NEGOTIATING FAN IDENTITIES IN K-POP MUSIC CULTURE

J. Patrick Williams

ABSTRACT

In this paper I bring together interaction, media, deviance, self, and identity to make sense of how young Singaporeans consume Korean popular (hereafter, K-pop) music and culture. My overarching goal is to highlight that being a music fan is not a straightforward or even easy experience. Rather, the self as music fan is continually developing within a complex variety of social processes, from the circulation of global, mass media representations to inter- and intra-personal interactions. I will present data collected from a study on K-pop music consumption in Singapore, a small island-nation in Southeast Asia with an insatiable thirst for foreign culture. The data show how a group of Singaporean K-pop fans were regularly bombarded with largely negative messages about what it means to be K-pop music fans, and how these meanings affected their own negotiations as fans. K-pop fandom provided a sense of shared identity and status within popular youth culture, yet their experiences were often soured by negative media portrayals of deviant fans, whose behaviors risked stigmatizing the K-pop social identity. This

1   *paper thus deals with some of the problems for self that being a music*
    fans entails.

3   **Keywords:** K-pop; subculture; authenticity; identity; symbolic
    interaction

5

7

9   **MUSIC FANDOM AND DEVIANT IDENTITY**

11 Social interaction is consequential in the development of the self (Mead,
    1934). The self is aware, knowing, feeling, and active (Weigert & Gecas,
13 2003), yet only partially known at any moment via identification, which
    establishes "*what* and *where* the [self] is in social terms" (Stone, 1962,
15 p. 93). The situated objectification of self into typologies has been described
    in detail in the literatures on social control and occupations (see, e.g.,
17 Holstein, 1992; Loseke, 1989) and involves "a reductionist characterization
    that subsumes diverse … experiences into a narrow interpretation of those
19 experiences. Often these typologies are built into institutional rhetoric, hav-
    ing 'political consequences' insofar as they express the intersection of power
21 and knowledge" (Fox, 1999, p. 435). This casting of the self into objectified
    social types occurs not only with situated identities, but with social and
23 personal identities as well.
        Of particular interest to me in this project is the mass-mediated construc-
25 tion of social identities and how such mass-mediated identities have affected
    K-pop music fans' personal identities. Since the 1970s, identities have been
27 increasingly conceived of as existing in relatively decontextualized terms,
    cut away from the specificities of situations within which they have histori-
29 cally been defined (Altheide, 2000; Cerulo,1997). As with other agents of
    social control, the mass media, especially news media, have developed the
31 ability to quickly articulate and disseminate information about problematic
    social identities, which often have tenuous ties at best to the lived reality of
33 those being typified. These identities are often tied to young people and/or
    their behaviors. The process itself is nothing new, having been studied dec-
35 ades ago as a key dimension of moral panics about youth cultures (Cohen,
    2002; Williams, 2011a). In the 21st century, news and social media seem to
37 produce a steady stream of new, or at least newly articulated, social identi-
    ties that problematize youths' cultures and practices.
39   Mass-mediated social identities are powerful components in the making
    of fan identities and news media continue to have a dominating effect

1 on popular understandings of music and fandom, with dramatized narratives of individual pathology or collective deviance predominating (e.g.,
3 Jenson, 1992; Rosenbaum & Prinsky, 1991; Wallace & Alt, 2001). In the Singaporean context, the news media regularly construct citizens' actions
5 into various functional or deviant typologies (Williams & Suhaimi, 2014). How these mass-mediated identities became meaningful in everyday life,
7 however, should not be assumed. Fans, like any other member of society, do not merely react to stimuli in the environment. Rather, they handle
9 the meanings of typified identities interpretively (Mead, 1934). Fans recognize complex identity hierarchies within music cultures and work
11 partially with, and partially against, typologies used by outsiders (see also Widdicombe, 1998).
13   In this study I deal specifically with K-pop music fan identities. Samantha, an undergraduate Chinese-Singaporean student who self-
15 identified as a K-pop music fan and invested significantly in her fandom, was the impetus and driving force behind the study. Having spent more
17 than a year in Korea between 2011 and 2013, ostensibly to study and intern but admittedly to feed her passion for K-pop music and culture, Samantha
19 encountered several situations while in Korea that caused her to question her and others' fan identities. Specifically, she came up against the mass-
21 mediated *sasaeng* identity. Rooted in journalistic accounts, *sasaeng* were said to be typically girls aged between 13 and 22 years old who were
23 reported to engage in many problematic behaviors vis-à-vis K-pop artists, including: installing closed-circuit television cameras near artists' homes;
25 attaching tracking devices to artists' cars, using GPS to track their movements; stalking them around town in taxis; and engaging private investiga-
27 tors to seek out highly personal information. So-called *sasaeng* fans have broken laws by breaking into the homes of artists to steal their personal
29 belongings, trafficking and abusing their personal information, engaging in high-speed chases and causing accidents while stalking, harassing artists'
31 families and associates, and assaulting both artists and other fans. Given the almost wholly negative orientation of such stories, the *sasaeng* fan
33 quickly became a mass-mediated folk devil across Asia.

35

37 ## RESEARCH SITE AND METHODS

39 The *sasaeng* identity caused trouble for Samantha while in Korea, as she began to (re)interpret some of her own fan behaviors as potentially

1 problematic. While not having broken any laws, she felt that some of her
   attitudes and behaviors were uncomfortably close to that of the *sasaeng*
3 and as a result she felt some degree of concern. Back in Singapore,
   Samantha decided to collect data on other "hardcore" Singaporean K-pop
5 fans to (in)validate her own fan self-conceptions (Ho, 2013; Williams &
   Ho, in press). Working together, we decided on a two-pronged approach to
7 data collection and analysis: qualitative media collection and analysis
   (Altheide & Schneider, 2012) and field research, including participant
9 observation and in-depth interviewing. Having recognized the cultural
   significance of the term *sasaeng*, we began our study by searching for its
11 presence in mass media sources in Asia. We identified approximately
   30 mass media news and documentary sources that discussed extreme
13 K-pop fandom in *sasaeng* terms. The news articles were published between
   late 2010 and early 2013, while the documentary excerpts were broadcast in
15 2012. In addition, we analyzed online comments posted in response to these
   information sources utilizing an ethnographic content analytic approach
17 (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). Our analysis identified patterned portrayals
   of the *sasaeng* phenomenon within the news media.
19   Additionally, Samantha accompanied a group of youths as they
   "stalked" a K-pop band and covertly recorded field notes of her experiences
21 along with details of the young people's interactions. We handled these data
   ethically in order to protect the identities of those involved along with the
23 authenticity of the fan context (see Spicker, 2011). Separately, she used stan-
   dard social media channels such as Facebook to recruit Singaporean K-pop
25 fans for interviews. Asking friends to share information about the project
   on their Facebook timelines, Samantha identified and eventually narrowed
27 down a sample of 10 respondents based on their intentions, motivations
   and the level of devotion displayed in their experiences searching for
29 and meeting the K-pop idols in Korea. She conducted semi-structured inter-
   views between January and February 2013, nine of which were done face-
31 to-face while one was done online. The interviews lasted between 90 and
   135 minutes. Previous readings of literature on deviance, subcultures, and
33 fan identities (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Williams, 2011b) informed the analysis.

35

37 THE MEDIATED CONSTRUCTION OF THE SASAENG

39 In his study of folk devils, Cohen (2002) demonstrated how collective
   acts that were labeled as problematic in the mass media could become

1 society-level moral panics, especially when the news media selectively repre-
sented events and individuals in stereotypical ways and then provided privi-
3 leged means for morally right-thinking people to weigh in on matters. Such
folk devils were prescient of a global discourse of fear that has emerged in
5 recent decades with various consequences for individuals and groups
(Altheide, 2002). Mass media sources were rife with portrayals of extreme
7 K-pop fan behavior and were key in framing information about K-pop
fans that is subsequently disseminated at the speed of broadband. The
9 inclusion of opinions from "average" fans, complaints from industry repre-
sentatives, and commentary from university professors, lawyers, doctors,
11 and culture critics in journalistic accounts further legitimized criticisms
about extreme K-pop fandom.
13   The source of the *sasaeng* phenomenon was allegedly rooted in embo-
died, pathological form via hypothesized desires for bodily connection to
15 and recognition by K-pop idols. This was represented in mainstream news
as well as in fan-based documentaries; the latter adding with more
17 frequency and depth the voice of *sasaeng* fans themselves. In one documen-
tary, for example, an interviewed fan explained her "obsession" with the
19 private lives of her favorite idols:

21   I feel like I get to know more about and get closer to the idol I love. If I go to a concert,
there are thousands of people attending, so the idol would not know who I am. But if
I become *sasaeng*, they will recognize me. If I keep telling them, "I am so-and-so. I saw
23   you at that place before. I am so-and-so," they will start to take note of me and ask
"Did you come again today?" To *sasaeng* fans, being recognized by idols is a good
25   thing. [Park, Park, & Yang, 2012, 3m40s]

27   While significant and meaningful to the fan herself, "in the popular ima-
gination, fans who pursue direct contact with media stars are seen as sus-
29 pect, possibly unbalanced, and threatening in a variety of ways" (Ferris &
Harris, 2011, p. 13). As the media-constructed story goes, fandom may
31 begin normally, but can develop malignantly to the point where fans
become *sasaeng* who devote their time to stalking their idols, abandoning
33 their own personal and social lives in the process. News stories reported
instances of skipping school, spending nights sleeping in 24-hour internet
35 cafes or in front of the idols' houses or agencies, occasionally dropping out
of school or becoming homeless due to the daily practices of idolatry; even
37 resorting to prostitution to cover stalking-related costs such as taxi fees.
    Such examples were embedded within larger discourses of fear and
39 stigma. Goffman (1963) argued that members of groups whose interests or
behaviors are defined as culturally or situationally problematic are given

1 stigmatized "virtual social identities," which are rooted in assumptions and
   stereotypes. Looking through a sample of mass-media reports on K-pop fan-
3 dom available on www.allkpop.com, we found that the virtual social identity
   of *sasaeng* fans was assigned a host of undesirable ~~attributes, including~~:

5
      ~~abnormal, aggressive, bizarre, brutal, crazed, criminal, dangerous, distorted, evil, exces-~~
      ~~sive, extreme, frightening, gang-like, horrifying, ignorant, illegitimate, irresponsible,~~
7   *~~obsessive, overboard, pathetic, scary, shocking, vicious, violent~~*

9   Some of these terms suggest psychological problems (*crazed, abnormal*);
   some suggest dangerous, even criminal elements (*aggressive, brutal, crim-*
11 *inal, dangerous*); while others provide vaguer, yet extreme, formulations
   (*excessive, extreme, overboard*). Together, they show an overwhelmingly
13 negative portrayal of the *sasaeng* fan identity that distinguishes certain
   K-pop fans from "normal" society. These findings fit with other studies on
15 the mediated construction of "deviant" cultural identities and show that
   similar processes persist in Asia as well as North America (e.g., Coyle,
17 2010; Eyres & Altheide, 1999).
      Extreme formulations of *sasaeng* fan identity were not only communi-
19 cated in journalistic accounts, but were regularly recycled by readers who
   interacted with news texts via social media tools. Looking at 168 comments
21 made by readers of three news stories published on Yahoo! Singapore
   Entertainment during this study, there emerged a rather clear consensus
23 based on disapproval of *sasaeng* fans' behaviors. Negative expressions of
   hatred and disgust, as well as moral judgments of *sasaeng* fans' reported
25 actions, included words similar to those found in mass-mediated news.

27   *childish, crazy, disturbing, dumb, godawful, goddamn stupid, idiotic, insane, lunatic, men-*
       tally deranged, obsessively mad, perverted, problem, psychotic, retarded, sick, too much

29   Note the similarity in the use of terms, particularly referencing mental
   and psychological characteristics as underlying reasons for deviant beha-
31 vior. When dealing with deviant youth subcultures, the semiotics of such
   negativity was at once supported by the political economy of news making
33 and supported the social cognition of those who interact with the news
   (Williams, 2011a). Social cognition served a notably instrumental function
35 by facilitating the process of stereotyping, whereby the characteristics or
   actions of an individual member of a social category were taken as repre-
37 sentative of everyone within that category.
      Interactional analysis showed how social media users negotiated the
39 meanings of the *sasaeng* fan identity in one of two ways. Some commenters
   used mass-mediated information to build up the image that the "K-pop

1 fan" was, at large, a problematic identity with comments such as "there're a lot of crazy stupid K-pop fans around," and "all this K-pop is a diver-
3 gence and detrimental to one's sanity." Other commenters wrote about K-pop fandom positively, but were clear to establish semantic boundaries
5 between themselves and the behaviors in which *sasaeng* fans engaged. Some commenters, for example, claimed to be fans, yet qualified the extent of
7 their fandom by writing things such as,

9 "I respect the idol's privacy."

"I will never go to that extreme."

11 "I'm not that crazy to stalk them."

"The most I would do is to buy their concert tickets."

13

"I will never do anything so sick like that."

15 It is not uncommon for participants in youth cultures to actively work at controlling the identities of others (Milner, 2006, chap. 5). In online discus-
17 sions, Williams (2006) found that straightedge music fans members were vociferous in maintaining a strict boundary between those who participated
19 in the culture the "right" way versus the "wrong" way. Similarly, some K-pop fans used the comments section of news reports to disassociate themselves
21 with *sasaeng* fans by declaring that the latter were actually not fans and explaining how true fans like themselves behave: "if you're a true fan, spend
23 the money buying the albums and concerts to support them, not stalking."

Such interactions worked toward naturalizing certain ways of being a
25 fan, which further entrenched everyday assumptions about K-pop fandom every time they were invoked within media texts. Through interactions with
27 and through mass and social media, "normal" K-pop fans actively con- structed a codified *sasaeng* fan identity that became a monolithic Other,
29 reduced either to a voyeuristic spectacle or to an object of fear. As mass- mediated spectators, K-pop fans and non-fans alike built up an image of
31 revulsion and appall despite a seeming lack of first-person experience with self-identifying *sasaeng* fans. Mass and social media quickly diffused the
33 *sasaeng* fan identity.

35

37 **IDENTIFYING AS A SINGAPOREAN K-POP FAN**

39 But what about the everyday experiences of Singaporean K-pop fans? Foremost, we found that the most common ways of consuming K-pop

1 culture without leaving the country were through mass and social media.
   Concerts and other local events were the only viable chance most fans had
3 to connect with K-pop idols, but such connections were typically fleeting
   and/or indirect. The Singaporean K-pop fans we interviewed collectively
5 expressed the importance of social media for receiving and sharing content
   about K-pop. Examples included publishing their own websites or blogs,
7 participating in social networking sites dedicated in part or in whole to
   K-pop, posting messages on K-pop forums, and uploading multimedia
9 content such as photos and videos. The Internet bridged the geographical
   gap that fans felt would otherwise severely constrain their ability to main-
11 tain an interactive relation with K-pop culture; it also intensified the plea-
   sures of active engagement with other fans, as well as helped develop a
13 sense of commonality among disparate fans. Singaporean fans we inter-
   viewed updated themselves on news and gossip by religiously visiting enter-
15 tainment news websites such as www.allkpop.com and by watching and
   sharing information about new music video releases, song or dance covers,
17 and clips of Korean television programs on YouTube.
       Due in part to their geographical displacement from the origin of
19 K-pop, Singaporean K-pop fans experienced K-pop differently than
   Korean fans. Many found mediated fandom to be insufficient to sustain
21 their desire to participate more intimately in K-pop culture, not least
   because they recognized that Korean fans were physically, intellectually,
23 and emotionally closer to their Korean idols. There seemed to be two con-
   sequential sets of behaviors related to Singaporeans' different experiences.
25 First, because opportunities to connect were less frequent, some young
   Singaporean fans were willing to make their own opportunities when possi-
27 ble, which increased the likelihood that they might be labeled as *sasaeng*
   fans. Second, Singaporean fans who came up against the *sasaeng* fan iden-
29 tity found it necessary to evaluate and negotiate their personal identities
   and practices vis-à-vis the mediated social identity of the extreme K-pop
31 fan. We saw evidence of these consequences in both the participant-
   observational and interview data.
33   Samantha had the opportunity to join a group of 11 Singaporean fans
   (10 females, 1 male), aged 15−18, as they "stalked" Big Bang, a K-pop
35 boy band that was in Singapore during their Big Bang Alive Galaxy Tour
   2012. While attending local K-pop events might be considered a very
37 practical measure of K-pop fandom to the average Singaporean K-pop
   fan, the young people we interviewed sought ways of distinguishing them-
39 selves from the average fan, who they saw as being relatively uncritical
   in their fandom. One preferred method of expressing relatively stronger

commitment to K-pop was through hiring what they called "stalking vans" − high-capacity passenger vans operated by full-time drivers − and following K-pop idols as they moved around the city before and after a performance or event.

Several days before the performance, Samantha found out about the group through a retweet by SG K-Wave, a Singapore-based K-pop community website providing news and information about events in Singapore. After establishing contact, Samantha was added to a mobile chat group, where members chatted and gossiped with each other and made arrangements for meeting up and paying for the van. The group disclosed their stalking plans through various social media as they searched for other fans to share the $450 SGD charge for hiring the van and received strong criticisms from fellow fans. A few excerpts from Samantha's Twitter log show a now-familiar process of articulating the *sasaeng* fan identity:

WTH! People r gonna stalk BIGBANG when they r here? Sasaeng fans. Hope it's not like what suju fans did last time. Embarrassing![1]

Stalk Big Bang vans??? I don't think I'm that crazy!

Alr got ppl plan to stalk Big Bang alr, Lol wtf.. And gathering in a group summore. Wtf is wrong with u all ah. Lol. Privacy for them please.

"Interesting in stalking Big Bang?" − DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT. STOP UR PLANS, I'M TELLING YOU. IF U DO THAT, YOU'RE A SASAENG FAN.

Members of the stalking group were aware of these messages and accounted for their actions by highlighting other fans' jealousy as well as defending the standards of their discretion, as excerpts from their private group chat on Whatsapp demonstrate:

Let them tweet la xD.[2]

Aiya they jealous only

:O we won't be retarded or what lah. Tsk.

Ya lor jealous people lmao

They talk cock la these ppl not like we gonna whack BB wat siao la

Ya la this is not called sasaeng pls

Sasaeng is like stalk until go hotel room leh

What is perhaps most interesting in this conversation is how the participants collectively positioned themselves as simultaneously better than those

1 who were afraid to stalk, while being careful to distance themselves from
   the more problematic behaviors of extreme fans. Later in their chat, one
3 person claimed that they were not *sasaeng* fans as "sasaeng [fans are] more
   scary" and that they would "only follow [Big Bang]." Such posts suggested
5 a clear recognition of the mass-mediated *sasaeng* fan identity and high-
   lighted how members of the stalking group worked to distance themselves
7 from it.

   The fans were prepared to stalk from the moment Big Bang arrived in
9 Singapore and therefore met at the airport before their expected afternoon   AU:1
   arrival.[3] Most of the afternoon was spent waiting for and then photograph-
11 ing members of Big Bang as they passed through the arrivals lounge and
   climbed into three black Mercedes, which whisked them to their hotel. The
13 *sasaeng* van followed, often pulling alongside the Mercedes so the fans
   could display homemade "fanboards" in the windows, and the group sub-
15 sequently joined a small crowd of fans that had already formed outside the
   hotel entrance (the hotel staff had set up barricades to prevent fans from
17 entering the lobby). To escape the heat, the group spent some time in the
   van cooling off and gossiping. Samantha took the opportunity to question
19 group members about other fans that were present at the hotel. What she
   found was that group members consciously divided the Singaporean K-pop
21 fan community into fans that were too extreme, too casual, or just right.
   Whereas they had earlier worked to distance themselves from *sasaeng* fans
23 who they saw as too star struck, deviant, or unstable, in the van they deni-
   grated fans that, in their eyes, had not developed sufficiently strong loyalty
25 to specific K-pop idols/groups.

27   Fan: "they go for every band event, waste money. Give us money lah, we [need to] pay
       for our van …

29   Samantha: Do they also have a van?

       Fan: No lah, they just come to the hotel. Stupid shit right?
31

   Because the Singaporean K-pop fans we studied happily engaged in
33 behaviors like van stalking, which were discursively connected to the
   sasaeng identity, they positioned themselves in such a way that they could
35 avoid claims of being passive-consumer fans on the one hand, but not to be
   deviant or extreme on the other. Casual fans tried too hard to be "all
37 rounded" or "well-versed" by following K-pop indiscriminately. These indi-
   viduals expressed the importance of being more "passionate" than casual
39 fans, while not being extreme enough to warrant the *sasaeng* fan label.
   Stalking idols in a van and waving fanboards at event locations represented

1 passion, while keeping a respectful distance and not breaking laws were signs of their normality relative to *sasaeng*.

3 The interview data showed similar patterns of negotiating the K-pop fan identity. When asked, all interviewees denied being *sasaeng* fans and pro-

5 fessed themselves to be relatively normal fans, but drew on information that demonstrated clear understandings of what would be considered pro-

7 blematic fan behavior. One fan, for example, admitted that her trips to Korea could be seen as "crazy" by some people, but that she had never

9 engaged in any behaviors that were not otherwise beyond scrutiny.

11 The craziest thing I've ever done would probably be just flying over to Korea to watch the concert. I don't think there is anything else I would do that is crazier than that.

13 [Brenda, interview]

Implicit in her talk was a belief that her actions were normal. Thanks to

15 her personal savings from her previous jobs, she could afford the trip and she saw her actions as being within the bounds of typical consumer/fan

17 behavior. Other interviewees sought to prove their normality by offering additional information that highlighted not only the boundary between

19 normal fans and *sasaeng* fans, but on which side of the boundary they stood.

21

No. I don't know how to install a CCTV. [*laughs*] [Nicole, interview]

23

In a study of young men with stigmatized identities, Hochstetler, Copes,

25 and Williams (2010) found that their interviewees regularly attempted to establish rhetorical distance between their own sense of authenticity and

27 the stigma that resulted from their criminal activities. The individuals inter-viewed, although they had been convicted of violent crimes, routinely dis-

29 missed the idea that they were authentically violent people, insisting instead that their own behaviors were either acceptable given the circumstances or

31 excusable in comparison to others' more violent actions. Similar strategies have been found in other studies where actors attempt to avoid being

33 attributed to an identity type (see, e.g., Widdicombe, 1998; Williams, 2013). Our respondents likewise described their fan behaviors to be less intense

35 than the actions of *sasaeng* fans and refuted suggestions that their beha-viors were even comparable.

37

Stalking is the intrusion of privacy, but our kind of stalking is just waiting for and fol-lowing the K-pop idols from schedule to schedule, venues to venues; not to the level of

39 stalking such as finding out their phone numbers, call records and bank transactions. There are different levels of stalking — ours is just the amateur level. [Jean, interview]

1   While acknowledging that stalking was often associated with the intru-
sion of privacy, Singapore fans denied the significance of "their kind of
3 stalking" in comparison. Interviewees talked about searching out their idols
in public spaces (e.g., waiting for chance encounters, gathering at locations
5 for expected appearances, following them on the roads), but emphasized
that they did nothing illegal, nor did they intrude on what they saw as per-
7 sonal space or private lives.
   Singaporean fans compared their behaviors to those of Korean *sasaeng*
9 fans as a way of justifying the relative normality of their own choices and
practices. They also expressed what they saw as a different mentality from
11 that of *sasaeng* fans by assuming a more understanding standpoint toward
K-pop idols. A recurring theme across interviews was the boundary
13 between idols and fans when they meet in person, in which all respondents
claimed to maintain a respectful distance:
15

> I don't like being close to the idols. I make sure I try to stay far away. I want to give
> them space. If I were them, I would feel very pressured if there was a fan staring at [me]
17 > all the time. As a fan, I don't want to pressure them. [Shirley, interview]

19   For fans, celebrity status was attractive, but there were socially con-
structed limits to that attraction. Whereas the celebrity auras that K-pop
21 idols possessed seemed to function as candles to which Korean *sasaeng*
fans were drawn like moths (at least according to mass media reportage),
23 those auras functioned more as wards for our sample of Singaporean fans,
much like for fans in other Southeast Asian countries (Siriyuvasak &   AU:2
25 Hyunjoon, 2007).

> I wouldn't chase them to that extent. To me, they are idols and that's why they are
27 > untouchable. There is no need to be so close to them, they're not my friends. If you get
> too close to them in real life, you will start to see all their flaws, like a lot of them actu-
29 > ally have their own dirty private lives, and other things that I'd rather not know about.
> I don't want to know. [Mindy, interview]

31   S*asaeng* fans were characterized as those who breach the limits of the
idol-fan boundary to get as close to idols as possible, while the
33 Singaporean K-pop fans we interviewed claimed a collective disinclination
toward getting too close, be it physically or personally. A majority of inter-
35 viewees expressed the desire to maintain an ideal image of idols in their
minds and feared that getting too close might spoil that. However, these
37 fans were quick to describe how they had ventured further than the "aver-
age fan" to meet idols when they felt such talk would not stigmatize them.
39 In sum, Singaporean K-pop fans engaged regularly in face work to estab-
lish a unique position with consumer-fan culture.

1 **CONCLUSION**

3 While the political-economy of K-pop has received significant attention in the last decade, particularly among Asian scholars (Chua, 2004; Shim,
5 2006), there has been virtually no research published that focuses on K-pop fan experiences within the context of mass-mediated images of deviance
7 and identity. This study not only contributes to the micro-sociological literature on K-pop fandom in Southeast Asia, but also deals specifically with
9 the processes through which deviant music-based identities are constructed, diffused, and negotiated. Music fan identities are rooted in the cultural pol-
11 itics of knowledge production. In line with mass-media studies of fear and moral panic (Altheide, 2002; Eyres & Altheide, 1999), we found that the
13 *sasaeng* fan identity as a typology was constructed largely through mass-mediated discourses of social control. Yet fans did not accept the *sasaeng*
15 identity uncritically. Singaporean fans were not necessarily either passive or resistant, rather they participated in a complex set of processes within
17 which they enjoyed and resisted aspects of public discourse surrounding the object of their fandom.
19 In the media-saturated realm of Korean popular music, the *sasaeng* fan has emerged as a seemingly self-contained identity that garners nearly as
21 much attention as the K-pop artists themselves. This suggests that mass and social media are increasingly becoming sites for the construction of
23 music fan types. Just as many journalists constantly search for dirt on celebrities in order to feed audiences that are allegedly ravenous for such
25 information, interactions among mass and social media users enable the propagation of deviant fan identities that become objectified as consumer
27 commodities. The *sasaeng* fan identity is one such example, which now functions both as a moniker for excessiveness that captures media consu-
29 mers' attention, and as a stigma that must negotiated by fans in every-day life.
31 The relationships among mass and social media and fans are growing increasingly complex and are therefore worthy of additional scrutiny. This
33 project explored the processes by which fans negotiated the shifting meanings of K-pop fandom in their everyday interactions with mass- and social-
35 media sources, as well as with other fans. For Singaporean fans of K-pop, social media sources were very important, as they provided participatory
37 pathways within fan culture. News and video sites, peer-to-peer networks, and communications apps were all used daily by fans as ways of staying in
39 touch with idols and with each other. Social media networks facilitated the diffusion of meanings within K-pop culture, both among fans who felt

stigmatized by mainstream-media representations and among fans who engaged in stigmatizing practices. Fans used social media alongside a variety of other fan practices, including concert attendance, music shopping, and "stalking" and further enriched those experiences. This supports other research on the strength of both online and offline sources for spreading subcultural knowledge, even among individuals who are not invested in the subculture or fan group (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Holt & Copes, 2010). The study thus further substantiates research on the role of social-media in the everyday life of K-pop fans outside Korea, as well as of members of stigmatized subcultures more generally.

NOTES

1. On January 28, 2011, Singapore's *The New Paper* reported that Leeteuk and Heechul, two members of Korean boy band Super Junior, were involved in a traffic accident the previous evening during rush hour. Eight fan vehicles were trying to get close to the van with the band members, resulting in a six vehicle pile-up, including the idols' van.

2. In everyday speech most young Singaporeans use Singlish, an English-based creole consisting of words from several other languages including Malay, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and Tamil. Our social media data included many Singlish expressions and the following are visible: "ah," "aiya," "la," "lah," "leh," "lor," "siao la [siao liao]," and "talk cock."

3. The Charles gang refers to a separate group of fans who were also awaiting Big Bang at the airport and outside the hotel entrance. While they were stalking the idols at the public spaces similar to our study subjects, they did not hire a stalking van. The Charles gang was apparently known for being fans of many other K-pop artists and attended virtually every local K-pop event, thus "proving" their uncritical, mainstream fan status.

REFERENCES

Altheide, D. L. (2000). Identity and the definition of the situation in a mass-mediated context. *Symbolic Interaction*, *23*(1), 1−27.

Altheide, D. L. (2002). *Creating fear: News and the construction of crisis*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Altheide, D. L., & Schneider, C. J. (2012). *Qualitative media analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Blevins, K. R., & Holt, T. J. (2009). Examining the virtual subculture of Johns. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *38*(5), 619−648.

Cerulo, K. A. (1997). Identity construction: New issues, new directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *23*, 385−409.

Chua, B. H. (2004). Conceptualizing an East Asian popular culture. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5(2), 200−221.

Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk devils and moral panics* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Coyle, M. J. (2010). Language, metaphysics and deviancy: Delineating the 'evil' 'criminal' 'other'. In M. Herzog-Evans & I. Dréan-Rivette (Eds.), *Transnational criminology* (pp. 127−144). Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.

Eyres, J., & Altheide, D. L. (1999). News themes and ethnic Identity: *Los Angeles Times* news reports of Vietnamese, Black, and Hispanic gangs. *Perspectives on Social Problems*, 11, 85−103.

Ferris, K. O., & Harris, S. R. (2011). *Stargazing: Celebrity, fame, and social interaction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Fox, K. J. (1999). Reproducing criminal types: Cognitive treatment for violent offenders in prison. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 40(3), 435−453.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Ho, X. X. S. (2013). *K-pop fandom and sasaeng fans: An exploratory study of hardcore Singaporean fans*. Unpublished B.A. Honors Thesis. Nanyang Technological University.

Hochstetler, A., Copes, H., & Williams, J. P. (2010). 'That's not who I am': How offenders commit violent acts and reject authentically violent selves. *Justice Quarterly*, 27(4), 492−516.

Holstein, J. A. (1992). Producing people: Descriptive practices in human service work. In G. Miller (Ed.), *Current research on occupations and professions* (pp. 23−40). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Holt, T. J., & Copes, H. (2010). Transferring subcultural knowledge on-line: Practices and beliefs of persistent digital pirates. *Deviant Behavior*, 31(7), 625−654.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jenson, J. (1992). Fan as pathology: The consequences of characterization. In L. A. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media* (pp. 9−29). London: Routledge.

Loseke, D. R. (1989). Creating clients. In J. A. Holstein & G. Miller (Eds.), *Perspectives on social problems* (Vol. 1, pp. 173−193). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Milner, M. (2006). *Freaks, geeks, and cool kids*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Park, S. Y., Park, J. I., & Yang, S. M. (Directors). (2012, March 23). *In depth look at sasaeng life*. Documentary. South Korea: tVn eNEWS. Retrieved from http://youtu.be/8QEDhh89ZLs

Rosenbaum, J. L., & Prinsky, L. (1991). The presumption of influence: Recent responses to popular music subcultures. *Crime and Delinquency*, 37, 528−535.

Shim, D. (2006). Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(1), 25−44.

Siriyuvasak, U., & Hyunjoon, S. (2007). Asianizing K-pop: Production, consumption and identification patterns among Thai youth. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 109−136.

Spicker, P. (2011). Ethical covert research. *Sociology*, 45(1), 118−133.

Stone, G. P. (1962). Appearance and the self. In A. M. Rose (Ed.), *Human behavior and social processes* (pp. 86−118). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Wallace, C., & Alt, R. (2001). Youth cultures under authoritarian regimes: The case of the swings against the Nazis. *Youth and Society*, 32, 275−302.

1   Weigert, A. J., & Gecas, V. (2003). Self. In L. T. Reynolds & N. J. Herman-Kinney (Eds.), *Handbook of symbolic interactionism* (pp. 267−288). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
3   Widdicombe, S. (1998). 'But you don't class yourself': The interactional management of category membership and non-membership. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* (pp. 52−70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
5   Williams, J. P. (2006). Authentic identities: Straightedge subculture, music, and the internet. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(2), 173−200.
7   Williams, J. P. (2011a). Structuring knowledge of subcultural folk devils through news coverage: Social cognition, semiotics, and political-economy. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 3(2), 3−13.
9   Williams, J. P. (2011b). *Subcultural theory: Traditions and concepts*. Cambridge: Polity.
    Williams, J. P. (2013). Authenticity and the dramaturgical self. In C. Edgley (Ed.), *Life as performance: A dramaturgical handbook* (pp. 93−107). Aldershot: Ashgate.
11 Williams, J. P., & Ho, X. X. S. (in press). '*Sasaengpaen*' or K-pop fan? Singapore youths, authentic identities, and Asian media fandom. *Deviant Behavior*. doi:10.1080/01639625.2014.983011
13 Williams, J. P., & Suhaimi, Z. (2014). Culture, discourse, and gameplay: New media citizenship in Singapore. In Association of Internet Researchers (Ed.), *Selected papers of internet research* (Vol. 4). Daegu, Korea. Retrieved from http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/download/999/663