularity online. Since many of these fans never see their idols in the flesh, idols are now making themselves more available through an increasing number of channels, including live-streams or mobile games. Bodies play a central role in the highly digitally mediated relationship between fan and idol; consequently, idol bodies are under constant scrutiny by management companies, mass media, and fans. In this thesis, I argue that idol bodies, physical and digitized, are fragmented and reconstructed by industry and fans in order to create "perfect" personas. I conclude that this landscape promotes a neoliberal ideology through flat aesthetics and self-care, often to the detriment of idols' and fans' health. I hope to raise awareness to the destructive ways technology and bodies are mashed up in K-Pop.

Tout au long de la dernière décennie, Hallyu, la «vague coréenne», a pris d'assaut la scène mondiale de la musique pop. Le mérite revient en partie aux fans internationaux qui, par le bouche à oreille et les nombreuses œuvres dérivées engageantes, ont contribué à diffuser la popularité des groupes d'idoles sur les réseaux sociaux. Étant donné que bon nombre de ces fans ne voient jamais leurs idoles en chair et en os, les idoles se rendent désormais disponibles via un nombre croissant de filières, comme les diffusions en streaming direct, ou les jeux mobiles. Les corps jouent un rôle central dans cette relation entre fan et idole hautement médiatisée; par conséquent, les corps des idoles sont constamment surveillés par leurs agences, les médias, et leurs fans. Dans ce mémoire, je soutiens que les corps des idoles, aussi bien physiques que numérisés, sont fragmentés puis reconstruits par l'industrie

elle-même ainsi que les fans, afin de créer des personnages «parfaits». Je conclus que ce contexte promeut une idéologie néolibérale à travers l'esthétique du plat et du soucis de soi, souvent au détriment de la santé des idoles et des fans. J'espère mettre en lumière la façon destructrice dont la technologie et les corps sont mélangés dans la K-Pop.

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1. Introduction

In August 2012, six-member boy band VIXX made a comeback with the song "Rock Ur Body," accompanied by a music video (hereafter "MV") based on the concept of arcade games. In the video, female idol Dasom plays the role of a girl who stumbles into an abandoned arcade. She finds a working console named Rock Ur Body and begins to play a fighting game, using the VIXX members as her champions (Figure 1). The video ends with the members coming to life and playing with Dasom. The number of K-Pop MVs released between 2010 and 2016 based on the concept of "video games" can be counted on one hand; however, after 2016, the concept became a staple in idol MVs. Popular groups like EXO and BTS incorporate elements of video games into their MVs, and the girl group Cherry Bullet even based their entire group concept around virtual and augmented reality.

Figure 1. Screenshot of VIXX's "Rock Ur Body"

Fans of Korean pop music around the world have also used video game aesthetics in their fanworks throughout the past decade, even before the concept became popular with idol

groups. Below is a screenshot from MOMOLAND's performance of the song "BBoom BBoom" at the 8th Gaon Chart Music Awards, held in January 2019 (Figure 2). The members are dancing on a barren stage, the decor provided solely by a video playing on the enormous screen behind them. The video was made by Spanish amateur video maker Darnu Pop, a fan who has been making 8bit covers (emulating the synthesizer sounds of old school arcade games and Nintendo consoles) of his favorite songs for the past decade. Darnu started learning how to code in his free time in order to make visual covers of MVs to go with his favorite music, with hopes of releasing his own game in future. According to him, he didn't start earning money from his YouTube covers until 2017. Visually, his MV covers emulate the aesthetic of platform games (think *Super Mario*): for each song, he makes miniature pixelated versions of the group members and places them in settings inspired by the original MV's sets. In his cover of "BBoom BBoom", the eight girls are seen running on a rollercoaster, fighting ducks, and attacking aliens.
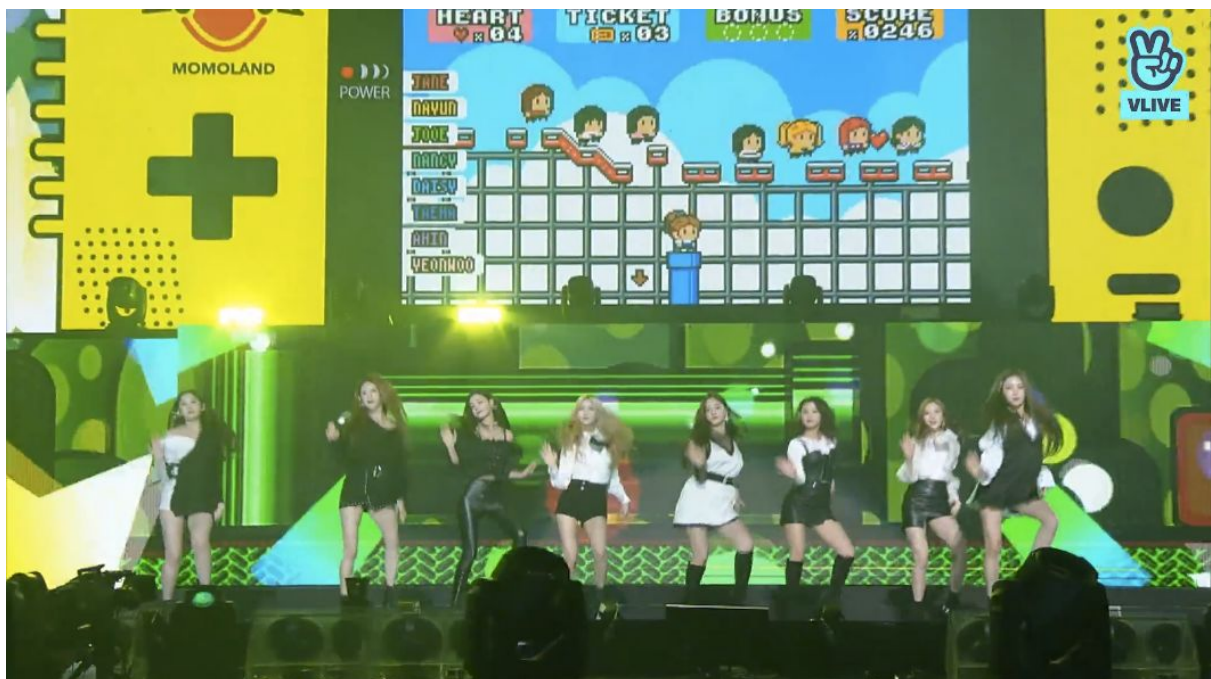
Figure 2. Screenshot of MOMOLAND's performance at the 8th Gaon Chart Music Awards

In both official MVs and fan covers that use video game aesthetics, idols play the role of characters that can be controlled by the player. Of course, none of these are interactive: the course of the video is pre-determined by the artist, and the watcher has no agency. Nevertheless, this little survey of "Rock Ur Body" and "BBoom Bboom" is meant to demonstrate that both "officials" and fans have a hand in shaping the treatment of idol bodies in visual media, even influencing one another. However, shaping idol bodies is not only digital but also physical: JooE from MOMOLAND once admitted on a TV show that she had gotten plastic surgery on her nose (*Knowing Bros*, "Episode 135"). In the Korean pop culture landscape, diet and exercise tips to achieve slenderness are a dime-a-dozen, and you would be hard-pressed to find diverse body shapes across the roster of singers currently active.

The field I am looking at in this thesis is K-Pop, or Korean pop music. Born from post-war camptown live bands, K-Pop is now being exported to every corner of the planet. The explosion in popularity of Korean pop culture (be it music, dramas, or games) started in the late 1990s and gained momentum at the beginning of the 2010s. In the late 1990s, this was heralded by Chinese journalists as "Hallyu," or the "Korean Wave" (Cho, "Reading the "Korean Wave" as a Sign of Global Shift" 150). Dal Yong Jin draws a line between 1997-2007 Hallyu and 2008-present Hallyu, dubbing the latter "Hallyu 2.0." Hallyu 2.0 is characterized by a strong government involvement in cultural industries, which helps companies export multiple cultural forms (especially music, video games, and animation) to a global market. By contrast, Hallyu 1.0 was based on the almost accidental popularity of Korean TV dramas and films in the East Asian sphere. Hallyu 2.0 is also characterized by the preponderant role of social media and the young age of the targeted fanbase (as opposed to the middle-aged audience of TV dramas). These two characteristics imply that much of the outreach work is done by fans themselves; JungBong Choi argues that most of the dissemination work of Hallyu is due to fans' dedication on digital channels, which is

unfortunately hard to track. In general, I use the term "K-Pop" to refer to Korean pop music that is intended to be exported abroad. In addition, a trainee system, Korean lyrics, hybridized music production, synchronized dancing, and fandom culture are all elements found across groups labeled as "K-Pop." The hypervisibility of K-Pop across platforms leads Michelle Cho to argue that "K-pop is less a pop-music genre than a performance culture" ("Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" 241). Consequently, the way K-Pop is visualized across platforms and between countries is an important part of grasping the phenomenon itself.

One last point to consider with respect to K-Pop is the emphasis put on bodies. Stephen Epstein and Rachael Joo argue that "the hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon has branded the nation's celebrities around the region and beyond as models of physical attractiveness" (2). The physical bodies of idols are closely monitored to fit into a mold of perfection and used as a tool of soft power. Epstein and Joo write that masculine physical power and feminine beauty become national properties, used to boost Korean pride and international prestige, and conclude by raising concerns about how this politic of idol bodies may affect K-Pop consumers.

The majority of literature on K-Pop focuses on macro-level economic and political processes. By looking at the bodies of idols and fans as sites where power is negotiated and reproduced, I offer a nuanced account of K-Pop that is closer to the fans' experience of such techniques of power. How are the bodies of idols treated by the industry? How do international fans view the bodies of their idols, considering that the great physical distance between them is always mediated by screens? In other words, what kind of body-altering practices are recurrent in the K-Pop landscape, and how are these techniques being passed on to international fans?

In my study, I look at multimedia fanworks in order to trace a genealogy of body modification by digital and physical means. Through these altered bodies, I identify industry policies and practices that might explain how a neoliberal ideology of self-care and gamification has led to the obsession about bodies in K-Pop. I also identify the reproduction of a Superflat, data-based visual culture that is vibrant in K-Pop fan culture. To address these topics, I take feminist readings of body politics in Korea and theories about the concept of flatness and pair them with analyses of various fan-made media objects like SNS (social networking service) icons, dieting vlogs, and mobile games. My research aims to contribute to area studies literature that criticizes the Western feminist and post-colonial positioning of Korean bodies automatically in relation to a white Other (a example recurrent in popular discourse referencing Korean culture would be the idea that Koreans seeking double eyelid surgery do so in order to look white). Relations of power need to be reexamined outside of the global North/South dichotomy.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Fan studies

Methodologically, I conceptualize "fandom" as a collage of experiences. Cornel Sandvoss writes in *Fandom* (2007) that fans "derive a distinct sense of self and social identity from their fan consumption" (30). Henry Jenkins argues in *Textual Poachers* (1992) that fans are creative, form vibrant communities, and are critical of their relationship to content producers. Jonathan Fiske wrote in *Television Culture* (1987) that TV shows are "producerly" texts, meaning that no one, not even the creators, can impose the meaning of the text on the audience, which gives viewers a lot of agency. Sandvoss has elaborated upon this point more recently, putting forward the idea that the fan text is "constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as

defined at the point of production" (23). All of these insights point to the complex nature of fan/industry relations. However, these first-wave fan scholars held in common the belief that "fan" is a fixed category. Since "fan" is an identity marker like many others, "studying fans" should involve studying how the performance of different identities by an individual might affect the expression of "fannishness." Race, in particular, has not always been thoroughly investigated in fan studies (Woo 2018), although recent works have started to bridge that gap (for instance Rukmini Pande's *Squee From the margins*, 2018). In the context of K-Pop, which is a product targeted toward a global audience, traditional fan studies will not always apply. Dal Yong Jin only went so far as to write that K-Pop fans are in their teens or twenties and come from America, Europe, and Asia - quite a wide pool. My own interviews with fan artists reflected the racial diversity present in the K-Pop fandom, and my thesis focuses on popular fan content found on non-hierarchical social media spaces like Tumblr or Twitter.

First-wave fan scholarship also advanced the idea that fandom is by default "empowering": Jenkins in particular argues that fans creatively play with the boundaries of a text to critique its production process. However, I have found that many people are fans of pop culture content without actively questioning the ideologies behind the text. Some fans might replicate industry idealogies in producing their own content but remain critical of their own actions. Paul Booth writes in *Playing Fans* (2015) that "by retaining ideological and textual concomitance, contemporary fanwork negotiates the boundaries between producer and audience while still maintaining a reverence for those boundaries" (15). Rather than explicitly criticizing the system of production, I argue that K-Pop fans are trying to bring it to light. Literature on real-person fanfiction (RPF) was particularly helpful in modeling the relationship between fan and industry, especially since - unlike many other fandoms - K-Pop fans consume real celebrities rather than fictional storylines or characters. Kristina Busse argues in "I'm Jealous of the Fake Me" (2017) that fanfiction writers writing about real

celebrities often start by writing them as archetypes, constructed from ephemeral traces like interviews. The scholarship on RPF thus highlights the nuances possible in both the fan/content relationship and within fanworks themselves.

In general, the Anglophone literature on fandom has been rather slow in expanding its choice of subjects and disciplinary scopes. Tisha Turk argues in "Interdisciplinarity in Fan Studies" that while an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to study fans, the field right now is more multidisciplinary: unable to connect with alternative sources. Moreover, little attention has been given to cultural products with global audiences. For this reason, I use both English and Japanese sources of theory in this thesis, including Azuma Hiroki's concept of the database from his 2001 book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* and articles about fanfiction from Anglophone scholars (Stein and Busse 2009, Piper 2015, Coppa 2014).

1.1.2.   Digital ecosystems

Although media studies scholars explore the aesthetics associated with the digital, such as David Berry and Michael Dieter's book *Postdigital Aesthetics* (2015) about the reproduction of computer aesthetics into digital visual culture (e.g. pixel art), they often ignore fan practices entirely. Most books on digital aesthetics speak from the position of art history, such as David Banash's *Collage Culture* (2013) or Anna Munster's *Materializing New Media* (2006). Digital practices cannot be adequately discussed without mentioning pop culture phenomena, which include fan practices. Studies that do not mention these phenomena are ignoring the vast majority of interactions that people have with digital aesthetics. Jinying Li argues that our global contemporary visual culture is Superflat: this is the mark of consumerist capitalism, which breaks down the subjectivity of consumers into multiple fragments in order to encourage further consumption. Her approach is based on Azuma Hiroki's *Otaku* (English edition published in 2009). Azuma explains that this fragmentation of consumers' subjectivity is due to the shift from the modern to the

postmodern in the 1990s. He looks at how, during this time, Japanese industry and fan practices shifted from a narrative-based to a character-based model of consumption. What fans value in the postmodern world are characters who can evoke in them the most affect. Affective elements are compiled into databases, making possible the creation of pop culture characters who are engineered to be as popular as possible. If Azuma's concept of the database (with some insights and corrections from Li) can be applied to any pop culture product that deals in affect and capitalism, then it is appropriate for the context of K-Pop. Azuma's theories have not been applied outside of Japanese cultural studies, and the Superflat aesthetic is not a favored topic of research for media scholars. Nevertheless, I argue that these theories can be adapted to provide a novel perspective of K-Pop.

1.1.3. K-Pop and Hallyu studies

The scholarship on K-Pop and Korean cultural products has enjoyed a boom in the past 10 years. I have already mentioned Dal Yong Jin's account of Hallyu 2.0 above; JungBong Choi also identifies a shift in how Hallyu was carried out by the Korean government after the turn of the decade. He goes beyond Jin and coins the term "Hallyu-hwa" to refer to this aggressive promotion of Korean pop culture abroad: "Hallyu-hwa is essentially a "political" movement fueled by the ever-growing influence of Korean popular cultures, mediated by the ethos of neoliberal globalization, and yet compelled by the nation's profound will to power" (49). But Choi identifies a "second wave" that was propelled by fans outside of Korea. Based on his discussion, I hope to clarify what the intersection of both waves looks like. Dal Yong Jin offers some more insights: he has written extensively on the digital economy of Hallyu and has examined the phenomenon across media platforms, in *The New Korean Wave* (2016), *Smartland Korea* (2017), and *Mobile Gaming in Asia* (2019). In this last book, he predicts that the next stage of Hallyu will be carried out over smartphones, which I set out to verify. I also use Michelle Cho's work on "reaction videos" (2017) and

Suk-Young Kim's work on K-Pop hologram concerts (2018) for their methodological insights into the convergence of Korean media and technology, which actively utilizes fan participation. Finally, I also look at theses written by my peers for insights on topics that are not covered by published scholarship today, such as Jungwon Kim's thesis *K-Popping* (2017), an ethnographic study of Korean fan practices.

1.1.4. Body politics

Because K-Pop is highly gendered and riddled with political subtext, setting up a feminist frame to discuss bodies is essential. Bodies, and by proxy all performance arts, transcend language; politics of the body need not be bound to a single country. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that everywhere, bodies are marked by signs of control and struggle. Susan Bordo explores in *Unbearable Weight* (2004) the role of mass media in the promotion of unattainable body standards for females, reproducing racial and patriarchal ideals and causing widespread psychological damage. I also bring in Samantha Murray's work on fat and the female body (2008). This approach is indebted to Michel Foucault's work in the 1970s on the exercise of power over citizens. Foucault conceptualized "deviant" bodies, such as those of medical patients or jail inmates, as sites where political and social constructions could be examined. These cases were used to demonstrate the techniques by which governments kept citizens in check. One of Foucault's conclusions was that capitalist economies employ techniques such as "self-surveillance" to discipline workers. I use Foucault's work, specifically the concept of "techniques of the self," to examine the idol body and the discourses of surveillance surrounding it.

While Bordo's work is about mass media in the United States, she also writes that body ideals can be "exported, imported, and marketed across the globe - just like any profitable commodity" (xxiv). Korean studies scholars use similar methodologies as Western scholars when looking at body politics in Korea. An increasing number of Hallyu scholars

are talking about the problem of the female Korean body, expressing consternation over K-Pop's questionable gender politics and its harmful effects on body image. Stephen Epstein and Rachael Joo's "Multiple Exposure" (2012) and Yeran Kim's "Idol Republic" (2011) both highlight the nation's role in perpetuating gendered body standards in the name of power, while Epstein and Turnbull analyze the sexualization of female idol groups driven by globalization (2014). These works only briefly mention how local and international fans experience these gender politics. Studies that are specifically about international fan practices surrounding Hallyu, like Kyong Yoon's "Transnational Fandom in the Making" (2018), tend to focus on the sociology of fandom rather than its visual or body culture. However, there are Korea studies scholars who have recently written about gender politics in Korean pop culture from a feminist point of view. Lee and Lim's study of slenderness in fashion magazines (2012), Sharon Lee's "Beauty Between Empires" (2016), Yoonso Choi's master's thesis on Korean dieting reality TV shows (2016), and Joanna Elfving-Hwang's work on cosmetic surgery (2013) have put forward the roles of Confucianism and the neoliberal ideology of self-care in shaping what is considered the "correct" appearance of Korean female bodies. I round out these feminist insights with works on clinical psychology, such as Jung and Forbes' cross-cultural study on body dissatisfaction (2007) and Lee et al.'s study on eating disorder behaviors in Korean elementary school students (2018).

1.1.5. Gamification

Paul Booth argues that fan communities, considering their high level of engagement with digital texts and platforms, make great microcosms for studying digital trends before they become mainstream. K-Pop fans, because they do not necessarily have physical access to their favorite artists, use platforms extensively to communicate with them. For example, YouTube has been identified as an important factor in the spread of Hallyu (Cho 2017, Jin 2016). Platforms have significant abilities to track and exploit fan activity in the effort to

develop the platform further. Korean corporations involved in the cultural industry have created their own platforms to mediate the relationship between fan and idol (e.g. search engine company Naver and the live-streaming app V Live). Gamification is also about data tracking, collection, and organization; it refers to the use of gaming tactics to help individuals achieve specific goals with efficiency, but in a joyful way (Whitson 2014). Gamification is ubiquitous among digital technologies, and as such, may affect anyone with a smart device. International fans, who rely heavily on digital media to engage with their idols, are even more likely to resort to gamification in their everyday lives. Dal Yong Jin predicts that mobile games will become an important mediating tool between international fans and K-Pop artists. As Alexander Galloway puts it, "Play is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture. It is the expression of structure" (16). To help me contextualize how K-Pop disseminates certain practices through playul media, specifically practices that involve digital and physical body play, I thus look at scholarship on gaming. There are now countless books (Bogost 2011, Taylor 2012, Frissen et al. 2015) and journals (*Game Studies, Games and Culture,* the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*) dedicated to the subject, as well as many interdisciplinary studies that look at the medium from the point of view of history (Mäyrä 2008), literature (Murray 1997), psychology (Peron and Wolf 2009, Waggoner 2009, Juul 2010), philosophy (Jayenamme 2017), sociology (Embrick 2012), or even nanotechnology (Milburn 2015). However, gaming is not yet studied as widely as its popularity and ubiquity warrants. There is currently no study that explores the intersection of gaming and K-Pop.

1.2.   Organization of the thesis

Because of its emphasis on visuality, K-Pop teaches its audience a "correct" way to look at bodies. It is thus necessary to excavate the discourses and techniques that propagate such ways of looking. I argue that body play, either digitally through editing apps or

physically through diets, is inherently a neoliberal act, and results in a variety of practices that at best question and at worst amplify normative body politics. In the first chapter, I trace the genealogy of digital body play through a survey of "fan edits" found on Tumblr. I argue that digital body play is motivated by a wish to experiment with the personas put forward by idols, which are flat reflections of industry-shaped databases. In the second chapter, I identify how physical body modification techniques are passed on from idol to fan through an examination of current Korean beauty standards, techniques of the self used by idols, and the emergence of fans performing idol diets on YouTube. In the third chapter, I explore in greater detail the role of gamification in shaping the relationship between idols and fans. By looking at especially playful derivative works, namely video and mobile games, I find that fans reproduce certain ideologies of the body while also negotiating their own visual representation within the industry. I conclude with a consideration of the role of idols in databases and a call to consider video game methodologies more broadly in the humanities.

A note about the romanization of Korean words in this thesis. Korean proper names used in promotional content and common fandom terms may already have established romanizations that do not fit a standard accepted by academia. For the sake of consistency with my primary evidence, the romanizations of these words will be left in their most popularized form. For example, while the proper romanization of the Korean word referring to family-run industrial conglomerates would be *jaebol*, I chose to use the spelling *chaebol*, more familiar to Anglophone readers. Other less common non-proper nouns in Korean will be converted according to the Revised Romanization standard.

2. Digital Body Play in the K-Pop Fandom

2.1. Messy edits

Figure 3. Screenshot of an icon set by teteblogie

Who are the "fans" of whom I speak? "K-Pop fan" is a huge umbrella term; just as a casual sports fan might follow the Olympics without sticking to a particular discipline, the term "K-Pop fan" refers to an individual showing appreciation for the music genre as a

whole. As K-Pop is only ever branded as a uniform multimedia performance to foreign audiences, the term "K-Pop fan" implies the exclusion of local Korean fans by definition. I define K-Pop fans therefore as "international," or overseas, fans. International and domestic K-Pop fandoms are radically different, not least in their relations with the Korean pop music industry: while the latter, targeted by Hallyu policies, is tasked with being an ambassador of Korean culture abroad, the former is expected to support the effort domestically (Cho 2017, Kim 162). This leads to vastly different practices: for instance, local fans put more emphasis on buying physical copies of their idol's albums to create revenue for the company and increase visibility in the local market, while international fans show support by attending live concerts held in their country and massively streaming and buying content on digital platforms to increase global visibility. Suk-Young Kim analyzes this strategy when she writes, "In a 2015 white paper, KOCCA suggested that live concerts could be one of the main "short-term strategies" for the K-pop industry to land new overseas markets. This intriguing perspective on live tours implies that long-term strategy would involve sales of digital music, which do not require K-pop artists to go through long hours of travel and extended absence from their home base, where their frequent media presence is required" (162). In this context, international K-Pop fans are marketing tools working alongside entertainment companies to sustain the success of Hallyu abroad, as proxies of the South Korean state. Since these practices take place both online and offline, in a myriad of countries with a myriad of tactics, it would be a herculean task to attempt to model the practices of K-Pop fans as a whole - the fandom is simply too broad to study.

I study the online practices of overseas K-Pop fans (hereafter just "K-Pop fans") because their way of engaging with transcultural media is a window into contemporary digital ecosystems. Fans act as proxies for anyone using digital media and platforms. As I

said earlier, fans' digital practices are in part defined by the soft power inherent in the Hallyu phenomenon. They are also influenced by neoliberal ideologies, as well as the politics of the hardware and software used. To understand these topics, I introduce my first site of study: the fan edit. My approach combines interviews I conducted with edit makers in 2017 and 2019 with visual analyses of said edits.

There is a long history of fans producing artifacts derived from cultural products, from 1960s *Star Trek* fan magazines to Japanese *doujinshi* fanfiction. When it comes to K-Pop, which puts emphasis on both music and performance, the production and consumption of *visual* fanworks predominate. Digital media offers fan communities a wide variety of channels for fanwork interaction, but servers and websites can constrain these interactions. Large fan communities therefore favor platforms that can handle image-heavy publications. User-generated content (UGC) platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, or YouTube all host large fan communities: the code on which they run is built specifically to manage large amounts of pictures or videos. Fans also favor social networking service (SNS) platforms that enable mass communication such as Twitter, Facebook, or Discord. It is important to note that some of these platforms exclude a significant number of K-Pop fans by virtue of being banned in certain countries. For example, none of the aforementioned platforms are available in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China), highlighting "the existence of multiple internets that are determined by language, regulatory measures, software interfaces, and communications infrastructures" (Cho, "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" 244). Keeping in mind my previous point about the size of the K-Pop fandom, these limits curtail the demographic scope of this study.

Because media is affected by the platform to which it is uploaded, studying fanwork is equivalent to studying the platform on which it is found. Here I give a brief introduction to

Tumblr, the platform where many fan edits can be found. Tumblr went live in 2007 under the keyboard of founder David Karp and quickly attracted thousands of users, popularity that was due in part to the crackdown on LiveJournal, the previous fandom-favorite platform. Tumblr was purchased by Yahoo in 2013 for $1.1 billion, then handed off to Yahoo's parent company Verizon when it became apparent the investment would not be fructuous. Finally, Tumblr was sold to Automatic in 2019 for less than $3 million. In spite of these managerial turbulences, Tumblr is still known as the stronghold of fandom, where fans can build intricate networks and intersecting communities. As of February 2020, it hosts 490.6 million blogs. Tumblr is a micro-blogging platform, which means users can upload and tag a limited amount of content on their blog at a time. All uploaded content also goes to a database of images, videos, audio files, and texts. Users can access content either directly from a blog or by browsing the database using tags. Amidst this crowdedness, Tumblr's broadcasting model and tag system help carve out smaller communal spaces. Fan communities on Tumblr are built around tag clusters: as long as a user is able to identify key fandom terms, it is easy to socialize with fellow fans. Lastly, Tumblr's monetized ad-generated revenue system, instituted under Yahoo's ownership, is a feature that cements Tumblr as a platform which mobilizes the consumer gaze of its users.

Beyond simply accessing content, Tumblr also allows users to "reblog" posts. The platform's most salient built-in feature, the "reblog" button allows user A to share user B's post on their own blog (not simply a hyperlink, but the whole post). User A's followers can do the same, triggering "reblog waterfalls." The dissemination of content on Tumblr is therefore unpredictable and potentially endless; the origin of a post is always indicated, but the channels of dissemination disappear into the collective. Louisa Stein argues that this collective authorship model contributes to carving out affective safe spaces: "one fan's

perspective does not seem to stand alone but is supported by potentially hundreds and thousands of likes. Fandom on Tumblr celebrates the possibilities of collective readings, collective critiques, collective creativity, and a collective affect" (92). This "messiness" allows users to transcend boundaries, not only geographical but also between different areas of interest, through their exposure to a variety of topics.

The second important thing to note about Tumblr is the type of post preferred by users. While Tumblr was initially imagined as a traditional blogging platform built to host text-based posts, users adapted the platform to their needs by favoring image-based posts. The median size of a photo post is 29 bytes, indicating a picture without captions, to be consumed on its own (Chang et al. 24). Why are images so prevalent? Tumblr's broadcasting-like model, unusual for a UGC platform, attracts fan communities who rely on images to act as carriers of affect and nodes of interpersonal connection. This mode of fan engagement is native to digital media. Pre-2000s digital communities were constrained to textual interfaces for communication, using mailing lists or instant-relay chat (IRC) channels and relying on analogous methods to spread visual fanworks (Stein and Busse 203). Since the images shared on Tumblr are relatively small, fandom content travels quite a lot between different media and platforms. A fanwork may be uploaded on Tumblr, and then published in a physical or digital fanzine, or re-uploaded (with or without consent from the original creator) to another platform. This system of collective authorship is not restricted to Tumblr but rather a feature of modern digital practices. This disregard for traditional content production has been described by various scholars using the concept of the "carnivalesque" (Booth 2015, Xu and Zhao 2019). Xu and Zhao write, "In the carnival space, polyphonic voices from the participants mark a temporary suspension of the hierarchical social order" (150). In the context of fandom, this means that fans subsume their simple "consumer"

identities, join a collective, and participate in free communication through the inversion of hierarchies like authorial rights. This carnivalesque attitude clashed with the capitalist aims of Tumblr's owner Yahoo, which is perhaps why the company sold the platform to Wordpress.

Edits are an excellent example of the reversal of authorial rights. An "edit," examples of which can be found by browsing the "edit" tag on Tumblr, is an umbrella term referring to GIF sets or still images that have been retouched in some way by the blogger. This could mean something as simple as applying a colored filter over a pre-existing picture or something as complex as creating an elaborate graphic design. I will be looking at a 2019 trend in edits in the K-Pop fandom: "messy edits," also tagged as "messy layouts" or "messy icons." This subgenre of edited pictures circulating in the fandom is mainly intended to be used for personal profile pictures. For instance, in the post below from user flowe20-lqs, we see three square pictures as well as three matching banners, all sized to match the Twitter profile layout (Figure 4).
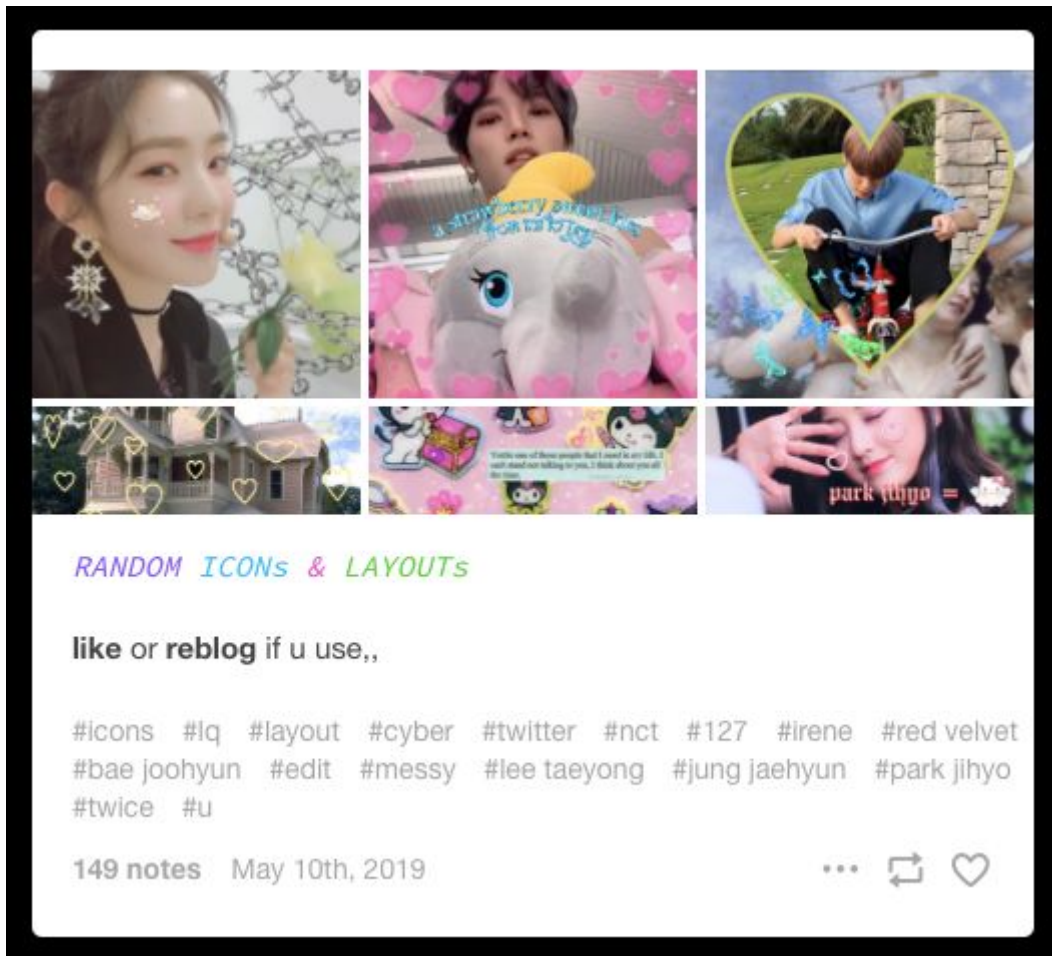
Figure 4. Screenshot of an icon set by flowe20-lqs

Tumblr user messyloves agreed to answer some questions about her editing process when making messy edits. She identifies as a 19-year-old female from the United States and is a fan of a handful of K-Pop groups, although she will take requests from her followers to make icons of any idol. This is how she describes the process of making an edit:

> I start by searching We Heart It for idol pics, sometimes I use Twitter
> or Google. I most look for pictures of idols that have nice colors I
> could use as a color scheme. It's hard to explain because while I'm
> looking at pictures, in my head I'm already editing them because I
> know what kind of stickers, filters and etc I normally use. Also, I'm

constantly looking at ~aesthetic~ photos like the ones I use for

headers so I'm thinking of those pictures while looking for idols pics.

I also use words like "cottagecore, webcore, kidcore, soft, messy,

cyber, cyber ghetto, etc." to find pictures and stickers. After I've

found pictures I mainly use Picsart to edit them! I think it's the best

app for edits, also this wasn't that brief I'm sorry!

As messyloves explains, an "edit" is fundamentally a picture that has been altered with editing software. In the K-Pop fandom, edits are based on a picture of an idol's face, or more rarely an idol's whole body, with added elements. In the true spirit of the carnivalesque, all images are procured from ambiguous sources and credit is rarely given.

In the case of 2019 messy icons, the whole process starts with a Tumblr user requesting a set of icons of a specific idol directly from a maker. The work is always free, save for the cost of a "please" written in the request, which was listed as a requirement by all the makers I interviewed. Some makers will make icons for a single group exclusively, but most will not discriminate as long as specific aesthetics are requested. The idol picture chosen as the base of the edit is usually a selfie or a close-up of a face, to cater to the demand for profile pictures, although pictures of different body parts are also widely distributed (for instance, close-ups of hands that cater to more erotic tastes). Base pictures are chosen with a focus on the idol's attractiveness as well as whether the picture's composition can be molded to different aesthetics and narratives. These base pictures can commonly be found on idols' social media accounts such as Instagram or Twitter. The presence of copyright or logos on the picture does not deter fans from cropping it out. Base pictures can also be accessed by browsing image databases, in which case the original picture has already been taken out of its context by someone else, and perhaps even already edited. Once chosen, the maker uploads

the base picture to an editing application, where additional images ("stickers," or transparent PNGs that are accessed in-app or imported by the user themselves) can be pasted on top of it. Available stickers range from chains to teddy bears to multi-colored hearts. The results might sometimes seem excessive: multiple subjectivities are expressed through messy edits, creating an infinite amount of personas for consumers to choose from. Part of the appeal of making edits is to find the most interesting stickers. One can encounter surprising themes, such as "anime edits" that feature cropped photos of orgasming hentai characters' faces pasted on top of an idol's face like a mask (Figure 5). Regardless of the maker's own opinions, requests are usually honored with no comment.

Figure 5. Screenshot of an icon set by c-andyluv

In the majority of cases, editing apps are available on mobile phones, which makes them more accessible than expensive and complex desktop software like Adobe Photoshop. The editor flowe20-lqs mentioned using PicsArt and Polarr, apps that are marketed as enabling ordinary mobile phone users to unleash their creative potential. The parent companies of these two apps are based in California and have attracted millions of dollars in

investments despite their relatively low profile. They are now in the market for artificial intelligence products.

The next step of the messy icon process is for the editor to upload the finished edit on their blog. Unlike most platforms, Tumblr has multiple channels of communication available to bloggers: anonymous one-way public "asks," private non-anonymous messages, or comments. This way, an edit maker can get real-time feedback on their work and keep tabs on community preferences. With the editor's work done, the picture is then downloaded by users to use as they see fit on any platform. Some might use the icons to customize their own Twitter profiles, others to set up avatars on various other SNS platforms, and still others might simply consume the picture privately.

A note on the demographics of edit makers: edits are a major form of fan engagement for fans around the world, which can be understood from the languages used by edit makers on their blogs (although all interviews were conducted in English). Of the makers interviewed in 2017, two were Americans, one was Australian, and one was Vietnamese. They all identified as female and were born in the 1990s. The edit makers I interviewed in 2019 were slightly younger, with half of them being born in the 2000s. Four were from South America (Brazil and Chile) and one was American. It is natural that these countries are represented amongst edit makers, considering the popularity of K-Pop in these regions, but the demographics of the K-Pop fandom on Tumblr does not reflect the fandom's actual diversity. For instance, the Tumblr fandom does not account for the large fanbases in China and in South Korea. This is not surprising, as Tumblr is banned in China and has to answer to the heavy-handedness of the Korean Communications Standards Commission in South Korea on account of the site's pornography subculture (Cho, "Tumblr to Cooperate with

Korean Authorities to Monitor Porn"). It is yet unclear how Tumblr's December 2018 ban on adult content has altered the platform's legal relationship with these countries.

From my two sets of interviews, I conclude that the production process of 1) scavenging a base image, 2) editing and adding stickers, and 3) uploading for consumption has remained consistent despite changes in edit trends. From 2013 to 2015, the majority of edits in circulation were images of idols photoshopped to appear in a *pastel* palette with a romantic, flowery arsenal of add-ons. These were made with desktop software because mobile apps did not yet allow such a level of editing. Using Photoshop was still the norm for the makers I interviewed in 2017. As such, some of the most skilled edit makers were more akin to graphic editors than casual creators.

Figure 6. Pastel edit by chimchins

Figure 7. Icon by messyloves

Here are two edits found on Tumblr: the first is a "pastel edit" (Figure 6) and the second a "messy edit" (Figure 7). The first picture is based on a fan-taken photograph of J-Hope of the boyband BTS, taken at a fansign event. Because the background has been cut out, the photographer's credits are not visible. The color palette of the picture has been edited to give it a brighter, cooler tint, so that J-Hope's appearance matches the chosen background color. However, it is also common for fan photographers to lightly edit their pictures to erase imperfections and lighten skin color. This picture thus illustrates how collective authorship functions in the fandom. The maker also added lines on J-Hope's cheeks, a reference to Japanese shoujo manga signifiers for "blushing," which (to the trained viewer) instantly categorizes the character as a cute and/or flustered youth. If we compare this to the 2019 messy edit of the same idol, we see that there is genealogical continuity in both the composition (close-up of the face, square dimensions, layered add-ons) and the use of visual character tropes (in 2019, it is rainbow hearts that are used to convey "cuteness").

One major aesthetic evolution comes from the type of base picture selected. Because idols were slightly less active on social media in the first half of the decade, the base pictures for pastel edits mostly came from fansites. Fansites refer to the personal websites of fans who, as amateur photographers, would follow an idol to his or her public appearances (at a concert, at the airport, etc.) in order to take and distribute high-quality pictures. Geographic constrictions meant that fansite administrators were predominantly Korean fans; edits were therefore a site of intersection between local and international fandoms. Fansites are still highly visible agents in fandom, but thanks to the proliferation of direct-access content (for instance through apps like V Live, launched in 2015), edit makers now tend to favor images that feature the idol in a more "natural" environment than the blank walls of a performance hall. Indeed, the main difference between the two edits above is that while "pastel edit" makers wanted to isolate an idol from their environment to convey a single recognizable aesthetic, "messy edit" makers seem to prefer to preserve the organic-ness of the picture. In the first half of the decade, fansite photographers provided the most direct link between overseas fans and their idols, at the marginal cost of an internet connection. Photoshopped or not, the authenticity of these pictures were widely acknowledged, but they do not compare to the affective closeness afforded by 2019's live-streams.

Additionally, the declining need among international fans for fansites has coincided with corporate *and* fandom efforts to limit infringements on idols' privacy. The number of fansite photographers who follow an idol around is slowly declining, regulations are being propagated on fan club websites, and idols are becoming active on an increasing number of social media platforms. Most idols now have Instagram accounts (a rare occurrence five years ago) and a small portion are even part-time YouTubers. This is not to say that idols did not interact online with their fans prior to the widespread use of these apps, but they used

local platforms that international fans did not have access to. For instance, in her study of Korean fan practices, Jungwon Kim writes, "[Korean] fans have created their own communities, also known as 'cafes,' in Korean major portal sites, such as NAVER and DAUM. In many cases, K-pop labels make use of these cafes as their stars' official fan clubs, having the stars registered as members of the fan cafes. Sometimes, the stars post greetings to the fan cafes" (68). Signing up for a café membership is not free and the process is very difficult without knowledge of the Korean language. Most overseas fans therefore do not have access to official fan clubs, once the most basic channel of fan-idol communication. As a result, international fans relied on fansites to get pictures of their idols, a need now fulfilled in other ways as idols post content on more widely accessible apps.

A third trend in edits became popular from 2015 onwards: collage-graphic edits in hyper-saturated darker palettes. While these pictures do feature idols' bodies, remediation of the bodies themselves is minimal. To a certain degree, the aesthetic of these collages match those of MVs released after 2015: as seen in the example below, BTS' 2017 "DNA" MV (Figure 8) displays the same color palette as the 2017 edit of BTS member Jimin (Figure 9). However, as MVs from the first part of the decade did not adhere particularly to the pastel aesthetic, I cannot draw a clear connection between fan and industry aesthetics. However, it is safe to say that MVs remain a consequential source of inspiration for fanworks.

Figure 8. Screenshot of the MV for BTS' "DNA"

Figure 9. Edit by mangatteok

Fan aesthetics do not develop in a vacuum. General trends also seem to influence fan edits. In terms of aesthetics, the genealogy of "messy edits" can clearly be drawn back to the TikTok-based "e-girl" trend. This past summer's hottest teenage micro-celebrity

phenomenon (at least in the English-speaking world), "e-girl" refers to a fashion style favored by teenage micro-celebrities on TikTok (a Chinese mobile video platform) and Instagram. The style recycles multiple aesthetics from all corners of 2000s and 2010s cyberculture, from MySpace emo style to Harajuku fashion (Figure 10). Unlike other subcultures, e-girls and e-boys are *only* visible online through the heavy mediation of UGC apps. In contrast to the high offline visibility of goth subculture, e-girls only ever wear the full attire when creating content for TikTok or Instagram. "E-girls" are less a subculture and more a trend about flaunting clout and making an impact on online audiences by turning oneself into a spectacle (which is why elements coded as "subversive" are used almost excessively). Messy edits feature the same stickers used by e-girls, such as chains, gothic scripts, cute animal stickers, and anime faces. I suggest that the K-Pop fandom is using this popular trend to connect their particular fandom with a wider community, which also serves the purpose of normalizing certain fan practices. The main difference between the two subcultures is that while they both play on appearances, K-Pop messy edits never use the maker's own face, but rather an idol's. To someone unfamiliar with K-Pop celebrities, a messy edit might even look like a picture that was created and uploaded by the person in the picture themselves. What the edit maker is sharing is not an individual brand, but a trendy mask that can be used by anyone at any time.

Figure 10. Screenshot of an Instagram post by user escty

2.2. Superflat

The essence of the fan edit aesthetic thus appears to be "playfulness." The maker plays around with images scavenged from databases and creatively arranges them like 2D building blocks on a flat screen, breaking the integrity of those images. Many details and colors are added without concerns for perspective, turning the final product into a depthless flat surface. This preference for messiness and flatness, exacerbated by e-girls and messy edits, is already a staple of 21st-century visual culture, where the blurring between edited and unedited pictures are common. Figure 11 shows a picture of the idol Sunmi standing in front of a stage screen during a concert. It is an unedited photograph, but might be mistaken for a messy edit at first glance because of the pro-lesbian message on the banner (the type of content typically favored by fan activists on Tumblr) and the use of warning tape (reminiscent of e-girl and messy edits aesthetics). Indeed, the eye of the modern consumer is

trained to see pictures displayed on screens as an arrangement of pixels, and thus as probably touched-up. This phenomenon has been coined by Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold as the New Aesthetic: it "refers to situations where imageries and structures that are usually associated with the digital networked computer are superimposed on – or leak out into – the physical world" (271).

Figure 11. Picture taken at Sunmi's concert in Paris

What broader concepts are these "imageries associated with the digital world" indebted to? I find Li Jiying's analysis of the Superflat the most adequate theorization of today's digital visual scape. The term was initially coined by artist Murakami Takashi to

describe his own work, which he claims is influenced by Japanese visual styles like Edo-period prints and manga. But for Li, the term Superflat is not confined to the Japanese visual landscape but is rather an omnipresent global visual mode. Li traces the genealogy of Superflat to "flat" technologies such as TV screens or smartphones as well as superplanar artistic styles like Japanese anime, in which "the image is densely packed with too many complex layers that all appear equal and without hierarchy" (206). "Superplanar" is an adjective that also applies to the plethora of Hollywood action movies that liberally aestheticize screens, such as 1982's *Blade Runner* (210). These three events converge in the 21st century to produce flat visual fields, where shapes are organized into a larger picture like pixels on a screen, without depth. Li finds this aesthetic offline (in billboard-saturated spaces like Times Square) as well as online (think of Facebook posts floating on a users' walls). Tumblr also favors the Superflat aesthetic: there is no hierarchy to the display of posts and no perspective to the organization of content accessible to users (Figure 12). When a post features multiple images, the user only has to hover their mouse over the post for all the images to appear over each other successively. As Li demonstrates, a single screen is actually a multitude of windows.
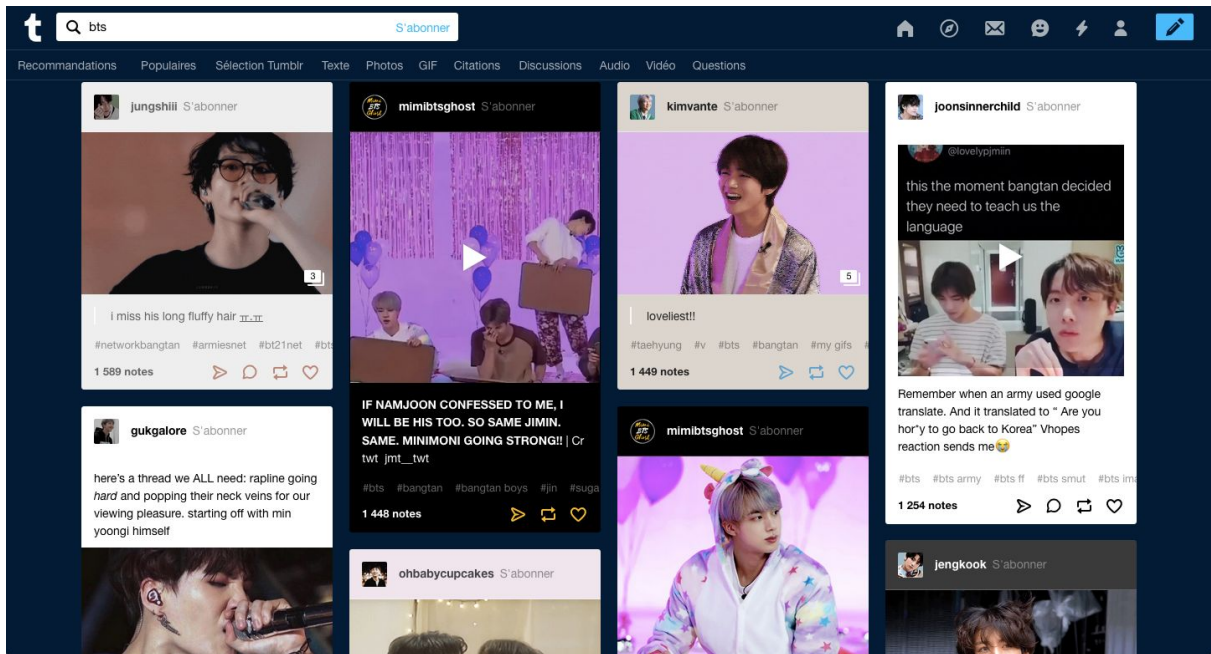
Figure 12. Screenshot of the results of the search for the tag "BTS" on Tumblr

That visual cultures are flat is no surprise; Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat* introduced the concept to the general public as early as 2005. Friedman wrote that digitization enabled virtually anyone with an Internet connection to access and manipulate files, films or pictures on a computer screen. But what specifically shapes the Superflat aesthetic? Li argues that Superflat is the perfect vehicle for consumerist capitalism. She theorizes that the Superflat perspective, because of its visual cacophony, invites a new way of looking, and thus the formation of new subjects capable of reading complex screens. She writes that users of digital media have to take on an active role when looking at their screens, and that this role is mobilized by consumer capitalism. By simply looking at a picture on a screen, the viewer is presented with entire databases of alternative products to consume. This could take the form of direct advertisement, as present on virtually all platforms, or user-sponsored commodity fetishism (as seen in Figure 10, the "e-girls" trend generously promotes the business of metal band tees). By virtue of being enabled by profit-seeking capitalist platforms, the consumption of Superflat content is bound to encourage users to

consume even more. Under the Superflat ideology, the consumption of free content made by K-Pop fans eventually encourages the consumption of other associated K-Pop products, such as fashion items worn by idols, access to premium content on platforms such as V Live, concert tickets, or even intangible goods like the Korean language (Choi 35). It is in both the platforms' interest and the Korean entertainment industry's interest to continue to mobilize the consumer's gaze by promoting Superflat aesthetics.

Li concludes her article by stating, "Through the virtual shopping window of the Internet, our gaze and subjectivity is not just flattened and decentered, it is *databased and computerized*. And the widespread superflat vision in the cyber-age may well be a manifestation of such a databased self" (216). Superflat is therefore connected not only to consumerism but also to postmodernism: Li links the fragmentation of the consumerist gaze in Superflat to the postmodern fragmentation of the self.

Broadly, Superflat is related to capitalist ideology through the digitization and commodification of culture. Superflat is also a product of the shift to postmodernity. Part of Li's analysis is based on Japanese *otaku* theorist and critic Azuma Hiroki. Azuma is concerned with the shift in pop culture that he observed in 1990s Japan. He argues, "Otaku culture beautifully reflects the social structure of postmodernity on two points - the omnipresence of simulacra and the dysfunctionality of grand narratives" (29). Azuma finds that stories before the 1990s were concerned with exploring a "grand narrative," while stories after the 1990s were rather fragmented and centered around characters rather than narratives. His explanation pinpoints postmodernity as the reason for this shift. To illustrate his point, Azuma analyzes how *otakus* 1) appropriate elements from character designs to build their own visual databases, in order to 2) create their own derivative works with the scavenged data. He writes, "Independently and without relations to an original narrative, consumers in the 1990s consumed only such fragmentary illustrations or settings; and this different type of

consumption appeared when the individual consumer *empathy* toward these fragments strengthened" (36, emphasis mine). In other words, rather than being interested in storylines, postmodern fans fetishize character designs. Content producers started mashing up fragments of characters ("*chara-moe*") to create new alluring characters, and *otaku* followed suit, collecting them and creating their own works in turn. Azuma calls both industry and fan-made works "derivative works," "works presented as simulacra, which are created as a combination of arbitrarily chosen fragments in the database extracted from the settings of the original" (82). Networked computers are central to this process of extraction, database creation, and fan community formation, as it enables unskilled fans to create derivative works that are just as authentic as official ones. Indeed, "characters are results of sampling and combining popular elements from recent *otaku* culture, as if to downplay the authorship of the designer" (42). In the vocabulary of Azuma, Superflat works are the *reflection* of postmodern databases. Azuma's thoughts on Japanese popular media also apply to the case of international K-Pop fans. My interviews with edit makers showed that fan artists extensively use communal databases (of idols' body parts, stickers, etc.) to try and create personas filled with affect to please other fans. The content they produce is a flat reflection of the original product that uses countless other databases of affective elements.

Superflat ideology can also be seen in the neoliberal co-optation of fan artists by the K-Pop industry. Idol management companies take advantage of fanwork disguised as "play" to boost their revenue. PJ Rey explains that the post-Fordist world is ruled by a creeping neoliberalism that manipulates workers during and outside of work hours into being "productive." By playing with Superflat databases and consuming more and more K-Pop content, K-Pop fans are incorporated into a neoliberal economy. Indeed, "the subjects of post-Fordist capitalism have demonstrated general acceptance of exploitation, and even manipulation, just so long as they are spared alienation" (Rey 2014). The limits between

what is non-alienating and what is a source of profit are blurred, since leisure time is associated with consumption and fun work and profit (for fans) is rarely monetary. Edit makers usually cite "being acknowledged by the fandom" as the reason they post their work online, even beyond personal satisfaction. C-andyluv self-deprecatingly refers to herself and other edit makers as "edit-machines" and regrets the lack of feedback she gets, despite the fact that the posts on her blog have been liked or reblogged more than 88,000 times. Her remark suggests that neoliberalism is present throughout the creation of edits: edgy content is fetishized while fan labor is erased.

Although Murakami coined the term Superflat in relation to a "Japanese subjectivity," the preponderance of Superflat aesthetics in K-Pop fanworks illustrates the fact that theories are not necessarily confined to specific national subjectivities. Consequently, Azuma's theories about *otaku* might also be applied elsewhere, to other fans. While Azuma took fictional characters as his object of research, he suggests that idols may also be products of the logic of the database, even though they possess real physical bodies. By this logic of the database, K-Pop official content exists on the same level as fanworks. In the next section, I examine how fans' engagement with Superflat aesthetics and databases are indebted to industry practices.

2.3.   Brokering role of the K-Pop industry

In this section, I argue that the K-Pop industry brokers the relationship between fans and capitalist consumerism by defining the parameters of the databases of idol bodies and aesthetics that fans tap into in order to make their own derivative works. I find that for all that databases deal in virtual data, the physical body sits at the center of them.

The K-Pop industry first enables the commodification of idol bodies, the central pillar on which the database rests. The commodification of idol bodies is done by flattening their

identities and appearances, turning them into blank semantic spaces waiting to be assigned specific meanings. This starts with the erasure of their personal identity in order to perform an assigned, crafted role without friction, although senior groups are allowed more leniency in appearing authentic. Yeran Kim reports that "the success or failure of any one idol group in the market depends on how existing (familiar and even banal) elements are mixed, including sexual, musical and subcultural codes, and formulated to create an innovative and attractive image of each idol" (338). Thus, the authenticity of the idol has to be superficially flattened so that other marketable traits can take over. Up until recently, it was common to have members of a group fill different roles, such as "the 4D (quirky) one," the cute *maknae* (youngest), the responsible leader, etc. Upstream, there are legal techniques employed to that effect, such as strict employment contracts preventing idols from expressing certain opinions publicly or engaging in romantic relationships.

Figure 13. Screenshot of the 2009 MV "Genie" by Girls' Generation

Idols' bodies are also flattened visually. Up until the beginning of the 2010s, this was done by treating bodies as cogs in a highly ornamental machine. Music videos, the main

entry point into K-Pop for many international fans, often featured sequences of bodies dressed identically and dancing in unison (see Figure 13). Each member is virtually interchangeable, but at the same time there is tremendous pressure on each individual to manage their bodies in order to play their part. For instance, Girls' Generation members were expected to maintain slender legs to maintain their popularity, especially abroad (Epstein and Joo 15). Over the decade, this style has been replaced with a Superflat aesthetic. Idol groups started experimenting with different concepts for each new comeback; a successful group could have dozens throughout their career. The boyband EXO, from the powerhouse management company SM Entertainment, has successively posed as superpowered aliens, werewolves, and football players. MVs also started being less visually coherent so as to be more favorable to experimenting with personas via an effusion of affective elements.

The following screenshots of three MVs by popular artists illustrate how K-Pop producers started to blend commodified flat bodies with Superflat visual elements to create an effect of artful messiness. In Figure 14, each TWICE member is wearing a costume from a different concept, with no overall coherence whatsoever apart from making the girls look "cute." In Figure 15, the EXO members are trapped in an arcade game. In Figure 16, Lee Hi spends a day as a console game character. These MVs feature elements like superimposed planes, computer windows, and colorful pixels, all falling under the umbrella of a "cyber" aesthetic reminiscent of Superflat. The idols are also outfitted from a database of trendy clothes (Lee Hi alone goes through more than 10 costume changes). The idols navigate these constructed spaces seamlessly, turning their physical appearances into another layer in this visual cacophony. Meanwhile, the striking (and sometimes confusing) aesthetics do not always reflect the narrative in the song's lyrics.[1] Instead, the visual spectacle diffracts the

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[1] Specifically, there is a disconnect between the lyrics and visuals of EXO's "Love Me Right" MV (Figure 15). The lyrics of the two others, particularly Lee Hi's song (Figure 16) about holding hands, do match the aesthetic.

attention of the watcher in so many directions that he or she navigates the MV only superficially (Figure 15 is especially fast-paced). After watching MVs in such a style, the viewer may only remember the playful experience, the vibe, maybe some specific shots, but not necessarily the whole picture. The overall experience of watching a colorful spectacle leaves the viewer with a feeling of fleetingness, assuaged by re-watching the video again and again, and looking for more content (official or fan-made). The MV's flat visualization of the idol group eclipses even the upstream efforts to flatten idol bodies that created the product in the first place. Therefore, what makes up the K-Pop database are not the physical and institutional efforts behind the enterprise but rather the flat reflections put forward by the industry.

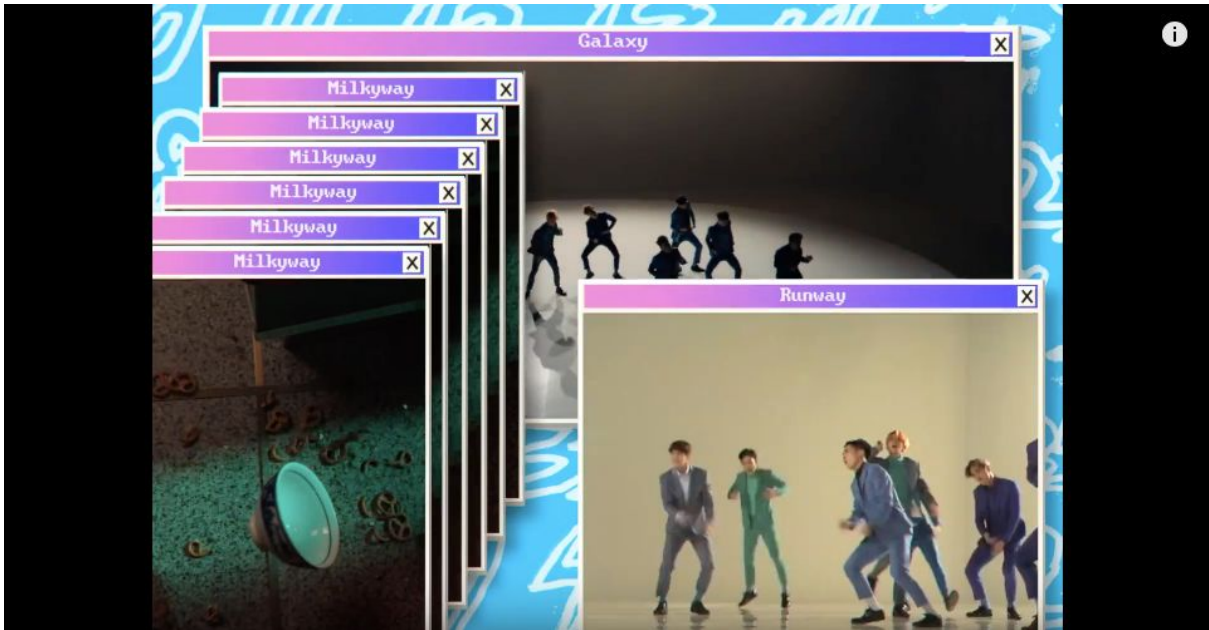Figure 14. Screenshot of TWICE's "AVENGERS" (2016)

Figure 15. Screenshot of EXO's "Love Me Right ～romantic universe～" (2015)

Figure 16. Screenshot of Lee Hi's "손잡아 줘요 (HOLD MY HAND)" (2016)

Although I argued in the previous section that fans do not always follow MV trends to the letter when making edits, I think that fans and the industry both use the database approach. Visually, K-Pop incites fans to value and reproduce the Superflat aesthetic in their derivative works. As the ongoing popularity of edits shows, this is quite successful. Idol management companies provide digitized blank bodies to which fans are free to add

whatever stickers they wish. The playfulness and the deskilling of the process invites more remediation and more play with bodies. With both industry and fan artists at work to expand the database, fans can consume whatever small narratives they want through multiple channels. Flatness is thus used to incite consumption. In this sense, it can be argued that K-Pop brokers a neoliberal capitalist ideology to its consumers.

A point that Azuma does not clearly explore is how the element of play is at work in the use of databases to create derivative works. Azuma focuses on the affect (*moe*) that drives and ties together the *otaku* community. But in fandoms as large as K-Pop, where fans practicing fannishness seem to fetishize aesthetics or software over idols, affect might not be what ties the community together. Paul Booth writes in *Playing Fans* that "for the fans described in my book, popular culture texts exist as pieces in a game, allowing fans to play with different aspects of the cult media world" (41). The product is not a transformation of the original text, but rather a makeover, a mirror of the ideologies of the text, a way of testing its boundaries. Messy edits are quite striking when encountered for the first time: the viewer doesn't know where to look or how to guess as to their purpose. Similarly, it is hard to navigate fast-paced MVs with an overload of movement and colors. Edit makers thus negotiate the meaning of the original text by playing with its Superflat style and reproducing messiness in their own works. By consuming works built from Superflat fragments, they create their own databases of affective elements and create derivative works extremely close to, if not cut from the same cloth, as the "original." The fan is thus not necessarily a fan of the idol in the edit, but rather of the database or the editing technology. With the normalization of these editing practices, we may be overestimating the extent to which the term "K-Pop fan" is an umbrella term. A practice that looks "fannish" might instead be about *trying out* the identity of a fan, from the safe space of digital media. Such "try-out fans" form "cloakroom/carnival communities" (Bauman in Booth 170), which meet around spectacles

and generate multiple meanings so that fans can pick and choose "to inhabit whichever identity seems appropriate at the moment" (Booth 170). The production and consumption of edits indicates that the overseas K-Pop fandom identity can be modeled by the concept of the deceptive carnivalesque cloak.

2.4.   Conclusion

With Superflat comes the idea that all digital images are interchangeable. With regard to edits, the appearance of an idol can be transformed in style and meaning while still retaining a surface sense of integrity. There are endless databases of pictures of idols in all kinds of positions and outfits that are easily accessible with an internet connection. Professional skill is not required to cut out body parts, change skin color, or add body modifications. The "raw" body of the idol is a highly sought-after fetishized commodity, but once acquired, it becomes intangible, meaningless. After undergoing a semantic and syntactic transformation, the body becomes the flat surface from which a myriad of fragments can be extracted. To these commodified body-bases, edit makers add additional commodities, each with their own semantic code. The result is a mix-and-match of semantically overloaded personas: "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung 190). These personas do not match any one person's identity: not the edit maker, not the consumer, nor the idol. They are empty facades that make visible the database they were made from. Playing around with personas allows fans to enjoy testing the semantic and stylistic boundaries of a familiar text to see if it might fit their own perceived identities, which is why messy edits are attractive as avatars on SNS platforms. It does not necessarily mean that fanworks are transgressive, as first-wave fan scholars have argued; in the case of Superflat edits, fans are actually reproducing industry practices. Fanwork is thus a mirror in

which we can clearly see industry ideologies (keep on consuming and commodifying bodies) as well as other, extraneous information (we certainly know too much about that fan that requested hentai Jungkook icons). Sometimes, we come full circle when the industry begins appropriating fan practices: for instance, the cover for Paper Magazine's "Break the Internet" 2019 issue featuring BTS makes use of a large amount of Lisa Frank stickers (Figure 17). This creative choice was deemed appropriate by Paper Magazine's digital director Justin T. Moran because both Lisa Frank and BTS encourage their fans to express themselves freely and creatively ("Why Lisa Frank Was Part of BTS' Paper Magazine Spread" 1:29).

Figure 17. Cover of *Paper Magazine*'s 2019 "Break the Internet" issue, featuring BTS

3.   Playful Neoliberal Self-care & K-Pop

3.1.   Bodies at the center of the database

Figure 18 Banner of the BTS World Official Twitter account

The same process of databasification is used in regard to the personalities of idols in merchandise and derivative products. Idols' identities are commodified in the name of coherence, making idols resemble fictional characters at times. Here I use the example of the mobile game *BTS World* to illustrate how idols' public personalities are patchworked together from different sources. The game is also an excellent visualization of the seamless combination of fragmented bodies *and* personalities for which the K-Pop industry strives.

BTS World is an adventure game developed by Takeone Company Corp and released by Netmarble in August 2019, accompanied by an original album produced by BTS' management company Big Hit Entertainment. Big Hit and Netmarble tightened their bond through this release: in 2018, Netmarble spent $190 million to acquire a 25.71% stake in Big Hit, making it the company's second largest shareholder behind the chairman himself (Lim 2018). In *BTS World*, the player travels back in time to 2012, takes up the mantle of a not-yet-debuted-BTS' manager, and is tasked with developing the members' skills to recreate the success of present-time BTS. The plot unfolds as the player obtains cards to pass levels, a very slow process necessitating long hours of "grinding," or in-game purchases. The

gameplay follows the style of visual novels, with long story sequences introducing each level's challenges, alternating with actual card-playing. Throughout the game, the player is able to "communicate" with the BTS members via text messages and phone and video calls. With each interaction, the player is presented with a couple of possible answers, which do not affect the development of the plot, but affect how many points the player gets (Figure 19). The rule of thumb is that the player should choose the answer that the character wants to hear: considering the typical teen romance plotline, in which the manager feels sometimes more akin to a romantic interest than a coworker, this amounts to choosing the most flirty, female-coded answer.
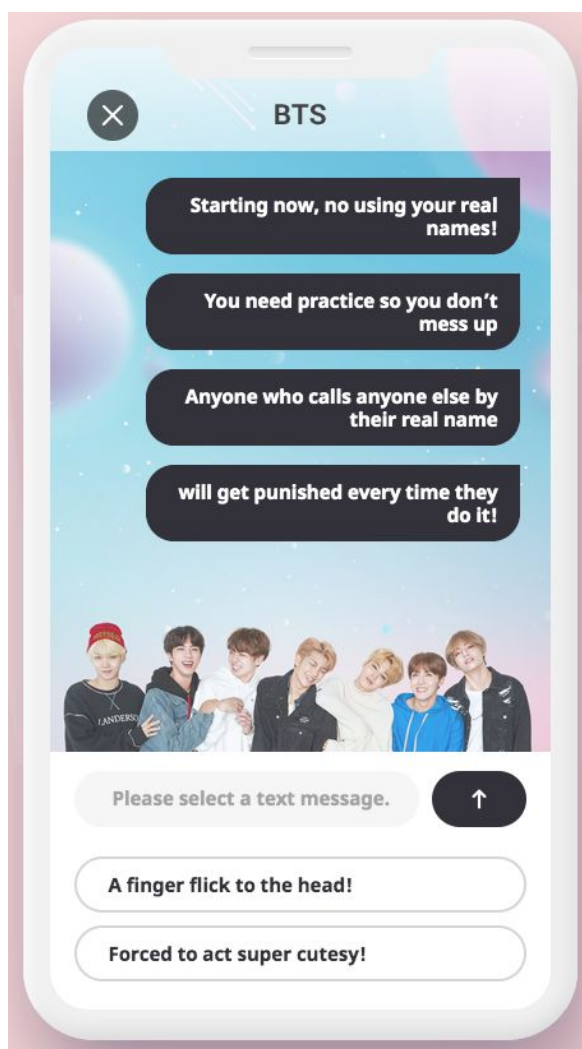
Figure 19. Screenshot of the *BTS World* preview

What makes *BTS World* different from other celebrity games is the use of photographs and videos of the members (Figure 20) instead of animated characters. The real BTS members also reported that their respective characters were greatly inspired by their own personalities ("The Making of BTS WORLD" 0:30). All in all, *BTS World* was marketed as bringing BTS as close as possible to the fans. Yet the characterizations seem to draw inspiration from a variety of sources outside of the members' "real" personalities. Some of this inspiration comes from the character archetypes in *BTS Universe*, a multimedia franchise that includes music videos (of which segments are used to introduce the members in the mobile game), a webtoon, and novels. The in-universe characters have the same names and faces as the real members, but fictionalized personalities. For instance, Min Yoongi plays the role of the "resident bad boy": with a devil-may-care attitude, he throws up middle fingers in his "Agust D" music video and punches other members in the music video for "Run." These *BTS Universe* archetypes are also present in *BTS World*: the character Min Yunki almost runs over his manager with his motorcycle and has a rude confrontation with them over creative license. The appeal of using repeated and intertextual archetypes in the BTS franchise is that it makes identifying the members easy for new fans and provides a sense of familiarity and continuity for older fans who come back for new releases. Unlike previously mentioned groups, BTS does not play with new concepts and personas. The prevalence of reified archetypes does not mean that fans are uninterested in the "real" personalities of the members, but these archetypes are easier to grasp than the ephemeral clues to the "real" that are gleaned from SNS posts or interviews.

Figure 20. Screenshot of *BTS World*

However, some of these "real" snippets are also included in the *BTS World* characterization. To go back to the example of Min Yunki, his ability to hole up in his studio for days on end is inspired by the real Min Yoongi's habits, as reported in a TV segment about the making of their song "DNA" ("[Eng Sub] 방탄소년단 BTS DNA Comeback 092117 - Suga's DNA/Studio" 1:32). The progression of the *BTS World* storyline also follows the actual path that BTS took in their coming-together as a group: for instance, the first levels of the game, which are about convincing the members to sign a contract with Big Hit Entertainment, recreate the same circumstances under which the members were actually scouted. The *BTS World* characterization therefore seems to be a mix of both "real life" and "BTS Universe" elements, familiar to fans who have already integrated these elements into

the "real BTS characterization." As there would be no use in including "real" personality snippets that fans would not be able to recognize, the extent to which the *BTS World* members are "real" is seriously limited. Some brand new *fictional* personality fragments are included due to the novelty of having the members interact with their manager; to this day, Big Hit's management style remains a mystery to many people outside the company. To sum up, *BTS World* presents the BTS members as "real," but in fact their personalities are partly authentic and partly fandom lore that has been taught to fans by Big Hit over the years. *BTS World* makes use of certain fragments from these personality trait databases in the hope that the final product will please fans. Once again, different identity fragments are mixed to create a derivative work with a blurred sense of authorship.

Despite all of these theories about characterization, the *bodies* of the characters are unapologetically branded as "real." In the context of video games, "real" means "non-animated." When creating characters for video games, developers have to consider bodies from a purely aesthetic perspective. Alex Lehmann, a Riot Game senior character animator, says that "the most important thing to consider as a game developer is how the character moves and how it feels… What if I show personality while he's running. What if he's touching his hair or readjusting his armor" (Owens 2017). Much ink has been spilled in criticizing the types of bodies visible in video games, especially in pointing out which body types remain unseen, such as women of color (Chess 2019, Embrick 2012, Jayemanne 2017, Patti 2017, Robson 2018). Characters in video games are most known for *moving* rather than having emotions or personalities. This is what Jayemanne refers to as "argot plastique": "emphasized salient features that act as integral framing devices" akin to caricatures (25). Having a *moving* body is thus what defines a video game character. However, in *BTS World*, the bodies of the members are both real and unanimated, bypassing the problem of infusing life into characters via appearance or motion but also opening new reflections on

embodiment. The BTS members appear either as static photographs or cut-out dolls which players can dress up (Figure 21) or as moving people in film segments. We have seen that personality-wise the *BTS World* members are almost cartoonish; physically-wise they are unanimated flat surfaces. *BTS World* set the embodiment standard in idol games as still and flat (if realistic) bodies paired with flat personalities, inescapably subordinated to the game's algorithm. This decision makes sense since *BTS World* is aimed at fans, who expect the characters' appearances to match the real BTS members as closely as possible in order to comfortably enjoy the game. To make the gaming experience as frictionless as possible, the BTS members end up like cutouts slid between the virtual pages of the game.
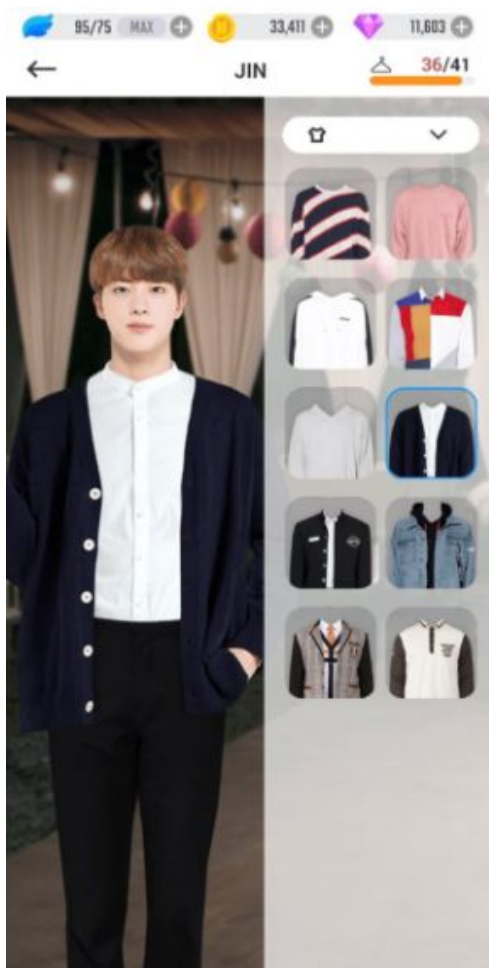

Figure 21. Screenshot from *BTS World*

Pasting patchwork personalities on top of real photographs reveals the extent to which databases were used in the process of making *BTS World*, but it also reveals a hiccup. Although the members in the game are supposed to be from 2012 (the game goes to great lengths to justify this), the photographs are from 2019: they do not match what the members looked like in 2012, neither in hair color nor style (Figure 22). The photographs seem randomly pulled from a database of interchangeable BTS bodies. It adds a layer of dissonance to the game that the player is expected to ignore. In a way, the characters from 2012 are invisible, made of a disembodied amalgamation of personality fragments with a random face pasted on it.

Figure 22. Meme of the *BTS World* character design

The porous public identities of the BTS members make them particularly adept at this kind of digital mobility. If we compare the fact that idols' actual bodies change significantly between one comeback and the next due to dieting, cosmetic surgery, or simply applying a different aesthetic, to the fact that fans make digital changes to these bodies in their artworks,

we can say that "the digital and the real are no longer phenomenologically separable entities" (Kim 141). For international fans who might only ever see idols as pixels on a screen, physical and digital bodies are inextricably entangled; Suk-Young Kim argues that "idols already exist in the pixel world of digital media apart from tangible reality, and therefore any attempts to distinguish real bodies from digital bodies, and 2-D bodies from 3-D bodies, inevitably lead to futility" (156). For the *BTS World* players, the game body is the same body they see in promotional pictures and MVs, and therefore just as real - if not more - than the physical body living in South Korea.

Following this logic, the BTS members *are* characters to a certain extent. While most fans make a point to distinguish the two, as exemplified by Figure 22, does one outweigh the other in fan imagination? To find the answer, I look at a fan-made mobile game. Of course, the work of one fan is not representative of all the rest, especially those who are silent consumers, but this game is quite popular and has garnered very positive reviews. *BTS Messenger 2 - Fake Chat* (Figure 23), developed by KitMew (Kayla) and written by her friend Trisha in 2018, is a mobile game with more than one million downloads as of December 2019. It is a visual novel-esque simulation game available on Android. On the App Store, it is available under the name *ARMY Messenger,* since Apple's stricter copyright rules do not allow the word "BTS" or the pictures of the members to be published. The premise is that the player is friends with the BTS members and ends up involved in a love triangle with two members of her choosing. The whole game unfolds over texts and phone conversations, each time with a couple of possible lines to choose from - the same visual novel game format as *BTS World*, although this fan-made game was released before the official one. Players can unlock "hearts" by strategically choosing the most heart-fluttering lines in the chats with the members, willingly watching advertisement videos, or by playing a short matching game in the app. It is also possible to purchase an unlimited quantity of hearts

for $10 and thus explore the entire game and all the possible combinations of lines and relationships without hindrance (Figure 23). Paying for this feature also disables ads from popping up.
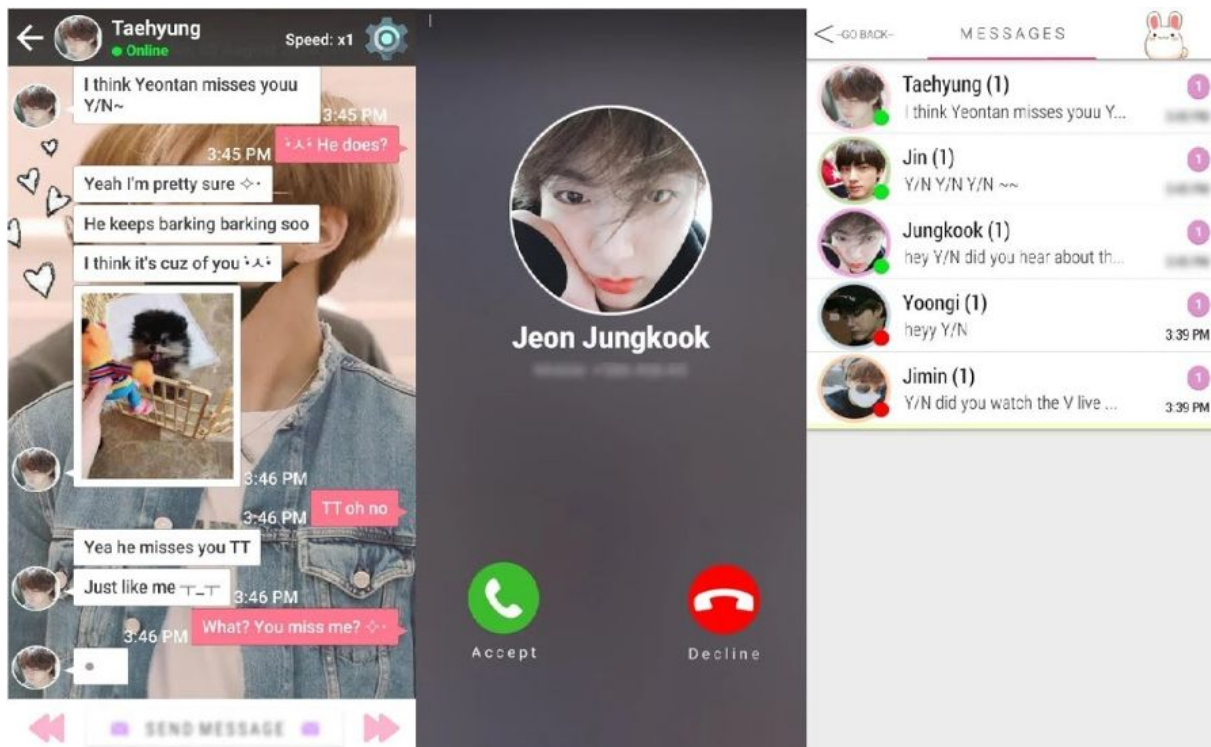

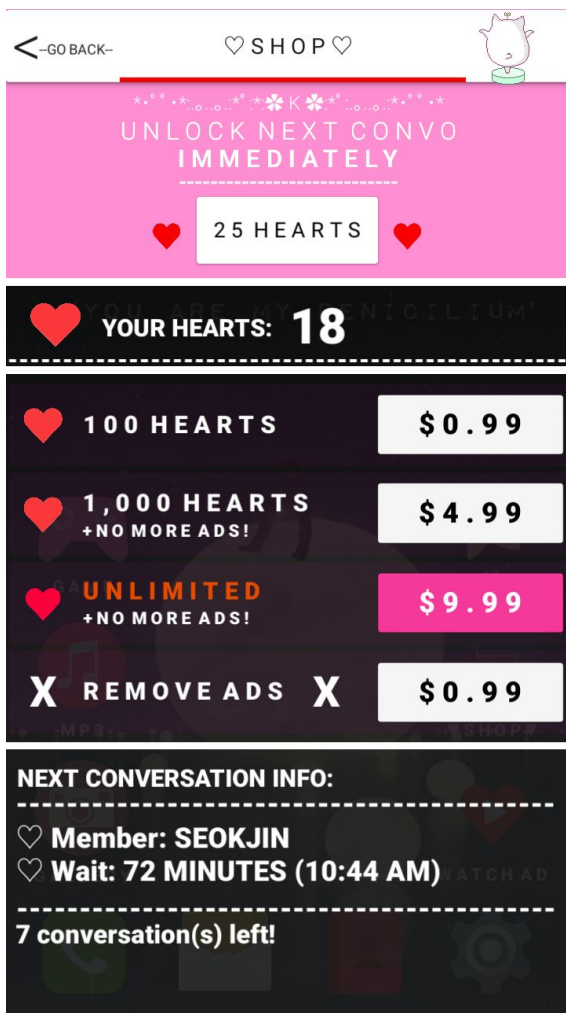Figure 23. Screenshot of the description of *BTS Messenger 2* on Android

Figure 24. Screenshot of the Shop feature in *BTS Messenger 2*

In *BTS Messenger 2*, the BTS members are non-playable characters based on Kayla and Trisha's understanding of their public personas. The developers write in the description of the game on the App Store, "This app was made with the members' personalities in mind! All conversations stay true to the individual members." These characterizations replicate many of the archetypes present in *BTS Universe*, such as Min Yoongi's propensity for working long hours in the studio (Figure 25). It is surprising how close Kayla and Trisha's characterizations of the BTS members are aligned with Takeone Corp's. Fan producers and industry producers seem to converge in their transmission of the BTS members' personalities to other fans, united in creating a frictionless experience for a mass audience. In terms of

bodies, the Android version features fansite-taken pictures of the members taken in public spaces, as well as selfies uploaded by the members themselves on their official Twitter account. As these photographs were taken at different points in their career, it is impossible to pinpoint when exactly the storyline takes place; rather, the game unfolds in an atemporal reality. The lack of references to actual events also enhances the feeling of the chats being "live." The built-in wait time between conversations also makes the whole experience seem even more real.
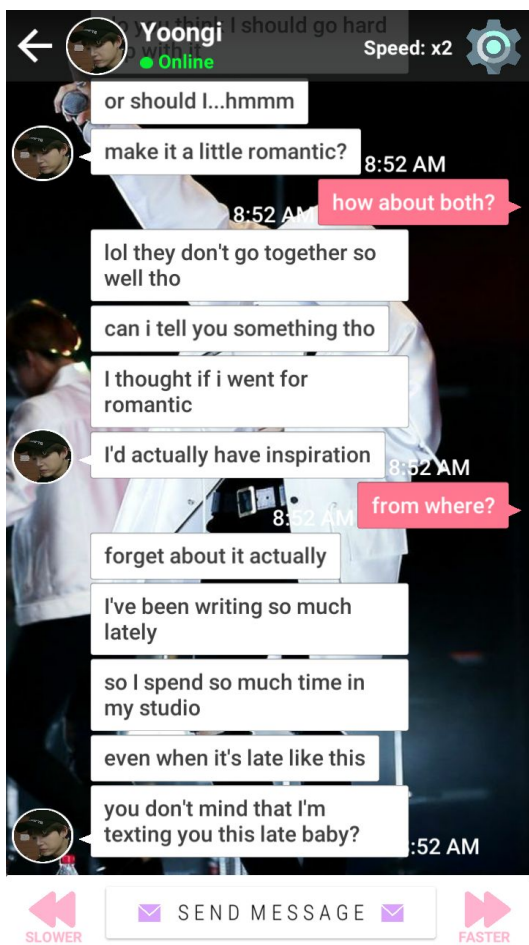

Figure 25. Screenshot of the text conversation with Yoongi in *BTS Messenger 2*

Kayla writes in the game's description, "DISCLAIMER: this app is 100% fake. Nothing is real. It's just a game that's supposed to simulate interaction with BTS (with a storyline done with fake calling and texting). The members in the game are not the real

members, but just fictional portrayals/simulations of them. Hi I'm just a fangirl. I'm not associated with BigHit in any way ￣▽￣ thank u." *BTS Messenger 2* is careful to not present the characters as the "real deal," and yet they can't be mistaken for anyone other than the BTS members. Melanie Piper uses Richard Dyer's concept of the "star image," a figure constructed from intertextual and publicly available material, to model this conundrum. In *BTS Messenger 2,* Kayla and Trisha construct characters out of official *public* material like interviews, vlogs, and photoshoots, articulated around the members' bodies and voices. This scavenged data constitutes a fragmented "star image" of the members and can be recontextualized however fans see fit (in this case, as idols looking for a relationship) to create a fantasized *private* image. Recontextualization is a concept developed by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (1992) and refers to the process of filling in the blanks of an original media text to create an alternative understanding of it. Jenkins is writing of the recontextualization of cult TV show characters, but recontextualization also works with real celebrities in the context of real-people fanfiction (RPF), which is Melanie Piper's area of research. She writes that when writing RPF, "the fan can choose to conflate the two variations [public and fantasized] on the celebrity's *star image*" (3.1). Trisha creates flirty characters out of real BTS members by combining original material such as selfies with her own romantic narratives. In the creation of these recontexualized personas, both official events and fan fantasies meet to create a brand new character just as "real" as the public idols or official game characters.

All of these media are built around pictures of idols' bodies. There is no *BTS Messenger 2*, no messy edits*,* without pre-existing pictures of the members. The flattened idol body is therefore central to recontextualization in digital fanwork. Francesca Coppa argues that this practice has its roots in theater performance. A story can be iterated hundreds of times, each time staged a little differently, but what ties these iterations together is the

performers' and public's knowledge that they happen to the same characters. In the context of K-Pop fanwork, the truth of this can be easily established as K-Pop is already considered a performance rather than simply music (Cho 2017). The idol-as-character is well-established in the minds of fans because character archetypes (as we saw with the example of Min Yoongi) are repeated across media, taught to fans directly by the management company, and because pictures of idols are freely accessible all over the internet. Coppa writes that fanfiction, especially of embodied texts like TV shows or K-Pop bands, is akin to a play: "fan fiction directs bodies in space even when it's not overtly written in theatrical form. Readers come to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters' bodies and voices" (228). The body is the "storytelling medium, the carriers of symbolic action" (236). Now that fans are producing work in the digital era, not only are the characters' appearances the same for everyone, but this stage of imagination is no longer necessary: Kayla and Trisha's characterizations of the BTS members are basic from a canonical point of view, but they are supplemented with real photographs widely disseminated on fansites and SNS. Big Hit offers, in the form of the BTS members' star images, "an aggregate of information without a narrative, into which all viewers could empathize of their own accord and each could read up convenient narratives" (Azuma 38). This amalgamation of fragments forms what Azuma calls the "grand non-narrative": there is no order or hierarchy to the aggregate of information, no deep hidden meaning. The process of the databasification of culture is turning idols - or rather, their star images - into full characters.

3.2.   Korean brand of body care

As databases are closely associated with the digital, it may seem that physical bodies have no significance. But in Coppa's work, we saw that the body (even imagined) is at the center of the database model. As Zhang Zhen demonstrates in an essay on embodiment in

martial arts movies, "the body is both the medium (instrument) and the message (aim) of a cultural practice" (225). Since the whole K-Pop system rests on the commodification of idol bodies, what ideologies are at play in this process?

The answer starts with the body management procedures to which idols are subject. Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, defines neoliberalism as the will to make the individual the enterprise of himself: the individual becomes his own capital. He coined the term "techniques of the self" to define actions that permit individuals to autonomously change their bodies, thoughts, behaviors, and ways of being in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, perfection, or immortality ("Technologies of the Self"). I will first trace the genealogy of such techniques in the K-Pop context, then explore their channels of dissemination from industry actors to international fans. Here I think it is appropriate to take a look at what local contexts shape Superflat endeavors in Korea before looking at how these endeavors affect international fans.

A simple overview of the current Korean popular culture landscape will reveal the paramount importance of appearance in daily life. Korean skincare and beauty products are exported around the world; Seoul is already known as the 21st century's cosmetic surgery capital, while "diet clinics" are starting to appear on the map. K-Pop news websites often report on the diet discourse that permeates Korean mass media, from diet-oriented reality TV shows like *Diet War* to compilations of idols' diet tips to reports of rampant bullying, including fat-shaming. In terms of numbers, Korean female college students appear to be both thinner and more dissatisfied with their body weight than their Chinese and American counterparts (Jung and Forbes 386). In a survey by the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 32.3% of middle school students reported trying to lose weight, and 16% of those tried to do so with disordered eating practices (Lee et al. 674). According to a 2016 survey from the Korean Statistical Information Service, 20% of Korean women are on a diet, while

40% wish they were (KOSIS 2017). In a culture where dieting is so prevalent, health risks associated with dieting are also on the rise: Dr. Kim Youl-Ri, a Fellow of the Academy for Eating Disorders, suggests that one in four Korean women will have an eating disorder at some point in their life (Kim 2016).

Within K-Pop, a discourse that equates success with a thin appearance is prominent: in October 2017, BTS member Jimin admitted on the show *Please Take Care of My Refrigerator* that he only ate one full meal every 10 days (Figure 26) in order to appear more handsome for the promotional cycle of their album *Wings* (Koreaboo 2017). In an interview, Jimin also confided that he had noticed gaining more attention as he became slimmer (Hannah 2017). Meanwhile, plenty of articles (Koreaboo 2018) and fan-made videos (AMFG Videos) have documented instances in which idols, after suffering from malicious comments directed at their appearance, chose to lose weight in order to portray a "better" image. Some idols, like Jimin, were simultaneously told to gain weight so as to "not look like a skeleton" ("BTS - Jimin Weight Loss Story 2013 - 2017" 19:38). The underlying discourse behind these comments is that, whatever the idol in question looks like, they appear to not be taking care of themselves, thus indicating that they are not serious about their job or that they do not care about their fans. Having an acceptable body shape appears to be linked to the ideal of "politeness" to which idols, as role models, are expected to adhere. It is important to note that management companies, mass media, and fans are all keeping track of idols' bodies.

Figure 26. Screenshot of the video "BTS - Jimin Weight Loss Story 2013 - 2017"

Comments about body shape and weight are especially harsh when directed against female idols. In an interview with CBS in January 2020, ex-f(x) member Amber, a Taiwanese-American singer formerly signed under SM Entertainment, exposed the gendered thinness standards that female idols are subjected to:

> I think for girls, the biggest thing, at least in my circle and for myself, is just to be skinny. Everybody's just like, "You didn't eat today right? No, I didn't eat either." [...] For boys, it's definitely a lot more lax. I think for women, there's a bigger emphasis on visuals and how you look. Are your legs the right shape? Are you skinny enough? Or are you too skinny? When I talk with a lot of my male celebrity friends, they're never really worried about their weight.

This equivalence between appearance and success is a staple of neoliberal societies. Bordo writes, "The slender body codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contractions of consumer culture" (201). The maintenance of a

slender body is considered an appealing trait; within a cultural environment that bombards people with countless food advertisements and incentives to indulge, it is a sign of self-mastery. Appearance is a form of capital, and the strict management of one's appearance thus becomes a standard through which individual worth can be evaluated. This is why getting cosmetic surgery before job interviews has become so popular for Korean college graduates (Stiles 2017). This is called "lookism," "a term that describes prejudice or preferential treatment based on how a person looks… When this system becomes part of dominant ideologies in a given culture, unrealistic expectations may be placed on certain members of that society to conform to a set of norms" (Tondeur). Lee Sorim, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on cosmetic surgery in South Korea, traces this preoccupation with looks to *gwansang*—fortune-telling based on facial physiognomy. The practice, popular since the seventh century, relies on the belief that one's personality and fate are reflected in one's facial features. In a 2018 interview, Lee explains that "this idea that one's identity is physically encoded became connected to ethnicity during the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945). Japanese rulers insisted that certain facial traits bespoke greater racial intelligence and nobility (perhaps unsurprisingly, Japanese features were deemed a civilizational cut above those of Koreans). Such beliefs created a receptive environment for ethnic cosmetic surgery techniques that were imported by U.S. doctors during and after the Korean War (1950-53)" (Davis 2018).

Decades after the end of Japanese colonization, race is no longer the first imperative for getting cosmetic surgery. Joanna Elfving-Hwang argues that "contemporary South Korean discourses of beauty, care of self and cosmetic surgery increasingly link notions of 'correct' or 'appropriate' appearance with performing adequately in society as a social subject" (2). For Elfving-Hwang, this is not related to racial discrimination nor to consumerism. Instead, Elfving-Hwang argues that cosmetic surgery in Korea is indebted to

the Confucian idea of harmonious social relations. My research suggests that body management is indebted to all three factors.

The idea that appearance is a signifier of success quickly leads to the management of appearance to retro-engineer success. In the period of intense industrialization overseen by president Park Chunghee in the 1970s and 1980s, female bodies came to be viewed as valuable "products," not only in Confucian and familial relations as mothers and wives, but also in the workplace as a cheap and docile source of labor (Koo 2007). Taking care of the female body thus became a national duty. This discourse is still present today: Dr. Kim Youl-Ri (mentioned above) advocates for more awareness and funding for treatment of eating disorders around the idea that they affect the national natality rate and maternal health. Dr. Kim assumes that the rhetoric of managing women's health for reproductive purposes is what is most likely to get Korean lawmakers and society at large to take action. Another factor behind "lookism" is the high rate of unemployment following the restructuring of the economy after the IMF crisis, coupled with a saturated higher education system, converging to create an environment where finding a well-paying job is impossible for many graduates even with a good education (Lee 2016, Elfving-Hwang 2013). Appearance thus becomes a tool to distinguish oneself from the rest of the competition. All of these factors spread the idea that 1) one can engineer success by possessing the right physical attributes, in the probable event that professional qualifications are not enough to do so and 2) not enhancing one's appearance is a giveaway that one is not taking care of oneself, and therefore that one is not serious about securing a good future. Faces and bodies thus become commodities to be carefully managed.

The fear of public shame over one's body shape is also a major drive for the pursuit of slenderness as a specific body type for females. Yoonso Choi argues in her master's thesis that while female bodies became more prominent in the media after the introduction of

American pop culture, traditional Confucian norms of disciplining women's identity and sexuality were still maintained. Women needed to be silenced because their bodies "called out" to men, while their own bodily desires were considered shameful. The 1960 thriller *The Housemaid* explores these themes by focusing on the affair between a piano teacher and his maid, an ex-factory worker who left her hometown to find work in the city. The movie ends with the death of both characters, casting shame on anything other than good Confucian behavior. Today, TV dramas continue this trend by rewarding hardworking filial female characters over female characters who scheme to get what they want. Interestingly, it is often these second female leads, the heroines' rivals, who end up with disordered eating storylines (e.g. *Heartstrings* and *Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bokjoo*).

This repression of the female body is paired with a public fear of obesity. According to the logic of neoliberalism, taking care of the body is a private problem: "There seems to be a less than unified medical belief about whether in fact 'obesity' is a disease or a result of personal irresponsibility… Without a clear reason for 'obesity,' the possibility of a cure becomes a maddening enterprise … [This way of thinking] constitutes a shift in focus from *curative* to *preventative* measures … aimed at *lifestyle* rather than the individual psyche" (Murray 27-28). The medical panic around obesity has played a key role in elaborating a disciplinary ideology of the body in neoliberal societies, which says that the body can be managed by individual choice and strong will. While Korea has one of the lowest rates of obesity in the OECD, there have been multiple public campaigns about eradicating it and promoting "healthy" practices, with mass media playing a big role in relaying the message (Choi 2016, Jung and Forbes 2007, Lee et al. 2018).

Assigning labels such as "fat" or "obese" to any body considered "abnormal" plays a huge role in shrinking the "normal" category. It also spreads the idea that bodies are always in need of scrutiny and repair. All of these factors have turned dieting, under the guise of

"healthy weight maintenance," into a form of biopower. Foucault's notion of biopower comes from *The History of Sexuality*. It refers to the knowledge-gathering and optimization of human life through technologies of control entrenched within law and norms in order to create a normalized society. Foucault links this development to the rise of the capitalist ethic that seeks to utilize bodies at optimal capacity. Foucault also argues that deviance from normalization ends up being pathologized. Proofs of alleged "deviant" behaviors are sought out on the body, so that the individual can be accordingly disciplined. In the case of nutrition, fat (especially female fat) is seen as a symptom of laziness, unproductivity, or failure (Murray 2008, Lee and Lim 2012). While neoliberalism promotes the idea that everyone "makes decisions for themselves" (Harvey 5), this discourse of fat as "deviant" drives the intense management of body weight and shape. Sharon Lee, in her article about feminist reactions to cosmetic surgery in Korea, reports that Womenlink, the country's biggest feminist organization, acknowledges the issue of lookism and is lobbying for a bill called the "Body Diversity Guarantee" (Lee 12). Yet Womenlink's response to lookism is to promote self-love. Lee argues, "Self-love, however, is itself a form of self-governance that parallels and thus cannot undo those forms espoused by the beauty industries feminists seek to stymie" (23). In the next section, I will explore what neoliberal self-care looks like in K-Pop and how it gets passed down to individuals outside of Korea.

3.3.   Transmission of techniques of the self from industry to fan

As we saw in chapter 1, the K-Pop industry flattens idols to create databases of affective fragments in order to produce successful products. But fans do not usually treat idol groups as mere commodities, like cell phones or cutlery; fans have affective ties with their idols. Some fans see celebrities as stars beyond their reach, some as remote friends, and others as role models. No one wants to emulate a laptop, but people do want to emulate idols.

Michelle Cho writes in "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" that K-Pop "traffics in fantasies of popular appeal and self-transformation" in order to exploit fan consumer identities (261). Azuma writes about the *moe* attributes of characters, such as bunny ears or other animalizing elements, which are often far removed from the realm of what actual human bodies can hope to look like. Unlike anime bodies, idol bodies are physical, and not that far removed from the bodies of fans. If K-Pop can influence digital fanworks by shaping the databases used to produce such works, then the techniques used to shape the bodies supporting the databases may also be passed on to fans. Here, I look beyond digital practices to physically *embodied* practices. I argue that K-Pop promotes a neoliberal message of self-care encouraging the reproduction of "flattening" behaviors, teaching fans to treat their bodies as a reflection of the database that is "themselves," which leads certain fans to brand their flat images for profit while openly crediting K-Pop for the inspiration.

Virtually all Hallyu scholars agree that "the pervasive *media determination of ideal body image* readily percolates down to the public, and statistics demonstrate a significant acceleration in body dysphoria in this millennium, with increased percentages of women (and, significantly, men as well) seeking plastic surgery as a tool for advancement in a competitive job market" (Epstein and Turnbull 332, emphasis mine). Hallyu is indeed at the heart of such "media determination," as idols are seen everywhere, from music shows on TV to advertisement boards in the city.

I now turn to the example of idol diets. Most diet tips originate from female idols: although men are increasingly feeling the need to control their bodies through food intake and exercise, dieting is still historically a gendered practice. Bordo writes that while in the past decades, "the diet industries, the cosmetic manufacturers, and the plastic surgeons 'discovered' the male body" (xxii-xxiii), female "body disorders have been trivialized and pathologized over the years" (xxiv), which she traces back to the Victorian era. In addition to

Jimin's diet mentioned above, I present a common female idol diet, one followed by IU, a popular singer who debuted in 2008 at the age of 15. The pressure on IU to maintain an attractive body when she is scheduled for public performances led her to follow a restrictive diet consisting of an apple, two sweet potatoes, and a protein shake per day, accompanied by intense exercise. She has mentioned following this crash diet regularly over the years, most recently during the shoot of her TV drama *Hotel del Luna* ("[ENG sub] 방송이 고파서 이야기 봇물 터진 아이유ㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋ" 4:08). IU has since been revealed to suffer from bulimia nervosa (Onsen 2014). In a TV segment, she confessed that the fear of not living up to her success was the reason she turned to disordered eating. She said, "My heart was empty. I always felt anxious after I made my debut and from a certain time, I filled the void through food." She added, "Rather than feeling good, I always had that feeling of anxiety thinking there's still something lacking" (Pao 2014).

Susan Bordo explains how the circle of intense dieting and binging has been a recourse to control female bodies performed by women themselves since the Victorian era:

> The representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitably. Such restrictions on appetite, moreover, are not merely about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical "discipline" (to use Foucault's term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse. (130)

Dieting is also a tool of control that is exercised by management companies, and to a certain extent the public, upon female (and increasingly male) idol bodies. Yeran Kim wrote in 2011, "This process of idol-making as cultural content embodies neoliberal strategies which valorize self-reinvention, self-training, branding and promotion, and which are operated in calculated regulatory systems under corporate management control" (336). Live bodies are trained to publicly portray a flawless image, and the commercial success of an act will depend on how well that image can be maintained over the years. The audience is presented with an image of perfect and constant self-control on multiple platforms; this digital presence is especially potent for international fans who almost never see idols in the flesh. As Seiji et al. suggest, "In Korea, more than 60% of all advertisements feature a famous face, and idol stars are among the most often used celebrities… Idol stars appearing in these ads become 'coterminous with consumption'… Simply, if a fan will buy a product that a star endorses, will they not also choose to emulate the star in more destructive ways?" (18-19)

The commodification of idol bodies that was explained in the first chapter not only serves to co-opt fans into the production process, but plays a role in policing them in their everyday lives as well. Neoliberalism, in the competition of body management, teaches consumers of K-Pop that not only is it *possible* to achieve a certain body, it is *necessary*. The discipline to which idols are subjected over their appearance trickles down from stars to fans through interviews, producing narcissism and insecurity, as well as fostering industries that cater to assuaging these insecurities. The whole process is framed as "self-improvement": "…the plastic aesthetic of K-pop bodies has been promoted through the alibi of self-transformation and individualism" (Cho, "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" 254). But the potential long-term psychological and physical scars this process might leave are not publicly acknowledged; Epstein and Joo warn that "the potentially regressive social

effects of such images urge a tempering note of caution for any who might rush to celebrate them as an empowering expression of individual self-making" (15). There is currently no study on the influence of K-Pop as a trigger for disordered eating for international fans, but the media and academic coverage of the recent suicides of K-Pop idols has launched the beginning of a discussion on the transnationalization of mental health issues (Seiji et al. 2018).

To explore how industry practices might be passed on to fans, I will look at "diet videos" in which fans vlog themselves replicating an idol's diet. This fad started appearing on YouTube a couple of years ago and has garnered significant popularity, with millions of views distributed across the total number of videos. The user Ellbat uploaded the video "I TRIED JIMIN BTS (지민 방탄소년단) KPOP IDOL DIET AND THIS HAPPENED" on September 29, 2018, which has roughly 480,000 views as of January 2020. In the 16-minute video, she documents herself following Jimin's diet for three days. Ellbat, who is herself recovering from an eating disorder, talks about her decision to follow this diet in order to showcase the "real" effects of restrictive dieting on mental and physical health. She starts by researching the exact specifications of the diet, gleaning information from other YouTubers who have tried it, and decides on eating 300 calories worth of snacks with no full meal for three days while simultaneously going to the gym for an hour a day. She then proceeds to vlog her experience, complete with a comparison of her "before" and "after" measurements. She repeatedly emphasizes negative side effects such as fatigue and pain, and concludes by strongly advising her viewers not to recreate the experiment. Another, more popular video is Confidential Bubble Tea (Sarah)'s "I TRIED THE BTS[방탄소년단] JIMIN DIET" (note the recurrence of the clickbait title). Sarah, for her part, decided to completely fast for 10 days while maintaining an active lifestyle; at the end of the 10 days, she only felt hungry enough to have a banana milk drink. She admits in a later video to having regained the

entirety of the 12 pounds she lost ("JIMIN Diet Q&A Video"). Her own experiment was motivated by a desire to lose weight, which she is still attempting to achieve with other K-Pop idol-inspired videos.
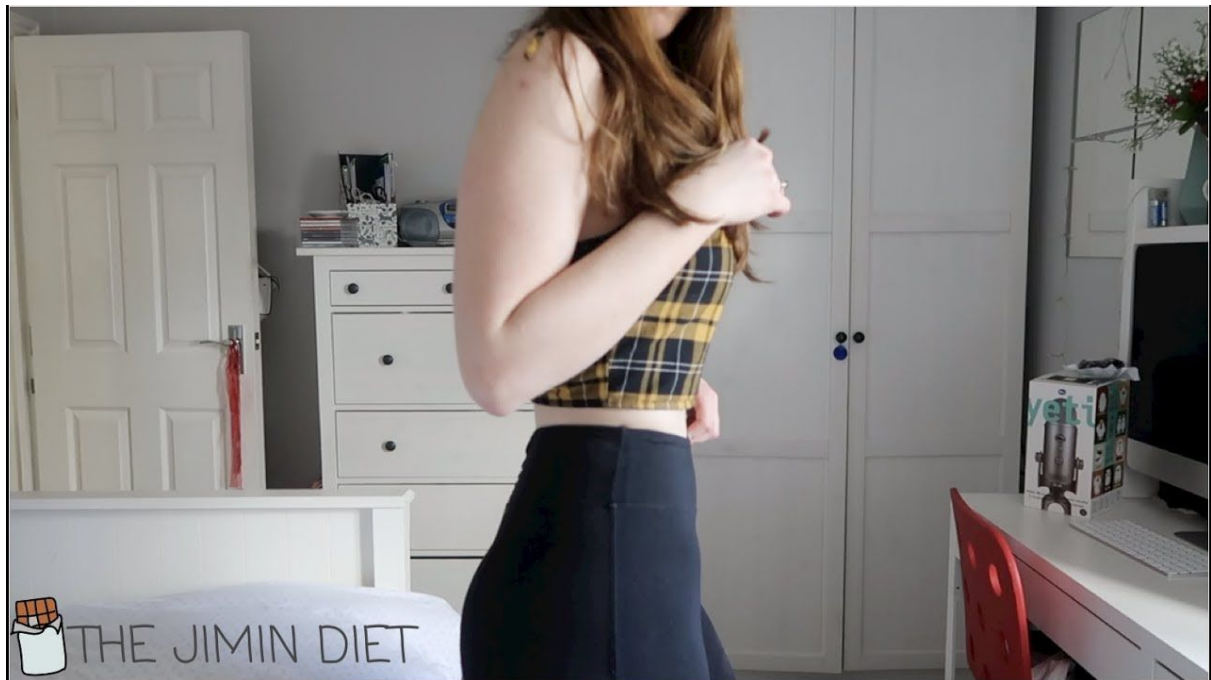

Figure 27. Thumbnail of Ellbat's video "I TRIED JIMIN BTS (지민 방탄소년단) KPOP IDOL DIET AND THIS HAPPENED"

Figure 28. Thumbnail of Confidential Bubble Tea's video "I TRIED THE BTS[방탄소년단] JIMIN DIET"

This model is repeated across almost all K-Pop diet videos. Well-intentioned fans/YouTubers vlog themselves following a diet: they report experiencing unpleasant side effects, but also achieving weight loss, which spurs on the production of more diet videos. The process behind the K-Pop diet video first involves an idol sharing dieting tips in the Korean media. The tips are then disseminated over the internet by domestic fans. The diet plans end up reaching international fans via coverage on Anglophone fan websites (such as articles on the popular website Allkpop) or through subtitled recordings of the original interview. Finally, some fans decide to follow the idol's diet and share the process on their YouTube channel. Ironically, most of these fans end up discouraging viewers from doing the same thing. The YouTubers behind Kpop diet videos share a fairly uniform profile: they are almost always female long-term creators of content about food, fashion, fitness and other lifestyle topics. Only a few have channels dedicated exclusively to dieting. On the other hand, their nationalities and ethnicities vary widely. At the other end of this process, these dieting guidelines only come from a handful of idols. This top-down trickle of dieting guidelines turns the diet into something akin to a "challenge," one in which fans seem eager to participate. For three days, they behave like Jimin: their stomach flattens, their weight goes down.

As a format, the diet video is indebted to vlogs created by fitness or model YouTubers, who share their own tips on how to eat and exercise to obtain an attractive figure under the assumption that anyone could recreate their lifestyle at home if they seriously tried. The diet video is also indebted to makeup videos, in which amateur or semi-professional makeup artists transform themselves into beauty figures in 15-minute videos. The common thread between these types of videos is that semi-professionals are putting forward a close

range of appearance standards with key words like "easy," "DIY," and "at home" that suggest that these ideals are attainable and can easily be incorporated into everyday life. If you still can't be pretty with all these online tutorials, then you're not trying hard enough. Similarly, all the K-Pop dieters dutifully document themselves resisting the temptation of eating, working out at home or at the gym, and measuring out their food. For them, dieting is a way to share a physical experience with their idols. This intimate approach is counterbalanced by the non-diegetic presence of editing montages and background music. Both idols and fans thus end up promoting a sort of "diet porn": while idols romanticize the idea of slenderness by emphasizing the awe-inspiring parts of body care (Jimin from BTS dieted specifically to show off his abs), diet-performing fans show the mentally and physically painful and arduous processes behind harsh diets. Yet dieting becomes a commodified behavior for both idols and fans: dieters who make a performance out of their weight loss are aiming to grow their audience and receive monetary compensation. Sarah from Confidential Bubble Tea concludes her video of Jimin's diet by stating, "The moral of the story is, subscribe to Sarah because she's willing to do a lot of things just to prove a point." The performance of diet underscores the "increasing confluence of media and capitalism, with the potential for vested interests in encouraging unhealthy body ideals" (Epstein and Turnbull 332).

In reality, the fans following the Jimin diet are only emptying their stomach and digestive tract by quasi-starving, which means they will bounce back to their original weight immediately after finishing the diet. Jimin might manage to maintain this state for a longer period of time, which would actually lead to drastic weight loss, but for those who try it out for a couple days, the results are not long-lasting. Fans who decide to stick to the diet in the medium- to long-term do not tend to share their experience in real-time; instead, they report it later after encountering negative effects. Indeed, just as IU confessed to having an eating

disorder, some international fans have admitted toeing the line with disordered eating after trying K-Pop idols-endorsed diets for weeks at a time (*Jakarta Post* 2019, Matsumoto 2014, Katy 2016). This is not to say that everyone who comes across these diets will try to follow them. In fact, fans often discuss idol diets negatively in the comment sections of K-Pop news websites (Figure 29). And yet the diet video is still popular.
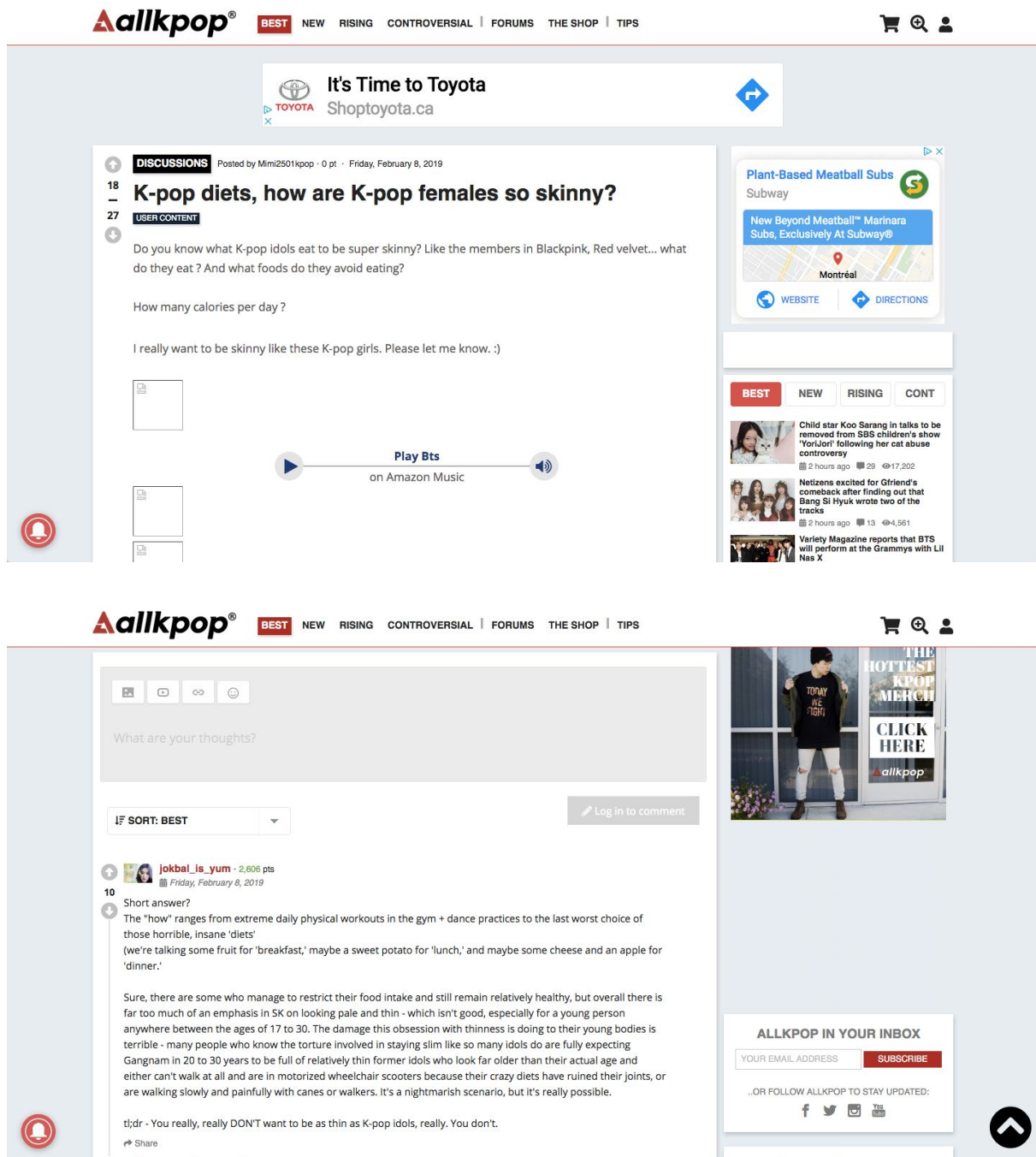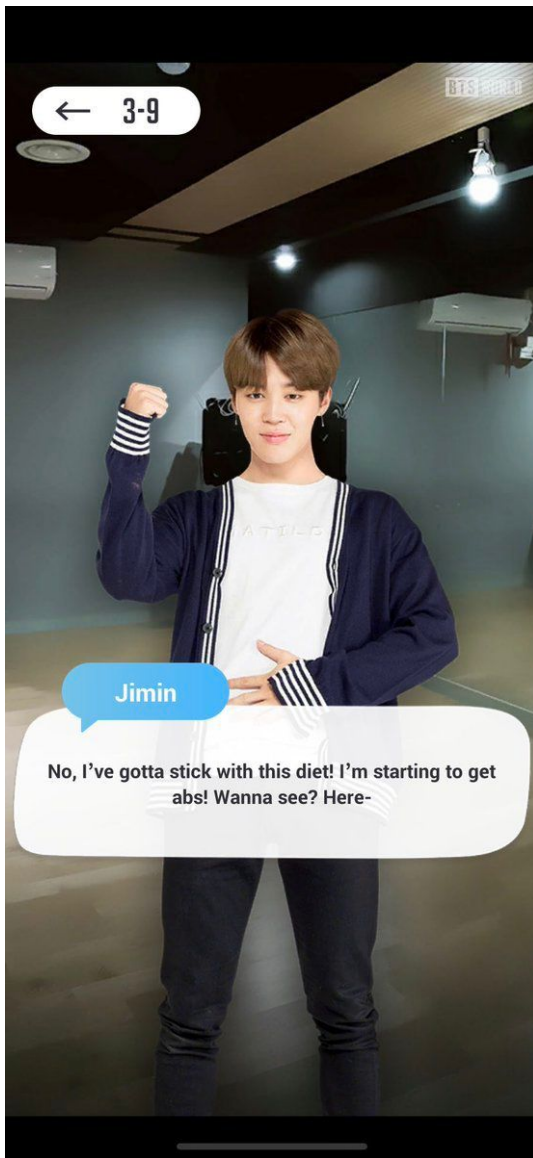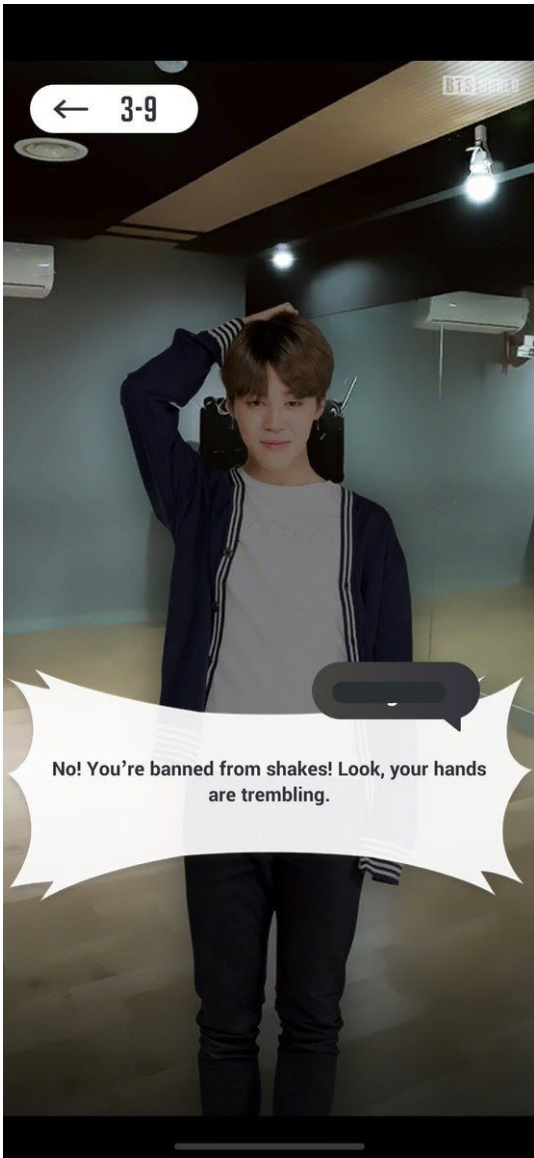

Figure 29. Screenshots of the thread started by Mimi2501kpop

A chapter from *BTS World* about dieting is another example of techniques of the self being shared to fans through an official source. In the third chapter of the game, the character trainee-Jimin refuses to eat anything other than protein shakes, because as the self-labeled "least talented member of the group," he has to kickstart his popularity by showing off his abs. This leads Jimin to collapse in the practice room (Figure 30). This plot point is inspired by Jimin's real experience mentioned above, adapted with creative license for a mobile game. To pass the level, the player has to successfully administer first aid. For fans who only know Jimin as a celebrity persona, but are also aware of some of his intimate issues, this was a troubling moment; for others, it was a game challenge like any other, a fictionalized plot point in a work of fiction (Figure 31). The plotline made many players question the concept of "reality" in digital games, the mode of embodiment chosen in *BTS World*. Most fans acknowledged that the reflections of Jimin to which they have access are, to some extent, constructed. Fans negotiate the boundaries of idols and characters with playfulness, as a community. But the issue of unhealthy dieting practices being displayed in a mobile game played by teenagers and young adults was left unattended.

No! You're banned from shakes! Look, your hands are trembling.

Jimin

No, I've gotta stick with this diet! I'm starting to get abs! Wanna see? Here-
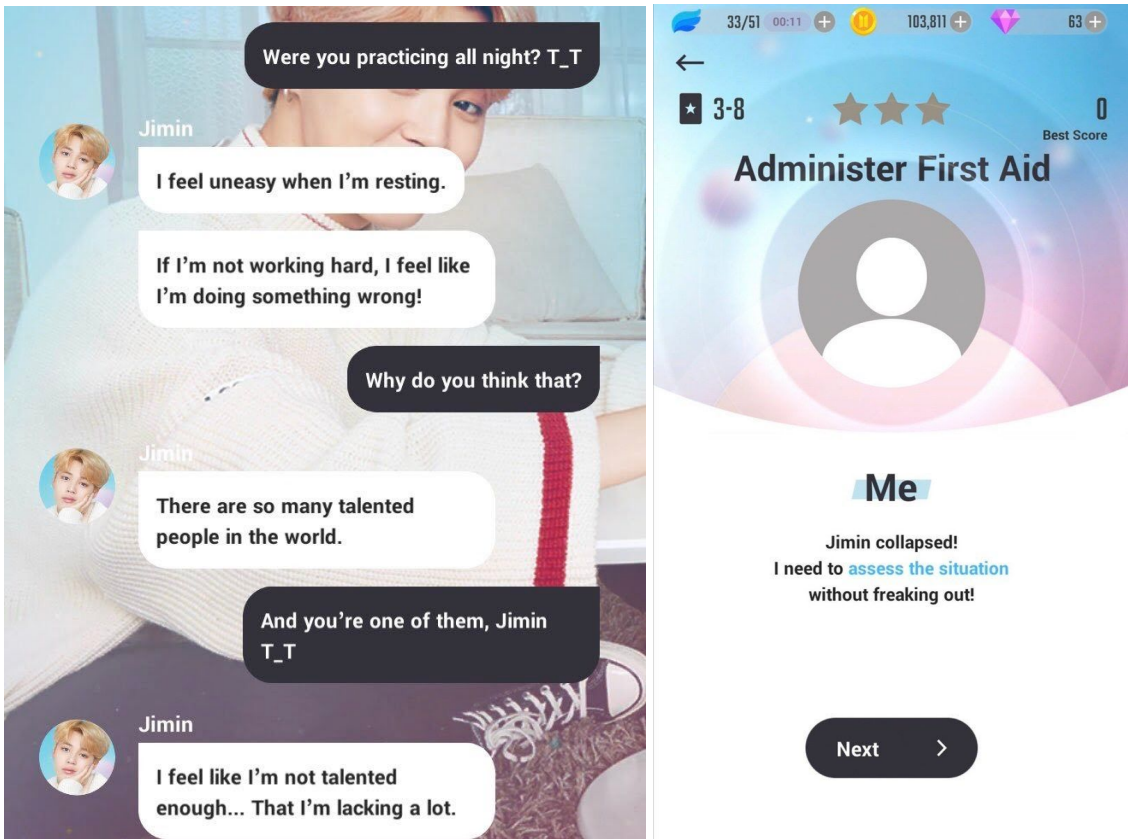
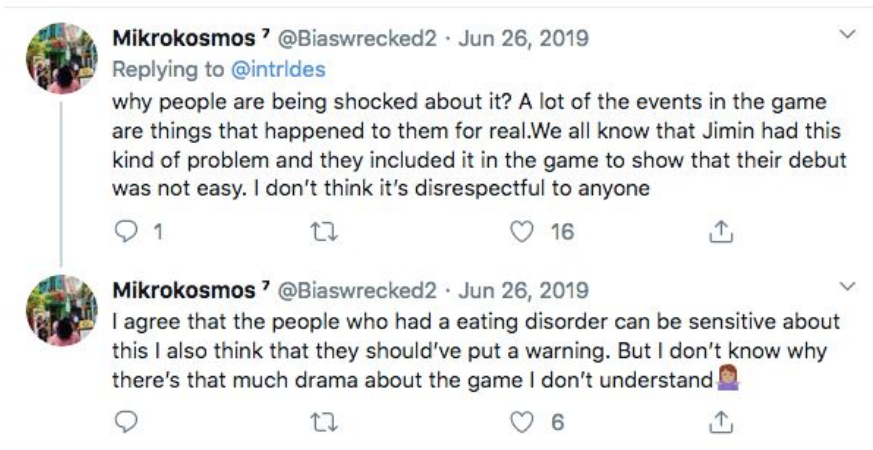Figure 30. Screenshots from the chapters 3-7, 3-8 and 3-9 of *BTS World*

Figure 31. Screenshots of tweets about the Chapter 3 storyline

The case of Jimin in *BTS World* illustrates the problem of technologies of the self being mixed with K-Pop. Essentially, *BTS World* is trying to make the player become a good idol manager by developing skills like listening to the members, being supportive, and taking responsibility for actions that may not benefit the group as a whole. *BTS World* also

illustrates how K-Pop is a neoliberal enterprise: success is individualized and it is solely the responsibility of the worker to make sure his or her body works adequately as a tool. At the end of the third chapter, the player has to understand that game-Jimin's behavior, however sensational, cannot be avoided by the player if she wishes to advance in the storyline. The player is also reminded that the characters are meant to be human, and that certain physical properties of human bodies (like falling to the floor because of overexhaustion) might apply to virtual bodies as well, however flat they may seem. But the player does not know which properties might be encoded in the game's algorithm; this is what cultural theorist Huizinga calls the "magic circle," a ludic space "within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (13). The concept was actually applied to digital games by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2003), in which they add that magic circles are porous, since "real" values, beliefs, or even currencies can travel in and out of it. The *BTS World* missions also illustrate the porosity of the boundary between real and game worlds, and how neoliberal ideas of self-care might inhabit that boundary. Indeed, the plotline establishes a link between gamification and the neoliberal value of self-care: the game is a recipe for how to find success as an idol, complete with set objectives and feedback, making use of techniques like calorie counting, hard exercise, and starvation. The playful manner in which the issue is resolved might make the experience fun, but it could also romanticize diet porn the same way that idols' diets and fan diet videos do.

3.4.   Conclusion

The discourse of self-improvement and cosmopolitan modernity propagated by K-Pop targets the body of the consumers of Korean cultural goods. Michelle Cho writes that "making spectacular the sort of *embodied consumption of K-pop* as a lifestyle leads to a

saturation of brand awareness that triggers a desire for the 'Korea' brand" (254, emphasis mine). The scope of "embodied consumption of K-Pop" certainly includes diet videos. So what kind of nationalist interests are hidden in diet videos? JungBong Choi talks about Hallyu-hwa, the second Korean Wave, as building a "Korean experience," with K-Pop as an introduction to other Korean cultural industries like food or fashion. Choi is critical of the co-optation of fans into a consumerist nationalist project, writing, "Frankly speaking, the second Hallyu, or what I call Hallyu-hwa, is a contentious enterprise: politically questionable, economically untenable, and culturally unpolished. In addition, I find it hard to support the way in which Hallyu-hwa is executed" (50). Hallyu-hwa, beyond exporting music and making money from fans, is about exporting the Korean model of self-improvement through idols with perfect bodies and magical remedies for weight loss, because this leads to the consumption of Korean appearance-enhancing products and products dealing in self-care. "In the particular realm of bodily aesthetics, these cultural productions proliferate a standard of beauty deemed particularly Korean and associated with Korea's seemingly successful forms of consumerist modernity" (Lee 18).

Western fans might come in seeking a model of efficiency allegorized by the desirable female idol, with a neo-Orientalist preconception of South Korea that is no longer unintelligible but rather "talks back fluently and stares back proudly in languages and images of high-tech futuristic architecture and finance capital" (Chow in Cho, "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" 243). On the other hand, South Asian fans might want to emulate the idol as it is sold to them as a model of successful regional identity. This regional identification through pop culture is what Youna Kim refers to as "pop Asianism" (Cho, "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-pop Video Culture" 254). Both pop Asianism and neo-Orientalism hide the politics of neoliberal consumerism behind the rationalization of self-improvement. The idea is that by performing like a cute and energetic Korean idol, the fan will gain access to the

secret of efficiency behind Korea's economic success story. Lee adds that this spectacular marketing tactic frames the cosmetically enhanced body of the idol "as an object rather than a subject of interactivity" (8), open to fetishization and "widely available for mass consumption" (5). This is the same conclusion I came to when I analyzed fan edits of idols through the lens of Superflat. Superflat is a global neoliberal mode of vision: by looking at the flattened (to the point of skinniness) bodies of idols, viewers become literate in reading Korean beauty standards, and adept at judging bodies under this lens. Another theory might be that as Suk-Young Kim suggests, idol bodies only exist on screens; the presence of a real body somewhere in Seoul is of course known to the fans, but that body remains unattainable, or even unimaginable. In this context, perhaps dieting is a way to physically communicate with idols. But that again implies that the fan has to submit to Korean standards.

I argue that the diet video is a mediation of the desire to try out different (commodified) bodies. Online, personas are attached to bodies. Like we saw in the first chapter with the example of messy edits, fans playfully try on new clothes online to develop their own online persona. I argue that K-Pop is trying to push fans to do the same thing but in real life: idols put forward various body types that people desire, and in certain cases, feel obligated to pick and choose from. The YouTuber fan demonstrates a level of fan engagement that goes beyond those of Tumblr edit makers, because it betrays a wish not to experiment with an idol's persona but to physically emulate them. Even for those who are just watching Kpop diet videos, there seems to be a desire to consume content in which people are creatively playing around with their bodies. The audience might be searching for proxies to mediate their need for dietary restraint, checking to see if the diets actually bring success without actually having to resort to such extremes. Like in all virtual environments, they get to experience lifestyles they might want to try out without the work of scavenging diet tips or the commitment to actually stick to it. The performance of dieting is framed as

playful: vloggers say they follow intense diets "for fun," and the video format is clearly supposed to provide entertainment. While this type of rhetoric suggests that diet videos are akin to games, no one would actually describe following harsh diets as being particularly fun.

4. K-Pop and Gaming

One of my objects of research is how K-Pop shapes both idols' and fans' relationship to bodies. I previously discussed how idols' bodies become playing grounds for the creation of derivative works that experiment with personas or body shape. At this point, I am critical of the position in which derivative works of "self-care" place fans. K-Pop seems to endorse a type of body management that has become increasingly gamified. I came to this conclusion through the analysis of pictures and videos, but also the mobile game *BTS World*. Idol management companies have recently begun expanding into new forms of media; it is now possible to attend K-Pop hologram concerts or play mobile games with idols in them. How is body play negotiated in video games, a medium that already has a complicated relationship to bodies? In this chapter, I conduct a survey of the interactions between K-Pop and gaming, looking specifically at how the flattened bodies of idols and the bodies of fans are treated.

4.1. Online gaming in South Korea

Like many other cyber-pioneers, the first video game developers were MIT computer scientists. The first code that could be called a "video game" was *Spacewar!*, developed in 1962 for the PDP-1 computer by a collective of software engineers (Milburn 2018). The popularity of *Spacewar!* spread very fast outside of academic institutions, and the commercial potential of this new entertainment format led to the establishment of the first gaming companies in the early 1970s. The first successful commercialized game has been retroactively acknowledged to be *PONG*, released in 1972 by Atari; it was first distributed in arcades before a home version was created in 1974 (Waggoner 11). Arcade games continued to be popular throughout the 1970s, but eventually home and handheld consoles supplanted them in popularity. The market grew at a frantic pace in the United States until a crash in

1983 reconfigured the whole global video game production system. 1983 was the year Nintendo launched the Family Computer, shifting the market dominance from the U.S. to Japan. From thereon in, gaming history has been characterized by exponential improvements in quality. By the mid-1990s, players had access to 16-bit infographics and could save their progress in a game, play on their personal computers, and participate in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). During the mid-2000s, an astronomical level of investment led to the development of globally connected online gaming. Gaming culture also expanded during that time with the normalization of eSports tournaments, so popular today that the prize for the 2019 International reached a whopping $34 million.

Gaming in South Korea is significant not only given the context of this thesis, but also because South Korea is at the forefront of new advancements and new research into gaming as a medium. The history of gaming in South Korea starts much later than it does in the U.S. or Japan: the local industry only took off in the 1990s, following the reshaping of the Korean economy after its entry into the WTO (Chung 498). The end of the ban on Japanese products, which invited transnational investments and knowledge transfers of video games, also had a hand in this sudden boom. Moreover, some of the policies to revive the Korean economy after the IMF crisis centered around the development of ICTs and cultural goods in order to regain wealth and national prestige (Jin, "Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture" 152). The growth of cultural industries – including the gaming industry – has therefore historically relied on heavy government involvement (with tools like legal protectionism, direct funding, research and development, and public relations support), a competitive market, and transnational investments (Jin, Chung). These factors have made the Korean gaming industry a significant source of revenue for the country: $2.7 billion in 2013 according to Jin in *New Korean Wave* (138) and $5 billion in 2018 according to the 2018 Global Games Market Report.

Instead of competing with console-making giants like Nintendo, Korean firms preferred to develop the online gaming market. Thanks to its low-cost, high-speed broadband connection (Oh and Larson), Korea has a high rate of internet penetration, making it an ideal market for MMORPGs (Chung 497). The export of online games is also a huge source of revenue, even exceeding revenues from the film sector in 2015 (Jin 2017, 151). Korean MMORPGs are exported throughout Asia (China and Japan are the biggest markets), North America, and Europe. However, Chung warns that "as the industry becomes more oligopolistic, with even fewer Korean global game companies concentrating the ownership of the market, there is a real need to carefully consider the value of the 'local factors' that help to make Korea an empowered online game nation." The local market is organized, like the rest of the Korean economy, around conglomerates (*chaebols)*. Big studios are backed by big investors; for example, CJ Games, the operator of gaming portal Netmarble (who released *BTS World*), is owned by Korea's largest multimedia conglomerate CJ Groups (Chung 511).

In terms of body aesthetics, Korean MMOPRGs are a mix-and-match of local and foreign elements. Games are developed according to the target audience, so the art draws inspiration from Korean as well as foreign traditions. For instance, *Lineage II* places an emphasis on the Confucian values of affiliation and solidarity, even though the game takes place in a fantastic European medieval setting populated by slender, blonde, white characters. Jin writes that "*Lineage*'s popularity has been based on innovative hybridization – a global role-playing game storyline with local mentality" (Jin, "Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture" 157). To a certain extent, "Korean game developers have strategically developed identity-less local games in the global markets in order to appeal to global game users, which has resulted in the popularity of local online games in many different global markets" (158-159). Glocalization also works the other way: the popular game *Player*

Unknown's Battleground was created by Irish developer Brendan Greene for the Korean studio Bluehole.

Regardless of the country of origin, video games are famous for displaying exaggerated bodies. As mentioned in the second chapter, character designs can be likened to caricatures: strong characters have boxy body shapes, female characters are scantily clad, and obese characters are often villains, although role-playing and simulation games let players design the character they wish to play. The feelings associated with video game bodies have been tracked across a variety of studies, with some pointing out the damaging effects that excessive musculature or thinness have on players' body image, especially for males (Barlett and Harris 2006, Martins et al. 2009, Cacioli and Mussap 2014, Zeely et al. 2018). Taking this into account, I will examine the types of bodies encountered at the intersection of K-Pop and gaming.

4.2. The intersection of K-Pop and gaming industries

In the next section, I will present two sites of intersection of the gaming and K-Pop industries that are visible to international fans: 1) idols streaming their gaming performances and 2) cross-industry marketing partnerships.

From the point of view of an international fan, idols become associated with games when idols themselves share their gaming habits. While it is not surprising that some Korean idols like playing online or mobile games, over the past five years this hobby has turned into a performance for the pleasure of fans. Globally, game-streaming took off in the 2010s with the boom in platforms like Twitch (established in 2011, owned by Amazon) or Douyu (established in 2013) and currently shows no signs of dropping in popularity. Korean live-streaming websites are even older: afreecaTV (perhaps most famous for its *mukbang* broadcasters) was launched in 2005 and already had half a million visitors in 2009 (Song 1).

Live-streaming is associated with a democratic model of broadcasting, but has recently been co-opted by traditional media corporations (afreecaTV now has a TV channel with national broadcaster SBS). Live-streaming websites have also become key platforms for K-Pop companies to stream official content. Live-streaming in K-Pop commonly takes place on the platform V Live, launched in 2015, where idol groups stream pre-recorded entertainment programs or hold casual live broadcasts. V Live is especially popular amongst fans of BTS (the most viewed video on the platform as of December 2019 is a live broadcast by member V with more than 500 million views). Member Jin is also known to stream himself on V Live playing games with fans on his birthday each year.

Here I am interested in how K-pop fans are being drawn to other Korean cultural industries, which, according to JungBong Choi, is the driving logic behind the second wave of Hallyu (Hallyu-hwa). Streams of idols playing games (on V Live or otherwise) is a new tool in the portfolio of actions which idols can perform to give international fans a sense of para-sociality. This is especially successful when idols stream themselves playing games *with* fans, the most salient example of which is the SM 2016 Super Celeb League. In this championship streamed on Douyu, Super Junior member Heechul and EXO member Baekhyun compete at *League of Legends* against each other with Chinese fans and Chinese and Korean professional players on their teams. SM League is quite elaborate, with the presence of a live Chinese translator off-camera. This event was a publicity stunt for SM Entertainment (note the presence of EXO merchandise in the background of Figure 32), for *League of Legends* (an American game developed by Riot Games, a studio heavily funded by Chinese digital giant Tencent), for the Chinese streaming platform Douyu (also backed by Tencent), and for the professional players invited. The stream was uploaded on YouTube a couple months after the event for the benefit of other international fans, with subtitles in

English. Whichever fanbase the viewer originally came from, they inevitably would be introduced to other franchises.

What kind of body do we get from these streams? Displays of intimacy (e.g. tongues running loose when immersed in a game, casual outfits associated with spending long hours in a computer chair) index the presence of a "real" body performing actions familiar to millions of players online. They *also* indicate the presence of a "real person" playing the game, instead of an image of an untouchable idol present only as a figure dancing on a smartphone screen - this even though both are only accessible through that same screen. During a live-stream, the body of the idol is pleasantly, surprisingly easy to grasp. It is a mostly unmoving body (quite rare for a celebrity trained in dance and music performance), showcased through the format of long videos uninterrupted by editing. For once, we are no longer seeing idol bodies as fragment-assemblages (like in MVs). During a gaming live-stream, the idol is not so much the reflection of the K-Pop industry but rather the gaming industry. The body type of the character the idol is playing is irrelevant. However, the familiarity of their live-streaming body may be used to mediate between K-Pop and gamers all over the world.

Figure 32. Screenshot of a video of EXO member Baekhyun playing in the SM League

Because cultural industries in Korea are all under the same mandate to make profit and produce national prestige, partnerships between film, music, and game industries are common. Advertising campaigns for online or mobile games featuring idols or actors can often be seen in public spaces. In this relationship, the idol is simply a means to sell a product, as ads target an audience wider than an idol's fanbase. This could be effective on both local and international audiences. For instance, a promotional video for Netmarble and CJ's *Lineage 2* featuring superstar G-Dragon was released between the Korean and international release dates of the game (Figure 33), perhaps to attract the attention of a global audience. Indeed, the game is available in a handful of languages, including Chinese, Japanese, English, and Russian. K-Pop might also feature on the soundtrack of Korean and non-Korean games or be played at e-sports tournaments. For example, the popular Japanese rhythm video game *Osu!* features plenty of K-Pop songs. This might be explained by the large pool of Korean video game players, but might also be because K-Pop is "hot" at

present. As Kline and Dyer-Witheford explain, "Today, music is a carefully planned aspect of game marketing. Gamers have come to expect soundtracks in their video games that are up to date with popular music trends. The incorporation of current musical styles potentially accelerates the speed at which a game's value is exhausted – if the music is outdated, the gamer gets bored – and this increases the turnover rate of game purchases. Game music provides another way to identify and target potential audiences with precision; if a game has a punk rock soundtrack, a gamer likely knows whether or not they are the intended consumer" (233-234).

Figure 33. Thumbnail of a promotional video for *Lineage 2: Revolution*

Marketing partnerships might go as far as making new K-Pop acts to promote a game. For instance, Riot Games enlisted four singers, including two idols from girl group (G)I-DLE, to provide the vocals for their virtual girl group K/DA's single "Pop/Stars" (see Figure 34). This virtual group consists of (G)I-DLE members Soyeon in the skin of character Akali and Miyeon as Ahri, and American singers Jaira Burns and Madison Beers as Kai'sa and Evelynn. A promotional video released on (G)I-DLE's official YouTube channel shows

how the project was prepared, with the bulk of the work being done at Riot Games' studios in Los Angeles ("(여자)아이들((G)I-DLE) - LoL K/DA 'POP/STARS' Project Behind(미연&소연)"). The music video for "Pop/Stars," produced by French studio Fortiche Production, features the four characters drawn in digital art with a neon aesthetic in Seoul subway cars or nondescript backgrounds. But the movements of the characters onscreen are the singers' own movements, having been recorded with motion capture technology (see Figure 35). "Pop/Stars" was released to promote new premium skins for each of these characters (a skin costs around $10), but the partnership also proved highly successful in bringing in fans who were previously uninterested in either K-Pop or gaming to the *League of Legends* franchise. People who were not originally fans still appeared to perform fannish behavior (*The Verge, Dazed*). "Pop/Stars" topped Billboard's World Digital Song chart in November 2018, while the music video reached 30 million views in five days (Lee). K/DA performed on the same day the music video was released at the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 League of Legends Championships in Incheon, South Korea. The four singers sang live on stage while their virtual characters were present on screens via augmented reality (Figure 36).

Figure 34. Screenshot of the cover of the album "Pop/Stars"

Figure 35. Behind-the-scenes picture of the shooting of the video "Pop/Stars"

Figure 36. Screenshot of the video "POP/STARS - Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Finals | 2018 World Championship"

What body types are we seeing here? We have moved away from live-streamers and have returned to the realm of fragmented bodies as reflections of databases in the name of profit. One thing of note is the transnational production mode that is careful to give credit where it is due and documents the whole process. In addition, the K/DA performance put various Korean cultural industries, whether it be games or music, on the map of many platform users. Merging K-Pop with new technologies under the banner of creative endeavor was heralded by former president Park Geunhye as far back as her inauguration speech in 2013: "A creative economy is defined by the convergence of science and technology with industry, the fusion of culture with industry, and the blossoming of creativity in the very borders that were once permeated by barriers" (Park 2013). But the success of this new "creative economy" (*changjo gyeongje*) is still a work in progress. K/DA, because of its transnational mode of production and original *yet* not groundbreaking style of performance (Japanese vocal software Hatsune Miku has been filling arenas since 2010), is a much more

successful product than native Korean innovations like SM Entertainment's 2015 hologram musical *School Oz* (Kim 153). The most obvious takeaway here is that obedient bodies (especially those of women) remain the preferred medium of new technologies, in part because of their expected sales value. Docile bodies obediently use new technologies without discomfort, as if they were components of the machine itself.

To conclude, the intersection of the K-Pop and Korean gaming industries revolves mainly around marketing partnerships. Idols, either in the flesh or digitally enhanced, are used as fetishized commodities to advertise gaming products like skins, new games, or e-sports tournaments. The bodies of idols take center stage in these advertisement campaigns, as they index stardom most recognizably for the public at large. In the next section, I will look at a more recent development in the partnership between K-Pop and gaming: official idol mobile games.

4.3. K-Pop mobile games

K-Pop mobile games are a different business from video games, which tend to capture a diverse and international audience of players. K-Pop mobile games are almost always marketed specifically to already loyal, female fanbases. Smartphones are central in the relationship between K-Pop and fans: Dal Yong Jin argues that "smartphone Hallyu is closely connected to the New Korean Wave because many global users enjoy K-pop and Korean movies as well as smartphone games. This implies that Korean smartphone makers are riding on the Korean Wave that has swept across Asia and other parts of the world in the past few years… Therefore, the increasing role of these smartphones will not be curbed anytime soon" (*New Korean Wave* 162). The reason for this is that international K-Pop fans consume Korean media on SNS platforms, which are now fully integrated into smartphones and mobile devices. As we've seen in the previous section, who says smartphones says

mobile games. These two points suggest that K-Pop fans are being groomed into becoming consumers of Korean mobile games.

Recently, the popularity of mobile gaming has threatened that of online gaming. In Korea in 2012, mobile gaming grabbed a third of the gaming market while online gaming retained two-thirds (Jin, *Smartland Korea* 133). Korean mobile games are also beginning to make an impact abroad: in 2014, the export of mobile games equated to half of the export of online games (Jin, *Smartland Korea* 134). The growth of mobile gaming is directly linked to the increased ubiquity of smartphones in everyday life around the world, as well as the increased shift to urban lifestyles, resulting in ever-longer commutes and the increased need to "kill time." It thus appears that mobile games are enjoyed by a wide population of urban users regardless of age, gender or nationality. The mobile game market is expanding quickly as established online game studios compete with new developers, leading to strategic alliances and transnational investment flows between studios and other actors. For instance, Tencent self-reportedly invested $500 million in CJ Games in 2014 (Carsten 2014). Korean mobile game developers are therefore anxious to replicate the success of mobile games abroad.

To boost exports, developers apply different glocalization strategies than those used in online games: instead of starting from scratch, they choose to take advantage of pre-existing hosting platforms like Facebook, already popular in target markets, to reduce costs and appeal more easily to local audiences. Another strategy for companies with more financial power is to directly invest in or acquire foreign studios in order to have local staff create content for local audiences. Either way, the platforms to access foreign-oriented mobile games are separate from those distributing Korea-oriented mobile games. Marc Steinberg reports that mobile games in Korea are mostly accessed through converging platforms like KakaoTalk, with many services unavailable to foreign users without a Korean

phone number. Therefore, the push to promote Korean mobile games abroad is still hampered by the logic of borders. American operating systems iOS and Android still exercise a global monopoly on application-hosting platforms, which puts local platforms like KakaoTalk and independent developers at a disadvantage (Jin, *Smartland Korea* 175). The same logic applies in China: Tencent invests in so many studios abroad because foreign studios need the company's support to enter the Chinese market. On the other hand, Steinberg suggests that neo-regionalism, a term coined by Leo Ching that refers to the displacement of Japanese and American hegemony in East Asia, might also be happening in the realm of online platforms. In the future, local chat apps like WeChat (China), KakaoTalk (Korea), and LINE (Japan) may eventually overthrow the hegemony of iOS and Android (234). K-Pop mobile games, however, can bypass these distribution issues by promoting directly to pre-existing fanbases. For instance, *BTS World* was released in 14 different languages.

Let us study Korean mobile games aesthetics in more detail. The aesthetics of Korean mobile games reflect the medium. In theory, mobile games are fundamentally characterized by "catchiness": to be catchy, the game has to provide the user a straightforward gratification system and a sense of familiarity (Bogost 1). A "straightforward gratification system" means that the game cannot be too hard to play. Mobile games thus encompass straightforward casual games like *Candy Crush* and mid-core games like *Lineage*, but exclude hardcore games like *Grand Theft Auto*. Second, a "sense of familiarity" means that the game must emulate structures that the player has already encountered, whether in the tasks to be performed or in the artistic setting. Visual familiarity is not only an enhancer of catchiness but also a structural necessity: the material properties of smartphones greatly constrain the embodied actions a player can perform, essentially boiling down to touching a small screen with their fingers. Thus, there is a need to purify elements from the screen that might lead the

player into touching the wrong button. Mobile games are also constrained by the shape of smartphones, with developers having to take into account the panoramic horizontal or vertical screen. Therefore, in most games, the action occupies the center of the screen and additional functions are located on the edges (Figure 37).

Figure 37. Screenshot of the Korean game *Cookie Run: Ovenbreak*

Familiarity also comes from the visual style of the game: as explained in the first chapter, the Superflat aesthetic permeates screens. In spite of the material incentive to purify the surface of the screen, once a game is opened, the viewer is still presented with a multitude of smaller windows: game controls float around and ads pop up randomly (Figure 38) or loop endlessly at the bottom of the screen. This depthless layering is reminiscent of the Superflat aesthetic for two reasons: first, it creates a fractured subjectivity (the player is constantly looking at multiple windows competing for her attention) and second, the presence of advertisement layered on top of a product of consumption is a confirmation of neoliberalist logic.

Figure 38. Screenshot of the ads system in the management game *Cooking Adventures*

With this background in Korean mobile games, I now explore *idol* games. A handful of K-Pop mobile games have been released to date, including *BeatEVO YG*, a mix of management and music tile games, and *EXORUN*, a platform game that is no longer available. But none are as intricate and carefully designed as *BTS World*, which I have already discussed in extensive detail. *BeatEVO YG* does not feature the physical bodies of the YG entertainment idols the player can "manage," instead using facial portraits of the idols on the cards used in gameplay (Figure 39). *EXORUN* did not feature the actual bodies of the idols either; instead, the members were represented by big-headed animated 2D avatars (Figure 40). Considering the limits of the medium, the game developers chose the most appropriate reflections for the visual representation of the idols from databases.
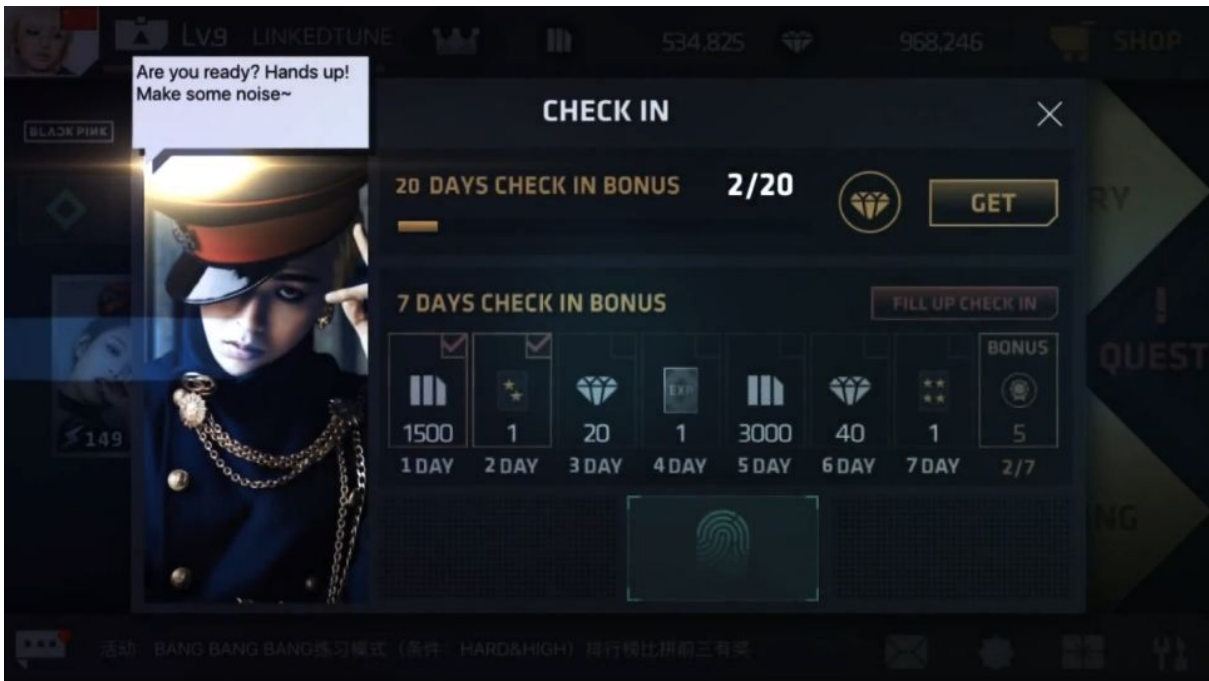
Figure 39. Screenshot of the promotional video for *BeatEVO YG*
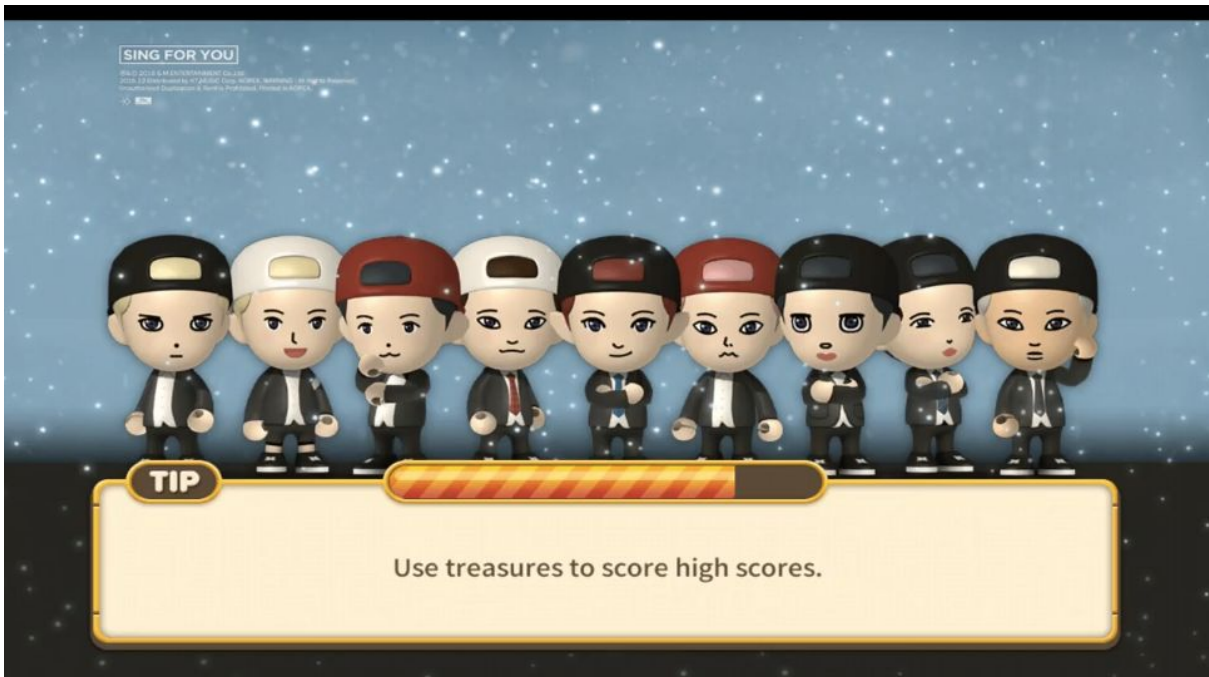
Figure 40. Screenshot of the gameplay of *EXORUN*

The type of body seen in idol mobile games usually follows the same directive: take up just the right amount of space, but still be attention-catching. More often than not, body shape in these games is not customizable. Shira Chess gives an example of this in *Kim*

Kardashian: Hollywood, where players can choose their character's skin color from a wide variety of shades but must have by default the hourglass shape for which Kim Kardashian is famous. Chess writes that most mobile games, being aimed at females, betray a peculiar body ideology of slenderness:

> … having the least possible offensive bodies helps to create a comfortable space for an expected audience of women gamers. Yet this also (uncomfortably) suggests the ideology of slenderness, per Bordo, referenced above. If buxom women are at the heart of games designed for masculine audiences, then slenderness is at the heart of games designed for feminine audiences. The most common visual image in time management games is a slender, ponytailed, white woman. (167)

Even in *BTS World*, the bodies and personalities of the members are flattened in order to appeal to the majority of fans. The members' bodies were also actively working towards physical slenderness, as seen in Jimin's storyline. Meanwhile, *BeatEvo YG* and *EXORUN* seem to bypass the problem of body image by emphasizing the non-human-ness of the characters in an effort to erase the physical labor behind both idol life and gaming production, while at the same time invisibly encouraging the player to physically work for the game. In the next section, I will take a look at how the body of the fan/player is treated in K-Pop mobile games.

4.4.   The embodiment of fans in mobile and video games

Let us look at the embodiment of the player-character in *BTS World*: the manager. Player-characters in visual novels usually have their own predetermined characterization subordinated to the game, but the manager in *BTS World* seems to obey what the player tells

them to do. This setup leaves players some agency over the obtention of points, but not over the personality of the manager. In the first English version of the game, the character was explicitly branded as female and used female pronouns. Fan discontent with this decision led Takeone to alter the dialogue to avoid revealing the gender of the manager (Figure 41). Many fans also complained that the algorithm took them in directions they were not interested in, occasionally pushing them into unwanted flirtations between the manager and the members. The developers seemingly chose to erase the body of the manager to cater to a diverse player pool, while at the same time assuming that all players would share the same gender identity and romantic interest in BTS.
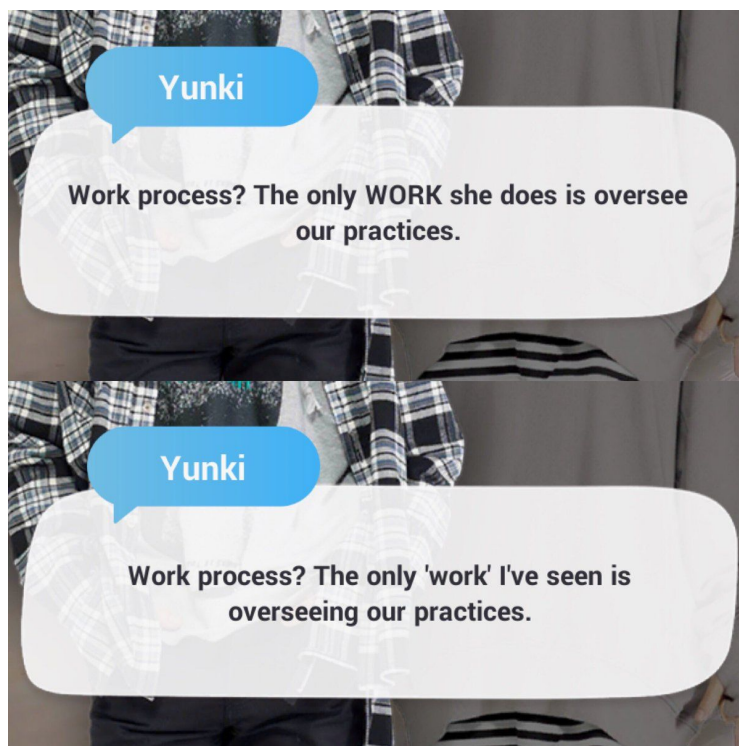
Figure 41. Screenshot taken by xYati25x

Effectively, all users end up playing the same version of the manager, who is some kind of umbrella ARMY (BTS' fandom name) seen through the eyes of the developers: young females with a romantic interest in BTS. In spite of these limitations, the figure of the manager is presented as the fan herself, as if it was a full avatar. In gaming, avatars are

understood to be a type of playable character with a customizable appearance and no personality (Nakamura 2008), blank pages onto which the player can project her own personality. In MMORPGs like *League of Legends*, the player may customize a champion's appearance with in-game modifications (for example, the champion Akali has now 11 different skins). In virtual worlds like *The Sims*, the player can choose the height, weight, skin color, and facial features of their Sim. Just like the image one uploads as a profile picture on SNS, the digital representation of a character created inside a video game is considered by default one's avatar. In *BTS World*, while the manager is the player's point of entry into the game, their appearance is never revealed, let alone customizable. The extent of avatar creation is limited to changing one's profile picture to a card obtained during gameplay. There might be hundreds of cards to choose from, but the "avatar" is still not the embodied representation of the player.

In *BTS World*, the player is an invisible, disembodied heterosexual female, which can be interpreted to be part of a larger patriarchal discourse urging women to not take up space, even online. The repression of the female body in mobile games resonates with this comment by Susan Bordo: "A constellation of social, economic, and psychological factors have combined to produce a generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves [read: without need, without want, without body]" (47). The fact that the manager has no body suggests that her labor is erased, that she is an invisible ghost performing behind-the-scenes despite investing time - and sometimes money - into her work. The ways in which female-oriented mobile games treat female bodies are at odds with those of MMORPGs, which emphasize hyper-sexualized bodies. "Pop/Stars" producer Viranda Tantula remarks about Evelynn from K/DA, "[You] gotta love how awesomely her demon seductress base lore plays so well into the man-eater pop music diva fantasy as well"

(Mickunas). In this sense, one could interpret *BTS World* as freeing rather than constraining. Shira Chess concludes her book on gaming and gender by avoiding the generalization of the question of bodies in games: "Bodies in a game world are both freeing and limiting. They assign an idealized model of what the gamer should look like, in addition to how that gamer is expected to behave… The body problem becomes a problem when it maps back to real bodies, the lived bodies of actual players that internalize who is expected to play and how that play should occur" (172). As we've seen in previous chapters, K-Pop often encourages unhealthy body ideals and promotes questionable techniques of self-care. The models of embodiment in *BTS World* sit on the fence: on the one hand, the game portrays Jimin dieting, but on the other hand, it does not assign a body to the player/fan. To see how fans deal with embodiment in idol games, I now turn to fan-made games featuring K-Pop elements.

The Sims is one of the most downloaded games of all time, having sold more than 200 million copies as of 2016 (Rhinewald and McElrath-Hart 2016). Developer Will Wright "described it more as a toy than a game, a digital dollhouse that served as the setting for endless domestic dramas" ("The Sims"). Players can build houses, get jobs, and raise kids; as such, the game has no specific goal or storyline to speak of. Instead, *The Sims* focuses on "situational, world, and character development rather than plot advancement" (Ruggill and McAllister 87). Virtual worlds like *The Sims, Second Life*, or even MMORPGs "have a definite, and often well-defined point of entry or beginning; they have intermediate objectives that players seek to accomplish; but they do not have a final and conclusive ending point" (Gunkel 156). In these conditions, it is the gamers' style of play rather than the game itself that determines the game experience. "While play defines the computer game experience, work defines the computer game medium": virtual worlds have large, dedicated fandoms that are constantly at work playing (Ruggill and McAllister 83). If players eventually get bored of the world and wish to increase the ludic aspect of the game, they can

either purchase game extensions that introduce more traditional gameplay, or take up the role of the developer themselves. Some programming-savvy players have developed modification software that allows any game-owner to spice up their play experience. These fan customizations include new avatar designs, missions with specific challenges called "mods" (short for modification), or chat codes to speed up the process of acquiring skills. This is taking the producerly role of fanwork to a new level of technical expertise. *The Sims* fan pages, where all this information is freely disclosed, are supported by EA, the game developer, as it "provides [them] with a sure-fire market outlet to promote further elements of *The Sims* franchise," and equally importantly, "monitor responses and discussion about games" (Kline 272).

To my knowledge, the closest K-Pop has come to these virtual worlds was when singer Hwasa participated in the Korean promotional campaign for the *The Sims 4* in January 2020. In the minute-long promotional video, she happily creates the mansion of her dreams, enjoys a sun-filled vacation, and goes on a date at the cinema thanks to the unlimited power of play offered by the game ("화사가 심즈4를 하는 이유"). Although Hwasa has her own avatar in the promotional video, her presence in the campaign is only due to her brand value, and does not represent the movement of Hallyu into virtual worlds. That is, at least for now; Big Hit Entertainment recently bought the mobile game company Superb. Superb's co-CEO Oh Minhwan stated, "Superb has been focusing on creating new ways of having fun by combining music and games. Through both parties' revolutionary content and development ability, we will work to create content that lives up to expectations of global users" (J. Lim 2019). To obtain the experience of embodied K-Pop play, fans have turned to *The Sims* to create their own idol skins (Figure 42) and put them in all sorts of scenarios (ranging from *Battle Royale* to babysitter). Some fans upload videos of the stories they come up with, or

tutorials to help other fans create idol-like Sims. Some fans even create K-Pop inspired mods, written in open-source code that is available for free.

Figure 42. Thumbnail of the video "◆The Sims 4 ¦ CAS - BTS Suga◆(+full cc list)"

"K-Pop Career" (Figure 43) is a mod developed by Kawaiistacie, based on the "Road to Fame" modification with a "K-Pop idol" storyline: the player has to train their Sim to sing and dance while passing challenges such as "Debut solo or in a group!" or "Trend online for good or bad reasons!" Kawaiistacie also created in-game accessories like trophies, awarded after gaining new skills. Playing such a fanmade mod is more immersive than participating in more traditional role-playing forums, but it does not allow for as much creativity. The development of the "K-Pop Career" plot is created entirely by Kawaiistacie. Players can cheat their way through laboring to develop skills, but ultimately they cannot deviate from the road.

Figure 43. Thumbnail of "K POP CAREER W // ROAD TO FAME - Mod Overview"

Kawaiistacie, like many other fan developers, uploads online the programs that determine Sims' appearance and outfits, putting her K-Pop skins at any player's disposal. In the mod, the player controls their own avatar, not a pre-existing idol character (though they can customize their Sim to look like a particular celebrity). Virtual worlds thus introduce avatars into the mixture of K-Pop and gaming, though the industry as of now excludes this type of involvement. As explained in past chapters, the intersection of playful fantasies of embodiment and K-Pop can have nefarious consequences for the actors involved. It seems that fans are re-creating these fantasies on their own in K-Popified virtual worlds. Yee and his co-authors write, "Instead of providing an escape from our bodies, virtual worlds have tended to encourage a meticulous scrutiny and obsessive fascination with our bodies" (Yee et al. 1). For instance, *The Sims* was imagined as a virtual dollhouse, allowing players to create their ideal life. But this alternative life still has to comply with certain standards, like the principle of the calorie. In *The Sims 4*, every food has a set number of calories, which is not

determined by real nutritional science: some foods like ambrosia or tiramisu do not have a calorie count. But eating food without burning calories through exercise will cause a Sim to get bigger over time, even if the Sim is eating just enough to satisfy hunger (*The Sims* Wiki). There is a built-in incentive to watch over food consumption and constantly exercise; counterintuitively, Sims never seem to get tired of standing all day.

The Sims is clearly perpetuating neoliberal techniques of the self via gamification. Gamification, ubiquitous in digital media, from Fitbit watches to personal banking visualizations, is a neoliberal tool to ludicize the process of self-care and self-improvement by inciting individuals to voluntarily track and record their habits. One's life, and particularly one's body, can be translated into a multitude of data points that together make up an alternative digital version of the self. Jennifer Whitson writes, "What gamification successfully borrows from games are the methods to provide clear *feedback* and *reinforcement* to users. This, and not playful or gameful design, is what characterizes current examples of gamification… Feedback thus governs behavior; steps toward a goal are encouraged in multiple ways and channels, while steps in the wrong direction are penalized" (346-347). In *The Sims 4*, feedback and reinforcement of eating practices are made obvious to the player with the changing shape of the Sim. Even though many physiological rules have been eschewed, the lesson on what is considered standard eating behavior, namely counting calories, is as clear as day. While K-Pop only intervenes indirectly in this mod, its message of neoliberal self-care integrates well with pre-existing structures of games like *The Sims*. Therefore, there are many convoluted ways in which performing K-Pop fannishness entangles the fan in discourses and practices of self-improvement and teaches techniques of the self to the player. Does the industry provide feedback to fans who obey these ideologies? Perhaps, via international auditions held by an increasing number of Korean management companies to scout new talent abroad. Korean standards of success and beauty are broadcast

in advance to international candidates, so they know exactly what is expected of them before they even step on stage.

4.5.   Conclusion

In this chapter, I found evidence that fan content makers are likely to reproduce the erasure of their own bodies, as is the norm in idol games. Kayla, in her game *BTS Messenger 2*, followed industry standards for dating simulations and chose to disembody the player entirely. Similarly, the goal of Kawaiistacie's mod was not to put oneself in the scenario of becoming a K-Pop trainee, but rather to virtually manage one. While the digital works produced by fans are reflections of their experience in K-Pop fandoms, their bodies did not get translated online. All the weight of embodying "K-Pop" in digital media thus rests exclusively on the idols. This willful disembodiment also makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which fans reproduce techniques of the self taught by idols. Qualitative interviews are a more appropriate tool to measure this.

5.   Conclusions: Avatarization

	Edits	Diet videos	Games
Digital media	SNS platforms and image databases	YouTube vlogs, calorie-tracking apps	Mobile games, virtual worlds
Body modification	Edition and remediation of digitized idol bodies	Change of fan's body shape on the model of flat idols	Erasure of fan bodies and database of idol bodies
Transmission	Flat idols, Superflat ideology	Neoliberal techniques of the self, thin imperative	Gamification, feedback reinforcing ideologies

My initial goal was to examine body modification by digital and physical means in the K-Pop fandom, and to see to what extent that modification was indebted to industry practices. I concluded that Superflat, neoliberal techniques of the self and gamification affected the consumption and modification of bodies, of both idols and fans, across media. In chapter 1, I created a genealogy of fan digital edits of idol bodies, made possible by the Superflat aesthetic. I then explored in chapter 2 how fans come to emulate the bodies of flattened idols after exposure to idols' techniques of the self in the context of Hallyu-hwa. In chapter 3, I looked for traces of continuity of these ideologies (Superflat and neoliberal techniques of the self) in the realm of K-Pop games. I found that K-Pop games not only referenced these ideologies in the gameplay, but also that fans reproduce some of the embodiment techniques in these games.

My goal was to examine what new perspectives the introduction of a new medium, namely games, would enact on K-Pop bodies. I suggest that it has primarily celebrated the erasure of bodies as a technological feat. Before mobile games, idols' bodies were flattened by legal, aesthetic, and nutritional means, but K-Pop mobile games push the plasticity of idol

bodies to new heights by explicitly treating them like resources taken from a database. I found that in *BTS World*, the bodies of the members were interchangeable, existing only as skins on a shelf separate from the characterization of the members. As an interactive game, *BTS World* directly references the fan-player. However, that presence is disembodied: the physicality of the manager is only implied, with no mediation available between the fan playing on her phone and the manager in the storyline. Fans consuming this content have been ambivalent toward this development. Some fans followed the official model of embodying idol characters from a database of bodies and erasing the body of fan characters, as Kayla and Trisha did in *BTS Messenger 2*. Others did not particularly like being collapsed into a single disembodied avatar (as exemplified by the pronoun issue in *BTS World*), but nonetheless did not try to introduce their own embodied avatars into their works. Instead, the model of embodiment created by fans on their own terms is the construction of avatars out of idol bodies, in a similar fashion to edit makers making Twitter icons in the first chapter. Virtually all models tend to erase the bodies of fans and erase the labor that goes into creating fanwork. Fan studies scholars model fan practices through concepts like the carnivalesque and cloak rooms. Both models suggest freedom, but as K-Pop increasingly co-opts the embodied participation of fans, neither model effectively accounts for the potential long-term consequences of fan practices.

I frequently referenced Azuma's theory of database consumption in *otaku* culture to model the production of derivative works by both industry and fans. Azuma argues that *otaku* culture shifted after the advent of postmodernity. But Li argues, "When Azuma charted a clean diagram illustrating a somewhat reductive genealogy that positions 'postmodern' as a linear historical progression after 'modern,' he seemed to forget that the definition of 'postmodern' often involves the very loss of history as such… In other words, by reading superflat vision simply as a symptom of the postmodern condition, we ignore the fact that

this vision may also be a contributing cause of such a condition" (213). Azuma does not look at factors that affect *otaku* consumption and create the conditions of life in postmodernity, although in his defence the book is not strictly written for academic consumption. Moreover, for someone who puts so much emphasis on the act of looking at databases, Azuma ignores the history of databases as scientific tools of power and surveillance. Reality, as it is seen under the lens of objectivity, is logged and tagged in databases, and thus can only serve one master. As Rey Chow says, "the process of (visual) objectification has become so indispensable in the age of modern scientific research that understanding—''conceiving'' and ''grasping'' the world—is now an act inseparable from the act of seeing—from a certain form of ''picturing'' (30). We have to take into account how the visual fragments making up databases reflect powerful ideologies.

I looked at bodies in K-Pop works and found that they are made out of fragments taken from databases. Fan derivative works and official content increasingly resemble each other because they both tap into the same databases. Min Yoongi writes songs in his studio until the early hours of the morning; this is accepted as a universal truth. Azuma explores this blurring of lines in 1990s anime, writing about *Evangelion* that "this thing that Gainax [*Evangelion*'s producing company] was offering was certainly more than a single grand narrative, with the TV series as an entrance. Rather, it was an aggregate of information without a narrative, into which all viewers could empathize of their own accord and each could read up convenient narratives" (38). The seven BTS members are not fictional characters like Shinji or Rei, but BTS *is* experienced as a cultural product with multiple points of entry and multiple smaller narratives. Idol bodies, both created by companies or edited by fans, are in some way *reflections* of the database. They embody affective fragments from the database (e.g. Jimin is cute and has abs) as well as the rules that shape it (relying exclusively on protein shakes is an acceptable form of body care). Azuma writes, "Once the

otaku are captivated by a work, they will endlessly consume related products and derivative works through database consumption. For in the database-type world they confront, there is no grand narrative that can quell that passion" (105). That excerpt seems written explicitly for new fans of K-Pop, who binge all available content to understand what the hype is about, to acquire the same vocabulary and knowledge older fans seem to share, and to understand and consume the derivative works fans have created. Idol bodies are at the center of that process, as they can easily travel between media like MVs, SNS selfies, fanfiction, and virtual worlds. Following Azuma, idol bodies are thus reflections of the database, a fact which is most obvious in novel games (106). *BTS World* included Superflat, techniques of the self, and gamification elements in the members' storylines and game-bodies while satisfying fans' desire to explore multiple storylines and combinations of affective fragments. Derivative works like *BTS Messenger 2* allow fans, insatiable in their desire to uncover the invisible hidden in the data, to explore the database of BTS fragments in greater depth.

I wonder if we can call idols-as-reflections-of-database "avatars." Avatar implies mediation, and idols already mediate between Korea and a global audience and between the fan and her ideal body shape. Academics studying video games typically look into how people choose to design their avatar (Waggoner 2009), how close they are to it (Gee 2008), how that affects gameplay, or what kind of relationships avatars have between them (Boellstorff 2008). Colin Milburn offers a novel perspective of avatars through the analogy of nanotechnology. From a religious perspective, an avatar is the representation of a Hindu deity in human form, involving the reduction of a godly figure to a human scale. In the realm of nanotechnology, avatarization refers to rescaling the scientist's subjectivity to the size of the atoms she is manipulating. It would be inaccurate, however, to say that avatars transport humans to another location. Avatars are just mediums: "The avatar is a delegate, a tool or

instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world" (Little 1999 in Apter 2008, emphasis mine).

Consequently, video game avatars, contrary to popular understanding, are not the physical representation of the player in the game (e.g. Lara Croft). Rune Klejver argues that the avatar is actually the remotely controlled virtual camera and writes that "an indirectly controlled camera, to the extent that it functions as a navigable camera, and to the extent that it is part of an apparatus of objective embodied presence, is nevertheless avatarial in its function, undermining a sense of miniatureness in favour of encapsulating telepresence" (33). In other words, the main avatar is a camera obeying the player's instructions under two key conditions: first, that it allows the exploration of a game world while being subject to the algorithm and second, that there is a real person with a body behind the controller. More than a simple eye, the camera-avatar is an aide, a source of information: "The player learns to make the vision machine show him/her that agency in the virtual space" (Crogan 228). Video games are already moving in this direction. Journalist Keith Stuart speculates that the player-avatar relationship might be akin to a controlling friendship, falling between the mono and duo-models: "Last year, I met the game designer and author Jesse Schell who has a theory that the relationship between player and character in third-person games will gradually evolve from one of semi-representation to one of co-operation. In short, you won't 'be' Lara Croft, you'll be her companion, her advisor… I think we're going to see more relationships like that - where you'll be chatting with your avatar, and then you're controlling him and giving him orders…"

Idols are thus not exactly mediums between users and the database, but rather guides that the camera (avatar) follows. It is the norm in visual novel games for the player to play the part of characters with distinct names, appearances, and personalities. Meanwhile, in *BTS World*, the player controls a disembodied manager who exists at the crossroads between a

character and an "avatar." The manager in *BTS World* is present in the game by virtue of being able to be seen by the other characters, even though physically invisible to the player. In this sense, the manager is an actual avatar, a disembodied eye allowing the player to look at the reflections of the database (the bodies of idol characters). Beyond video games, in our Superflat environment, avatars-as-cameras are our eyes in the realm of databases, "decoys masking the thingness of data" (Apter 2008) "like Murakami's floating eyes" (Li 217). (See Figure 44.) It is unfortunate that avatars, even when completely disembodied, are still often assumed to possess certain attributes. By the same token, embodied reflections of the database (idols, cute animals, or your digital double) can be actively designed to help the user navigate the database and integrate into the rules that shape it. Developers and programmers have their own languages to communicate with computers, but for most people, a visual interface is necessary to navigate hardware and software. This is why idols make excellent embodied database reflections: they are good at teaching us its rules.

Figure 44. Murakami Takashi, *EYE LOVE SUPERFLAT*

I take a moment now to critically assess whether I have also fallen into the trap of reducing idols to objects in this thesis, a position that I criticize throughout the paper. To clarify, I discuss the objectification of idol bodies that is already occurring, without making judgements about idols' persons and identities. I have tried to restrict myself to looking at how idols' bodies are treated in digital spaces. To be clear, idols do have some agency in this process. As far as I am aware, the pictures uploaded on their SNS pages are taken on their own terms, and many idols extensively manage their own image in the name of popularity. But when it comes to the practices that concern their *digitized* body, this can quickly be taken out of their hands. Fans can be quite cavalier about what they do to flattened idol bodies. In the Superflat, neoliberal, gamified environment, this ends up painting a not-so-pretty picture of idolhood.

Because no one has yet written about K-Pop games, I became curious about the topic. I wondered if the current scholarship on video games could be applied to the K-Pop case, as scholarship that exclusively centers on fandom almost always misses the mark when it comes to transnational cultural products. Although this thesis was written from the perspective of media studies, not game studies, I found that their theories worked well with my object of research, which in turn might even challenge the popular understanding of video games. I think I have proven that idols are often treated like characters in a story. Although Azuma wrote about fictional characters, his theory, involving so many factors that affect postmodern life beyond cultural artifacts, can be applied to a broader spectrum of objects. Many fans argue that idols are "real people" and therefore can never be "un-real." Others treat idols like commodities on the basis that they were produced as such. I am not here to take a side, but instead to demonstrate that bodies are being co-opted into narratives that encourage both the playful exploration of identity performance and unhealthy behaviors. That neoliberal works are problematic is nothing new, but I think that message is still not heard enough in academia

beyond queer, gender, or clinical psychology studies. Cultural products aimed at an international audience are an excellent reflection of what an imagined global culture would look like. Indeed, databases show us what we (are taught to) value, but also what kind of self we choose to perform.

Datification has been criticized by scholars for hastening the fragmentation of the self. Clemens Apprich addresses this anxiety in the conclusion of his book on algorithmic pattern discrimination:

> In social media, the individual gets atomized, in order to become a source of data production, as well as an identifiable subject for marketing. This form of algorithmic governance is well known by now. However, most of today's critical examination is simply repeating the implicit presuppositions of the problem, that is that the individual has to be preserved, rather than asking for *new forms of individuation* in our post-media time. Such an approach doesn't necessarily imply an affirmation of the status quo; on the contrary, it could help to set up some criteria to better understand, and maybe even *vanquish the paranoid anxiety* caused by "postmodern confusion" (see Chun 2015)..." (113, emphasis mine)

If games are so important to postmodern life, then perhaps a new form of individuation could be constructed around the "player" identity. Whitson, in her article on gamification and techniques of the self, argues, "There is something important about interpellating players instead of users. This play includes joyful explorations and tangential detours/detournement. It includes counterplay, both of which complicate the surveillance projects that constitute corporate gamification endeavors" (355). Experiences with different, playful forms of individuation have been tested out in gaming, such as second-person games

or queer AIs. What would that look like in the context of K-Pop? I leave that question open to

future research.

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