The Archival Wave:
Communities Represented By & Constructed In K-Pop Fan Archives

Abstract:
The Internet has democratized archiving in new ways. A dominant form of the new digital archive is the fan archive, which seeks to preserve and make accessible highly specific sections of popular culture. The will to archive is driven by affect and fans help to foster a sense of devotion and representation through their archival work. By analysing the role Korean pop (K-pop) fan archives have played in fostering the Korean wave, this paper will explore how archives not only represent communities but also construct their own. In doing so, it suggests emerging archival practices arise most prominently in the affective space, unbound by traditionalism.

Keywords:
digital archives, fan studies, affect, community, social media, hobby

DOI:10.33137/ijournal.v6i2.36461

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A search of the word “archive” on social media is likely to retrieve more than just the traditional archive. In fact, many of the most followed accounts self-designated as archives represent an emerging category: the fan archive. These archival (web)sites, founded by nonprofessional archivists, are driven by affect and attempt to preserve/make accessible highly specific sections of popular culture. Herein, fan archives test the traditional bounds of the archive and combine Sarah Baker’s (2015) conception of an “affective archive” (an outgrowth of Cvetkovich’s (2003) “archive of feelings”) with Dr. Abigail De Kosnik’s (2016a) conception of the “rogue digital archive”. In opposition to modernist conceptions of objectivity and canonical representations of culture, these fan archives foster a sense of devotion, representation, and community through the act of archiving. The transnational and cultural power of fan archives is best represented by those dedicated to Korean pop (K-pop) stars or “idols”. These fan archives, entirely curated and run by fans for fans, represent a necessary broadening of archival practice in response to new forms of digital media and irreverence towards the traditional bounds of archival praxis. By assessing these emerging archives, professional archivists can better understand the evolution of the public’s conception of and relationship to archives, and the impact archives can have on the communities they represent and themselves forge.

“Fandom,” defined by John Fiske (1992, p. 34) as an intensification of pop culture formed against official culture, is inherently rogue in its distinction from the commercial product it arises from. Yet, scholars in fan and youth culture studies have emphasized the K-pop fandom as a particularly unique representation of a transnational community born out of a fan-led, new media-driven flow of information beyond traditional gatekeepers (Yoon, 2019a; Oh, 2017). Fiske (1992) proposes fans in fandom engage in three kinds of “productivity” which transform their texts: semiotic (reading/understanding the text), enunciative (discussion of the text) and finally textual (the production of fan texts). I add the “will to archive” as a key tier of productivity which puts forward a new motivation to preserve the history and memories of one’s chosen fandom. Of particular interest in this research paper will be the key role transnational fan archivists take on to construct information repositories that spur other tiers of productivity in their community, thereby giving way to webs of connections and opportunities for dialogues with/between fans.

Fan archives are inherently anti-institutional. The “nonprofessional appropriation” of archives has historically been met with apprehension from institutional archivists (Pearce-Moses, 2005). The Society of American Archivists’ definition of “archive”, for instance, references William J. Maher’s assertion that the verb has been used (by non-archivists) to lend respectability to what is little more than a “personal hobby or collecting fetish” (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 30). Yet,
Maher’s argument broadens (as ours must) beyond this initial public concern to suggest that the rapid growth of technology must propel archival professionals to assert their professional dimension within the broad use of “archives” (Maher, 1998, p. 255). That is, the act of archiving and the archive (as repository and site) have both inevitably shifted under the demands of a rapidly changing culture. Fan studies spurs continual interest towards understanding the affective relations fans build towards their fandom (Long et al., 2016), such relations are especially present in the fan archive. The continued relevance of archival praxis requires going beyond a modernist neutral investment in the archival object or institution, to drive a healthy consideration of the abstract archival process. In doing so, one is best equipped to confront an archive that exists outside the physical site and especially, takes full advantage of the increasingly digital landscape and its unique styles.

Abigail De Kosnik’s model of archival styles presents a useful structure for new constructions and understandings of archives. Digital fan archives explicitly reject the cultural canon and operate under the goal of proliferating a non-canonical culture/fandom. Three archival styles arise out of this marginalized space: universal, community and alternative (De Kosnik 2016a). The web archive, more so than the analog archive, can fully preserve a “documentary culture” that emphasizes mass proliferation over selection. While the physical site is bound by limitations of storage and space, the web site is instead able to propose a comprehensive archival approach which collects and makes accessible as many texts as possible, presenting all as equally valuable (De Kosnik, 2016b). This belief in democratization and equality similarly lends itself to the archive’s community stylings. Michelle Caswell borrows from media studies to suggest that traditional archives (akin to mainstream media) have perpetuated a symbolic annihilation of minoritized groups by ignoring, misrepresenting, and maligning them (2016, p. 57). Yet, the highly specific nature of web archives forces a new space in which artifacts are preserved by and for individuals who share values, identities and affects – communities. This specificity positions them within an alternative style. The very need for these web archives is often born out of a lack. In lieu of seeking acceptance within dominant traditional institutions, these web archives instead assemble their new repositories and invite archival building by users (De Kosnik, 2016a). Altogether, these styles render a new archive altogether which strives to represent an archival body of and for its own kind.

The proliferation and power of the digital fan archive is best embodied in transnational K-pop archives. The global dissemination of K-pop has occurred in waves. The early roots of K-pop lie in cultural policies meant to recover a nation struggling with the aftermath of the 1997
Asian financial crisis. As Dr. Hye-Kyung Lee notes, popular culture was then viewed largely as an industry through which Korean culture was carried as a distinct spirit, identity, and character (2013, p. 192). The “Korean wave” policy encompasses several cultural exports: not only K-pop idols but also television series, films, automobiles, skincare, etc. However, economists distinguish K-pop from these exports due to its longevity, broad appeal, and global chart success (Messerlin & Shin, 2019, p. 410). Yet, the industry has grown in global size and profit ostensibly since then, increasing from 16.7 million earned through exports in 2006 to 277.3 million by 2013 (Messerlin & Shin, 2019). Three key elements which especially affirm the medium’s increased propensity to digital archiving are Internet infrastructure, product selection and a high focus on audio-visual inputs – all elements which have also been suggested as key to K-pop’s success (Messerlin & Shin, 2019). The K-pop medium is an immersive form which includes an abundance of content including fan site photos, variety shows, streaming broadcasts, interviews, social media updates and news media. As such, it is key that fans establish networked fan practices which ensure they can navigate the transnational borders moderating this flow of information. Here, it has been up to fans, rather than K-pop companies themselves, to bridge cultural gaps and acquire/make content accessible to other fans.

Collecting is a key element in fan culture and feeds into the development of a K-pop fan archive. Despite the state’s stated interest in using K-pop as a national-cultural tool, the archiving and translation of such media has largely been put in the hands of fans themselves (Kelley, 2017). Fiske suggests that physical fan collections distinguish themselves from art collections by way of their emphasis on quantity and all-inclusiveness over exclusivity (1992, p. 45). Digital fan collections similarly prioritize comprehensiveness and yet, even more so than the individual collection, invite a level of community participation. These archives, even when operated from a single account on social media, precipitate on an archival design that involves members of their communities at every level (fan submissions, alerts, etc.). In that way, one is led to consider Ann Cvetkovich’s suggestion that the fan is a model for the archivist (2003). Despite suggestions that their attachment to subjects (idols) is obsessional, fan archivists aim to collectively generate deep knowledges about their subjects which are then further made meaningful by interpretation and attachment.

In the mid-2000s, many international K-pop fans created fan communities which functioned as both discussion boards and information repositories. One such community was Soshified (figures 1 and 2), which declares itself the “one-stop portal for all things Girls’ Generation”. These “things” include pictures, video streams, in-house English-subtitled videos, and other
primary and secondary content. Notably, Soshified embodies several of the traits of rogue digital archives defined by De Kosnik (2016, p. 77). It is staffed by volunteers without training in LIS who are dedicated to the long-term preservation and accessibility of content related to the Korean girl group, Girls’ Generation. It also boasts itself to be the defining digital archive of its kind, emphasizing traffic of about 1 million visitors a month. There are calls for information submissions by the community and while traffic has slowed compared to the group (and thus, the website’s) heyday, there remains steady information updates and dissemination through the main website.

Digital ephemerality and the fear of loss underlies much digital archiving. While long-standing sites such as Soshified require the maintenance of domain subscriptions, other fan archives operate on social media not only out of ease but also for access. The microblogging platform, Tumblr, for instance, has long been home to “fuck yeah” blogs which operate as information hubs for fans (Carpenter, 2015). Though De Kosnik writes off Tumblr’s possibility as an archive (2016a), I suggest that while Tumblr may not operate altogether as an archive, it can act as a hosting platform for archiving by its users ((Engleberg & Needham, 2019) presents a complicated historiography of how Tumblr was used to construct a collective queer memory for instance). Fuck Yeah EXO (FY-EXO) (figures 3 and 4), a Tumblr archive dedicated to the Korean-Chinese boy band, EXO, uses the platform to present a comprehensive historical record of its subject. In this way, FY-EXO collects and comprises the fonds of their subject in real-time. Archival repositories of fan driven content have often sparked moral debates regarding free access vs. privacy. While the breadth of this archive’s collection embodies its mostly universal archival style, concerns regarding whose content is shared reverberate in its accession and redistribution of fan-taken photos. Scrutiny of the sources of archives’ holdings call to mind the moral dilemmas of professional archivists developing policies regarding sensitive materials (Hodson, 2004). In this way, though one may feel inclined to paint non-professional archivists as unsophisticated, this argument fails to realize how these fans may run into the same archival concerns of professionals in their archival practice.

The hybrid nature of EXO itself requires a transnational archival community which can comb not only Korean sources but also Chinese and other international sources to gather information for widespread facilitation. In this manner, it touches upon the way in which fan archives assert a diasporic community through which affect helps to promote positive affirmation of one’s own identity (Yoon, 2019b, p. 185). Transnational fan practices empower fans to not only imagine but also interact with lives and contexts distant from their own. It helps to instill a sense of representational belonging (Caswell, 2016) pure to the fan community yet also resonant with
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Figure 1: Soshified, About Page.

Figure 2: Soshified, Soshisubs Page.
existing identity markers. Many fans embrace a sense of “pop cosmopolitanism”, as termed by Henry Jenkins (2004), in which they embrace difference from their local communities to connect with a feeling of loss or adopt a broader cultural experience.

One of the forefront K-pop acts to hit the mainstream internationally in recent years is the boy band BTS (Bangtan Boys). Not unlike Girls’ Generation and EXO, this group is immersed in an abundance of content that a significantly non-Korean speaking fandom must traverse. Fan translators have been considered a key element to their success (Kelley, 2017). Bangtan Subs (figures 5, 6 and 7) is another fan archive which seeks to preserve the cultural memory of its subject. However, as their Youtube channel declares its operation “since 2013” one understands the archive to have grown alongside BTS themselves since their debut. The non-profit, fan-based team works together to collect and translate content for use by fans, as Bangtan Subs explicitly states that they “exist to be a bridge for international ‘ARMY’ (a name identifying fans of BTS)”. While previous examples have largely maintained presences on a single platform, it cannot be ignored that this archive has attempted to decentralize their holdings to combat a fear of digital loss. The adoption of mirrors has been used to safeguard content which may be taken whether due to issues with hosting or copyright concerns.

Figure 3: FY-EXO, Main Page.
Fan translation archives operate within a unique liminal space between De Kosnik’s (2019, p. 65) distinctions of fan-archivists who maintain amateur productions (translations) and pirate-archivists who store and facilitate access to downloaded copies of industrial mass media. While typically, pirate archives are decentralized and transmitted from user-to-user, accessibility is a key feature of the K-pop fan archive. Instead, these archives rely on a tacit understanding from their subjects’ companies themselves to “look the other way” so to speak. One reason for this understanding may be that overseas fans become a source of legitimacy for K-pop artists positioning themselves within, or even more so as ambassadors of, the Korean wave (Lee, 2013, p. 195). Additionally, Korean copyright regulations are far more lax and friendlier to consumers than for instance, Japan’s restrictive private practices (Messerlin & Shin, 2019). Whereas, the Japanese music industry remains largely focused on the sales of CDs and offline sales, the K-pop industry instead has recognized the value of physical sales alongside digital innovation.

Yet, digital innovation in archiving remains largely in the hands of fans themselves. While the Korean Creative Content Agency has established their own K-Pop Archive, it has been criticized for its lack of universality (Park & Lee, 2014). While a fixed focus is expected of fan archives, the same is not said of established commercial agents seeking to establish their own.
repositories. This perhaps highlights the value of the affect present in fan archives. While the commercial origins of pop music may lead to suspicion of its value as cultural expression, the archival impulse present in fan archives is almost wholly brought on by the motivation to explore and preserve the historical materials and memories of a beloved cultural act and moment (Long et al, 2017). While the priorities of the fan archive may coincide with the commercial interests of music companies (the success of their idols), the fan archive has not and perhaps, cannot be wholly subsumed by dominant cultural forces.

While we have understood community archives as spaces in which communities can represent themselves, in many ways, affective fan archives present a case of communities building around the archive itself. Though, one cannot detach the archival subject from the power of these holdings, fans themselves hold an indelible level of power in their ability to guide and construct new representations of culture that have yet to be tackled by traditional archives. Thus, it is by considering digital fan archiving that one can best ground his/her/their self with emerging practices that have yet to dissipate to the traditional realm.

Figure 5: Bangtan Subs, Tumblr.
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Figure 6: Bangtan Subs, Youtube Channel.

Figure 7: Bangtan Subs, Main Page.

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