

Research Article

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**Intimacy and the thirst for soft masculinity:
Fanfiction and K-pop fans in Indonesia**

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Abstract

Fanfiction is a medium for K-Pop fans to portray the idea of their perfect people in the form of their idols. Driven by intimacy formed through parasocial relationship, those fans create stories in an alternative universe, where their idols are not idols anymore but mere humans in certain plots of the story. Since fanfiction about K-Pop idols is common in Indonesia even since the 2nd generation of idols, this study is focused on the characteristics of male characters in Indonesian fanfiction based on Korean Idols. The data, which are fanfictions with the highest ratings, taken from Wattpad as one of the most famous fanfiction sites. Analyzing fanfictions using parasocial relationship and the soft masculinity concept is related to the real condition of society in Indonesia nowadays; this research tries to dig deeper into why soft masculinity is something that those K-Pop fans are longing for. The findings show that indeed, parasocial relationship between idols and fans plays role in pushing K-Pop fans to write fanfiction. Moreover, gender inequality within patriarchal society also triggers female K-Pop fans to write about characters who possess the traits of soft masculinity like tender charisma, purity, and politeness.

Keywords: fanfiction; soft masculinity; intimacy; parasocial relationship; Indonesia K-Pop fans; patriarchal society

1. Introduction

All this time, fans, especially K-Pop fans, are not only seen as people who are passively consuming their favorite popular culture. It is widely known that they are actively consuming the popular culture by creating meanings and even further producing things related to the culture that they consume. This participatory behavior reflects how fans are no longer passive audiences, but active contributors who engage deeply with the content they love. For Indonesian K-Pop fans, we can see things like fan art, unofficial merchandise, fanfiction, and many others are produced and distributed among the fans themselves. Things like unofficial merchandise and arts are commonly distributed freely on events like concert or fans gathering. Furthermore, digital fan art and fanfiction are uploaded in fans' social media accounts or websites dedicated to the publication and consumption of fanfiction. These activities also show how deeply global pop culture can be reimagined within a local context.

Fanfiction itself, according to Jenkins (1992) "...is about drawing materials from dominant media, and utilizing them in ways that serve the writers' own interests, pleasures, and imaginations". It is a kind of medium for the fans to portray their idols based on their own perceptions to satisfy their imaginations. Starting from limited printed versions, fanfiction nowadays is widely produced

and distributed thanks to the existence of the internet, where many fanfiction authors upload their works on various websites and social media platforms. Not only they do it for representing their identity as K-Pop fans, but they also do it for getting recognition from their fellow fans, which is a form of social capital in the fandom. They can not only get many feedbacks from other fans who read their fanfiction, but also praises and and new friends. Commonly, the study of fanfiction is mostly about adolescent culture which is commonly done in the virtual space by the fans (Christenbury et al., 2009).

Through the time, fanfiction starts to be an important part for K-Pop fandom. Starting from around the mid-1990s, when H.O.T. as part of K-Pop first generation getting a lot of attention, fans started to write fanfictions about the members, inspired by Harlequin Romance and fanfictions about Japanese idols, which were quite famous among Korean teenagers at that time (Kim, 2017). Fanfiction authors at that time posted their works to online fan communities, then other fans would read those fanfictions through these communities. Kim (2017) also added that SM Entertainment's strategy in using fanfiction as a mean to promote their idols became another factor that increased fanfiction's popularity. Nowadays, there are many websites specially made for fanfiction, from something global with English as the main language like asianfanfics.com to the ones created for local fans with their own language. Even fans nowadays also post their fanfiction in their social media accounts.

Most of the time, those fanfictions are written in alternative universes (AU), where their idols are not idols anymore but mere humans in certain plots of stories in various genres, like romance, drama, comedy, action, thriller, horror, and many others. The interesting part is, the shifting of masculinity traits that those fictional characters possess. Instead of applying traditional masculinity traits that those fanfiction writers are familiar with, they rather use soft masculinity traits that they believe their idols really have. All this time, traditional masculinity concept associates man with competition, domination, exploitation, and oppression (Fakih in Kusuma, 2012). This contrast the perspective of masculinity among fans, who are drawn to a more gentle and emotionally expressive form of masculinity that challenges long-held gender norms. The main male characters in fanfiction are portrayed more as pretty boy, which is not only about their physical appearance but also about their appeal, which is far from the traditional masculinity concept.

From that perspective, this research then aims to scrutinize two points related to fanfiction written by Indonesian K-Pop fans. First, how does parasocial relationship affect those fans to write fanfiction? Second, how does soft masculinity in those fanfictions relate with patriarchal society where those writers come from?

Soft masculinity is a concept of masculinity that is far different from traditional concept of masculinity that is influenced by Western culture. Sun Jung (2011) stated that "soft masculinity is a hybrid product constructed through the transcultural amalgamation of South Korea's traditional *seonbi* masculinity (which is heavily influenced by Chinese Confucian *wen* masculinity), Japan's *bishonen* (pretty boy) masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity." Sun Jung added that this kind of transculturation formed something called *mugukjeok* or non-nationality, which then helps the concept of soft masculinity to be accepted rather easily across national boundaries. This phenomenon especially happens and is more commonly observed within the boundaries of Asia.

In Korean value, *seonbi* is known as a kind of character that represents traditional virtues as politeness, integrity, faithfulness, loyalty, and cultural-scholarly attainment, which is influenced by Chinese Confucian *wen* masculinity since Korea itself is historically influenced by Chinese Confucian tradition (Jung, 2011). *Wen* itself, which is more of mental than physical, is seen as something more elite masculine than *wu*, the one which is associated more with physical work. Furthermore, *bishōnen* is seen as the mixture of both masculine and feminine traits, which is quite common in Japanese pretty boy stars (Jung, 2011), and also a general feature for most of Korean K-

Pop idols, which makes it the “shared imagination” of pan-East Asian soft masculinity. This concept is also known as *kkonminam* in South Korea, which is more about tender charisma than feminine behaviors.

Aside from soft masculinity, this research also analyzes the influence of intimacy, or parasocial relationship, in the process of writing fanfiction. Parasocial relationship, as Horton & Wohl (1956) stated, is a kind of fans’ illusion where they think that they maintain direct communication and understand fully about their idols’ personality, while in fact, it is merely the persona shown by their idols. Originally, Horton and Wohl (1956) described parasocial interaction as “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” which is not really defining fans – idols’ relationships which are mostly through social media, where they can directly communicate through question-answer sessions during idols’ live streaming in social media. However, Grosznan (2020) stated that this theory is still suitable to be applied for fan studies, especially K-Pop fandom analysis since K-Pop idols constantly interact with fans through meet-and-greets, social media posts, livestreams, and regular concerts, where they deliver steady stream of content to their fans.

Nowadays, the development of social media platforms is an essential factor in forming a parasocial relationship between K-pop idols and their fans. The content uploaded by idols not only creates a strong emotional attachment that the fans feel toward their idols, but also forms fans’ perceptions and expectations about their idols’ traits and behaviours (Syawal, 2023).

2. Methods

There are three fanfictions uploaded in Wattpad which are analyzed in this paper. Wattpad is chosen as the main source of the data for this paper since Wattpad itself is considered as one of fanfiction biggest websites. Those three fanfictions are *Kak June* with 29 parts, 950.039 readers, and 133.273 voters; *About University Life*, a university AU fanfiction with 25 parts, 96.879 readers, and 12.337 voters; *Edge of Dawn* with 47 parts, 94.456 readers, and 20.291 voters. Those fanfictions are chosen under the tag *K-Pop fanfiction* and *Kpoplokal Stories*, sorted under category hot or the popular ones with good engagement by the time it was searched, and the ones with most readers. Related to the second question, where soft masculinity in those fanfictions is compared with patriarchal society in Indonesia, then some posts and comments related to the theme on social media like Twitter are also taken as data for this research.

3. Results and Discussion

Fanfiction is a work of fiction which can be written in various genre. One thing noticed here is, whatever the genre that the writer meant the fanfiction to be, romance between the main characters almost always happens. This fact also shows the desire of the writers about their own fantasy, the romantic story between them and their favorite idols or between their main OTP – one true pairing --, which are portrayed between the characters here.

One interesting point in these fanfictions is the blend between global and local, as some of the writers tend to use Indonesian names along with their idols’ real names. An example from *About University Life*, the writer describes that two of the characters’ names are Taeyong Alfathan Prakoso and Jennie Kemala Pradokso, whom in real life are Lee Taeyong from boy group NCT and Jennie Kim from girl group Blackpink. From this point, it can be concluded that the work of fanfiction is not only about K-Pop and K-Pop idols, fans still blend it with things that they are familiar with, like local language, local values, and local settings among many other things.

3.1 Parasocial Relationship and Fanfiction

Study of intimacy and parasocial relationship is not something new among researchers. This study is based on Horton & Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial relationship, where the fans think that they maintain direct communication with their idols and understand fully about their idols' personalities, while in fact, it is simply the persona publicized by their idols. Forming intimacy between fans and idols is a common strategy applied by K-Pop idols, where interactions are mainly done within virtual space through social media. By using social media, K-Pop idols apply specific strategies which create illusion that there are no boundaries between idols and fans, by telling some private and emotional stories or using domestic background (Rojek, 2016). This way, fans will slowly feel emotional connection between them and their idols, where they get the impression that they have a special relationship and mutual understanding with their idols.

Unlike ordinary celebrity admiration, parasocial relationships involve a one-sided emotional bond in which fans feel a deep sense of connection, familiarity, and even affection toward idols who are entirely unaware of their existence. The parasocial relationships in K-pop inspire extreme devotion, but personal creative expression as well, in diverse forms such as dance covers, visual fan art, fan videos and compilations (Gonzales, 2021). This psychological phenomenon also plays a central role in motivating fans to translate their feelings into written narratives, which is nowadays known as K-Pop fanfiction.

There are two factors related to parasocial relationship that trigger fans to write fanfiction. First, parasocial relationship creates an illusion of intimacy, where some fans may imagine that they have special relationship with their idols. Through constant exposure to their idols via social media and other mediums, it creates a sense of familiarity that mimics the feeling of knowing someone personally. They begin to develop emotional investments that go beyond simple admiration, as they feel as though they genuinely understand who their idols are as individuals. When fans feel as though they share a special, even though imagined, connection with their idols, they naturally begin to imagine romantic scenarios onto them. This kind of thoughts can then be made into real love stories by making them into fanfiction. Although in the end, they still add several imaginary characterizations to the character of their idols to make them more interesting, mysterious, or fit the plot of the fanfiction itself. In this context, fanfiction becomes a safe and imaginative space for fans' fantasies. By writing stories in which them as fictional characters share intimate moments with their idols, fans are essentially materializing the emotional bond they feel in their parasocial relationship. Here, they turn an invisible and one-sided connection into a tangible and fully realized narrative.

Second, since the common behavior in parasocial relationship is consumers "try to understand a persona's goals, attitudes [and] utterances" (Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm, in Groszman, 2020), fans support a theoretical romantic pairing between two personalities who they believe they have knowledge of the interpersonal dynamics between them (Groszman, 2020). K-Pop fans are quite well known for their intense attention to the interactions, behaviors, and relationships between group members or even between idols of different groups. Through years of watching their idols together in various settings like variety shows or interactions within social media, fans develop what they believe to be a thorough understanding of the personalities, habits, and emotional dynamics between specific idols. Fans try to show their support of this relationship, whether it is real or not, by writing fanfiction about them. It can be seen in *About University Life*, which is an example of a romance fanfiction about NCT members and Blackpink members.

This kind of imagination on how these individuals might interact in more private or romantic contexts, forming for what is commonly known in fan communities as shipping. Shipping is a kind of fan practice, where the fans support a romantic pairing between two real or fictional personalities. This fan practice is closely tied to the second major factor through which parasocial relationships drive

fanfiction. Whether or not a real romantic relationship exists, fans use the knowledge they believe they have gathered to theorize and imagine what such a relationship might look like.

3.2 Soft Masculinity in Fanfiction and Patriarchal Community

Images of *kkonminam*, or those with soft masculinity characteristics, would seem to stand in stark contrast to those with hegemonic media representations of traditional masculinity. These characteristics, as stated before, are commonly used to portray the characters in fanfiction, written by K-Pop fans for their fellow fans. *Kkonminam* men are portrayed as attentive, sensitive and ready to express their feelings if needs be (Elfvig-Hwang, 2011). In most of the fanfictions, both main characters and second lead characters carry the characteristics of like tender charisma, politeness, and purity.

For example in fanfiction entitled *Kak June*, both June, as the main character, and Hanbin, as the second lead character, show their gentlemanly and polite behavior toward Jane, the main female character. It is shown when June helped penniless Jane to buy food, or when Hanbin always tried to put Jane's feeling above his own, as shown in chapter 11, "Gue genggam tangannya dan menuntunnya keluar area sekolah. Sebisa mungkin menghindari sesuatu yang bisa bikin cewek ini kembali rapuh," (*Kak June* by Gayodaejun, chapter 11). This scene also provides example of what Louie (2012) stated as a softer image than the macho male, which is a characteristic owned by people with tender charisma.

Another example is shown in *Edge of Dawn*, where the male character, Athar, shows how he knows and cares about what the female character – Nadine – wants. "“Mereka nggak bakal berani sama kamu, Princess,” Sahutku menyodorkan gelas es tehku yang sudah habis. Menyisakan bongkahan es batu yang disukainya." (*Edge of Dawn* by Notkinderjoy, chapter 18). This scene shows how Athar gives Nadine thing that she loves, eventhough for outsiders it is considered silly. Louie (2012) stated that soft masculinity changes the traditional masculine notions of competitiveness and conformity into relations based upon friendship and love, which is, in this scene, constructed by his understanding of the female character's needs.

Aside from tender charisma and politeness, those male characters also possess purity as their characteristic. It is shown by Hanbin when he hinted about his love, without pressuring her to accept him back. The dialogue in chapter 12, "Iyalah, orang gue suka sama yang makan," (*Kak June* by Gayodaejun, chapter 12) is one of the examples how he expressed his love without showing aggression. This characteristic of soft masculinity also shows what Ainslie (2017) described as a lack of aggressiveness and sexual dominance.

In most fanfictions written by Indonesian K-Pop fans, both main characters and second lead characters are constructed around these traits, presenting a vision of manhood that is soft, emotionally accessible, and morally pure. This is made by fanfiction writers who are deeply influenced by their parasocial relationships with their idols. This makes them project the qualities they admire most onto the characters they create. Rather than portraying male characters as dominant or aggressive, which would align more with traditional masculinity norms, fanfiction writers consistently gravitate toward a gentler archetype. Almost all of the protagonist characters are written to be considerate in their words, careful in their actions, and sincere in their emotions. Those traits reflect the idealized version of their idols that fans have come to know and love through years of media consumption.

Images of *kkonminam* does not only stop in the demeanor of each character. It is also portrayed in the physical appearance of each of them. Aside from the fact that the fanfiction authors also put the picture of each character, the ones taken from the media as a means for portraying them in their *kkonminam* images, they also put some descriptions picturizing their looks. An example of this description is when the author of *About University Life* describes one of the character, Jaehyun Abyeon Setya as "looks really kind and gentle and he is,..." (*About University Life* by SprinkleGlitters, chapter Character Profiles). Rather than emphasizing strength or dominance through physical traits, fanfiction writers tend to describe their characters with features that visually connect kindness and gentleness,

such as a face that looks kind and gentle, soft eyes, or a warm and approachable smile. These physical descriptions not only portray about how they see their idols in their eyes, but also serve as visual extensions of the characters' inner qualities, creating an image of a man who is both beautiful and emotionally tender. This alignment between inner character and outward appearance reflects the *kknominam* ideal in its fullest sense, where physical beauty and moral purity are seen as inseparable.

These traits of soft masculinity are contrary to the ones that women in this society face in their daily lives. Taken from a post by @convomf in twitter on January 12th, 2024 where people shared their experiences related to patriarchy, they stated how difficult their life as women in this society. They shared how people – not only men but also women – still think that women with achievements are useless since there will be no men who would want to marry them, also how marrying women who cannot cook is unprofitable because it is their duty to cook for their husband, and women have no right to have their own decisions as well since they are inferior compared to men. Those kinds of comments, and many others, show how many women are still not appreciated enough within this society. Women in Indonesia are frequently positioned as subordinate to men, expected to fulfill roles that prioritize domesticity, obedience, and submission above personal ambition. As a result, Indonesian women are frequently conditioned from an early age to accept a secondary position in society, internalizing the belief that their worth is largely defined by their ability to serve, support, and comply rather than to lead or assert themselves independently.

Ahmadi (2022) stated that being a man should be able to denote his masculinity in the terms of healthy masculinities such as strong, responsible, honest, kind, sexually healthy, do not commit sexual crimes and oppression, or do not hurt women. However, the growing of hegemonic masculinity in a patriarchal society, which is described by Tomsen & Gadd (2019) as men who are considered oppressing and dominating toward women, cannot be avoided. Women here, still adhere to societal standards and beliefs, such as passively accepting what life offers, even when it includes violence (Dewi & Suwandana, 2024). Women who experience domestic abuse or other forms of oppression are often discouraged from speaking out, as societal norms tend to prioritize the preservation of family honor and social harmony over the safety and well-being of the woman herself.

Comparing these fanfictions written by Indonesian K-Pop fans with the reality that they have to face in their society, it is safe to conclude that fanfiction, aside from the fact that it is written for fulfilling their imagination about idols, also as a medium and a safe space to portray what kind of masculinity they desire for. Fanfiction seems to be a means of voicing their opinions and frustrations about their own patriarchal society through social networking sites and fan sites. The lack of power relations between women and men causes gender inequality which places women in a weak position (Huriyani in Dewi & Suwandana, 2024), and those female authors show their objection toward this kind of power relation dynamic through their fanfictions by giving their male characters such characteristics that will bring benefit for the female characters. Fanfiction here becomes a space of creative freedom where writers, who are mostly female fans, hold complete authority over the world they construct, the characters they design, and the dynamics they portray.

In this space, the social rules that dictate how men and women should behave in real life can be rewritten or even entirely discarded. In a society where men are traditionally expected to be authoritative, the male characters in these fanfictions are written to be gentle and deeply respectful toward the women in their lives. Romantic relationships in these stories are built on mutual care rather than on power imbalances. By portraying these kinds of relationships in their narratives, fanfiction writers are rejecting the normalized image of the dominating man and the passive woman, and replacing it with a dynamic that values tenderness and mutuality.

Furthermore, writing fanfiction also gives women the opportunity to reclaim narrative agency. In these stories, women are not merely passive recipients of male attention or victims, but are active participants in their own narratives, capable of making choices, expressing desires, and shaping the

direction of their own lives. The fact that these narratives are mostly written by women, for women, and circulated within a female-dominated fandom represents a significant shift in who holds the power to tell stories and whose perspectives are centered.

5. Conclusions

Related to parasocial relationship, fanfiction appears and becomes an important part of K-Pop fans, including the ones in Indonesia, because of the parasocial bond and the feeling of intimacy toward the idols as the characters in the story. This connection then is expressed through the characters' thoughts and emotions, which make the readers experience an intense emotional response to the story since they have similar parasocial relationship as the authors. In the soft masculinity context, fanfiction becomes a medium in voicing female fans' opinions and frustrations about the patriarchal society that they have to face. They show their objection toward the imbalance of power relations between men and women by giving characteristics to their male fictional characters that will bring benefit to the female characters. By portraying male characters as people who embody softness, tenderness, and emotional vulnerability rather than dominance and control, fanfiction writers show meaningful statement against the hegemonic masculinity that continues to oppress women in their society. The act of writing, in this context, becomes an act of resistance.

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