

STRAY KIDS AND SKINSHIP:
AN INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE
ON QUEERBAITING AS FAN SERVICE IN K-POP

By Savannah R. Bigbie

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Approved:

Dr. Jessie K. Finch, Ph.D., Chair

Dr. April Petillo, Ph.D.

Dr. Nora Ann Stefani, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

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SAVANNAH R. BIGBIE

The K-pop industry has standardized the establishment of parasocial relationships among fans and K-pop idols and has seen increasingly global success with this marketing strategy. Despite language and cultural barriers, fans all over the world feel a connection to K-pop idols and will interpret their actions in ways that are subjective to the fan's own perspective. As of 2023, there are little to no successful K-pop idols that are openly queer. Fans engage in resistant readings of idols' behavior as a way to project their own meaning onto the idol's intentions, but this projection is constructed and encouraged by K-pop companies themselves through subtle tactics such as queerbaiting. With the successful K-pop boy group Stray Kids and their variety series *2 Kids' Room*, the methods in which these readings are encouraged by producers are analyzed through the lens of symbolic interactionism. In this thesis, the dialogue between the members is analyzed for sociological themes as well as the frequencies of visible touch occurrences (VTOs) where the members are shown engaging in touching or *skinship* on camera. The discussions of the members in the series reveal sociological themes such as body image and weight, masculinity, and expressions of emotions and hardships. These themes as well as the presence of queerbaiting are used to inform this case study of fan service as a marketing tactic and establish

why queer references in K-pop are delivered almost exclusively as implicit and indirect rather than direct representation.

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INTRODUCTION & RESEARCH QUESTION

As socialized beings, we are greatly impacted by the world around us. Just as we learn language and social cues from our family and close contacts, we are susceptible to messages and socialization from the media content that we consume either passively or directly. Every day, we are consuming content from various platforms that deliver us information and entertainment for various uses in our own personal lives. From an interactionist perspective, though, we are both impacted by the messaging that we receive from our media and we participate in informing and defining that media by our own standards, social location, and meaning-making.

John Fiske defines the term “popular culture” as the ways in which people use, abuse, and subvert various “cultural products” to create their own meanings and messages (Fiske 2011). My personal interest in fandom and celebrity culture can be traced to my obsession with Hillary Duff as a child: I would frequently buy magazines such as *J14* and *Tiger Beat* and I would spend hours reading every article and putting the posters that came with the magazines up on my walls. As an adult, I am still very involved in keeping up with my favorite celebrities and musicians, and this became even more relevant to me as I started listening to K-pop music over the course of the global Covid-19 pandemic. There are several factors that contribute to my personal love of K-pop, from my taste for pop music and catchy melodies to the maximalist concepts and seemingly endless production of visual content; however, I also recognize these are not purely personal reasons and are part of a manufactured plan from producers, artists, and

industry. Indeed there are some scholars (Rapkin 2021) who have documented the rise of K-Pop specifically during the pandemic.

Regardless, as I learned more about the K-pop industry and discovered more artists, I found myself willingly engaging in parasocial relationships with K-pop idols from my favorite groups, and I started to recall previous sociological questions that I had about these connections, fan interactions, and celebrity culture. Parasocial relationships are social bonds that an audience creates with media personae and are considered to be more meaningful and impactful on the audience than on the entertainer (Bond 2018). It is a fascinating phenomenon that a celebrity such as Taylor Swift, 16 years after her debut, can maintain an Instagram following of 277 million and continuously expand on the manufactured perceived closeness with her large fanbase. As Swift is an artist who is known to write her own music and is generally assumed to have control over her creative direction, fans of Swift feel like they have a special connection with her that Swift upkeep by using symbols and motifs in her work, called “Easter Eggs,” and fans express their appreciation for Swift by buying her merch and promoting her on their own time. No stranger to feuds with public figures, Swift has even been accused of “weaponizing” her fan base to attack others for her own benefit (Roy 2022). But what happens when an entire industry, with strict standards and even stricter contracts constructed to manipulate artists, takes this same spirit of manufactured perceived intimacy to the next level?

The K-pop industry has utilized various methods to develop and maintain the parasocial bond between idols and fans. K-pop companies market their idols and groups as wholesome, inoffensive, and—most importantly—available to and for fans. While Swift’s romantic relationships make up a majority of her song lyrics and she has even publicly supported political figures, idols from major K-pop companies are typically not allowed to publicly date (in what are

popularly known as “dating bans”) or share their political and social views to their fans.

Although they may claim to, K-pop companies do not position their idols as unique individuals to be seen for their message and artistry, but as gears within their respective idol groups that exist primarily to turn the machine of fan idolization and rev up the engines of consumption.

Fandom culture within South Korea has been popularly characterized by the growth of “fansumers,” defined as people who actively participate in the branding and producing of idols (Park 2019). Fans of K-pop idols are very vocal when they believe that an idol has been wronged by their company or another individual, and have been known to use social media as a vehicle for their frustration. Recently, for example, during a broadcast on a subscription-based interactive platform called Bubble, Dahyun, a member of the K-pop group Twice, skipped an ad that played before a YouTube video she was showing to fans watching the broadcast. The ad featured a song from Lisa of a peer idol group called Blackpink. Although Dahyun acknowledged the song and nodded her head to it for a few seconds, she skipped the ad and explained that she received an ad because she was not subscribed to YouTube’s premium subscription service. Fans of Blackpink became outraged and posted thousands of comments under Dahyun’s Instagram posts asking her to apologize to Blackpink’s Lisa. These demands included middle-finger emojis, snake emojis, and death threats. A sort of “fan war” ensued on Twitter between Blinks (the fandom name for Blackpink), and Once (the fandom name for Twice), who argued that Dahyun did nothing wrong and that Blinks should apologize to Dahyun for being disrespectful to her and trying to damage her image. Blinks meanwhile attempted to prove that Lisa’s song was not an advertisement, but that Dahyun intentionally clicked away from it as a sign of disrespect towards Lisa and ultimately all of Blackpink (Dawson 2022).

The passionate dedication that fans of K-pop idols hold towards their favorite celebrities is not by accident; leading companies such as SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment, have greatly contributed to the manufacturing of K-pop idols as products to be consumed by the public. Companies want their idols to appeal to as many people as possible (hence idols' suppression of their romantic/personal lives and political beliefs) to give the group the best chance of success and, in return, provide income and status for the company. Idols must adopt an image that conforms to Korean standards while still being open to interpretation by the consumer who looks to project their own meaning upon an idol.

When it comes to an idol's broad appeal, following societal norms is key. South Korea is a country in which misogyny and homophobia is highly present; same-sex partnership is not legally recognized and as of 2023, South Korea has no legal protections against discrimination towards LGBTQ+ individuals, including no protection for hate-crimes against people based on sexuality and/or gender identity (Equaldex 2022). Despite this, K-pop attracts many LGBTQ+ fans globally. For example, a gay U.S. male Youtuber living in South Korea named "EDMERICA 에드메리카," said in an interview "the definition of masculinity is different in K-Pop. The expectations are different." Eddi went on to explain that while "there's not a lot of actual gay representation in K-Pop, a lot of men are allowed to be feminine. They're not deemed as less of a man for doing that" (Jackson 2018). Many Americans that are exposed to K-pop groups will often say that male K-pop idols appear "too girly" or feminine. It is not uncommon for male K-pop idols to wear heavy makeup, dye their hair in various colors (including shades such as pink or purple), wear earrings, paint their nails, and present in ways that are traditionally considered to be feminine, particularly in Western cultures. Male idols are also almost never seen with facial hair or noticeable body hair as there is a strong cultural stigma associated with facial

hair in South Korea (Reena 2022). On top of physical presentation, many LGBTQ+ fans are attracted to K-pop because of the frequent touching and affection that K-pop idols show towards their group members, which is referred to by a Korean term called “skinship.”

Journalist Lai Frances describes skinship as “holding hands, having arms around one’s waist or a quick peck on the cheek or forehead... and it’s greatly hyped in the K-Pop fandom, especially when it’s between members within the group, or idols with other idols of the same sex” (2018:1). Almost all K-pop groups are constructed with members of just one gender, not co-ed, with only a handful of groups in the history of the K-pop industry debuting with both boy/man-presenting and girl/woman-presenting members. As most idol groups have members exclusively of the same gender, fans are accustomed to the members’ interactions with each other and have a general understanding and/or assumption that idols in the same group are close both physically and emotionally.

International fans of K-pop view Korean idols from the lens of their own cultural perspectives; as such, U.S. K-pop fans are not as familiar with displays of skinship or perceived emotional and physical closeness amongst Western celebrities in Western media. For example, a 2018 research study that examined cultural differences in Mexican American and European American college students found that Mexican American men and women are more accepting of affectionate touch with both close friends and acquaintances in public settings than European Americans (Burelson 2018). Because of this lack of physical contact in Western culture and thus in the media, this skinship phenomenon has garnered much attention from U.S. K-Pop fans. As Jackson explains, “in the media right now, Western media especially, there isn’t much LGBTQ+ people of color, let alone Asian representation...so I believe fans somewhat look to K-Pop and hype up ships and their skinships as a way of relating.” (2018:1). Although skinship and

touching is more accepted and common between people of the same sex in Korea, K-pop idols push the boundaries of affection much further than the general South Korean population (DKDKTV 2020). It is not uncommon for members in the same K-pop group to participate in actions such as holding hands, massaging the shoulder and back areas, kissing on the lips, cheeks, or neck, and other displays of affection that are not often considered to be platonic by American audiences. K-pop companies are more than aware of the global audience that consumes their content from their groups and they are also aware of the strong presence of queer fans that consume their content.

Statement of the Problem/Research Questions

Because of this unique phenomena, this thesis studies the frequency of skinship amongst the members of the popular K-pop boy group Stray Kids. The justification for this selection is explained in more depth in the literature review and methodology, but their content can serve as a case study for my research questions and theoretical frameworks. This research specifically seeks to explore the following questions:

- Based on officially produced Stray Kids materials, what amount or what types of skinship are most common?
- Which members are more likely to participate in skinship and why might that be the case?
- To what extent is this public display of skinship as shown by Stray Kids a form of queerbaiting?

While some may argue that skinship is a way for Stray Kids to speak to queer fans (and potentially their own identities) without getting “canceled” by mainstream South Korean culture,

there are many facets of this material that can help illuminate sociological and communication studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Celebrity Idolization & Media Studies

Celebrity idolization and fandom have long had a strong presence in U.S. culture – from The Beatles and “The British Invasion” to the boy band mega-hits of the 1990s by groups such as ’NSYNC and The Backstreet Boys, fandom and issues of sexuality have been of interest to scholars (Cohen 2022; Jamieson 2007; Liebes, Tamar & Curren 2002). In hoping to garner international fame, the massive industry of K-pop begins with the music which can involve “the same lush harmonies and catchy hooks [as prior bands] but more rhythmically aggressive than the ’90s boy band sound, mixing it up with elements of Hip Hop, R&B, and EDM” (Frederick 2021:1). The music of K-pop serves as just the springboard for the various media elements that distinguish the K-pop industry from other global music industries. As Hae Joo Kim states:

“highly visual in nature, K-pop is perhaps best characterized as music that you watch.

Accordingly, it thrives on the Internet, spreading on social media in colorful sets and slick choreography. The package that is K-pop—music, dance, fashion, drama—makes it a thoroughly consumable entertainment that presents multiple ways for audiences to engage” (2021:1).

The K-pop industry built itself around these engaging elements while simultaneously nurturing an intense fandom culture that has helped the industry evolve and thrive particularly in online communities. A modern pillar of the K-pop industry involves producing an extraordinary amount of content; beyond music, idols will often participate in live streaming, variety shows, reality shows, commercial films, photoshoots, and many other types of media that are used to directly or indirectly promote the group. This results in hours upon hours of content that is available for consumption by fans, feeding the idolization and fandom.

K-pop idols go through an extensive training period before debut in which they are trained to sing, dance, act, and model according to industry standards, but they are also trained and encouraged to form close connections with their fans that lead to parasocial relationships. These relationships function as a form of entertainment and one-sided emotional attachment for the fan and as a form of marketing and promotion for the idol and their group. Dedicated fans of K-pop groups are typically very active online as they see social media as a tool to promote and discuss their favorite groups/celebrities. Social media has not only given fans more access and connection to celebrities, but also to other fans with whom they can build community.

Social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram play a major role in facilitating spaces for online fandom communities to congregate and connect to others with shared interests. In the context of K-pop fandom internationally, these social media sources can often be the only source of contact a fan may have with other fans, as K-pop is not considered to be a mainstream source of entertainment in many countries outside of Asia. The K-pop industry has built itself in the context of fandom and offers a reciprocal relationship in which K-pop companies provide fans with content and access to idols while fans commit their money, time, and energy to the idol and often serve as another source of promotion for the idol and/or the group.

Celebrities and their respective companies/labels utilizing marketing strategies to recruit and retain fans is not anything new, but the K-pop industry has set a standard to prioritize building the relationships between fans and celebrities within the first year of the group debuting, and some companies will publicize their trainees before debut to attempt to build a pre-debut fanbase that contributes to the future success of their group. For example, the company SM Entertainment has a trainee team called "SM Rookies" in which they produce and present content involving selected trainees with the company. From 2013 - 2018, trainees that have been involved with SM Rookies have debuted in successful K-pop groups under SM Entertainment such as Red Velvet, NCT, and SM's newest debuted group as of 2020, aespa. Similarly, KQ Entertainment, the home company of the increasingly popular boy group ATEEZ, has an official name for their trainees called "KQ Fellaz." The company provides content including the trainees

as if they were already active idols. The current cohort of “KQ Fellaz 2” has 10 members and performed original pre-debut songs as the opening act for ATEEZ’s 2022 Fellowship: Break the Wall World Tour (KProfiles 2022). The need for fandom involvement in K-pop groups’ success cannot be understated. With an abundance of content available for fans to consume and with unfettered access to fans of the same group, there is a sizable amount of fans that do not take all of the content they are being provided with at face-value.

Fans openly engage in parasocial relationships with idols as a way to symbolically relate the idol to themselves; regardless of fluency in Korean, fans of K-pop feel a personal connection to idols and are heavily influenced by the images and perceptions of them. Idols and actors in the South Korean entertainment industry must abide by strict standards of beauty that enforce thin body types and light-toned complexions. The body types of a majority of idols are very thin and many idols share similar facial features that fall under Korean ideals of beauty. For international fans, this makes it seem as if this would be a representation of the average Korean or even East Asian individual, but idols are not a direct reflection of how the average Korean looks, and South Koreans are highly susceptible to the negative stigma that is associated with higher body weight (Brewis et al 2017).

Much of this corporate modeling, as well as queerbaiting, is based on successful international cases. The successful British boy group One Direction garnered their initial fanbase from competing on the competition show *The X Factor*, and during their 6 years of promoting as a group fans became enamored with the members’ perceived close relationships with each other. Fans were able to see the members hugging, kissing (or more often, pretending to kiss), and groping each other from the content that was released by the group or from their live concerts. Fans felt like the interactions between the members were genuine and many fans interpreted their actions as flirting. This became so prevalent, the fans began “shipping”--or rooting for a relationship--for the members to be together and developed online communities that supported these “ships.”

Shipping is a word that derives from the word relationship and is the desire by fans of two or more people, real-life celebrities or fictional characters, to be in a relationship, romantic or otherwise

(Dictionary.com). Shipping is more often used to put a moniker to a friendship of two or more people, but there are many fans that use shipping in a romantic context, especially for the most famous ship of One Direction, Larry Stylinson (a portmanteau of band members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson) (Southerton & Mccann 2019). Fans of this ship call themselves “Larries” and are so prolific with their belief that Styles and Tomlinson are secretly in a romantic relationship that 7 years after the group’s official hiatus, Larry Stylinson remains in the top 50 of most published relationship tags on Archive of Our Own, an open-source repository for fan fiction and other fan works contributed by users (Organization of Transformative Works 2022). Larry Stylinson was also referenced in an episode of the popular HBO series *Euphoria* as a real-person slash (RPS) fan fiction written by one of the show’s characters (Martin 2021). While slash fiction features a genre of fan fiction that is written with two fictional characters in a sexual or romantic relationship, RPS concerns fan fiction that is written about two real-life people rather than fictional characters within a text. Louis Tomlinson expressed his distaste for the scene in the episode, which depicted an animation of Styles and Tomlinson having sex before they went on stage for a concert. Tomlinson has been carefully vocal about the effect of these rumors on his and Styles’ friendship and has outright denied all of the rumors that they were romantically or sexually involved (Bate 2019).

The Larry fandom has continued to grow even after years of inactivity from One Direction as a group and after years with no public contact between the two; from Styles’ solo debut *Fine Line* and Tomlinson’s solo debut *Walls*, fans theorized that the two were referencing each other throughout their albums with “Easter Eggs” or hidden messages to be interpreted by fans. In a radio interview from 2019, Styles explicitly states that there were 12 Easter Eggs hidden throughout his album *Fine Line*, fueling the Larry shippers’ debate about their meanings (Martin 2021). Styles’ fluidity with his gender expression paired with the Larry rumors and his refusal to publicly define his sexuality has garnered him accusations of queerbaiting. Although the topic of queerbaiting originated from discussions of fictional texts, in recent years many celebrities have been accused of queerbaiting as a marketing tactic that is meant to appeal to queer fans without alienating heterosexual fans (Ermac 2022). Ultimately, the sexuality of Styles and

Tomlinson is not the important factor in fan discussions of their ship, but rather the identifications and communities that are formed around these queer readings (Crimp 1992).

This particular case helps us to better understand the complex ways in which idolized celebrities play off their fan bases desires to see them in relationships, particularly queer relationships. This issue is more broad than K-pop, as seen in this example, but the concept of queerbaiting needs additional study specifically in diverse international contexts.

Queerbaiting

As Emma Nordin states, the word “queerbaiting” has historically had several meanings:

“In 1981, it was used as a description of verbal abuse and the homophobic and discriminating rhetoric in US courts. As recently as 2009, the word was used to describe the attempt to ‘expose’ and purge homosexual individuals in the US during the 1950s and ‘60s... Now, it is much more often used in fan forums to refer to when producers intentionally try to lure an audience to watch something under the false pretense that it will have queer content” (2019:1)

The modern use of the term “queerbaiting” is often considered to have originated from online communities over fan discussions of its use in popular media (Nordin 2015). Social and legal censorship rules in the 1990s and previously made it difficult for producers to create overtly queer content, so in order to tell queer stories, subtext was employed to avoid the text being censored or canceled. In June of 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled 5-4 in favor of legalizing gay marriage, a historic ruling that marks a shift towards progress and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities in the United States (Loyal 2020). Despite this, queerbaiting and unresolved subtext in U.S. popular media continues to prevail:

“Such efforts are likely in service of protecting the broadest possible appeal of a product, while also keeping open parts of the text that might inspire more subversive interpretations and thus continue to capture niche followings... while cultural scholars may now value the active reading strategies of fans, power imbalances and a general fear of alienating a wider audience

ensures that queer readings remain talked about, even encouraged, but scarcely confirmed, endorsed or, most crucially, transcribed in a manifest way” (Brennan: 10).

Discussions on celebrity queerbaiting have increasingly garnered more attention in recent years, and fans have begun putting pressure on celebrities that have not explicitly defined their sexuality to clarify themselves, or risk being accused of queerbaiting (Rowello 2022).

Queerbaiting is also seen as a marketing tactic that relies on the “true” meaning of a text, which is not always clear. The “contest of queerbaiting” is staged around who has the authority to claim knowledge of the “authentic” textual meaning, which is often a battle between the producers of the text and the reader of the text. For celebrity queerbaiting, the authenticity is centered around the person and that person’s sexuality, so access to that “truth,” while debated, lies solely with the celebrity in question (Brennan & McDermott 2019). Celebrities that have been accused of queerbaiting include Harry Styles, Nick Jonas, Ariana Grande, Billie Eilish, Bella Hadid, David Bowie, Prince, and K-pop idols.

Critical discussions of queerbaiting by readers of texts is said to be a form of queer activism as queerbaiting is seen as a marketing tactic that is exploitative of the LGBTQIA+ community. As such, queerbaiting inherently involves a power imbalance and discussions of its use is a means by which the readers or consumers of a text can hold the producers of a text accountable for their exploitation of queer fans and queer aesthetics. Critics of the tactic claim that queerbaiting within the realm of corporatism exploits queer narratives or aesthetics for profit while it fails to challenge dominant models of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality. The continued use of queerbaiting in media and text contributes to a lack of dynamic queer representation on a wider level (Samperio 2020). Given its divisive nature, there are many who suggest queerbaiting tactics should stop, but many fans have alternative takes within international contexts, where national norms around LGBTQIA+ identities may be less accepting or even place both fans and celebrities in danger.

K-pop and Queerbaiting as Fan Service

Companies within the K-pop industry have regularly employed queerbaiting tactics as a marketing strategy, especially since SM Entertainment popularized the tactic with the girl group f(x) in their commercial film for LG Chocolate that featured the members posing closely together in a sultry and voyeuristic fashion that can be read as queer (Rana 2020).

Fan service is a broad term that is used to describe intentional actions by the producers of a text or celebrity with the goal to please their audience. The term originates from Japan (ファンサービス, *fan s̄abisu*) out of manga and anime fandoms and can often be used in reference to sexual content that is placed within a text for fan enjoyment (Barrett 2010). The term of fan service has evolved in recent years to encompass fan interactions with celebrities and when producers of a text change the text or introduce new aspects to the text as a response to fan desires. In an article posted by Soompi, an English-language website that posts K-pop-related news and articles, the author defines fan service by K-pop idols as “the times when our faves cherish their adoring fans as we all gleefully watch on from our screens” and “touching instances of idols giving back to the fans” (2018:1). While Soompi frames fan service as a way for idols to give back to fans and show their appreciation to them, fan service and fan interactions also function as a form of promotion and marketing for the idol or idol group.

It can be assumed from the capitalist practices of companies in the K-pop industry that the main goal of producing and promoting K-pop groups is to make money off of the fans that consume the group’s content and merchandise. One of the ways fandom is produced is through fan service. Physical sales of K-pop albums more than doubled between the first quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of 2022, with a significant increase in sales shown during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yonhap 2022). The success of K-pop physical albums can be attributed to the unique packaging and contents of the albums; rather than a plastic jewel case with a CD and small booklet, K-pop albums are often manufactured in the form of a photo book that features pictures of the members of the group as well as random inclusions such as photocards, postcards, stickers, and other goodies. For example, Stray Kids’ most recent album *Maxident* (2022) features an 80-page photo book, a CD, a lyric pamphlet, 1 out of 8 random member mini posters, 1

out of 8 random member stickers, 2 out of 24 random member photocards, and 1 out of 8 random member letters/polaroid photos as a pre-order benefit. The album comes in three different versions and if bought from a specific store, it may also come with store gifts/benefits that come in the form of a unique photocard or postcard produced by the store. This strategy is used by K-pop companies as a way to increase album sales and in turn, increase success for the group. It is an effective strategy, as physical album sales account for 97% of *Maxident's* 110,000 first week album sales in the USA alone (Caulfield 2022).

K-pop idols engage in fan service in many different ways; in an article posted by Soompi, idols are shown signing autographs for fans outside of events, engaging in playful banter with fans at a show, pretending to scold fans for skipping school to attend a fan sign, and instances of idols showing care towards their fans (Soompi 2018). Fan service from idols can also manifest in the way idols present themselves, such as posing for photos with making hearts with their hands or performing *aegyo* (애교), a Korean word for cute, which can involve changing the tone and expression of the voice to sound higher and acting coquettish and “baby-like” (Jang 2021). Both female and male K-pop idols are expected to perform *aegyo* as fan service, and idols typically act embarrassed or ashamed before or after performing *aegyo*.

Queerbaiting or ship-teasing is also considered to be an act of fan service as idols will often engage in flirtatious and teasing behavior with their fellow group members in public spaces where they are meant to be seen, such as in front of cameras or at fan meets (VGK 2022). Ship-teasing is when two or more idols tease fans by flirting and making implicit or explicit suggestions that the ship in question is more than platonic. For example, a popular ship among fans of Stray Kids (but not the most popular - to be discussed later) is “Changlix” involving the members Seo Changbin and Felix Lee. Felix and Changbin have engaged in flirtatious behavior with each other since pre-debut, with Felix often vocally or noticeably admiring Changbin’s muscles while the cameras are rolling. Before the group had made their official debut, they were producing content for MNet, a Korean television channel that uploads clips from

their broadcasts to YouTube. One clip in particular features Felix daring Changbin to kiss him on the cheek and Changbin obliging after a bit of hesitancy. The editors of the video prefaced the kiss with videos from previous events of Changbin and Felix looking at each other with longing gazes, including a clip in which Changbin is blatantly staring at Felix's lips. During the kiss, the editors imposed a pink frame and edited roses around the two members, deeming the kiss as a romantic and flirtatious action (Mnet 2017). The title of the video is roughly translated to "Excitement/flirting explosion! 'What do you think?' 'I love you!'" (설렘 폭발♡ '어때요? 저 사랑하잖아요!')

The content of the video and the title of the video are meant to rouse fans and bring attention to Stray Kids as a group—a clear example of queerbaiting as fan service. This kiss is often referenced by the members, especially Changbin and Felix themselves, where they reflect on the kiss in their *2 Kids' Room* volume 6 episode with each other. The relationships and interactions between the members serve as a way for fans to relate to the members and offer an endearing image of the group as close friends.

Another instance of fan service that can be read as queerbaiting is the Pepero game. Pepero is a Korean biscuit snack that is produced in the form of a thin stick. The Pepero game is almost exclusively played between two idols within the same group and thus, the same gender. The purpose of the game is for the two idols to eat the stick at opposite ends until they meet in the middle where they are to attempt to break the Pepero stick down into the smallest possible piece without touching lips (Joya 2019). This game is an obvious attempt at queerbaiting with idols as it provides another avenue of "almost-kissing" that is shown frequently among same-sex K-pop idols. The game can be made more exciting depending on the members' enthusiasm over it, and sometimes a fellow group member will push the idols' heads together to attempt to force them to touch lips (K-drama.net 2016). Although same-sex idols are often engaging in behavior that mimics queer interactions with a romantic partner, these interactions are always mediated and idols and companies are wary to not tread too heavy on any actions that can be read as *explicitly* queer, hence why it is baiting. Jamie Zhao discusses the K-pop girl group Blackpink and their queerbaiting tactics:

“These queer moments, which are closely associated with Blackpink’s promotional activities, are always carefully mediated for both heterosexual male and queer gazes. They have been explained as the group members engaging in playful yet sexy performances, affirming feminist- and queer-friendly expressions or “sister bonding” while those performances are not claimed to be representative of their own lesbian identities and relationships” (2021:1035).

Queerbaiting tactics are not always directly delivered by the idol; K-pop companies often produce music videos and photo concepts that heavily rely on queer aesthetics or implicit queer themes. To promote their second album *Pink Tape* released in 2013, the girl group f(x) under SM Entertainment released “The Pink Tape Art Film” to YouTube as a teaser. The short video features the members of f(x) performing quirky, nonsensical actions over a song from the upcoming album, one shot of which includes two members kissing on a couch with white sheets placed over their heads. The photobook for the physical album includes the members draped over one another with their faces posed close to each other as if they are about to kiss (Rana 2020).

The same company, SM Entertainment, sparked conversations about queerbaiting with the 2020 release of *Monster* by the subunit Irene & Seulgi of Red Velvet. The music video for the title track features copious amounts of shots with the two members staring at each other, stroking each other’s face, and plenty of almost-kisses. The aesthetics of the video combine several horror tropes, with fans and critics theorizing that one of the inspirations for the gothic-themed sets being *Carmilla*, a novella from the 1870s that involves a lesbian vampire romance (Koreaboo 2020). The physical album cover and concept photos for the album include images of the two idols stroking each other’s faces and staring intensely at each other’s lips. Although Red Velvet has previously featured an explicit one-sided lesbian romance in their music video for their Christmas song “Wish Tree,” the video was created and produced by the winner of a contest and does not feature the members in the video (SMTOWN 2016). The subunit WJSN The Black’s music video for “Easy” features the members dressed in more androgynous fashion as well as shots of the members handcuffed to each other with an abundance of almost-kisses and elongated stares at each other’s lips (Starship 2021).

Instances of queerbaiting between female idols is often more likely to be seen in officially released materials such as music videos and album jackets than male idols as these interactions are often created within the context of the male gaze and ultimately do not challenge the role of hegemonic masculinity in Korean society. While there are instances of queerbaiting between male idols in officially produced materials, it is more common to see male idols engaging in queerbaiting tactics in fan-oriented situations such as concerts, fan meets, and live broadcasts that are run by the members through social media apps. However, it can be assumed that instances of queerbaiting from male idols are not performed primarily for gay males, but rather straight females, much like Boys' Love (BL) dramas. BL, also known as *Yaoi*, is a genre of fictional media that originates from Japan and features homoerotic relationships between two or more male characters. The genre is typically created by women and for women and thus despite the nature of the genre revolving around homoerotic themes, the content is not considered to be a form of positive representation for gay men (Chang & Tian 2020).

One particularly strong case of queerbaiting by a male idol group lies in OnlyOneOf's video and performance choreography for their title track "libidO." Although the lyrics of the song are written for a female love interest, the choreography features overtly sexual actions between the male members, such as "when member Nine gently trails his hand down leader Love's typically bare back, his touch ghosting over Love's bottom before Love suddenly ties Nine up by the neck and pulls him in towards his crotch. The [dance] move ends with Nine directly grabbing Love's crotch from between his legs as he kneels below him" (Kelly 2021:1). This dance move is emphasized by the camerawork in both the music video and live stages for the song in which the camera zooms in on the members performing the choreography. The music video features homoerotic shots of the members longingly gazing at each other, feeding each other fruit and drinking wine, hanging out together and eventually touching each other's bodies, and even the members essentially spooning on top of a car while sucking on lollipops. The images presented by the video are accompanied by stereotypical masculine activities, such as off-roading and playing sports, but the focus of the video is not on the activities of the members but their interactions with each other. The long gazes and excessive shots of their hands inching closer together without ever touching function as a

perfect symbol for queerbaiting in K-pop: finding the closest proximity to queer aesthetics and motifs without any direct representation or indication that queer people or queerness is endorsed. It seems that OnlyOneOf's company understands this concept from the description of the music video on YouTube: "The title track "libidO" shares the boy's impulsive mind through the expressions of S.Freud. The mind's energy "libidO" is considered as a feeling that shouldn't be openly talked about in real life and should be concealed, so its existence is often denied. However, the more the boy tries to suppress "libidO", the stronger it gets and the more impact it has on his subconscious behavior" (OnlyOneOf Official 2021).

These examples clearly demonstrate queerbaiting as both a marketing tactic and as fan service meant to appeal to a more-than-heterosexual audience demographic. However titillating these descriptions are, though, there are still cultural norms that K-pop idols and their respective companies must answer to.

Cultural Differences in Touching/Skinship

Not all instances of skinship shown by idols should be classified as queerbaiting. Physical touch and affection is heavily associated with sexual attraction in U.S. culture rather than with other potential meanings of platonic care or group solidarity. A 1999 study that observed adolescents' behavior with touching and aggression in Paris, France and the United States showed that French adolescents, both same-sex and opposite-sex, spent much more time engaging in casual physical touch while the observed adolescents in the US exhibited more self-touch behavior as well as more aggressive verbal and physical behavior (Field 1999). This is consistent with previous research on touch cultures in which America frequently ranks as one of the lowest-touch cultures in the world (Jourard 1966). Although South Korean culture is not generally thought to be overly affectionate, in comparison to the touch-averse U.S culture, U.S. K-pop fans are not as accustomed to public displays of same-sex affection as Korean fans. Researchers have argued for years that Americans suffer from a lack of touch and affection and this results in increased hostility and aggression, particularly among adolescents and teenagers (Dachner 2010; Field 1999; Malik n.d.). It is not very common for acquaintances or friends of the same gender in

the United States to express physical affection with each other, especially in public spaces. Men in particular are much more likely to avoid touching other men due to patriarchal standards that restrict most physical contact and affection between men to homosexual intent. For example, Greene (2017) suggests that “by putting the fear of the sexual first in all our interactions, we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, avoiding all contact rather than risk even the hint of unwanted sexual touch” (1). This leaves many U.S. men (or those who are assigned male at birth) to avoid any kind of touch with others that are not considered to be a romantic partner and to associate all affectionate contact with others as sexual in nature. U.S. K-pop fans are socialized into being aware of this avoidance of platonic touch between men; seeing male idols lay over each other, hold hands, and rub each others’ shoulders can often be read as more queer than platonic by U.S. viewers compared to other international contexts.

Although South Korea is a society that is heavily influenced by patriarchal values, Korean standards of masculinity differ from Western standards of masculinity. South Korean culture values family and community above the individual’s welfare, a contrast to the individualistic standards within Western cultures (Bennett n.d.). Although industrialization and rapid economic growth brought many changes to traditional gender roles in South Korea, the patriarch of the family is still expected to earn a majority of the family’s income and women are still expected to perform a majority of household chores even as women increasingly enter the workforce (Park n.d.). Through traditional gender roles and practices as well as a conservative-leaning political landscape, men in Korea are at the top of the social hierarchy and are expected to lead and provide for their heterosexual nuclear families. The prevalence of religiosity-fueled homophobia continuously reinforces the standard of the nuclear family in Korean society and politicians running for office in South Korea are pressured to explicitly denounce homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights by their constituents (Rashid 2021). Despite these homophobic values, physical affection among same-sex platonic friendships is not seen as homosexual or indicative of a queer relationship, but rather an expressive way to show care and affection for a friend (Oczon 2014).

Many Americans react to the amount of members within K-pop groups with confusion and distaste for the perceived manufacturedness of the group. The Western pop music industry finds more

success among solo acts rather than group acts. While the 1990s and 2000s saw a plethora of successful pop groups from Girls Aloud to Destiny's Child to 'NSYNC, the prominence of pop groups in the U.S. music scene fell off after this era and has only been slightly rekindled with the short reign of One Direction and the briefly successful pop groups that followed them. From a business perspective, it is far easier to manage and finance a solo act rather than a group act; solo acts are also perceived to be more authentic by the U.S. audience that demands authenticity and scoffs at the manufactured concept of an "industry plant." The head of the K-pop and J-pop divisions under Warner Music Asia states that "individual fans have their own favourite members but also appreciate the chemistry in a group. There can also be sub-group projects that offer something different. The group format is viewed as more dynamic because there is simply more to do and show compared to a solo artist" (Lynskey 2021:1). Americans may be as starved for the collective feeling that a group or community provides as U.S. men are for platonic touch. "A good band creates a community. They have an ecosystem that, as a fan, you feel like you want to be part of. Despite all that's been said about individualism, there is still a hunger for that collective feeling" (Lynskey 2021).

Western norms of individuality, heterosexuality, and sexual touch create a unique lens from which U.S. fans of K-pop interpret the actions of the idols they may watch. Stray Kids is one of the more well-known K-pop bands that engages in queerbaiting as fan service through the practice of skinship, but there are additional questions and ways to explore this content.

Sociological Theory

Herbert Blumer coined the term for symbolic interactionism, a micro-sociological theory that focuses on the meanings people create through interactions with each other and the world around them. Interactionism "seeks to unify intelligent thought and logical method with practical actions and appeals to experience" (Turner 2000:1). As queerbaiting tactics rely entirely on the implied and symbolic interpretation of queerness, interactionism is an ideal theory to analyze the presence of symbolic representations of queerness within K-pop. It can also be argued that the idol-fan parasocial relationship is

endorsed and maintained by symbolic actions on the part of the idol that are intended to appeal to and maintain fan interest.

Fans of media and celebrities are active agents in creating meaning from the text provided. John Fiske's term "semiotic democracy" describes the power of the viewer to participate in the construction of meaning (1989: 109). Fans interpret symbols and images provided by authors or producers in ways that resonate with them and their experiences and subsequently form their own participatory culture in response to the text. Producers of the text can vary in their interactions with and endorsement of fan readings; for example, the producers of the show *Supernatural* seem to have a somewhat encouraging relationship with fan readings of the show; they will happily discuss potentially queer content in the show in a joking manner while they ignore fan requests for serious discussions of tropes such as queerbaiting within the show (Collier 2015).

Fans of pop groups often have an understanding of the standards and expectations that the celebrities must live up to within their group, which fully aligns with Blumer's ideas of meaning making. For the case of "Larry" and One Direction fans, the perceived management of One Direction was consistently criticized by fans. Fans saw instances of managers pulling the boys away from fans or each other and believed that their management was too restrictive of them and did not allow the boys to express themselves. Fans of One Direction and particularly Larry shippers did not buy the perceived manufactured masculine image of the group and actively challenged it, creating their own perception of the members and their relationships with each other. The fans of One Direction created an active participatory culture in which they rejected the forced image of the members of One Direction and enforced their own readings of the members' personalities and desires.

A major symbol of this defiant reading was created in 2014 when a fan threw a stuffed rainbow teddy bear on stage at one of One Direction's concerts. This bear was kept by one of the members of One Direction's concert crew, or potentially one of the members themselves, and was nicknamed Rainbow Bondage Bear (RBB) by fans after the bear was seen with duct-tape styled in the form of bondage gear and placed near stage equipment at future One Direction concerts. A second smaller stuffed bear was

added to RBB and was nicknamed Sugar Baby Bear by the fans (fanlore.org n.d.). The bears were placed at every concert for fans to see and keep track of, and a Twitter account was created by someone involved with posing the bear; the bears were posed and styled in ways that referenced queer icons such as Freddy Mercury, Judy Garland, Grace Jones, Liberace, and more (Time.Graphics n.d.). The person responsible for the bears would reference the Larry ship through the inclusion of blue and green colors that correlated with the colors used for Styles and Tomlinson on stage, and during one show would position a picture of the British comedian Larry Grayson next to the bears signed “Love, Larry.” The group denied any knowledge of the origin or significance of the bears, and while some fans believed the bears offered “proof” of the romantic relationship between Styles and Tomlinson, others criticized the bears and images of the bears as queerbaiting (Southerton & Mccann 2019). Regardless of the intent of the bears, they serve as a motif for the resistive readings that fans engage in when consuming content from their favorite celebrity or celebrities. When the RBB Twitter account posted a new image, fans analyzed every aspect of the image and the gay icons that were referenced by the bear, posting to Tumblr and Twitter about their research on the history referenced by the bear and infusing the gay icons into the “Larry canon”.

Blumer’s theory of symbolic interaction aligns with the meaning-making that K-pop fans as well as other fandoms actively participate in. Because of the social and political standards that Korean idols are limited to abide by within the industry, fans generally understand that idols cannot always express themselves in the most genuine way; this leads many fans to speculate about idols’ true intentions with their fan service and what they share with fans. While some fans argue against speculating about an idols’ sexuality, other fans, mainly queer fans, are more likely to engage in meaning-making around the observable interactions between group members and how they interact with their fans. For example, during a fan sign a fan asked Stray Kids member Felix about his ideal type. A common question for idols to receive in interviews and from fans, the question refers to their ideal type of person to date, which most idols answer in ways that suggest heterosexuality either explicitly or implicitly. Felix surprised the fan by asking if they meant a boy or a girl, and the fan responded with either. Felix responds by stating that for boys his ideal type is his fellow group member Changbin, and for girls he stated “I like Stays just the way

they are!” (Everlasting 2019). This interaction was secretly recorded as fans are not allowed to record on their phones during fan signs and fans speculate that because Felix was not aware he was recorded, he answered the question more honestly than he would have if it was not within this context. This instance is a rare form of idol/fan interaction outside of a mediated context, where the idol interacted with the fan under the assumption that the interaction would be only between the idol and the fan. Many Stray Kids fans interpret the recorded interaction between Felix and the fan as a subversive way for Felix to “come out” as bisexual, and many praise him as a bisexual icon because of this interaction (Derwyns 2022).

Fans of K-pop will likely never see their favorite idols come out as LGBTQ+ as long as South Korean culture continues to endorse homophobia through its politics and social values. Queer fans are aware of this and understand the pressures idols face about their sexuality within the Korean entertainment industry. Queer fans may also be more accustomed to consuming queerness at a level that is subtextual and implicit rather than direct and representative (McLelland 2017). Instead of direct, substantial evidence of proof of idols’ sexualities, fans read into idols’ interactions with their fellow group members and search for small nods to their sexuality from the limited direct interactions idols have with fans such as during fan signs, fan calls, and live broadcasts where fans communicate with the idols through a chat room and the idols can decide which messages they read out loud and respond to.

METHODOLOGY

Stray Kids as Case Study

A boy group under JYP Entertainment, Stray Kids was formed by having the members compete for a spot in the group through a survival show by the same name of the group. The nine members of Stray Kids competed as a trainee team against other JYP trainee teams with the winning team of the show privileged to debut as JYPE’s next K-pop group. The show finished airing in December of 2017 and Stray Kids debuted as a nine-member group in March of 2018. In December of 2019, Stray Kids’ then oldest

member Kim Woojin left the group and the company JYP Entertainment for reasons described as “personal circumstances” (Ziwei 2019).

Since their debut, Stray Kids has become exponentially more successful, with 9.5 million of their Korean albums sold worldwide and over 5 million of those albums being sold in 2022 alone. Their 2022 release *Maxident* has seen their best album sales yet, with 2,188,013 units sold worldwide within the first week of the album’s release (AllKpop.com 2022). *Oddinary* was released in March of 2022 and reported sales of about 800,000 within its first week of release, marking the group’s exponential growth. Both of their 2022 album releases debuted at number 1 on the Billboard 200 US album chart, making them one of only three Korean acts to accomplish this in the history of the chart (Caulfield 2022).

Although K-pop groups have seen increasing success in the United States, most groups besides the pioneering BTS are not considered to be household names. As such, most scholarly research on K-pop and K-pop groups has been centered around BTS and their fandom. In the US, Blackpink has seen the most success of any female K-pop group; they are the only K-pop girl group to chart at number 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart (McIntyre 2022). With Stray Kids’ success that follows the lead of BTS and Blackpink (or as some fans of the groups may say, “paved the way”), the timeliness of this research is ripe due to their increasingly global success as a group. After their 2022 album *Proof*, Big Hit Entertainment announced that the members of BTS will be enlisting for South Korean mandatory military service and that fans should not expect for them to promote as a full group until 2025 at the earliest (Tsioulcas 2022). With BTS as a group temporarily out of the spotlight, Stray Kids is next in line to dominate the K-pop sphere, especially internationally. This makes them the ideal subjects for an exploratory study of this kind.

Selected Stray Kids Content

K-pop companies provide an incredible amount of content for their groups; as such, fans are known to make edits and compile videos on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and many more. After a few watches of K-pop music videos, YouTube’s algorithm will

recommend fan-edited content that functions as an indirect way to promote the group. This content can range from showing the idols being funny or acting cute to showing the idols in a more sexual way. User Katya Strom has two videos titled “Yeah...its definitely ‘Stray Kids’, not ‘Straight Kids’” and “Stray Kids are Not Idols, They’re Just 8 Dudes Flirting with Each Other” that have racked up over 500K views and 300K views respectively (Strom 2022). Fan-curated content such as these compilation videos serve as evidence for the participatory culture in online K-pop fandom and will often serve as a starting point for new fans to learn about the members of the group and their personalities.

For this project, however, I want to focus on idol and company produced materials. In this research I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of Stray Kids’ variety series titled *2 Kids’ Room*. This series is available on Stray Kids Official YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9rMiEjNaCSs31MRDCRA>). There are 6 volumes of the series with volumes 1-4 featuring approximately 10 episodes each, and volumes 5 and 6 have 9 and 28 episodes respectively. Volumes 1-5 were uploaded to YouTube between August 11, 2018 and November 6, 2019 while Volume 6 was uploaded to YouTube between January 24, 2022 and July 31, 2022. The total amount of run time for all six volumes of the series is 12 hours and 44 minutes. Due to limitations with time, Volume 6 is not analyzed for content as this volume is an outlier in respect to the first five volumes with 28 episodes at an average of 15 minutes each rather than 8-9 episodes at an average of 9 minutes each. Each volume also features an undisclosed clip episode that compiles unused footage from all of the unit episodes; due to time limitations and the non-linear way the clips were edited into these episodes, episode 10 for volumes 1-4 and episode 9 for volume 5 are not analyzed. Because this series is publicly available and does not require direct involvement with human subjects, submitting this proposal to the Institutional Review Board for approval was not necessary.

Data Analysis

This analysis was conducted using a grounded theory model and inductive coding. Created by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory takes an inductive approach to qualitative research

through the construction of a theoretical framework (1967). Because this research concerns the producers of Stray Kids' content and how Stray Kids engage in affectionate behavior with one another, this analysis greatly benefits from utilizing an inductive coding schema that was developed as I collected the data. The novelty and specificity of this work, unique as of 2023, make grounded theory an especially useful analytic tool. Content analysis is beneficial to fandom and media studies as "the collection of observational data facilitates deliberate attention to context and permits the inclusion of both language and nonverbal actions and behaviors in the analysis" (Creamer, et al. 2012: 6). The content will be analyzed through a symbolic interactionist perspective.

This project features mixed methods, primarily of qualitative content analysis as well as a quantitative piece for gathering visible touch occurrences (VTO) shown by the members in the series. The length of VTOs are cross-referenced with the view counts of their respective YouTube videos with the intent to analyze if the amount of skinship shown by the members influences the amount of views that the video garners.

It should be noted that because I am a European-American anglophone woman, I am subject to the perspective of my own cultural context; thus, I will analyze their actions from a cultural-relativism perspective with the understanding that the translation of their words and actions may not be a direct representation of the intended meaning. However, given that the theory of symbolic interactionism is all about contextual meaning making, this does not impact the overall validity or reliability of this work.

JYP Entertainment provides translations of the videos in six languages including Chinese, English, Indonesian, Japanese, Spanish, and Thai. It is unclear if a staff member under JYP Entertainment is providing these translations or if a third-party or fan translator provides the translations, but as this content is directly produced by JYP Entertainment, it can be assumed that the translated subtitles are intended to be a representation of the group Stray Kids, but analysis of translated text should be approached with caution. For example, at the end of the *2 Kids' Room* videos, the members are shown writing sentimental messages to each other on a clear board and are translated through the captions provided. Hyunjin's message to Changbin is translated as:

“Changbin, Hi, I never thought I’d get to write a letter to you, but it is easier for me to express myself through writing than talking. Sorry the intro was so long. I wouldn’t have been able to stand being a trainee without you. Whenever things got rough, you listened and gave me feedback. Thank you. I think it was a moment of destiny that I got to make my debut with you. This is getting too long, goodbye.”

The sentence “I think it was a moment of destiny that I got to make my debut with you” may be interpreted in English as more meaningful than the Korean meaning due to the cultural context of a term such as “moment of destiny.” Thus, when phrases and terms such as this are used by the members, it is important to keep a cultural-relative perspective in order to properly code their actions and intentions.

I chose the *2 Kids’ Room* series to analyze as this series features two members of the group sitting together in a room, assumingly being prompted by the producers or managers to talk about themselves and their relationship with each other and the group. This content is produced as a form of promotion for Stray Kids, and thus can be analyzed as a form of marketing for the group. Stray Kids has also produced corresponding shows to *2 Kids’ Room* such as *Two Kids’ Room + 1* and *One Kid’s Room* which feature three members being filmed in a room together as well as one member being filmed alone in a room, respectively. I chose to focus on the *2 Kids’ Room* series as this series had the most consistent format across episodes. Additionally, coding was much easier to facilitate in groups of 2 rather than three or more members interacting all at once. Additionally, the “couple” design of the program seemingly hints at the potential of queerbaiting and “shipping” that is frequently a part of both Stray Kids and the K-pop industry’s marketing.

The episodes of *2 Kids’ Room* were filmed on a set that is designed to model a bedroom or casual area of a home. The sets for volumes 1-3 feature a loveseat sofa that is accompanied by a dresser or a bedside table, with the set for volume 1 having the most props such as a large stack of manga in the corner of the room and a sleeping bag on the other side of the loveseat. Each set with a loveseat or twin bed features several pillows and snacks that are intended to create an atmosphere of comfort and familiarity. The set for volume 4 switched the loveseat to a twin bed for the members to sit on and film

together. Volume 5 was filmed on-location in a warehouse and features the members sitting in different chairs by a window surrounded by dilapidated walls and random props such as a ladder, megaphone, fence, and baseball bat.

The series was released along with the promotion of Stray Kids' *I am Who, I am You*, *Clé 1: Miroh*, *Clé 2: Yellowwood*, and *Clé 3: Levanter* mini-album releases (or extended plays) respectively. Volume 6 was released after the promotion of Stray Kids's second full-album release, *Noeasy* in 2021 and during the promotion of their 2022 *Oddinary* mini-album. The first four volumes of the series collectively equal 36 episodes with unique pairings across the nine members. For volume 5, the pairings were reset and supposedly were decided by asking each member which member they would like to speak to again for *2 Kids' Room* during the filming of volume 4, clips of which were shown at the end of each episode for volume 5. Only 8 out of 9 unit episodes were released for volume 5 as member Woojin left the group while volume 5 was being released. The ninth episode would have featured Woojin and Lee Know as a pair and clips of Lee Know from this episode were released in the undisclosed clip for volume 5. Based on how the release schedules for volumes 1-5 correlated with Stray Kids comebacks, it is likely that JYPE intended to produce *2 Kids' Room* episodes along with the promotion of SKZ's first album *Go Live*, the repackage album *In Life*, and the second full album *Noeasy* throughout 2020 and 2021, but due to losing a member, it appears they may have pivoted to the *One Kid's Room* and *Two Kids' Room + 1* format during this period.

Before starting this project formally, I watched a few episodes of volume six of the series in my leisure time and found myself interested in the members' interactions with each other from a sociological perspective. Although there does not appear to be an explicit description for the purpose of the show, due to the topics discussed and included by the producers it can be assumed that JYP Entertainment is using this show as a way for fans to feel closer to the members and for the fans to feel as if the members are more than just colleagues, but also close friends who genuinely care for each other. The perceived relationships among the members function as a form of marketing for Stray Kids as well as an avenue for maintaining the parasocial relationship between the idol and the fan.

When I began my preliminary research for this project, I initially analyzed the content through a mostly-deductive approach in which I expected affectionate or flirtatious behavior such as excessive touching, winking, eye contact and discussions of physical attractiveness between the members. From the first video I watched, I found that there were more behaviors and interactions that I had not considered from a deductive coding approach such as playful jokes that come off as flirtatious, talking about meeting each other's friends and families, staying over at each other's houses outside of work, and taking vacations with each other. As such, the inductive, iterative, and grounded theoretical approach best fits my analysis. To supplement coding the members' interactions with each other, I also recorded the amount of time that the members are shown touching each other on screen in the video, as described below.

Visible Touch Occurrences and Video View Counts

Visible touch occurrences (what I have dubbed "VTO" for ease of reference) between the members were recorded by documenting the timestamps in which the members are shown touching on camera. When a VTO was seen in the frame of the video, I paused and recorded the time the VTO began and paused again when the VTO ended to record the time. The most common VTO observed involve leaning against each other or laying on each other, legs or knees touching, arms touching, high-fives, shoulder pats, and knee pats. Multiple camera angles were used to film *2 Kids' Room* and due to this there are several instances where it is likely that the members are touching each other, but only VTO that are shown within the frame of the video were included in the data. In V5E5, Lee Know makes a lasso using the pull strings from his sweatpants and wraps them around Han's wrist; although this was not a direct touch occurrence that was typically seen in *2 Kids' Room*, it was included as a VTO since Han was literally tethered to Lee Know by his sweatpants. There were a few instances where the VTO was obscured and it was not possible to tell if the members were touching from camera angles; these instances were not included in final data collection as it could not be determined if it was a true VTO. Some VTO instances happened very quickly and appeared on screen for less than one second; these VTO were rounded up to 1 second for simplified data.

View counts for all episodes across the five volumes were recorded to be cross-referenced with touch occurrences. All episode view counts were collected on March 3, 2023.

It should be noted that these videos are not raw footage, so this series as well as most Stray Kids content is edited by JYP Entertainment in a way that presents the group as appealing to the viewer as possible. As such, generalizations about the findings can only be made about the editing choices of the producer and not about reality or fan/audience reception.

DISCUSSION

Below, I review the findings first by giving an overview of the series, then I focus on the three major themes that arose: body image and eating habits, masculinity, and expression of emotions as well as queerbaiting. I then discuss the visible touch occurrences and how they relate to the view counts of the episodes. Finally, I link these findings with my theoretical framing and prior literature in the conclusion.

“The View” : Setting the Scene

2 Kids’ Room was filmed on a set that may have been built for the series for volumes 1-4. From comments made by the members in the series such as in V2E8 we learned that some of the volumes filmed two episodes at the same time, only sharing a wall between sets. The sets for volumes 1-4 are designed to invoke a youthful and boyish atmosphere, with volume 1 featuring a colorful blue couch, locker, and sleeping bag set with large stacks of manga in the corner, a Marvel Avengers poster on the wall and knick-knacks of video game and anime characters positioned on the locker by the couch. The members are given food such as cans of Pringles chips, lollipops, fruit and other snacks throughout the filming. The idols are styled in relaxed and comfortable clothing such as sweatpants, tee shirts and flannels, and socks. The styling of the members and set design contributes to a feeling of comfort and relaxation, as if this were a casual hang-out session for the members and not filming for their job. This

design not only creates an atmosphere for the members and Stay (as fans of Stray Kids are known) to feel comfort and familiarity with, but also symbolizes a youthful and innocent tone for Stray Kids. At the time of filming volume one the oldest member was Woojin at 21 years old and the youngest IN at 17 years old. From the set design to the conversation topics included, JYP Entertainment is emphasizing the youthfulness of Stray Kids rather than their more adult or mature aspects. Although the legal age to drink alcohol in Korea is 18, the members never discuss alcohol or partying in the series. Romantic relationships or even school crushes are never discussed or hinted at by the members. The topics discussed in the series include training under JYP Entertainment, pre-debut hardships and activities, the members' evolving relationships with each other from training to promoting as Stray Kids, the members' home lives and families, eating out and traveling together, and other topics such as first impressions and giving compliments to each other.

From moments when the members looked or pointed behind the camera, we can assume that there were managers and producers behind the cameras for the filming of the series. Volume 5 was filmed on-location at a warehouse and features the members sitting in their own chairs in front of a window instead of sharing a piece of furniture. In V5E2, Hyunjin and Seungmin take note that they are the only ones in the room for filming, revealing that volume 5 was filmed with a camera setup and did not have staff or producers in the room while filming. However, at the end of V5E4 many claps are heard behind the camera, so this may not have been the case for every filmed episode for volume 5. From a brief viewing of volume 6, I unintentionally learned that volume 5 was filmed after the group had finished a dance practice, and in V6E5 it is revealed that when Changbin and Hyunjin filmed V5E8 the two had a fight before the episode was filmed; this fight is somewhat referenced in the volume 5 episode but is not discussed in detail. Again, volume 6 was extremely different in formatting than the prior seasons. For this and a whole variety of reasons, it is not included in this analysis.

JYP Entertainment frames the purpose of Stray Kids' activities and efforts as exclusively for Stay's enjoyment, with their slogan for the group being "STRAY KIDS EVERYWHERE ALL AROUND THE WORLD - YOU MAKE STRAY KIDS STAY." This enables the members to equate

themselves with the fans and make them seem more attainable than they actually are. The concept of Stray Kids was developed by the members themselves, particularly the group's in-house production team 3RACHA featuring the group leader Bang Chan and rappers Changbin and Han. The name Stray Kids initially represented a lost child wanting to chase their dreams but over time the members evolved the concept to represent the idea of finding a way out of the ordinary together. The concept for the group was meant to appeal to youth culture and to individuals who may not be accepted by social standards.

From their debut single “Hellevator” to “Maniac” in 2022, the lyrical content of Stray Kids songs has evolved from focusing on hardships and escaping one's situation to standing out and embracing deviation from the norm. This concept is presented in a mediated context and is cautious not to endorse too much deviation from social norms – such as queerness or queer identities. Stray Kids' concept does not speak explicitly to their queer fans, but is delivered in a vague and abstract way that allows fans to interpret the meaning of their music and statements and place themselves within the context of Stray Kids, an example of how semiotic democracy thrives in K-pop. 2022's “Maniac” from the mini-album *Oddinary* represents the evolution of Stray Kids' concept and how fans can interpret their lyrics as a vague representation of queerness. “The real self has been released / Barely holding on / After blinking once, back / Again, back to cosplaying as what society defines normal to be.”

This concept of standing out from the norm and being perceived as different is shared by other JYP Entertainment groups that debuted after Stray Kids such as ITZY, Xdinary Heroes, and NMIXX. ITZY is a five piece girl group who debuted in 2019 with the single “DALLA DALLA (달라달라)” which means different, different in Korean. Their concept shifted away from typical girl-group songs about romance and love and more about confidence and not caring about what other people think. Xdinary Heroes is a rock band that debuted in 2021 with their name being a shortened representation of the term extraordinary heroes - meaning anyone can be a hero. The group's music is punk pop inspired and their lyrics often reference the members being viewed by others as weird or different in the context of social standards. JYPE's newest group NMIXX debuted in 2022 with the divisive single “O.O” in which

JYP Entertainment marketed a new genre titled “mix-pop” where various musical styles and concepts are compiled into a single song accompanied with tempo and genre switches that come together to create a feeling of musical whiplash. This concept was embraced by some listeners and criticized by many others and was seen as a risk for the company to take with debuting a group as the structure of their music does not follow standard song structures, even within the industry of K-pop that often features jarring transitions and multiple infusions of genres in a single song.

As of recent releases, JYP Entertainment appears to be creating a sort of multiverse for its artists in which there are shared motifs and symbols across groups, concepts and songs released under JYPE. The only group that does not seem to follow this sort of eccentric concept is TWICE, JYP’s most senior active girl group that has been gaining increasing global success since their more mature concept switch-up “Fancy” was released in 2019. Whether or not JYP Entertainment had direct influence over Stray Kids’ concept, it is clear that JYP Entertainment has been taking steps as a company to attempt to distinguish itself from the competition of other major K-pop companies through its artists’ concepts and creative direction.

“Side Effects”: Body Image and Eating Habits

An extremely common theme discussed in *2 Kids’ Room* was body image and appearance. While the members discuss each other’s appearances by complimenting each other or asking for compliments from each other, there were several discussions of eating habits in the context of body weight and image. For instance, the conversation between the two youngest members Seungmin and IN from V5E6 below:

IN: I was so starving, as I slept on an empty stomach
I felt so hungry when I woke up
SM: Your body needed sugar?
IN: I was so starving
SM: So you had grapes?
IN: I didn't eat much, but my face got puffy anyway
SM: Same here
IN: But why?
SM: There are those days Your face is puffy quite often
IN: Yes, it does But I don't care anymore

It was swollen while I hosted 'Show! Music Core'
 SM: Right, I saw that yesterday
 IN: I didn't even eat anything the day before
 SM: You worked out -
 IN: I even exercised
 SM: Wasn't it because you did weight training?
 IN: Was it?
 SM: Yes, from exercising your muscles
 IN: I even applied a facial mask the night before
 SM: You really take a good care of yourself
 IN: To look better, you know
 SM: It was your first time
 IN: But with my face swollen, it looked huge on camera
 That was a bummer but I kept going anyway
 SM: You eat a lot less than you used to, right?
 IN: Yes, a lot less
 Since I don't eat a lot
 SM: You didn't eat much as a trainee either
 IN: Huh?
 SM: You didn't eat much, but I got you to eat
 IN: Right, you did
 SM: You were always self-conscious about eating
 IN: Huh? Was I?
 SM: You always wondered, 'Is it okay for me to eat'?
 So I took you around to feed you

IN is openly discussing skipping meals and associates eating directly to his appearance, in this case his face appearing puffy or swollen on camera. 18 years old at the time of filming, IN speaks of his frustration with his face appearing swollen while he hosted for *Show! Music Core* and states that he intentionally did not eat anything the day before hosting, even exercising and sleeping on an empty stomach. It is interesting that the producers chose to keep these conversations in *2 Kids' Room* despite the fact that they seem to promote unhealthy eating and exercise habits for their audience.

A similar conversation happens in V5E2 with Hyunjin and Seungmin discussing eating habits the day before shooting for a television program:

HJ: Is your 'WE K-POP' shooting tomorrow?
 Then, you have no choice, you can't eat
 SM: I feel something lacking
 HJ: Do you want to have some night snack?
 SM: Yes, it's my birthday
 HJ: It's sad
 If it's birthday, shouldn't you eat it anyway no matter what?
 SM: It's sad

HJ: Go ahead and just eat
Later watching that video
'It was my birthday', you would think
If you eat night snack,
I have a stomachache now
I think it's serious
but I'll eat it with you
Because I finished 'Show! Music Core' yesterday

Hyunjin frames the possibility of eating the day before a video shoot as “no choice” but to skip meals. Seungmin mentions that it is his birthday and both of them share sentiments of disappointment with sacrificing eating in order to look presentable for filming, even on a day meant to be special and fun such as a birthday. Hyunjin seems to encourage Seungmin to eat regardless of the schedule on the next day and says that he'll eat with him, but only because Hyunjin had finished filming for a television show the day before and does not need to be concerned with his appearance on camera. This conversation serves to normalize the restriction of eating in order to be seen as presentable or desirable for fans and consumers and reflects standards of disordered eating among South Korean youth.

South Korea has very strict and homogenous standards of beauty that idols must abide by or they are subject to enforced dieting by their companies or hate comments and harassment from netizens. Many studies on body image in South Korea reflect similar sentiments about eating and body image as the members of Stray Kids in *2 Kids' Room*. Distorted body image is highly common among Korean youth, with a prevalence of 49.7% among males and 51.2% among females between the ages of 10-24 (Jung, Hong, Kim et al. 2015). Disordered eating behaviors are very common among this age range and are often normalized by K-pop companies and idols. It is no coincidence that the age range of 10-24 is also the most common age for K-pop trainees and active idols. IU, an incredibly popular South Korean soloist and actress, shared on a variety show that her diet of one apple, two sweet potatoes, and one protein shake a day helped her lose 5kg in five days after she put on weight for a role in a drama, an unhealthy yet normalized pace of weight loss for idols. Momo of TWICE, a girl group under JYP Entertainment, once discussed on a V-Live broadcast that her managers at JYP Entertainment told her she had to lose 7kg or she would not be able to compete for a spot in the group through the survival competition show *Sixteen*.

Only having a couple of weeks to lose this weight, Momo talks about starving herself for a week straight to lose the weight, exercising daily and constantly spitting up to attempt to extract as much water from her body as possible. Heartbreakingly, Momo shares that to prevent gaining weight, she would eat only a cube of ice for the whole week and when she laid down to sleep at night, she would cry in fear of not waking up the next morning (Koreaportal 2018).

Idols openly sharing their disordered eating habits that stem from the pressures of meeting these beauty standards directly affect and influence the fans that watch them. Twitter users such as “layladiets” see these “diets” as a challenge to be taken and will post Tweets of them following the diet and whether it “worked ” for them or not (layla [layladiets] 2020). YouTube user Confidential Bubble Tea posted a video shortly after TWICE Momo discussed her pre-debut “diet” of starvation titled “I tried the twice(트와이스) Momo diet for 5 days and...” that has racked up 349,935 views since its posting in July 2018. K-pop companies will heavily sanitize and edit the content that is provided of their idols if it is something that may potentially upset K-netizens or I-netizens, such as curse words or slurs, disrespect towards Korean elders, insensitive comments about South Korean history, or anything that can be interpreted by fans as idols feeling negatively about their fans or their company.

K-netizens are quick to take action when they believe their favorite idols are being mistreated by their company or by another idol and will often participate in boycotts or protests to demand better treatment for the idol. It is significant that JYP Entertainment chose to include these conversations in 2 *Kids’ Room* and demonstrates a strong theme of conformity to body image standards at all costs, even at the detriment of the idol’s long and short-term health. While there will likely be some comments by netizens in concern for the idol’s health, it is clear that JYP Entertainment does not consider idols’ comments about their eating habits and body image to be enough of a concern to be removed from their produced content, and may be actively encouraging these eating restrictions for their audience. Trainees under K-pop companies before they debut are often treated as expendable, especially if they may not possess some or a majority of the Korean standards of beauty. Momo of TWICE moved to South Korea

from Japan at age 15 with the dreams of debuting as an idol; Momo as well as thousands of other K-pop trainees are willing to sacrifice everything, including their health, in order to fulfill their dreams.

JYP Entertainment as well as all other K-pop entertainment companies are very aware of the desperation their trainees possess and companies are attempting to maximize their audience by debuting the most attractive idols as possible - talents such as singing, dancing, and rapping are essential to form a successful K-pop group, but often come second to image and appearance. Similar to professional athletes, the amount of trainees a company houses will always outnumber the amount of idols that debut. A survey of the amount of trainees across South Korean entertainment companies in 2020 found that there were 1.4 thousand trainees preparing to debut as a singer or dancer in the K-pop industry, and K-pop trainees took up 72% of all entertainment trainees in South Korea. (Statista 2021). The number of trainees may be even higher in 2023 as many new K-pop and entertainment companies are being created in South Korea after the exponential growth of *hallyu* or the “Korean wave” seen from the COVID-19 pandemic. In their discussions about their trainee days, the members often reference their expendability as trainees and express sentiments of relief and fatigue towards their past struggles.

“My Pace”: Masculinity

Themes of masculinity and abiding to standards of masculinity were discussed by the members in *2 Kids’ Room*. In V2E4, after Felix tells Han that he was jealous of his skills while they were trainees, Han admits he was jealous of Felix’s deep voice:

HN: I was jealous of you too when we were trainees
Back then, my voice was sort of like an inferiority complex
Because its tone is so high
I wanted it to be deeper
That desire was so strong
FL: Come on
HN: That's why I always changed my voice when I rapped
FL: Really?
HN: I used to lower my voice when rapping
That's why my throat got damaged

Felix has a deeper rapping/singing voice than the other Stray Kids members and several of the members mention it as one of his charms in *2 Kids' Room* episodes. Deeper vocal tones are associated with the male sex and ideals of masculinity; Han discusses that he felt his higher-toned voice was an inferiority complex for him as a trainee despite his position of being one of the top trainee rappers in JYPE, which Felix references earlier in the episode. Han is expressing an expectation of masculinity that is associated with vocal tone and how his desire to have a deeper voice caused him to damage his throat while rapping to attempt to meet these expectations. Through this statement we get a glimpse into the competitive nature of the K-pop industry before idols debut and that many trainees and idols look to their peers for guidance on how masculinity can be produced and performed.

In V3E9, we are shown a conversation between Changbin and IN about IN's classmates where Changbin asks IN if any of his classmates talk about him:

CB: I.N, how's school?
Don't your classmates say that I'm good looking?
IN: No
CB: Don't they talk about me?
IN: No
CB: Don't they talk about how cool I am?
IN: No
CB: They don't talk about me at all?
IN: No
CB: You have bad classmates
IN: They all talk about Hyunjin
CB: You should transfer
Go transfer
IN: They don't talk about you at all
CB: Not at all?
IN: A lot of the guys actually do
CB: They talk about me?
IN: Yes! they say you rap well
CB: Really?
IN But I heard them ask 'But he's the shortest one, right?'

IN initially states that his classmates talk about Hyunjin, then says that the guys talk about Changbin's rap skills. Hyunjin is a part of Stray Kids' dance unit called Danceracha which also includes Lee Know and Felix. All three members are considered to be the visuals of Stray Kids - a position earned by their dance

abilities and attractive features that abide by Korean ideals of beauty - and they are also considered the most popular members of the group. This is reflected in the view counts of *2 Kids' Room* where each of the top watched episodes per volume feature at least one Danceracha member. IN may be referring to his female classmates that talk about Hyunjin and may be implying that his female classmates aren't as interested in Changbin. IN mentions his male classmates discussing Changbin's rap, and Changbin appears to be enthused by this until IN says they bring up Changbin's height as he is the shortest member of Stray Kids.

Height is a symbol of masculinity that is typically positively associated as taller men are socially perceived to possess more masculine characteristics such as dominance in comparison to shorter men. This association leads men and boys that do not meet these standards of masculinity to feel self-conscious about their height and to assume that their subjective short height reflects a lack of masculinity. IN is teasing Changbin about his height by mentioning that his male classmates found his rap skills impressive, but ultimately his perceived masculinity is subject to his height rather than his rapping skills. Throughout the first five volumes of *2 Kids' Room*, body image as associated with masculinity is mentioned several times, often in the context of broad shoulders and height. In V1E7, Bang Chan and IN play a game in which the other person must respond with the phrase "of course" or they lose the game. Chan says to IN "You do know that you don't have broad shoulders?" to which IN reluctantly agrees and asks Chan "Do you know that you're shorter than me?" Bang Chan is four years older than IN, which makes IN's comparison of their height more poignant and Chan reacts by playfully hitting IN with the pillows on the loveseat as the episode ends. This is an example of how ideals of masculinity are upheld by idols and the ways in which male idols can call on these ideals to tease or subordinate each other.

In V5E4, Woojin and Changbin discuss Changbin's body frame and connect his frame to his rap style and ultimately his masculinity:

WJ: You're really fit right now
CB: Hmm... How can I put this?
Compared to thickness of front and back, the side isn't that wide
I want to have broader shoulders

But since my body is slim
 if I don't work out and lose weight I look too skinny
 I want to maintain the body type through workout
 But that's tough when we have a busy schedule
 WJ: I think you look better now that you've put on some weight
 CB: Right, if it's not too much -
 WJ You look different
 At some point
 CB I was too skinny
 WJ You were too skinny
 I was shocked when I saw your old pictures
 You were really skinny
 CB You know that my rap style is wild
 You know I try to look charismatic on stage, you know what I mean?
 I try to look serious
 But back then, no matter how hard I try to look wild
 when I monitored myself
 I seemed to lack a sense of weight
 But these days,
 WJ Now you do
 CB Even if I don't try, I carry that weight
 WJ Since you put on weight
 CB Right
 WJ I think you have to have only small muscles to be light
 Like Bang Chan?
 CB HAN!
 Like HAN and Felix
 WJ Right
 CB They're really swift
 They are really fast
 WJ Felix's legs are really fast
 CB Yeah
 HAN is really fast as well So fast
 WJ And really light
 CB I thought that kind of light feel doesn't go well with my rap

Changbin is known by fans as the member who attends the gym most often and in other episodes he discussed his exercise and nutrition habits that support his workout routine. Changbin expresses his desire to have broader shoulders and to appear more muscular as opposed to more thin. Changbin and Woojin both say that Changbin was too skinny at one point, likely closer to their debut days. Woojin and Changbin discuss Changbin's weight gain in a positive context as there is an association with Changbin's rap style, masculinity, and body image. Changbin describes his rap style as "wild" and says that smaller, lightweight muscles do not fit this style.

Most idol rappers take inspiration from and study African-American rappers and hip-hop music to build their rap skills. Representations of masculinity in hip-hop music and imagery are often accompanied with lyrical content that depicts violence and misogyny and can be delivered in an aggressive and assertive tone. Idol rappers are not able to present lyrics and imagery that explicitly depicts violent themes, but they will attempt to emulate the style and “swagger” of American rappers and try to present themselves as authentic as possible, a reflection of the influence of African-American culture in K-pop. Changbin is associating authenticity with his appearance and says that he believes that a thin body frame does not suit his aggressive rapping style - reinforcing notions of masculinity that connect to body image.

“Give Me Your TMI”: Expression of Feelings

One of the ways fan service is utilized in *2 Kids’ Room* is through producers prompting the members to compliment each other and to express their feelings for each other. Of all of the fan service tactics used in the series, the members’ expression of their feelings about each other seemed to be the most prominent. At the end of each episode of volumes 1-4 the members were shown writing a message to the member they’d just spoken to and would often express their gratitude for each other and write “I love you” in these messages. One of the longer messages left by the members can be seen in V2E9 Felix’s message to Bang Chan:

(Chan, I’m writing this letter with all of my heart)
Oh my god.. i know you’re not into cheesy stuff... however I’m going to pour all my feelings into this delicious, sweet and salty dish i made just for you! Just like to say thank you for everything you’ve done for the team... and for me ever since I had first arrived in south Korea. At first i didnt know where to begin and felt pretty lonely at the time... that was until we started a team of 9 together “Stray Kids”.
Having you to be the big brother and leader of the team made me happy and proud. I had and always looked forward towards your every pro-making decisions, I’ve never complained :) Hey... remember the time JYP got me eliminated...? Yeah well it wasnt a good moment and i ddidnt where i had belong. Although you cheering me on and giving me hope was the only thing that gave me strength. Ok!! We’ll stop the cheesy dish from being too greasy now! If you’re reading this, I just want to let you know I’m always the Batman’s sidekick, Robin Hood! Love you bruv and you’re doing great!

(Yongbok / Felix)

Note: this is a direct translation from the *2 Kids' Room* episode and all typing mistakes were included directly from the translation.

While there were several conversations that did not dip into more sentimental or emotional topics, it is clear that one of the main purposes for *2 Kids' Room* is to showcase the connection between the members and to contribute to the fan perception of Stray Kids as more than colleagues but also close friends. There are several instances where the footage cuts to a member asking a question such as “What was your first impression of me?” or “Do you have anything you’d like to compliment me on?” These prompts may be suggested by the producers to stimulate conversation for the episode and to keep the members on topic. Some members seemed to express their emotions more freely and frequently than others, such as Felix. Over several episodes, Felix openly discusses his parents’ expectations, their initial lack of support for his goals and the pressure he feels from them, the difficulties he had when he began as a trainee at JYP Entertainment, his struggles with learning and speaking Korean, and his difficulties with expressing his feelings in Korean. In V3E1 with Lee Know, Felix expresses his gratitude to Lee Know for his dance instruction:

FL: It sounds a little too much?
That's what I thought sometimes
LK: No
FL: I just liked
LK: Like what?
FL: that you taught me the basic
Umm
You treated me sometimes, what was that, 'sundere'?
LK: You meant, 'tsundere'
FL: Tsundere?
LK: Yes
FL: You treat me in a 'tsundere' way sometimes
But I like it when learning
I was touched because you taught me
You don't have to
I really want to be... How can I say
good at dancing, but...
Why is it so hard to describe my feelings?

There were also several instances where the members would compliment each other based on their first impressions of each other or from their looks or skills, such as V1E6 with Changbin and Felix:

CB: There was one time when I thought you were so amazing
First of all you have a great voice
You have a great voice and great eyes
So when I see you just stand still and rap in a really low voice, it's so cool
And when we do photo shoots
You're always so natural and effortlessly cool
You look so great to other people. You're a total professional
When did you think I was pretty cool?
FL: When I first met you
CB: When you first met me... Okay
Really? When you first met me?
So the more you got to know me the less cool I became
FL: No let me explain
CB: Okay explain
FL: It was when I first started training
I came here on my first day and I was sitting on the floor
I was watching how everyone was preparing for the showcase
And you were right beside me
"Oh? You have a really charming face"
CB: I said that?
FL: No that's what I thought
CB: When you first saw me?
FL: Yes
CB: Oh really?
FL: Wow such a charming face

While it appears that some episodes may have had producers prompting the members to discuss certain topics, there were many instances where the conversation naturally steered into a more sentimental tone.

After discussing in detail a particularly intense fight they got into as trainees, in V3E3 Hyunjin and Han reveal to Stay how they connected and built their relationship with each other:

HN: The time I really opened up to you...
was when we had a lot of time to talk during the early days after our debut
HJ: That's right
HN: Every time...
you expressed how you were having a hard time
and how you wanted to change your personality
That was when I was really emotional
You were crying a lot then
I cried a lot on my bed then
HJ: Really?

HN: I felt really bad...
because I realized how 'you already have a nerdy personality'
'but I stabbed a dagger in his heart'
HJ: What do you mean nerd?
HN: Anyways
HJ: That was really
a turning point for both our personalities
HN: Right
HJ: Afterwards, we became closer than anyone else
I felt like I had nothing to hide
I didn't feel like I had to show you my good side
I felt like I could be myself around you
but we were considerate to each other
so it was comfortable
...
HJ: I really feel you're like
a true friend A long time friend
I feel comfortable around you...
and I don't have any hard feelings towards you

These moments between the members are intentionally shared to allow Stay an insight into the perceived genuine relationship the members have with each other. The fights between Hyunjin and Han are referenced by all of the members across the series as a way to demonstrate the difficulties they experienced during their training period and how they have evolved to where they are now. The members expressing their feelings towards each other and growth in their relationships invites Stay into those relationships on a symbolic level. In V3E5 we see the members Bang Chan and Changbin talking about their past struggles with each other and how they appreciate the care they have for each other:

BC: When we were roommates
I also
didn't make it noticeable when things were hard
and hid my feelings
But sometimes I ended up telling you unconsciously
And you'd hear me out every time
and we sometimes talked all night long
CB: Right, that was really annoying
BC: I was talking but then you'd fall asleep in the middle
CB: I'm kidding
BC: Sometimes that happened
But you really understood me out of all the others
and I think you know me the best
So just for that, I want to really thank you
I still don't know who I really am
CB: Right

BC: I still don't know who I am
so because of that I still have a lot of thoughts about it
But the fact you try to understand how I feel
and completely understand me, that alone
I feel so thankful
I wanted to tell you how thankful I am
CB: That's nice
First off, you
have the strongest sense of responsibility among us
and you're bearing all the burden
So I was very thankful for that
I am thankful for your sacrificial attitude
of always putting the team first before yourself
BC: Right
CB: I could really see that
So that's really awesome
and thank you
I think what I'm about to say is really fitting
I'm thankful for your mere existence

2 Kids' Room is providing fans with sentimental moments they may not see between the members while they perform on stage or film for other series. From this series, Stay is given more context to how the members act around each other off camera and how they made it to where they are as Stray Kids today. The producers of *2 Kids' Room* did not avoid including the members' past issues with each other such as Hyunjin and Han discussing their fights they had as trainees in V3E3:

HJ: It was the worst when we didn't get along
Our relationship was the worst
That fight occurred when we were practicing all together at midnight
HN: When I slammed the door
HJ: We almost physically fought
HN: We did but the guys stopped us
I slammed the door and what did I say?
I was like "#\$#~" when I went down
HJ: How childish! Bleh bleh bleh!
HN: I went down
and I was crying
and Bang Chan came down to comfort us
I went back up
and I was trying to talk to you
I couldn't say anything to you
I didn't really understand why I got angry at you in the first place
HJ: Me neither
HN: I got really upset
We couldn't communicate well
HJ: True

We were just awkward
HN: And the last time
HJ: The deciding match?
HN: Do you call it the deciding match?
When we fought in front of the teacher
I think that was the final blow
HJ: Why did we fight then?
HN: During the hook I was supposed to do this
and like this for the rest
You pointed that out to me a few times
HJ: That's right
HN: "It's this"
HJ: That's right
HN: But that day, I didn't do it, just that day.
HJ: That's right
HN: You pointed out that I didn't do it
but that really got on my nerves
We weren't on good terms
so every single thing bugged me
I told you to mind your own business
You said "How am I supposed to act like nothing happened..."
"when you made a mistake?"
Then we fought
You told me "Dance better!" and I told you "Focus on your rap!"
HJ: We were so immature!
HN: The teacher made us all stand in one row
and told each of us to come out and speak individually
You felt sorry so you apologized
I said "There's this one person..."
"and I hope he stops bothering me"
Everyone knew I was talking about you
HJ: It was in the basement studio!
HN: That's right!
HJ: "If you did anything wrong..."
"or you feel sorry for something, each person come out and say it"
- That's how it turned out
HN: That's right
HJ: I expressed my apology
but you came out
HN: I was acting like Southern hip-hop
HJ: "There's one person I hate"
HN: Seriously
HJ: When I heard that, I was like...
"This is seriously messed up"
HN: Wait, wait
HJ: and I ran to the restroom
HN: The teacher made us two talk separately
I chased after you to the restroom
to talk to you
What we said in the bathroom was
"Let's just avoid each other as much as possible"

"Let's ignore each other"
That was when our relationship was a mess
HJ: It was free-falling!
HN: It was like this
Vertically dropping!
HJ: "Let's just ignore each other"
"and act like nothing's up in front of the others"

This fight between Hyunjin and Han is just one of several interpersonal fights that were mentioned by the members in the series. This particular fight involved much more details than others that were discussed and the members share that they almost physically assaulted each other over their anger and cursed at each other. The pair laugh about their immaturity and assure Stay that they are on much better terms at the time of filming. It may seem counterintuitive for JYP Entertainment to release this conversation where the members reveal how deep their conflicts with each other used to be, but mentions of fights and hardships is included in *2 Kids' Room* as a way to connect the Stray Kids members to Stay by sharing the relatable experience of conflict between peers.

Revealing past conflicts between the members makes the fans feel like they have a more holistic view of the members' relationship and how it was formed. This information is delivered in hindsight, which allows for the time that has passed to lessen the intensity of their argument and past frustrations with each other. If this fight between Hyunjin and Han happened after their debut as Stray Kids, it is unlikely that the members would have discussed it in as much detail as was given as it would break the illusion of Stray Kids as a united team once they debuted. Fans are able to take these stories about their conflicts with each other and essentially consider them a part of Stray Kids canon. These kinds of stories that map the evolution of Stray Kids' relationships with each other function as evidence for fans about the strength of the members' relationships and the bond they grew with each other while preparing to debut.

2 Kids' Room also included discussions about the members' hardships during their pre-debut period, such as Han and Seungmin talking about practicing all night and going to school without sleep in V1E5:

HJ: When was the most difficult time during your training?
Practicing through the night and coming out in the morning?

Didn't you go to school right away
SM: Yes
I'd practice until 4 or 5 AM
Go home to take a shower and go to school right away
After school, I'd come back to the company
I have no idea how I did that

The members do not discuss these hardships from a critical perspective but rather from the Confucianist perspective that their hard work earned them their position in Stray Kids. This kind of busy schedule that normalizes overworking and sleep-depriving minors that still attend school is not questioned or critiqued by the members in *2 Kids' Room* but is considered to be necessary in order to achieve the goal of debuting as a K-pop idol. JYP Entertainment did not include any kind of footage that may hint at the members critiquing their demanding schedules or company policies. The producers of *2 Kids' Room* did not see the members revealing their hardships as something that could fall back on JYP Entertainment, but included these discussions as a way to contextualize the hard work that the members put into their training, their dedication to the group and ultimately the fans. Work culture and work ethic was a frequent theme throughout the series, as seen in V2E8 with Changbin and Han:

CB: You know what they say
When you're asked
if you have pushed yourself to the limits at least once in your lifetime
they say not a lot of people can say they have confidently
But I think I can say I have
HN: Me too
When I was a trainee, I worked harder than any other time in my life
CB: I know
HN: Of course I'm going to work harder
..
CB: We should work hard
HN: Let's work hard
You should work harder
CB: Work hard

A common phrase used in South Korea is “Let’s work hard” or “Work harder” and this phrase is frequently used by Stray Kids in *2 Kids' Room*. This emphasis on hard work and dedication to a team reflects South Korea’s Confucian work ethic. Confucianism values societal achievement over the

individual's achievements and emphasizes faithfulness to duties and hierarchical structures (Yeh, et al 2010). The inclusion of Stray Kids' discussion of their hard work and the ways they continue to work hard appeals to these philosophical ideals and functions to promote Stray Kids as a hardworking group that has worked to earn their success. This also relates to Stray Kids' initial concept as a group which centered on the group fighting to break out of vague conditions of hardship and struggle.

“Secret Secret”: Queerbaiting and Ambiguity

Although there were fewer instances of queerbaiting than I expected to be displayed in *2 Kids' Room*, there were several significant occurrences of queerbaiting that were invoked by the members. From viewing Stray Kids' content in my own time, I found the most frequent instances of queerbaiting amongst the members happened in live show/concert and fan meeting settings, which are common settings for performance of fan service by K-pop idols as fans are able to directly interact with idols and see them without interference of editing or video cuts in face-to-face settings. Stray Kids' queerbaiting is not directly intended to influence fans to believe that the members are dating or infatuated with each other, but serves as a way to keep fans interested and excited about the group. Most K-pop groups have a fair amount of “ships” that the fans take notice of and reinforce through “shipping” the pair with comments or posts on social media or fan-fiction stories. These ships are sometimes enforced by fans as friendships and sometimes enforced by fans as more than platonic.

One of Stray Kids' most popular ships is MinSung which involves the members Lee Know (whose real name is Lee Minho) and Han (whose given name is Jisung, Han is his family name). MinSung were paired together on episode three of Stray Kids' survival competition show of the same name and quickly caught fans' attention when Han held Lee Know's hand on stage to support him. This interaction was emphasized by Lee Know's status in the competition as he was on the verge of being eliminated in this episode. Fans took notice of the perceived affection the boys had for each other and would Tweet gifs and images of the pair to fuel the social media campaign to bring Lee Know back on the show after he was eliminated. The pair's perceived closeness and interactions with each other only built

on the validity of the ship for fans and JYP Entertainment took the opportunity to subtly reinforce MinSung through officially produced Stray Kids materials such as *2 Kids' Room*. It is not coincidental that MinSung's episode of *2 Kids' Room* was the second episode released for the series. While the first episode of volume 1 of *2 Kids' Room* garnered 1,009,242 views by March 3, 2023, MinSung's episode, V1E2, has 1,742,288 views despite being the second episode released in the series and also has the highest view count of any episode in volumes 1-5. In this episode, Han and Lee Know tease each other by making jokes about each other's appearance and playfully hitting each other. Han jokingly refers to Lee Know as "baby" and jokes that Lee Know is happiest when he is with Han:

HN: When are you the most happy?
Tell me baby
You're happiest when you're with me?
Why are you hitting me?

At the end of the episode, Han performs *aegyo* for Lee Know under the guise of giving him a private lesson:

HN: Okay, Han's charm school!
For our fans I get a lot of opportunities
To show off my charms one to one during signing events and stuff
Come here
I'll give you a private lesson
You told me to do it
LK: Yes I did
HN: You told me to do it, okay?
LK: I'll sit on my hands since I might hit you
HN: I'd prefer you fold your legs too
I think you'll kick me
LK: Okay I'll be very humble
HN: I can't do the showcase if you kick me
LK: Is this what you wanted?
Okay Why don't you try it?
HN: Okay let me block off all potential threats
LK: Okay okay
HN: Don't move
No open your eyes
You have to open your eyes
One plus one is cutie
Two plus
No you have to look into my eyes

Come here
LK: This is a school, right?
I'm dropping out
This school is trash
HN: Oi, student!
LK: This school is trash!
How could you do that to a student?
HN: Boy, this is how you do cutesy things
LK: Why? You're getting thirsty?
For your information,
Being cutesy has to have this vibe
HN: Don't do that! - Ow!

In this scene, Han situates himself and Lee Know to be directly facing each other on the couch and prepares to perform *aegyo*, a common form of fan service that Han directly states he performs for fans at events. Lee Know acts as if he is resisting Han despite Han saying that Lee Know told him to do it. Before doing *aegyo*, Han puts pillows up around Lee Know and says he is blocking off potential threats of Lee Know physically hitting or kicking Han in response to his *aegyo*. Inches away from Lee Know's face, Han does an *aegyo* rhyme while pressing his fingers into his cheeks. When Lee Know tries to close his eyes to avoid Han, Han gently touches his neck on both sides to force Lee Know to look straight at him.

After his performance is over, Lee Know responds aggressively but playfully by yelling and stands up from the couch to hit Han with the pillows. This is one of the most blatant examples of queerbaiting shown in *2 Kids' Room* and due to the cuts of the footage, it is possible that the producers may have prompted this interaction. Han mentions that Lee Know asked him to do it and Lee Know agrees, but footage of this was not included in the final edit for the episode. For volume 6 of the series, Lee Know and Han's episode ranks #2 in view count with 1,931,564 views as of March 3, 2023 despite it being the 16th episode released for that volume.

Although volume 6 was not analyzed for content, view counts for the season were collected to compare the view counts of volume 6 with volumes 1-5 as volume 6 is the most recently released of the 6 volumes and the view counts reflect an increase in Stray Kids' viewership. The most watched episode for volume 6 is the first episode released of the volume with Hyunjin and Felix at 2,927,388 views. Hyunjin

and Felix are another ship within Stray Kids that Stays endorse, but unlike MinSung there are not as many fans that endorse the ship as more of a relationship rather than a friendship (although there are certainly fans that endorse HyunLix as a romantic relationship). Fans were able to begin shipping MinSung before Stray Kids debuted due to the *Finding Stray Kids* series that JYP Entertainment produced to form the group. The interactions of MinSung shown on the pre-debut show enable fans to canonize their relationship. JYP Entertainment and the members do not explicitly endorse MinSung as a genuine romantic relationship but rather endorse the reading of MinSung as a queer relationship through fan service contexts such as Han's *aegyo* performance for Lee Know in *2 Kids' Room*. By subtly but not explicitly endorsing MinSung as a ship, JYP Entertainment is able to avoid any accusations of queer behavior or endorsement by conservative audiences while also stimulating resistant readings among the shippers of MinSung. This is not exclusive to MinSung as all of the members of Stray Kids somewhat engage in flirtatious interactions with each other across Stray Kids content.

For volume 5, the set and format of *2 Kids' Room* slightly changed to where a preview of the members' conversation is shown at the beginning of the episode. These previews show the members speaking out of context and are meant to excite and entice fans to watch the full episode. There were a few instances where there was footage included in the preview of the episode that was not included in the full episode, such as V5E5 Lee Know and Han:

HN: I feel awkward to have a deep conversation with you
LK: This is how the rumor starts
HN: We understand each other, it's just that the other members don't
HN: You liked it back then, right?
LK: Not really
LK: Please be quiet!
LK: Han Jisung

Lee Know saying "This is how the rumor starts" is not shown in the full episode and there is never context given to why he said this. This is an example of production using queerbaiting as a marketing tactic to promote this episode of *2 Kids' Room* and ultimately the ship of MinSung. The context of Lee Know mentioning rumors may or may not have been planted by production, but regardless the inclusion

of this statement functions as evidence to support JYP Entertainment's endorsement of queerbaiting as a form of fan service.

There were several interactions that could be flirtatious and intended by the members to be an expression of affection through flirting. This often manifested through teasing and joking with each other such as Seungmin and IN in V2E1:

SM: I feel happy when I look into your eyes
IN: Do you?
SM: And I can't control my body

In V4E3, Changbin makes a suggestive joke about the set change to a twin bed. This joke is one of few instances in *2 Kids' Room* that hints at more adult themes such as sex:

CB: I love this room
WJ: Yes, this is more comfortable thanks to the bed
CB: Right. I didn't expect that I would film a 'bed scene' with you here
WJ: A bed scene? It sounds like...
CB: Let's say 'I didn't expect that I'd film on the bed with you'

There were mentions of flirtatious behavior between the members even if the member was not a part of the unit for that episode, such as Bang Chan and Hyunjin talking about how Changbin treats Hyunjin at home in V2E5:

BC: You and I are the most athletic members in Stray Kids
HJ: For sure
BC: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha
Are you guys watching? Ha ha ha ha ha
HJ: Changbin, are you watching? Ha ha ha
HJ: He would come to my room later
come up on my bed
He'd show me this video and hit me
BC: He'd try to hug and give you a smack on the cheek
HJ: A hug, smack on the cheek, and lips
He's kind of weird
He comes over and touches my lips

In this scene, Hyunjin mimics the way Changbin performs *aegyo* towards the younger members and says that Changbin is kind of weird, implying that his actions aren't necessarily socially normal. Instead of

saying the direct Korean word for “kiss”, the members will often refer to kisses as “smacks” or “pecks” as these terms do not carry the same connotation as “kiss.” There is tons of footage of the members of Stray Kids attempting to kiss each other or actually kissing each other, mostly on the cheek or neck. There is very little footage of Stray Kids actually kissing each other on the lips, but Hyunjin directly states in this episode that Changbin kisses him on the lips when they are at home, giving Stay an exclusive insight into their life at the dorms and opening up the possibilities of what is not being shared.

References to dorm life and traveling together were very common in *2 Kids' Room* as it is understood by fans that Stray Kids spend as much time with each other off camera as they do on camera. In the first episode with Changbin and Hyunjin, the two talk about their sleepovers during trainee days:

CB: Yes I'd never slept over at another trainee's house before

HJ: Really?

CB: I went all the way to Yongin

I slept at your place so much

And you slept over at my place a lot too

HJ: Yes

CB: You came about 8 times and I went about 8 times

We slept over a lot

HJ: Yes

CB: We went almost every weekend

I went to Yongin a lot

HJ: Thanks to you I was able to visit Bora-dong

I met your friends too

These conversations were included to express to the fans that their relationship with each other is genuine and has been built since their trainee days. JYP Entertainment seems to regularly emphasize the members' shared living arrangements as the concept for Stray Kids' 2022 Season's Greetings merchandise was “Roommates”. Although there is a plethora of filmed content for Stray Kids, there is little to no footage of Stray Kids' dorms or apartments available to fans. K-pop companies attempt to minimize the private lives of idols for fans as they want their idols to maintain as positive of an image as possible and the less private information that is revealed about the idol, the greater chance of marketability the idol has. Due to the fans' lack of access to idols' private home life, the members have the power to share what does and does not happen at home, and the producers of *2 Kids' Room* included these discussions as a way to plant

an ambiguous context around their shared living experiences. This is shown in Woojin and Hyunjin's conversation in V2E2 where they talk about Hyunjin coming over to Woojin's place as if it were a hideout:

WJ: When we were trainees,
you use to come to my place after the lessons
HJ: Yes, I did
WJ: You often came over
My place was like a hideout
HJ: Yes, hideout
I almost lived in your place as if it was mine
I even knew the password to get in
WJ: Your school was close to my place
HJ: Yes, I even went to school directly from your place
3 or 4 times, I guess?
WJ: Yes, 2 or 3 times

The members also mention instances of dorm life that fans are interested in hearing about such as seeing each other before or after showering or mentioning them sleeping or walking around in only their underwear or less. In V2E1, Seungmin talks about IN sitting on his bed in his underwear:

SM: When did I get angry with you?
IN: You've changed
Yesterday, you were angry
when I was sitting on your bed without taking a shower
SM: No, hmm, well...
I would've understood if you sat down wearing pants
But you were only wearing a sweaty underwear

There were a few episodes that featured the members discussing Lee Know's habit of sleeping only in his underwear, such as V2E3:

CB: There's something I really don't understand about you
LK: What?
CB: Should I really say it?
LK: What is it?
Tell me
Tell me. What is it?
CB: (Not wearing underwear while sleeping)
LK: It's not that I don't wear it
I do wear it It's just that's the only thing I wear
CB: The others...
LK: Yes?

CB: They wear underwear
When they sleep
I've seen them wear nothing else
I've seen them only wear underwear
LK: Of course, they only wear underwear
CB: But you don't wear underwear!
LK: What are you saying?
CB: I don't understand that. Am I wrong?
The red garment.
LK: That's underwear
CB: What are you talking about?
I was shocked yesterday

Changbin makes eye contact with the staff behind the camera when he initially brings up Lee Know's sleeping habit and whispers what he wants to say to Lee Know before they openly discuss it. Changbin acknowledges that this is a private detail and just enough information is given about Lee Know's sleeping habits for the fan to be able to imagine the rest of the scenario between the members. Although Lee Know denies sleeping nude, Changbin is revealing exclusive dorm-life events to Stay that would involve the members seeing each other naked and even saying that he was shocked the day before filming when he discovered Lee Know in only a mysterious red garment. In V3E6, Seungmin also brings up Lee Know's sleeping habit:

SM: When we did "The 9th" and went to Nami Island, when they woke us up in the morning you were naked.
LK: Oh
SM: You were just wearing underwear
LK: When we did a wake up mission?
SM: Yes
LK: That's right
SM: Is that comfortable?
LK: You should try it
SM: No

The producers of *2 Kids' Room* intentionally included these conversations that reveal behind-the-scenes of Stray Kids' dorm life. These exclusive bits of information given about Stray Kids' private life contribute to an intentional atmosphere of ambiguity towards their off-camera activities. This ambiguity is strategically used to entice fans to fill in the gaps of the missing information with their own desires and fantasies about the boys. In V4E4, Lee Know and Hyunjin discuss Hyunjin's post-shower routine:

LK: When you come out after taking a shower
and apply lotion on your face
HJ: Do I look attractive when I do it?
LK: When you apply lotion being naked
HJ: So?
Does it attractive? Why?
LK: I just like it
HJ: Does it look attractive?
LK: It was fun to see

Lee Know seems to bring up this topic out of nowhere from the way the video is edited and says it is fun to see Hyunjin apply lotion to his face while naked without explicitly mentioning why. This is an example of a conversation that was intentionally left without context or details that allows Stay to fill in the gaps with whatever scenario they would like to. The members are aware that they have access to information Stay would like to know and sometimes directly signal to the camera that they are aware of this, such as Changbin and IN's conversation in V3E9:

CB: I think of you every night
That's why I go looking for you every night
It's not just you It's all the younger members
I bother all the younger members every night
IN: When we were trainees, you called me a lot
CB: That's right
That's right! We were close when we were trainees
IN: I guess so
CB: We were close

When Changbin says “We were close”, he looks directly into the camera and raises his eyebrow in a playfully suggestive way. It is not clear if Changbin is trying to hint that his and IN's closeness is more than platonic or if he is being somewhat sarcastic about them being close as trainees. Regardless, Changbin is showing to Stay that he is interested in the younger members and breaks the fourth wall to indicate to Stay that he knows more than they do.

“Connected”: Visible Touching Occurrence and Episode View Counts

There were various amounts of visible touching occurrences (VTOs) that were observed in 2 *Kids' Room*. The episode featuring the highest VTO was V4E8 Hyunjin and IN at 4 minutes and 23

seconds. There were three episodes in which there were no VTO observed: V2E2 Woojin and Hyunjin, V2E8 Changbin and Han, and V5E2 Han and Seungmin. The volume that featured the highest VTOs was Volume 1 and the lowest VTOs was Volume 2. From highest to lowest, the total observed VTOs for volumes 1-5 of *2 Kids' Room* for each member is Hyunjin at 14 minutes and 9 seconds, IN at 8 minutes and 1 second, Han at 7 minutes, Seungmin at 6 minutes and 46 seconds, Woojin at 4 minutes and 57 seconds, Felix at 4 minutes and 55 seconds, Lee Know at 4 minutes and 20 seconds, Changbin at 3 minutes and 36 seconds, and Bang Chan at 3 minutes.

Hyunjin's observed VTO was almost double the amount of the second-highest VTO recorded due to his habit of laying directly on the members during *2 Kids' Room* filming. In the first episode of the series with Changbin, Hyunjin lays his head on Changbin's arm within the first 15 seconds of the episode and remains in this position until the timestamp of 1:35. In V1E9 with Seungmin, Hyunjin lays his head in Seungmin's lap for three minutes while they both eat snacks and talk about playing sports in their school days. Interestingly, the conversation steers towards a more sentimental tone after Hyunjin no longer has his head in Seungmin's lap. Another episode in which Hyunjin lays his head in another member's lap is V4E8 with IN and this episode features the longest VTO recorded for volumes 1-5 of the series at 4 minutes and 23 seconds. Hyunjin's observed skinship with the members was mostly from sitting in close proximity to the members rather than a lot of touching with his hands. The second most observed VTO for a member was IN at 8 minutes and 1 second, but this is due to his elongated instance of skinship with Hyunjin in V4E8 rather than his own direct expression of skinship across the series. Without this episode, IN would likely be on the shorter side of the observed VTOs in *2 Kids' Room*.

The member with the third-highest VTO was Han at 7 minutes of observed touching. The episode with Han's highest VTO was V3E3 with Hyunjin in which they discussed in detail their previous fights they had with each other as trainees. This episode also has the highest view count for volume 3. There could be several reasons for the high view count for the episode; Hyunjin is known as a popular member of Stray Kids as is Han. Their discussion of their previous fights may also be a factor to the relatively

high view count of the episode as these arguments were referenced in earlier episodes as well as later episodes of the series and fans may find these stories interesting to hear and revisit.

Due to the relatively simple data, the episode view counts and VTOs were analyzed for trends without any additional research software or data analyst programs. This data is collected to find if the amount of skinship shown by the members in the series impacts the amount of views the episode garners. As shown in the tables below, nine of the top fifteen episodes by view count are the same episodes as nine of the top fifteen episodes by VTO. This shows a positive correlation between high view counts for an episode and high frequencies of VTOs. |

Top 3 View Count by Volume				
Vol 1	Vol 2	Vol 3	Vol 4	Vol 5
02 LK x HN	09 BC x FL	03 HJ x HN	04 LK x HJ	05 LK x HN
01 HJ x CB	04 HN x FL	01 LK x FL	08 HJ x IN	07 BC x FL
06 CB x FL	07 LK x IN	07 HJ x FL	05 BC x HN	02 HJ x SM

Top 3 VTO by Volume				
Vol 1	Vol 2	Vol 3	Vol 4	Vol 5
09 HJ x SM	01 SM x IN	03 HJ x HN	08 HJ x IN	07 BC x FL
01 HJ x CB	04 HN x FL	07 HJ x FL	02 FL x SM	05 LK x HN
02 LK x HN	06 WJ x SM	08 WJ x HN	04 LK x HJ	03 FL x IN

From the data collected, there is certainly a trend in which the episodes that feature longer displays of skinship gain higher view counts, but these view counts were not gained in a vacuum. Since K-pop groups can have many members (the biggest known group as of 2023 being TripleS under MODHAUS with 24 members) fans of groups will often prefer a member and refer to them as their favorite member or their “bias” of the group. It is very likely that many fans of Stray Kids have not watched every *2 Kids’ Room* episode but will selectively watch the episodes that feature their favorite

members. This is reflected in the lowest view counts by volume as seven of the fifteen lowest viewed episodes feature ex-member Woojin, who was not a popular member when he was in the group and has since been shunned by fans of Stray Kids due to his abrupt exit without explanation by the members, Woojin himself, or JYP Entertainment.

There is also the possibility that casual fans of Stray Kids may only watch selected videos of the members they know of or prefer. As mentioned previously, the most popular members of Stray Kids tend to be Lee Know, Hyunjin and Felix who make up the dance line of the group and are also referred to as the visuals and center of the group. As they are the most skilled at dancing compared to the other members, these members often get the parts of songs where the audience is supposed to be paying the most attention, such as the “point” or “killing part” of the song like the chorus or bridge. It is likely that casual fans of Stray Kids prefer these members because they are positioned to be the face of the group and may be more exposed to them through casual viewings of their content.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative content analysis of the interactions between Stray Kids members serves as an exploratory study of how skinship and affection between idols is produced for fan consumption by K-pop companies such as JYP Entertainment and may be perceived as queerbaiting. This case study on the production of queerbaiting offers a view of how K-pop idols are presented to the public and their fandoms through the application of the theory of symbolic interactionism. As the K-pop industry grows within Korea, it continues to expand its global reach and attract listeners and “fansumers” throughout its growth. Due to the social and political limitations of LGBTQ+ in Korea, the K-pop industry as a whole shows very little signs of endorsing LGBTQ+ rights or even LGBTQ+ visibility in an explicit manner. K-pop fans do not expect any kind of support for LGBTQ+ through K-pop companies themselves, but idols can show small instances of support during interactions with fans in spaces such as fan signs or concerts, and more seasoned idols may openly express their support for the LGBTQ+ community through their

personal social media accounts (Treñas 2022). Despite these small displays of support, the likelihood of a successful idol coming out as queer is very low as K-pop companies, including JYP Entertainment, are known to sever their contracts with trainees if they are caught in a homosexual relationship (Koreaboo 2021; Rin 2021). K-pop idols must abide by strict Korean beauty and social standards in order to be successful within the K-pop industry and very few companies are willing to risk the stigma that is associated with LGBTQ+ for their groups, as it would be an obstacle to the marketability of the group and thus would not generate as much profit as would be possible if the idol was presumably heterosexual.

It should also be noted that beyond queerbaiting, other sociological themes arose from the content of *2 Kids' Room*. The members made frequent references to themes of body image and social standards of beauty throughout the series; these were often accompanied with the topic of eating habits. It is important to document the ways in which K-pop idols speak about their weight management and body image as fans are very susceptible to internalizing these restrictions and standards of eating and/or “dieting”. Themes of gender and masculinity were discussed in implicit ways by the members and reflect the approach that certain members take when performing to produce an image of masculinity. Finally, the members selectively included information about their personal relationships with each other, such as their feelings towards each other and past conflicts they shared. The sharing of their feelings, struggles, and personal relationships function as a form of fan service that invites the fans of Stray Kids into the relationships of the members on a symbolic level. Fans are able to take these bits of information and project their own meaning onto the relationships of the members; *2 Kids' Room* does not function to display Stray Kids as only platonic coworkers but as a team who has struggled together and grown together along with their growing fanbase and global exposure. There are plenty of conversations in the series that were left with ambiguous meanings for fans to create their own outcome for. Fans pull certain actions, words and projected meanings of the members' conversations from symbols or representations of something the fan may be looking for, such as a hint of queerness or a perceivably queer interaction. An interactionist perspective illuminates the ways in which these symbols are produced and given to fans in an indirect manner. By not clarifying these ambiguous moments and promoting alternative readings of their content,

JYP Entertainment is calling on fans to engage in semiotic democracy to create their own meanings that are not directly intended by the producers.

Reflexivity Statement

As a queer U.S.-based K-pop fan, I find it important to be mindful of the cultural context of the content I am consuming and how it may affect my perceptions of Korean culture; while it is exciting and fun to consume the music, visuals, and merchandise that the K-pop industry provides, it is also important to remember that K-pop idols are not representative of the average Korean person but are positioned as products to be consumed by the broadest general audience. While fans enjoy the skinship and flirting that is on display between same-sex group members, Koreans may face harsh discrimination and retaliation for being openly queer, such as being fired from their job, attacked in public, and facing bullying and harassment in the workplace and schools with no legal protections (HRW.org 2021; Benjamin 2022). Non-Korean fans of K-pop may have their perceptions of Korean culture warped by the heterogeneous nature of K-pop music and its inspirations from Western pop culture, so it is necessary for social researchers to continue to study the production and consumption of K-pop content and how it affects the experiences of those within the Korean and general East Asian diaspora. My own interpretation of this content is mediated by my personal social identities, and I do not claim to ignore or deny these biases. However, as an initial exploratory study, my own research and personal interest create a way for me to continually be aware of my own biases as I conduct this research.

Limitations

As this research only involves a case study of one series provided by Stray Kids, this research is quite limited and only covers a small fraction of the content provided by Stray Kids themselves. Although the goal of this research is to observe and measure the amount of skinship shown by Stray Kids, this particular series involving two members in the same room together may include more instances of skinship than Stray Kids content with more than two members. Stray Kids is also just one of thousands of

groups in the K-pop music industry and their interactions and relationships with each other should not be assumed to reflect the same interactions and relationships among other groups under other Korean entertainment companies.

Since the researcher for this project does not speak fluent Korean, there is a language barrier that requires a reliance on translations of the video where the translations may not be 100% accurate or reflect nuanced communication such as jokes and sarcasm. There is also a possibility for the translators of the video to leave out certain information that may not translate as fluidly which could cause the viewer to interpret the members' conversations differently than the context they were given in. Beyond language, there are other cultural and social location biases that should also be noted as seen in the reflexivity statement.

The initial research plan for this project involved transcribing and analyzing volume 6 for content along with volumes 1-5. Due to time constraints, volume 6 was not included in the final data collection involving analysis of the themes discussed in *2 Kids' Room* or visible touch occurrences. Also, the 6th volume was much different from the first five volumes and was reasonable to exclude due to the switch-up in the show's format.

Suggestions for Future Research

As this research focuses on the production of queerbaiting and not the reception of it, it would be beneficial to study the consumer's reception of celebrity queerbaiting as fan readings can sometimes become more impactful than the intended "truth" of a text. For my own future research, I would like to delve deeper into the parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities, particularly fans of K-pop and K-pop idols as the industry continues to grow and globalize. K-pop companies are utilizing evolving technologies such as augmented reality and subscription-based messaging apps that appear to give the fan more personal connection and access to the idol. As a majority of pop music has been known to cater to and attract younger viewers, particularly girls/women and queer folk, understanding the ways that labels and companies produce celebrity and reinforce the power structures between fans and celebrities is crucial

to understanding how media and fandom operate as a form of socialization. The millions of fans that consume K-pop content every day should not be disregarded as obsessive and trivial, but should be acknowledged as the participatory culture that provides people with a form of connection and understanding of themselves and the world around them.

A micro sociological theory, symbolic interactionism serves as an ideal theory to analyze and interpret parasocial relationships as these relationships almost exclusively operate on a symbolic level. It is important for researchers to study these relationships from a holistic perspective; there are always connections and meanings of why an audience may engage with a celebrity. Social researchers have been paying more attention to the value of studying the impacts of popular culture and how it is produced as well as consumed in recent years, but the field has a long way to go in not just covering these topics as a legitimate social phenomenon but also in meeting the fans where they are and speaking of their interests and passionate behaviors from a perspective that does not patronize them. As mentioned previously, pop music has historically attracted a young audience of predominantly girls/women and/or queer/femme individuals and thus the reaction to fans of pop music or even the music itself can be met with implicit forms of misogyny and homophobia. Fans of K-pop, particularly global fans, are attracted to the industry for a multitude of reasons that should be studied by researchers for not just the pull of the industry, but the effects and impacts it has on fans as well as the globalization of South Korean cultural products. From this case study of a singular K-pop group under a successful K-pop company, themes of body image, masculinity and expression of feelings and hardships can be used to gain a perspective of how these parasocial relationships are produced and maintained as a form of promotion for a music group and how fans are impacted by these discussions.

The K-pop industry has standardized its methods of production, promotion and consumption of idols and groups in a way that has allowed it to break through the borders of South Korea and continue to expand globally. The commodification of idols and production of goods has contributed to South Korea's rising GDP and has enabled the K-pop industry to be one of few global music industries that sees an increase rather than a decrease in physical album sales (Yonhap 2022). With evolving technologies such

as streaming services that involve less direct income for musicians and record companies, we may see the American music industry adopt some of the tactics and methods that the K-pop industry uses to create and maintain these parasocial bonds which result in profit and income for the company.

As for queer representation in the K-pop industry, there are artists and creatives both in front of and behind the camera that are making small pushes for acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in South Korea. Holland is an independent solo artist who has released a handful of music videos since 2018 that directly depict a homosexual relationship; this is represented in the lyrics of his music as well as his stage name Holland, which he named himself in honor of the first country that legalized same-sex marriage (Collins 2020). Despite his efforts, Holland's fanbase is composed of mostly international fans rather than domestic Korean fans, and Holland faces an uphill battle with promoting in the industry as he has been subjected to censorship by Korean broadcasting channels and homophobic attacks in public (Benjamin 2022).

The group LIONESSES is a boy group composed of three openly LGBTQ+ idols who explicitly reference their queerness in their music and concepts. Under a small company, the group has not seen a substantial amount of success and the company will often release statements that threaten legal action due to the harassment the members receive for their sexualities (Khan 2021). Note: although South Korea has no legal basis of discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, they have unique defamatory laws that companies often use to pursue legal action against netizens that engage in excessive amounts of harassment towards idols.

MAMAMOO, a four-piece girl group under RBW Entertainment (stands for RainbowBridge World) has a sizeable LGBTQ+ fanbase due to the members' open acceptance of their queer fans and alignment with openly queer Korean celebrities such as Harisu, a transgender South Korean singer. Although all of the members have directly or indirectly supported LGBTQ+ visibility, the lead rapper of the group Moonbyul has openly discussed that she wants to present herself in a way that defies expectations of gender and femininity that is typically projected onto girl groups. While there have been girl group idols who have presented themselves in androgynous ways, Moonbyul is one of very few idols

who uses gender neutral language in her solo music and as of 2021, she has even used she/her pronouns in the song “Shut Down” in which the lyrics clearly reference sex (Genius n.d.). Although MAMAMOO is a well-known and globally successful K-pop group set to embark on their first US tour as of 2023, these instances where the members may hint to their own queerness are delivered in subtle and strategic ways; “Shut Down” is a pre-release track for Moonbyul’s solo album *bequence* rather than the title track that is promoted more heavily and ultimately gains more attention. Since Moonbyul is still an active idol, she must abide by the social standards and general passibility of heterosexuality that is imposed on idols in the industry, but she is giving fans small doses of representation in subtle ways that do not serve to disrupt the heteronormative standards of South Korea but rather to establish a connection with her queer fanbase.


Idols performing queerness or queer aesthetics in a direct or indirect way should be analyzed in the context of South Korea’s social climate - idols often come from relatively privileged backgrounds and successful idols have a much higher socioeconomic status than the general South Korean population. Although an idol may face intense public backlash if they are outed as queer, idols are able to openly engage in behavior that can be read as queer with their fellow members in a fan-service setting without fear of losing their job or social status. The same kissing, flirting and affectionate behaviors that fans enjoy amongst idols could potentially lead to the average Korean to lose their job, housing, social standing and more if they engaged in these behaviors outside of this context. As a queer American consumer of K-pop, I find it important to consider the experiences and perspectives of the queer voices we are not exposed to from mainstream K-pop promotions. Globally as well as domestically in the United States as well as South Korea, LGBTQ+ rights and visibility leave much to be desired. Everyday activists and consumers are voicing their concerns about queerbaiting as it is a form of exploitation rather than representation of queerness, and as long as queer people are not able to freely openly live and present as themselves, queerbaiting will always be a form of exploitation.

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