Creating a Safe Space for Queer Teens?: Some Initial Findings on Queer Teens in K-pop Cover Groups and Fan Community

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Abstract

In his article on emerging gay communities in the Philippines, Michael L. Tan emphasized that there is no such thing as a homogenous gay and lesbian community; however, he noted that "the emerging `gay' movement is fluid and includes some middle class *bakla* as well as the *parlorista bakla*—plus [the] so-called yuppie gays…"(128). In short, gay communities in the Philippines, however slowly, are being transformed by global and local (glocal) socio-historical forces that push the diverse members of Filipino gay communities to interact with each other and with the members of the dominant straight communities in more frequency and in different scenarios. An example of such a scenario is created by the glocal opportunity is in the area of K-Pop community whose participatory fan activities (such as the K-Pop Cover Group) has created a space of interaction and a common identity for both Filipino straight and queer teens. This preliminary study on queer teens in K-Pop Cover groups touches on the following intersections: performed sexuality, fandom, Hallyu in the Philippines, gender representation in popular media, global Hallyu and an emerging gender equality in the local teenage community. Through on-line research, textual analyses and email interviews, this preliminary study uncovered the dynamics of queer teens interacting in a still dominantly heterosexual K-pop community.

Keywords: Queer teens, K-Pop cover groups, reverse K-Pop cover groups

Introduction

In October 2013, the T.V. station ABS-CBN through its noontime variety show "It's Showtime" launched the first–ever

lesbian beauty pageant in the Philippines (and possibly in the whole wide world) in the form of the segment "That's My Tomboy." The segment generated attention not only locally, but internationally. The website Afterellen.com, a website "dedicated to the representation of lesbian/bi women in popular culture" featured an article on this T.V. show segment and stated that it: "isn't just about tapping the boundaries of traditional femininity; it's normalizing lesbian experiences through visibility, allowing millions of Filipino audiences to see that being a dyke doesn't make you an alien, or ugly or undesirable."

The article also reports that: "[b]y the end of the month, the segment was an internet sensation. Hashtag #thatsmytomboy trended on Twitter internationally and LGBT advocates praised the show for finding an innovative way to entertain and educate audiences who likely had very little previous exposure to lesbian culture."

Indeed the segment was newsworthy because it provided a glimpse of some young Filipino lesbians, an often unrepresented/underrepresented part of the queer population in the country. In the contest proper, each contestant was given time to introduce one's self (with this introduction, a witty line or "pick-up line" included), show her talent and answer a question. What makes this contest of interest to this Hallyu conference is the inclusion of one contestant in the pageant who was not only able to bring a facet of her chosen gender and sexuality on stage but was also able to present her passion for K-Pop, in particular, her passion for the K-Pop Group *Exo*.

19 year old, Nicole Lauren Escalderon who also goes by the name of Nicky Song, is an avid fan of Exo and copies the fashion and dance moves of one of its members called Kai. Nicky Song herself is part of an Exo Cover Group called Exzone Planet which has been featured and competed in K-Pop Dance Contests.



Image 1: Fan made on-line poster of Nicky Song's photo side by side with *Exo*'s member Kai. Poster was used to promote Philippine Kpop Convention 5. "NICKY SONG LOOKS LIKE KAI FROM EXO //O//O BOTH OF ARE REALLY CUTE !!\ GO NICKY. she'S FROM PHILIPPINES!!! http://francesloisocampo.tumblr.com



Image 2: Nicky Song with her cover group *Exzone Planet* (photo from Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/KPOP-Cover-Groups-Philippines/

This paper took initial inspiration from the K-Pop fan and "tomboy" Nicky Song's exposure in Philippine mainstream television via her participation in "That's My Tomboy." The mostly positive reaction that Nicky gathered in social media both as a proud lesbian teenager and as a proud K-Pop fan who

channels her sexuality through K-Pop performances raised the interest of this researcher to find out if there are more "Nicky Songs" in the Philippine K-Pop Cover Group Scene and whether they too are receiving positive reception by other members of the fan community. To re-state, this paper's focal question is: does the local K-pop community isolate or integrate queer teens? This broad question was addressed by analyzing the following two sub-questions: first, what observations can be deduced from the reception of the local fan community to the queer teen performers in the physical and virtual spaces of the local K-pop teen subculture? And second, what perceptions did the performers have of themselves as queer teens who are members of cover groups and members of the local K-Pop fan community?

Some Terms Defined

The first term for definition is the term **"Queer"** which I use to describe the teen members of cover groups I sampled. "Queer," whose definition I take from the LGBT Resources from the UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, is defined as:

> *[a]n umbrella term to refer to all Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual and Queer (LGBTIQ) people;*
> *[a] political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking Binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid;*
> *[a] simple label to explain a complex set of sexual behaviors and desires. For example, a person who is attracted to multiple genders may identify as queer;*

The definition also noted that: "[m]any older LGBT people feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long and are reluctant to embrace it." I would like to emphasize that in this paper the term "queer" is chosen to describe the group of teenagers I studied because of the fluidity of sexual orientation

espoused by the term. I do not seek to use the term in any derogatory way.

The second term for definition is **"K-Pop."** The On-line version of Oxford Dictionaries (oxforddictionaries.com) defined K-Pop as "Korean Pop Music that mixes European music." Although the definition captures the transnational quality of this type of music, clearly the definition is simplistic. To expand this definition I turn to Crystal Anderson's definition of K-Pop which she states to be a:

> *type of post-1990 South Korean popular music that fuses Korean and global musical styles, particularly American, and redirects that hybrid music back onto the global stage. The transnational nature of K-pop manifests itself in a variety of ways, including actively seeking global popularity, using Internet and social media to target and engage global audiences and participating in other cultural production with global appeal. This does not mean that Korean popular music did not exist before 1990, but the term Kpop refers specifically to this unprecedented cultural fusion in post-1990 Korean popular music (2012).*

It is by no accident that K-Pop emerged during the time that South Korea's economy peaked and became one of the world's G-20 economies; it is no secret after all that the export of popular cultural products such as K-Drama and K-Pop continue to help fuel the south Korean export-driven economy. It is known that K-pop is one of South Korea's biggest cultural exports. K-Pop's effective cultural hybridization is a means to meet "the complex desires of various consumer groups, which maximizes capitalist profit" (Jung 2011).

CNBC shared that that "[t]he industry's revenues hit about $3.4 billion in 2011," according to the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), a government group that promotes the country's cultural initiatives. K-pop's exports also rose to $180 million last year — jumping 112 percent compared to 2010. Exports have been growing on an average annual rate of nearly

80 percent since 2007" (Naidu-Ghelani). *Hallyu* clearly is Korea's soft power and that K-Pop as an example of such soft power is at the forefront of a socially and economically globalizing Korea.

The third term for definition is **"Cover Group."** Sung Jung shares that "[t]he term *cover* usually means a version of a song sung by an artist different than the original singer. However, in the case of fan activities, *cover* refers to a version of a song or dance performed by fans" (2011). Cover group performances are also of two types: first is the conventional cover group wherein let us say, a male K-Pop group will be covered by a male dance group. There is also a "reverse cover group" wherein a K-Pop group will be represented by a different gender. Images 3 and 4, for example, show originally all female groups represented by all males.

The fourth term is **"bias"** which KPopKollective.com defines as "someone's favorite from one particular group. It is a singer that you like everything about: their singing, dancing, unusual quirks, and other activities such as acting and modeling. An ultimate bias is a person's favorite out of all the Kpop groups."

The last term is "**Fandom"** which is a blending of the words 'fans' and 'kingdom.' Henry Jenkins (1992; in Chaplin) believe that fandoms are not passive consumers, and with the increase of an online culture of fandoms, there is an increase of "people/fans taking media in their own hands" which both critiques and re-defines consumerism today. An off-shoot of fandom interaction is the creation of participatory fan activities that may take the form of charity work, fan fiction, cover dance groups, etc.

Methodology

Data for this paper on initial findings on the presence and reception of Filipino queer teenagers in K-Pop Cover Groups and Fan Community were gathered from the following sources: email interviews with three queer teenagers who are active in performing with their K-Pop cover groups, an email interview

with Hallyu scholar Dr. Sun Jung of National University of Singapore, textual analysis of Facebook news feeds and comments that are in public setting of Philippines's K-Pop minor celebrity, Nicky Song; video uploads of performances of select K-Pop cover groups on YouTube and discussions with K-Pop fans.



Image no. 3 "Boy's Day," the reverse cover group of the group *Girl's Day* (photo from Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/KPOP-Cover-Groups-Philippines)



Image no. 4: "Queen A", the reverse cover group of *Miss A* (photo from Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/KPOP-Cover-Groups-Philippines)

As much as this study would like to present a picture of true equality amongst genders, like all studies, it is limited by the collected data, and for this initial venture, let me point out that this study *cannot provide* and *does not aim yet to provide* a solid conclusion of what can be derived from the presence of queer teens in the Hallyu scene and how truly beneficial the connection is in the long-run. What this study attempts to do is to share

these early data to stimulate more interest and discussion on this area of inquiry.

This study explored the space occupied by Queer teens in the local K-Pop community's dance cover group interactions in the form of performances made in the programs of their fandoms and the highly competitive cover group contests. The study focused on the selected Queer teen performers in the local K-Pop community and is limited to it.

Significance of the Study

Very little has been written about Queer teens in the Philippines, with most of the studies focusing on the male homosexual teen. Studies about Filipino lesbian and bi- teens simply do not exist yet. This study attempted to address this lack by opening an opportunity for discussing this silent, yet equally important member of the Filipino youth—those that see themselves with fluid sexuality or that of Queer. K-Pop Dance Cover groups provide both queer and straight teens opportunities to interact and perform their sexuality on stage with the support of their respective fandoms and perhaps even the entire K-Pop-loving local community whose on-line presence is emerging to be a tight-knit, organized community.

Results

Inside the Fandom: Interview with Three Teen Members of Cover Groups

The three respondents I interviewed for this paper are three queer, Filipino teenagers whose ages range from 16 to 18 years old. All three of them have been performing with dance cover groups for the past two years. The type of dance cover group they are performing in are reverse dance cover groups. Their friends are all into K-Pop and they said that their friends encouraged them to perform in cover groups. One respondent even said that it was his boyfriend who encouraged him to perform in a cover group. Outside of their fandoms, incidentally, all of them are

pursuing their college education and they come from middle-class backgrounds. You may be wondering why I have chosen only three respondents for my interview. This is because, I pre-selected the respondents through the following criteria: first, they should be truly active in the local K-pop scene (e.g. they have already joined fan performances and competitions). I also selected respondents who are active in their on-line fandoms, such as those found in Facebook or YouTube. This second criterion is necessary to also check feedback that viewers of video uploads give, or the comments that are provided in posts by these queer teen performers. And third, all of them are queer. Our interview was conducted via email exchange between April - May 2014. I told the respondents to just select and answer the ones that are applicable to them and those that they feel comfortable answering.

Let me now share with you a summary of our interview.

a. The respondents enjoy the products of Hallyu, especially of course K-Pop, because of its uniqueness, the effectively entertaining K-Pop talents with the exciting songs and programs that they have. One respondent gave an interesting response: *"Para sa akin kse ang mga KPop or KDramas ay parang inspirasyon dn na maituturing like sa aming 3rd sex, hindi maiiwasang walang magmamahal sa amin. We are happy that there are Kpop that we can watch and laugh with* [sic]." (For me, KPop and KDramas are inspiring for us members of the "third sex" (i.e. queer); it cannot be helped that it is difficult to find someone who will love us. We are happy that there [is] Kpop that we can watch and laugh with).

In this answer, it is suggested that Hallyu, particularly Kpop provide an outlet for affirmation for this teen.

b. They shared that they get a lot of benefits from joining fandom activities (whether on-line or actual ones). Some of these benefits are fan-benefits such as getting information about their favorite groups. Fandoms they say also boosted their self-confidence, created a bigger network of friends and support, especially

during competitions. One respondent claimed that joining a fandom allows one to truly be united with the other fans because in the end you only have what he refers to as “one desire” and that is to be with your “bias” group or group member.

c. As for the question “do you think there is gender equality in fandoms?” All three respondents gave a resounding answer of “yes” to that question. As one respondent said: *“Super equal dto sa Philippines. Walang girl boy beki tiboom or whatsoever. Ang bongga!”* (We have “super” equality here in the Philippines. No one cares if you are a girl, boy, gay, lesbian or whatever. It's cool!)

d. All the respondents also felt that Hallyu or KPop fan activities empower the local LGBT community as well because all of them are fans who are united by a common cause that to them transcends the differences brought about by gender. They all feel that they are equals and are respected in their fandoms.

Crossing-over to Mainstream TV: Nicky Song

Let us now go back to my earliest example, Nicky Song. Her case is a bit unique because she tried to introduce into the mainstream two aspects of her person that are still considered to be “marginal” to a certain degree. Although I must emphasize that the changing times might make these marginal aspects of Nicky become part of the norm in the Philippines very soon. First is that she is a Queer and second is she identifies herself as part of the local K-pop fandom which is still largely a predominantly heterosexual teen subculture.



Image no. 5 : Screen Capture Image of Nicky Song's First Appearance in ABS-CBN's" It's Show Time" (October 28, 2013)

Nicky's exposure in the local noon time show has made her minor celebrity which can be attested by the thousands of Facebook friends and Instagram followers she has. Some of her posts are in public setting and it is from these posts that I was able to get data about her experience as a queer teen cover group performer. In a February 20 Instagram and Facebook post she shared how she felt lucky to be part of a cover group that accepts her sexuality:

> *Dami nagtatanong kung ako lang daw ba Tboom sa cover group namin.Yes ako lang, 2 years na po kami magkakasama at wala akong naging problema hindi naiba ang tingin nila sakin, tinuring nila ako na one of the boys talaga minsan nalilimutan pa nga ng iba na Tboom parin ako, hahaha. #exzone #exocg*
> *("A lot [of people] have been asking me if I am the only Tboom [Filipino slang for lesbian] in our cover group. Yes, I am the only one, we have been together for two years and I never had any problem. [T]hey did not look at me differently, they really treated me as one of the boys, sometimes they even forget that I am still a Tboom, hahaha. #exzone #exocg")*

Nicky finished 4th place in the contest that attracted more than fifty contestants. In another post she shared that she also valued her experience of joining the contest because it was the first time she claimed that she had as much exposure of interacting with other Queers (Facebook post dated February 2). However, the other group she represents, that of the KPop community had a mixed reaction to her inability to bag the crown. In one of Nicky's posts she addresses one particular member of the local Kpop community who apparently got dismayed with her performance during the grand finals of the contest:

> *..Sorry if malaki akong disappointment sa KPOP Ph. Nahirapan po ako kahapon sa talent ko dahil wala akong kain at tulog... Eh ako nga wala nga eh kuntento nako. Pasensya na po sobrang kulelat ko ba? Hahaha. Di naman ako galit sinasabi ko lang :)("...Sorry if I am a big disappointment to KPOP Ph. I had difficulty yesterday with my talent [presentation]because I didn't get to eat and sleep. ..While I am content. I am so sorry that I am low in the ranking. Hahaha. I am not mad, just saying :))*

From this comment posted by Nicky in her account what can be observed is that Nicky felt she was made to represent the Kpop subculture in that show and that winning the top prize is perceived to be synonymous to the Kpop community's growing power and acceptance in mainstream entertainment. Some supporters of Nicky Song did feel that way that later resulted to the comment above. Interestingly, there was never comment from the entire Kpop community during the entire duration of the show that was derogatory to Nicky Song's sexuality. All posts in Nicky Song's account were in support of her bid in the contest. It can be deduced from such reception of the local fan community to Nicky Song is that of acceptance and with that acceptance is that equal treatment within the group. Her exposure in local media was perceived positively because it provided a possibility of legitimation for the Kpop subculture.

Results

Following Michael Tan's discussion on gay communities in the Philippines, I agree that there is no such thing as a homogenous gay and lesbian community, however as he noted "the emerging `gay' movement is fluid and includes some middle class *bakla* as well as the *parlorista bakla*—plus so-called yuppie gays…(128). Today's generation of Filipino queers practice what Tan discussed to be an act that is "courageous in taking over space, and yet…cautious by carving the space within a straight world and by conforming to some of the straight norms" (135). That is to say, queers "come out" with their sexuality in society but are still very careful to follow rules that are set forth for them by the predominantly "straight" society. Thus, what can be observed in practice today in most contemporary societies is predominantly tolerance and still not equality. However, in my initial experience of studying queer teen performers in KPop cover groups in the Philippines I have come to realize that an emerging place for equality for queer teens can be found in this teen subculture.

In the case of the four individuals whose cases I studied, it can be seen that the local K-pop community is an accepting and supportive community of predominantly young people who are bound by their common characteristic of being part of a fandom. Gender and sexuality are treated as non-issues in K-pop fandoms as seen in the reception of reverse cover dance groups whose members are queer. As Jung (2011) stated in her study of reverse cover groups with female members in Indonesia: "[i]t can be argued that their cover dance practices epitomize the ways in which the fans attempt to deconstruct normative gender representations, which in turn reinforces the construction of new Indonesian femininity;" the case of queer teens in reverse cover groups or cover groups (as in the case of Nicky Song) has shown that these groups have successfully deconstructed gender representations in the Philippines as they are given support and acceptance by their K-pop fandoms. Thus such groups have become a vehicle for social integration among the youth in the K-pop fandoms

Conclusion

Indeed, imitation is still the best form of flattery and for hundreds of K-Pop fans in the Philippines, the creation and support of K-Pop dance cover groups are acts that show reverence to their K-Pop idols. With the aid of social media, teenage fans are now able to form cover groups with other fans they meet on-line, get informed on possible performance venues for them, upload their performance videos and communicate to a virtual fan community or fandom that is generally appreciative of their efforts. There is no denying that fans (which include members of the cover groups) have created a strong virtual space for themselves that help translate to a congenial physical interaction during actual K-pop events. That is to say, members of one fandom generally treat each member with respect and friendliness.

It can also be argued that the rise of technology and the use of social media have also become instrumental in the rising gender equality in the Kpop subculture in the Philippines since the internet is a medium that allows queer teens to form a virtual community not only with other queer teens but teenage fans regardless of sexuality. While the internet community allow queer teens because "it is an anonymous and safe space in which they can practice aspects of same-sex sexuality" (Hiller and Harrison 95) the active K-Pop fandoms emerging in different places in the world which includes the Philippines, allow some of these queer teens to "perform" their sexuality on stage as they join cover groups and compete in cover group competitions. The competitions are not just restricted to queer teens but to all fans. The fandoms allow queer teens to safely transition from their online gay selves to the physical gay selves without any fuss. The bottom line in a fandom is that what matters is the reverence to the K-idols, fans do not make an issue of the sexual orientation of its members.

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