Toward Productive Coexistence: A Relational Analysis of a Feminist Counterpublic in Twitter K-Pop Fandom

YENA LEE[1]
Northwestern University, USA

Counterpublic research highlights the significance of counter-discourse in challenging dominant public spheres. Yet, less focus has been given to how counterpublic actors could destabilize the relationships within a dominant public to foster counter-discourse. I examine the creation of a feminist counterpublic within Twitter K-pop fandom to understand how oppositional actors can transform the toxic technocultures of the dominant public to create a counterpublic. Formed by feminist K-pop fans, this counterpublic defied toxic relational norms of the mainstream K-pop fandom, cultivating a culture where fans could critique problematic K-pop star text without renouncing their fan identity. I bring the concepts of relational schemas and scripts to the study of counterpublics to demonstrate how creating an alternative schema can be a tool of resistance. To do so, I highlight how feminist fans reappropriated existing relationship scripts and formulated new ones to modify the relational schema of the mainstream K-pop fandom. I argue that these relational strategies helped feminist fans regroup by creating opportunities for productive coexistence, facilitating an alternative relational schema around a critical fan identity.

Keywords: networked counterpublic, relational schema, K-pop, K-pop fandom, toxic technocultures, feminist counterpublic, fan activism

Social media platforms have become spaces where individuals can create a community of people who share the same interests, ideas, or political views that challenge those of the dominant public. The rising visibility of such spaces has led scholars to characterize them as counterpublics (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Kuo, 2018) or networked counterpublics (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2018; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; D. Kim, 2021; Renninger, 2015; Trott, 2021), counterpublics enabled and restructured by networked technologies.

Most of this research refers to Fraser's (1990) definition of counterpublics as a "parallel discursive arena" (p. 67) where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-

Yena Lee: yenalee2024@u.northwestern.edu

discourse to challenge existing power structures. Due to this emphasis on discourse in the definition, existing research on networked counterpublics has primarily looked at discourse circulation among actors of networked counterpublics (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; D. Kim, 2021; Kuo, 2018) and the specific platform affordances that enable such discourse (Renninger, 2015).

While discourse is a central component of networked publics and counterpublics, discourse is influenced by and influences the system of relations (Warner, 2002) that have given rise to such spaces. While networked technologies can present challenges in building relationships, networked publics with their own relational schemas do exist (Graham & Smith, 2016; Massanari, 2017). Relational schemas are mental frameworks that aid in understanding common patterns of interaction among individuals. Concurrently, these relational schemas are guided by relationship scripts, which delineate and guide behaviors and interactions in various interpersonal scenarios (Baldwin, 1992). Studying the oppositional actors who have challenged and transformed existing relational schemas can provide an understanding of how relational strategies could disrupt existing power structures and facilitate the regroupment process necessary for counterpublic formation.

Central to this study's focus on oppositional actors are feminist K-pop fans. K-pop, short for Korean Pop, is a music genre that originated in South Korea but has since captured global attention. K-pop fandom is an example of a networked public well known for its distinct relationship scripts that make it a deeply intimate (King-O'Riain, 2021) and sometimes toxic and hierarchical (Jung, 2012) dominant public sphere. From how fans express themselves to the different ways they address and interact with other fans (Lee & Ji, 2015), fans with more influence, and K-pop stars, the strict relational schemas governing the duties of a fan are embedded in all aspects of K-pop fandom activity and enables fans to function as a highly coordinated public at a global scale, capable of topping trending issues on Twitter and fooling Trump and organizers of his Oklahoma rally back in 2020 (Abidin, 2020).

Despite the recent attention that K-pop fandom is receiving as a force for political activism, Black and Brown K-pop fans who have criticized idols' cultural appropriation and racist comments have been subject to intense cyberbullying by K-pop fans who branded them as antifans in disguise (Chaudhry, 2020; Dahir, 2018). This is a similar logic with which the dominant public sphere of K-pop fandom threatened feminist fans of BTS who started raising awareness around the group's misogynistic lyrics and actions starting in 2016. Their efforts instigated a wave of feminist activism in other fandoms, culminating in a networked counterpublic with its own relational schema and scripts. It was a product of a series of contested actions that feminist fans took to create a space where fans can be fans and feminists without being forced to subscribe to the "good" versus "bad" fan binary so prominent in the dominant public sphere of mainstream K-pop fandom.

What makes this feminist counterpublic interesting is the process by which feminist fans were able to structure an alternative system of relations based on a different kind of relational schema than those of the mainstream K-pop fandom. Rather than duplicating the mainstream fandom's dogmatic and divisive "us versus them" schema, feminist fans concentrated on fostering an environment where they could establish a sense of belonging in ways that are less fixed, confrontational, and conformist. When feminist fans started

raising awareness around misogynistic lyrics, they were accused of putting feminism over idols because the relational schema that K-pop fandom promotes does not allow fans to put anything "above" idols and encourage bullying those who challenge this "all-or-nothing" mentality.

This study focuses on the relational strategies with which feminist fans co-constructed a feminist counterpublic despite intense opposition from the mainstream fandom. Even though social media platforms can be a space of networked intimacy (Papacharissi, 2016), they can also function as a prism that amplifies perceived polarization (Bail, 2021) and facilitates toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017). Studying how actors of a networked counterpublic were able to challenge the toxic relational schema of the dominant public sphere and foster an alternative relational schema can provide insights into how regroupment can take place on social media.

To investigate the kinds of relational strategies that led to the formation of the feminist counterpublic, I conducted an 11-month-long digital ethnography on Twitter. I also interviewed 12 Korean fans who identified themselves as feminists. Seven of these fans had the experience of creating or managing public feminist fan accounts on Twitter.

I divided my analysis into preformative and formative stages and analyzed the types of relational strategies that feminist fans adopted to reform the public sphere (preformative stage) and create a counterpublic (formative stage). I divided the counterpublic into two stages to distinguish feminist fans' adaptation of existing relationship scripts to reform the public sphere from later strategies of reappropriating and inventing new relationship scripts to create a new schema. Putting these strategies into perspective, I argue that even though the feminist fans' out-group differences from the mainstream fandom and subsequent in-group differences in the feminist counterpublic made them vulnerable to attacks from the mainstream K-pop fandom, feminist fans were able to regroup by iteratively crafting relationship scripts centered on an alternative relational schema emphasizing collaboration and productive coexistence.

Why a "Relational Turn" in the Study of Counterpublics?

There are two types of research on networked publics. The first type conceives networked publics (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2016) as a type of gathering with an emphasis on the action of gathering. The second type focuses more on the public itself and conceives networked publics as a microcosm of social relations with its own culture and discourse. Unlike the short-lived nature of the first type of networked publics that could be formed and dissolved within a few hours, the second type is a product of long periods of community and relationship building by its actors. Examples of such publics that have been previously studied are #GirlsLikeUs network (Jackson et al., 2018), Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022), TV fandoms (Williams & Gonlin, 2017; Wood & Baughman, 2012), K-pop fandom (Zhang, 2016), and gamer community on Reddit (Massanari, 2017). These publics align more with Warner's (2002) perspective on publics and counterpublics as a body given shape by self-organized relations among strangers.

Most previous counterpublic research has relied on the first conceptualization of publics to understand how previously unconnected users can come together through discourse production around shared oppositional consciousness against the dominant public sphere (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Kuo, 2018). Whereas counterpublic research like Jackson and Banaszczyk's (2016) work on #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen highlighted the political potential in using hashtags to challenge hegemonic ideas, there is more to counterpublics than counter-discourse because discourse is not the only aspect of a counterpublic that can be oppositional. Since discourse and relationship are so interrelated, I argue that more research should study the second type of networked publics and counterpublics—those that have crafted their unique approaches to building relationships, nurturing intimacy, and establishing relational norms and objectives—for a deeper insight into what truly characterizes counterpublics as "counter."

For Warner (2002), counterpublics are "counter" due to their undefined and constantly evolving forms of expression and styles of address, which make them transformative. This differs from the dominant public sphere, which takes its lifeworld and associated rules and practices for granted. For a counterpublic to have such transformative potential, it must supply alternative ways of imagining "stranger-relationality"— how relations among strangers are created and maintained inside the counterpublic—and "reflexivity," which is how they recognize themselves to be members of a counterpublic.

Relationships are at the heart of how actors of a counterpublic form a sense of membership and solidarity. Relationships are typically described as the way people behave and feel toward each other, which is heavily influenced by personal and cultural contexts (Montgomery, 1998). Thus, the relational schemas guiding our interactions in specific scenarios are deeply anchored in cultural and historical contexts. Relational schemas are conceived as "organized presentations of past behavior and experience" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 468) that "facilitate the coordination of action, reduce the effort of interaction, and reduce the necessity of attention to small details and allow joint action to be organized" (Ginsburg, 1988, p. 30). Whereas relational schemas act as models, relationship scripts provide the blueprint for social interactions like a sequence of actions or behaviors expected in a particular situation or a type of relationship (Schank & Abelson, 1977).

Stable relational schemas, bolstered by multiple sustaining relationship scripts, are instrumental in the functioning and preservation of public spheres. On the other hand, relational schemas can have a pivotal role in effecting solidarity obligations for collective action (Polletta, 2020). This research combines scholarship on relational schemas (Baldwin, 1992; Ginsburg, 1998) and counterpublics to demonstrate that establishing a counterpublic—complete with the discourse and cultural practices that lend substance to it—initially requires challenging prevailing relational schemas and formulating novel ones that diverge from the mainstream.

Problematic relational schemas that allow and stimulate misogyny have catalyzed the emergence of toxic technocultures, contributing to incidents like "The Fappening" (Massanari, 2017), where behaviors like sharing explicit celebrity images were not only overlooked but, at times, even endorsed by community members. Employing a relational perspective to study networked counterpublic formation can shed light on the potential strategies dissenting agents can use to destabilize and transform the harmful relational

dynamics established in dominant public spheres. Therefore, this research employs a relational lens to investigate how feminist fans strategically subverted the prevailing relational schema at the level of relationship scripts, eventually giving rise to a new repertoire of relationship scripts that have helped shape the feminist counterpublic within K-pop fandom on Twitter.

The relational approach I adopt takes a process- and context-driven approach to study relationships not as static but as shifting and evolving over time. Even though network analysis is useful for capturing a snapshot of the structuring and restructuring of networks (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Kuo, 2018; Trott, 2021), a structural approach of calculating relational ties based on one's position and one-time interactions like liking, following, and retweeting cannot provide in-depth insight on the relational motivations underlying those interactions. To do so requires going beyond analyzing the contents of discourse to contextualizing them in the networked ways that stranger-relationality is nurtured to foster solidarity despite the different relational challenges that counterpublic actors may face.

By "networked" I refer to the creation of a shared social space that makes distributed pieces of networked discourse recognizable. While networked publics may not be physically tangible, they are given an infrastructure by the networked affordances, which are, in turn, shaped by the relational dynamics that influence actors' interactions and discourse. This research thus underscores the necessity of a "relational turn" in examining these networked counterpublics, highlighting how oppositional relational schemas and scripts are not merely inherent characteristics but integral building blocks of these spaces.

Case Study

The feminist counterpublic within K-pop fandom emerged during the K-pop fan feminist digital activism of 2016. Whereas K-pop fandom is a powerful cultural force (J. O. Kim, 2021) that has made K-pop not only a global phenomenon valued at $5 billion (Noh, 2020) but also a site of progressive activism (Abidin, 2020), the collective nature of K-pop fandom that makes all these achievements possible does not necessarily translate to its capability to serve as a counterpublic.

The subversive potential of K-pop fandom is undermined by the exploitative system of the K-pop industry that demands and expects unwavering loyalty and devotion from fans. K-pop celebrities are commonly referred to as "idols" in Korean, a salient term considering the degree to which fans are trained by the idol agencies to "idolize" their favorite singers with their time and money. By rewarding and punishing fans for their degree of investment (e.g., differentiating fan club membership benefits based on the number of streams played and albums purchased), agencies instill a top-down idea of what a "good" fan should act like, which has been reinforced and reverberated by fans outside of official fan clubs to social media platforms more recently. As a result, K-pop fandom has grown into a highly cohesive and collaborative collective capable of taking over trending hashtags but not progressive or subversive enough to criticize the K-pop system or hold idols accountable for problematic deeds or comments.

The feminist counterpublic in Twitter K-pop fandom formed as part of a K-pop feminist fan activism of 2016, which started in May 2016 as an extension of the South Korean feminist resurgence movement that began in 2015 around the "Iamfeminist" hashtag (J. Kim, 2021). This development, which was

described as a "feminist reboot" by Sohn (2016), signified a shift in the feminist movement's strategy and medium, with Twitter becoming a critical platform for disseminating feminist discourse and making the personal political. This movement represents a recent instance of a feminist counterpublic, drawing from the legacy of early digital feminist activism that endeavored to create an online counterpublic through feminist webzines and forums, efforts that inform and echo in today's social media–driven feminist activism (Choi, Steiner, & Kim, 2006; Yoon, 2014).

As feminism started gaining momentum on Twitter, K-pop fandom had already established a strong presence on the platform. In the early 2010s, with the increasing popularity of Twitter, a significant number of K-pop fans started transitioning from closed online fan communities to this open platform. By 2015, K-pop fandom had evolved into a large, well-connected community on Twitter, renowned for its impressive scale and swift mobilization. In August 2016, K-pop fandom began to exhibit a newfound consciousness as some fans started retweeting feminist hashtags, mainly #IAmNotFlutteredAnymore, to shed light on issues of dating violence present in K-pop lyrics and celebrity narratives. For example, a tweet (BTS, 2013) featuring j-hope, a member of BTS, a seven-member South Korean boy band formerly known as the Bangtan Boys, resurfaced online. The tweet features a photo of j-hope holding a camera, accompanied by a caption warning that he would use the corner of the camera to "*jjig-eo*" anyone who cheats on the group. The Korean verb "*jjig-eo*" derived from "*jjikda*" can mean either to "stab" or "take a picture," and feminist fans pointed out that despite the ambiguity, the tweet was problematic for hinting at physical violence.

In response, a handful of feminist fans of BTS initially sparked the "WeWantBTSFeedback" hashtag by establishing a Twitter page dedicated to raising awareness around sexist lyrics and comments BTS members had made in the past. Fans from other fandoms who were inspired by BTS feminist fans began to voice their concerns about their idols. Before long, the initiative that began as feminist hashtag activism from one fandom broadened into a multifandom effort, bringing attention to a range of issues, including misogyny, colorism, homophobia, and ableism in K-pop star text, which spanned from song lyrics to past comments and actions made by idols.[2]

The feminist K-pop fan activism of 2016 marked a significant turning point in the history of K-pop, promoting an elevated consciousness of gender and intersectional issues within the K-pop industry. The campaign succeeded in eliciting responses from multiple male and female K-pop groups, including public apologies from BTS's parent company, Big Hit Music (Kang, 2020), changes made to lyrics,[3] music videos, and others.[4] K-pop fans' increasingly critical perspectives on K-pop content and their proactive stance against sexism, colorism, homophobia, and ableism underscore the substantial impact the South Korean feminist movement has had on the K-pop fan community. This highlights how the interplay

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[2] These actions included overt sexual objectification of women in music videos, dressing up as female idols and mockingly copying their dance, making fun of members with darker skin tones, and using the term "autistic" in a derogatory sense.

[3] Zico from Block B changed the words "faggot bitch" in his song "Tough Cookie" (Mills & Zico, 2014) to "freaky" on several streaming sites.

[4] Adventure Calling Emotions (A.C.E.) established a feminist bulletin board inside their official fan club.

among popular culture, digital activism, and feminism in Korea is continually evolving, reflecting shifting societal norms and consciousness.

What makes the struggle around relational schemas especially important for the counterpublic in question is that it was started within K-pop fandom, a fandom known for its strict rules around being and acting like a fan. K-pop fans are tightly bound by loyalty, affection, and connection with other fans, elicited and bolstered not only by the agencies' top-down management of fans but also by the digital intimacy mediated by the socio-emotional organization of online interactions that fans have with idols and other fans (King-O'Riain, 2021). By identifying and tracing the creative ways with which feminist fans challenged the problematic aspects of intimacy from the inside while giving shape to an alternative fandom network, culture, and a more nuanced approach to being a fan, I attempt to demonstrate that despite how volatile and decentralized social media platforms are—specifically Twitter—a distinct and even subaltern form of relational schema can be cultivated through seemingly uncoordinated and unplanned actions of strangers.

Method

I opted to conduct digital ethnography to contextualize in real time how individual interactions fit into the larger processes of relational building and meaning construction taking place within the counterpublic. The purpose of conducting digital ethnography was to gain intimate familiarity (Cooley, 1909) with the feminist K-pop fan network and understand how these fans fostered a feminist counterpublic while advocating for a feminist agenda within K-pop fandom.

Since I wanted to approach my field site as a network (Burrell, 2009), I started my observation by identifying potential entry points that could lead me to feminist fans in the various corners of the emerging network. My first entry points into the online fandom network were the key activist hashtags that have surfaced from multiple K-pop fandoms, such as #WeWantBTSFeedback and #WeWantEXOFeedback. Even though no representative body of main actors led the formation of the feminist counterpublic, browsing through the search results of these hashtags led me to a few public accounts that were more vocal and active in their criticism of idols and their problematic comments and behaviors. From there, I expanded my network by following accounts that these main accounts interacted with while immersing myself in the network for a few hours every day, practicing a mixed method of unobtrusive "lurking" and participant observation. I often wandered outside of Twitter to follow the hyperlinks that fans shared, which included personal blogs, news, and magazine articles.

To complement the findings from my observations, I decided to conduct contextual ethnographic interviews (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022), which are interviews privately and intentionally conducted as part of a broader ethnographic project. For this research, I created a public researcher account on Twitter, introducing myself as a researcher studying feminism and K-pop fandom. I asked Femibasun Hub (Femibasun Hub, n.d.), a well-known fan activist account of 1,832 followers, to post my recruitment message on their wall, and from May 2017 to December 2019, I interviewed 12 Korean K-pop fans who identified themselves as feminists. Seven of these fans had the experience of creating or managing public feminist fan accounts on Twitter. Given that the feminist movement within the Korean

K-pop fandom originated on Twitter in 2016—a period when the international K-pop fandom was not as prominent on Twitter as it is today and coinciding with a significant moment in Korean feminist history— I chose to conduct interviews exclusively with Korean K-pop fans who participated in the movement during its inception. All but one of the Korean fans I interviewed were based in South Korea. All interviews were done in Korean and translated into English by the author. In 2017, I also visited Femibasun Hub's booth at the Seoul Queer Festival and attended the second of the three offline parties they hosted in July.

My observations began with taking field notes and analytic memos to identify different types of counterpublic discourse. When I mention "counterpublic discourse," I am not only referring to the actual conversations that occurred on Twitter but also the way these exchanges were influenced by the technical and cultural norms inherent to the platform. This perspective aligns with Brock's (2018) critical technocultural discourse analysis, which emphasizes the interplay among technology, culture, and discourse. A unit of counterpublic discourse was usually coded several times based on the type of discourse, its mediated context, and the relational purpose it served. By continuously comparing the previously coded data with new information from ongoing digital ethnography and in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016), I was able to come up with broader themes around different relational strategies that fans adopted in the preformative and formative stages of the counterpublic.

Results and Analysis

Preformative Stage of the Counterpublic

Counterpublic formation was initially not on the minds of feminist fans who first started feminist activism within the BTS fandom. Their primary objective was to initiate reform within the public sphere of mainstream K-pop fandom, specifically by encouraging BTS to confront and address their problematic remarks and by rallying other fans to support their cause. Therefore, the feminist fans tried to adapt some of the familiar relationship scripts that still adhered to the existing relational schema of mainstream K-pop fandom, while highlighting its problematic "critical public versus shielding fan" consciousness.

Adapting the Dominant Public's Relationship Scripts and Making Reformist Efforts Legible

K-pop fandom is known for its strong fandom consciousness that makes it such a cohesive public. A feminist fan I interviewed used the fandom lingo, "*saeujeot*," translated as "pickled shrimp," (Figure 1) to characterize what she thought was the default fandom mindset:

> Just like how we don't make eye contact with each piece of pickled shrimp we eat, the idols see only a lump of pickled shrimps and not individual human beings when they watch us from the stage. This is why we call ourselves pickled shrimps.
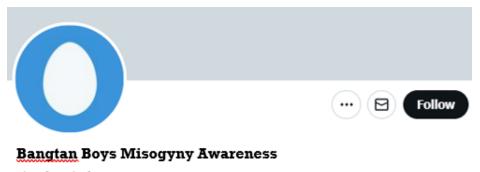
Figure 1. "The Last Bossmob Shrimp" is ready to surveil and punish fans going against K-pop fans' code of conduct (Ppasun Magazine, 2016).

She further elaborated that, with this "pickled shrimps" mentality, K-pop fans unite to aid their idols in "walking the flower road"—another fandom lingo that means making idols successful. Drawing attention to idols' sexist lyrics or their problematic remarks can put them at risk of getting criticized by the public, and it is the fans' duty to shield idols from the public, not the other way around. It is also not uncommon for K-pop fans to sabotage rival K-pop idols by bringing attention to their actions and comments that could become controversial. Soon enough, mainstream K-pop fans began to label feminist fans as antifans and "Twitter feminists," a derogatory term referring to Korean Twitter users who posted about feminism, blocking them, and cutting the relational ties they once shared as fans of the same idol group.

The major relational challenge that faced feminist fans was disrupting this "critical public versus shielding fan" consciousness. Their relational strategy was to turn feminist activism into a form of fandom culture around idol management. Giving idols constructive criticism regarding their performance and potentially controversial behavior is an accepted practice perceived as a way of "managing" their idols (Jung & Lee, 2009). In return, idols are expected to provide "feedback," a fandom lingo for giving a response that usually contains an apology and a promise to do better. To turn their message into a recognizable, accessible, and relatable form of fan feedback, feminist fans adopted a few familiar relationship scripts of the mainstream K-pop fandom.

The first relationship script feminist fans adapted during the preformative stage was the use of an anonymous "egg account." An egg account is an account with no profile picture. In 2016, the shape of an

egg was the default profile picture of Twitter accounts. These accounts became an "imagined affordance" (Nagy & Neff, 2015) within K-pop fandom that took on a specific meaning inside the context of K-pop fandom associated with role-playing. Role-playing is a prominent relationship script in K-pop fandom that symbolizes the erasure of an individual identity behind a role, which is a fandom way of conveying that the account is serving a specific function in the fandom and the issue it is raising is not particular to an individual fan but applies to the whole fandom.

Figure 2. Twitter profile of Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness [Screen capture with English translation]. (Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness, n.d.).

Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness (n.d.) was the first egg account that assumed the role of a feedback account, requesting corrective action from a K-pop idol group for their problematic lyrics, past remarks, and actions. In addition to curating the basics of a feedback account, they created #WeWantBTSFeedback and tagged the official Twitter of BTS, their company, and the CEO of their company to request feedback. As previously mentioned, the word "feedback" in the #WeWantBTSFeedback is also a fandom lingo that feminist fans repurposed for their cause, making sexism into a fandom issue that needs to be directly addressed by the idols.

Another relationship script that Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness incorporated into their discourse was phrasing their message as a letter, which is a form of communication that is closely associated with feelings of affection and sincerity in K-pop fandom. Addressing BTS, the authors of Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness (2016) implored in their letter, which was released in both Korean and English, "Please do not categorize this situation as some form of nitpicking. It is more of a form of affectionate advice for the members to become more mature, rather than just nagging." Here, the creators address the fandom name, ARMY, to emphasize the suffering of fans as a group.

The letter, which was posted on the Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness account, highlights specific instances of BTS members' problematic lyrics and actions from the past. For instance, they referenced a mixtape lyric by BTS's leader, RM, that paired "bossy girl" with "gonorrhea." Even though the letter points out and criticizes BTS for specific instances of problematic lyrics and actions they made in the past, its tone is more caring than critical and subscribes to the relational schema expected of a concerned "good fan." The authors end the letter emphasizing that their intention is not to badmouth BTS or its agency but to prevent the issue of sexism from aggravating further and stopping BTS from "becoming a rival-less global celebrity in the future" (Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness, 2016). The emphasis on accomplishment and success positions the authors as fans devoted to the work of managing BTS so that they could become the global stars they were meant to be instead of losing everything they have accomplished so far.

During this preformative stage, feminist activism revolved around reforming the public sphere from within. Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness set the example by curating an anonymous feedback account and a campaign that catered to the familiar relationship scripts of K-pop fandom, such as requesting idols to respond in the familiar form of "feedback" and writing a letter to convey sincerity. By adapting existing relationship scripts to turn feminist activism into a form of fans managing their idols, Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness provided a blueprint for future feminist fan activism as the first visible anchor through which feminist fans could find and connect with one another.

Formative Stage of the Counterpublic

While feminist fans contributed to making feminist activism a familiar and recognizable practice within K-pop fandom, there was still no connected acknowledgment of an emerging public. In the words of Fraser (1990), "counterpublics function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (p. 68). Whereas withdrawal by blocking mainstream K-pop fans who sent feminist fans threatening messages on Twitter was quick and immediate, regrouping was the more significant relational challenge that feminist fans faced. How can a minority group "regroup" on an online platform like Twitter when they lack a central collective identity, structure, and direction? In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate how feminist fans started reappropriating and creating new relationship scripts to foster regroupment by subverting and creating a new relational schema centered around a more critical fan consciousness.

Reappropriating Existing Relationship Scripts to Create a Collaborative Network of Feminist
Fans and an Alternative Relational Schema

Approximately five months after the first tweet from Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness, feminist fans of VIXX decided to create a feedback account. Within a few months, more than 13 fandoms, including EXO, BlockB, and NCT, had their own feedback accounts. This appearance of feedback accounts in multiple fandoms signified a reappropriation of anonymous role-playing accounts that introduced a loose network of feminist fans that did not center around managing the idols. Instead, the network revolved around an alternative relational schema of socializing as feminist fans and broadening the discourse on critically interpreting K-pop and K-pop star text.

Although the majority of these feedback accounts emulated Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness by adopting similar names reflective of their purpose, they largely deviated from their predecessor's methods by placing less emphasis on mobilization activities such as initiating hashtag campaigns or releasing statements directed at managing the idols. Instead, these accounts directly addressed fans to participate in the collective knowledge production and discussion around K-pop idols and their star text. Rather than making the process of coming up with activist material internal like Bangtan Boys Misogyny Awareness, the feedback accounts from other fandoms that came later welcomed and encouraged fans to submit instances of star text that they thought were problematic.

For example, they created anonymous Google and Naver forms to encourage participation and assumed the role of re-reporting the crowdsourced information and archiving it as Twitter moments. Some of these accounts also operated open chat rooms in a more direct effort to foster dialogue within the fandom. While the initial discussion on BTS focused on misogyny, the accounts gradually began to adopt the framework of intersectionality and cite intersectional theories (Crenshaw, 1991) to point out issues like xenophobia, racism, colorism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia.

For feminist fans of EXO, one of Korea's most multicultural K-pop bands, publicizing and requesting feedback for xenophobia and colorism was the top agenda. The creators of the EXO Hate Against Minorities Feedback account voiced concerns over Korean EXO members' mocking foreign members' Korean accents and making a caricature of members with darker skin color. They emphasized the interconnected nature of racism and colorism to spotlight the issue of intraracial prejudice based on skin color.

Mirroring the style and building on the discourse started by previous awareness accounts created a loose but recognizable and self-reflexive feminist discourse within K-pop fandom, providing a discursive and structural foundation for more concentrated forms of regroupment. This regroupment indicated a shift in the relational schema that focused less on altering the behaviors of idols but more on fans' discussion around K-pop's role in perpetuating and reinforcing patriarchal ideologies, traditional gender norms, and Whiteness.

Derogatory labeling was the second type of relationship script that feminist fans reappropriated to directly challenge the mainstream relational schema that enforced a singular fandom identity. Labeling is a prevalent boundary-work strategy that K-pop fans use to ostracize fans who deviate from the prescribed relational schema associated with being loyal fans. "Meta-fan" was one of the derogatory labels mainstream K-pop fans used against feminist fans engaging in self-aware dialogue on what it means to be a fan. "Meta-fan" started gaining visibility in the feminist fan network as fans began to reappropriate the label to collectively resist monopolizing a specific fan identity.

Instead of identifying themselves as "meta-fans," feminist fans turned it into an action verb, namely "*meta-dukjil*." "*Dukjil*" is a Korean fandom lingo equivalent to "doing fan." Even though the word "fan" is not used in a verb form in English, if "fan" were to be a verb, "fanning" would be an accurate translation of "dukjil" because "duk" means fan and "jil" implies action. Forming an alternative consciousness around "doing" instead of "being" signified fans' resistance to having their critical views define their fan identities and acknowledgment that critical perspectives can differ.

Meta-dukjil discourse was a multifandom discussion that expanded from criticisms of problematic K-pop star texts to a broader discourse around ethical consumption of K-pop, ranging from boycotting paparazzi photos that captured idols in their vulnerable state to the exploitation of fan labor by the idol industry. Even though there were no circulating hashtags or serious organized efforts to raise visibility around the ongoing discourse on ethical consumption, fandom, or the K-pop industry, there was a sense of circulatory drive and "ambient, self-sustaining mode of reflexivity" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 310) as if the users were in synchronous conversation with one another.

One feminist fan told me about the change she experienced as a participant in the meta-dukjil discourse:

> I have noticed an increased sense of freedom within the K-pop fandom network on my Twitter feed. It used to be a very somber space where criticism against the idols was treated very seriously. However, as discussions on feminism and valuing individual opinions over collective fandom views gained traction, people care way less about what others think about their idols because they know they are just opinions. A mutual respect for different opinions exists, and there is no cutting someone off for criticizing one's idol. I have never regretted my choice since coming over to this side.

This would not have been the case inside the mainstream K-pop fandom, where fans' interactions are governed by the dominant relational schema that puts idols' success over fans' opinions or feelings. What enabled the formation of an alternative relational schema around meta-dukjil was feminist fans' keen understanding of the relationship scripts deeply embedded in K-pop fandom culture. Their strategic deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of these scripts laid the groundwork for an expanding network of feminist fans and a collaborative space of knowledge production, catalyzing more fans to openly negotiate the challenge of aligning their love of K-pop with their political consciousness.

Creating a New Repertoire of Relationship Scripts and Putting the Collective Reimagination of an Alternative Fandom into Practice

Although discourse played a significant role in meta-dukjil, it was through the construction of a shared culture that feminist fans managed to transform this critical discourse into a locatable, action-oriented counterpublic. To give reason and opportunities for fans new to the meta discourse to join the network and existing contributors to stay, these feminist K-pop fans created a new repertoire of relationship scripts and built them into their collective reimagination of an alternative fandom and how it could function as a public.

One notable relationship script that feminist fans repurposed from the mainstream fandom and turned into a new replicable relationship script was "*jjik-duk*" accounts, which they renamed to "wow" accounts. Wow accounts, meta versions of jjik-duk accounts, specialized in editing and regularly posting idol photos. The meta aspect of these accounts stemmed from their collective stance against paparazzi photos, which the creators of these accounts deemed unethical. Wow accounts were first started by fans of Key, a member of a popular idol group, SHINee, who could not stop "wowing" at his photos. Since they

supported boycotting paparazzi photos, the first wow account featured a selection of photos of Key that were not taken by paparazzi. Like feminist feedback accounts, wow accounts were quickly mirrored by other critical fans who supported the cause of boycotting paparazzi photos. To show that feminism and boycott movements were part of the same efforts to expand the discourse around "meta-dukjil," fans who operated "wow accounts" also operated other types of feminist fan accounts, like feedback accounts, and used these accounts for cross-promotion.

Another significant development during this period was the emergence of collaborative relationship scripts, including fan-made magazines, fan fictions, and feminist book support projects. Published in November 2016, Ppasun[5] Magazine (n.d.) is a fan-made magazine with fans from multiple fandoms presenting their critical perspectives on K-pop and K-pop fandom. This initiative was very unusual because interfandom collaboration among fans was unprecedented in K-pop fandom due to intense rivalry.

More in-depth and interpersonal collaboration came in the form of feminist book support projects. "Support" is a fandom lingo that encompasses various gifts to idols, ranging from small food items to expensive bags. Instead of making support private, feminist fans turned it into collaborative projects: creating a feminist book support account, crowdsourcing book suggestions, selecting books together, reading and discussing them as a group, and even coauthoring a booklet containing feminist fans' reflections addressed to the idols.

Infinite Book Support Project was one of the successful feminist book support efforts. On top of conducting an open survey for feminist book suggestions, the creator of the Infinite Book Support Project held offline feminist study groups to select, read, and send books to her favorite boy band, Infinite. Most importantly, they produced a booklet titled *FemiHa.Ja*, which translates to "let's do feminism" in English. The booklet contained essays penned by Infinite feminist fans, which was also sent to the idols. The feminist fan who led the project shared with me that she chose the title "Infinite Book Support Project" over "Infinite Book Support" because she wanted the process to feel like a group project:

> Even if this does not end up directly influencing an artist's behavior, this project could serve as a message for fans, especially those who were doubtful of this project. It is our way of saying it is okay for fans to speak up and say this is wrong and should be criticized.

With all these smaller and larger-scale role-playing accounts expanding the feminist counterpublic, the counterpublic needed a hub account that could unite and connect feminist fans. Femibasun Hub is a fan hub account that was created by a fan who wanted to encourage other fans to keep up the momentum by inviting socializing among feminist fans. The creators of Femibasun Hub saw the need for a centralized space where feminist fans could connect and keep up to date with the whereabouts of the feminist fan network. One of the ways Femibasun Hub carried out this vision was to operate Twitter lists for different idol groups so that they could match feminist fans from the same fandom and provide a more streamlined space for them to find other feminist fans. Femibasun Hub operated 63 Twitter lists, each dedicated to a different idol

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[5] "Ppasun" or "basun" is a gendered term that refers to female fans in a derogatory way. Ppasun Magazine and Femibasun Hub are two main feminist initiatives from K-pop fandom that tried to reclaim this term.

group. They also acted as a matching account, promoting different role-playing accounts by retweeting their posts as a sign of support.

In an interview with feminist webzine Monthly Yeogi (광개토女, 2017a), the creator of Femibasun Hub said she was motivated to host offline events because she felt that the movement was losing its voice due to cyberbullying and wished to boost the fading sense of solidarity. In addition to representing feminist fan voices in public events like Seoul Queer Festival and Feminism Festival FEMEET in 2017, Femibasun Hub hosted numerous offline Femibasun parties from 2017 to 2018. One of the games that the group prepared for their offline parties was "Idol Phobic Awards" (Figure 3). It was a game where fans voted for an idol with the worst record of hate speech. By planning these games that "only feminist fans could play" (광개토女, 2017a), the creators of Femibasun Hub gave fans opportunities to coalesce around a sense of intimacy and comfort in being part of a community where both affection and criticism were accepted and encouraged.

Figure 3. 2017 Idol phobic awards [Screen capture with English translation] (광개토 女 [Gwanggaeto], 2017b).

During the two years from the #WeWantBTSFeedback campaign in May 2016 to May 2018, when the third Femibasun party took place, feminist fans managed to turn a handful of oppositional voices into a counterpublic with its own culture and network that was made visible through the repertoire of relationship scripts that facilitated interfandom collaboration. Regroupment only happened when feminist fans began to actively shape the conditions of interactions based on their relational needs to break out of the mainstream K-pop fandoms' normative schema restricted to the binary of a good fan versus an antifan. It is within this challenging context that feminist fans, through a series of contested actions, created their own space—a feminist counterpublic—where they could express their fan identity without being vilified or marginalized. This new space allowed fans to critique problematic aspects of K-pop culture while still expressing their love and passion for K-pop, thus redefining what it means to be a "good" fan in the process. Even though the feminist counterpublic formation was not a streamlined process premeditated from the beginning, I argue that it could result from an iterative process of co-creating a group culture and communal history that

enabled the feminist network to expand and eventually evolve into a counterpublic drastically different from the dominant public.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to Bail (2021), the root cause of social media polarization is not solely algorithm driven but is significantly attributed to our inherent desire for identity and a sense of belonging. Whereas algorithms do act like a prism by amplifying and distorting peoples' behavior and perceptions, we cannot ignore the relational norms that incentivize people to boost certain content over others in the first place.

Networked publics are a product of people acting according to the publics' relational norms or schemas. However, there is a lack of research on publics and counterpublics that studies how problematic relational schemas could be challenged. This represents a serious oversight as counterpublics not only serve as spaces of oppositional discourse but can also act as spaces of relational transformation, challenging the existing relational norms of the dominant public sphere.

This research empirically demonstrates how actors of an emerging counterpublic were able to oppose existing power dynamics by creating a relational schema that challenged the behavioral paradigms of the dominant public sphere. In the preformative stage, feminist fans leveraged existing relationship scripts to reform the public sphere in ways that still adhered to K-pop fandom's relational schema. Moving into the formative stage, these fans creatively reappropriated and invented new relationship scripts to guide interactions among counteractors, establishing an alternative relational schema centered around a nuanced, critical fan identity while nurturing a sense of belonging in less dogmatic ways than the mainstream. From initially shaping the discourse in ways that were in tune with the dominant relational schema to eventually forming an alternative schema around "doing" instead of "being" a fan or feminist, feminist fans strategically created opportunities for productive collaboration and coexistence in the form of multiple relationship scripts, such as feminist feedback accounts, feminist book support projects, and offline parties.

For my interviewees, K-pop fandom became a space for feminist fans to practice and apply feminist viewpoints in their interpretation and critique of K-pop star text. Feminism, on the other hand, became a means for feminist fans to exercise agency and challenge the prevailing dynamics that positioned fans as caretakers of male idols, while also highlighting the objectification and hate speech directed at women within K-pop. Furthermore, feminist counterpublic expanded to take an intersectional stance around feminism, leading many young feminist fans to question and critique previously unchallenged racist and homophobic practices within K-pop fandom. Despite severe cyberbullying from some quarters, these feminist fans managed to exert sufficient pressure to bring these issues to the fore, capturing the attention of mass media and catalyzing a broader industry-wide consciousness concerning gender awareness and hate speech.

Aside from the positive changes, I also want to highlight the challenges that feminist fans faced in keeping the engines of productive coexistence running. They needed to continuously generate new relationship scripts to keep existing members engaged and attract more fans to the feminist counterpublic. Several feminist fans I talked to voiced fatigue and frustration over the perceived lack of direction and consensus within the feminist counterpublic. One limitation of this research is that it stops at the formative

stage of the feminist counterpublic. Therefore, future research on networked counterpublics should address the issue of fatigue and sustainability in the postregroupment phase of a counterpublic's evolution.

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