

## “Are You There?": Exploring What It Means to Be a Part of the Kpop Discourse Community

Katy Lewis

In this article, Katy Lewis explores what it's like to be a part of the American Kpop discourse community. She thinks through the different genres she encounters and the different literate activities she participates in and how they ultimately affect the way she sees and understands the world differently because of her experiences.

Simply put, I am a music fiend. Like . . . I absolutely LOVE music. And, sure, there are people who say they “love” music, and other people roll their eyes at them. (You know exactly who I’m talking about, too, I bet.) But, me, I really do love it. I was raised on Motown and beach music along with '90s country, with my discovery of the Backstreet Boys randomly thrown in. So, my music tastes have always been sort of a jumble, but it’s because I think music is amazing and fantastic. And I’ve never been one to shy away from listening to something new.

So, when I scrolled through YouTube in November 2015 and noticed a new video from The Try Guys (who were then producing videos under BuzzFeed) that featured music, I was definitely intrigued. In this series, Eugene, who is Korean, was introducing the other Try Guys to Korean culture in a series of five videos:

The Try Guys Watch K-pop For The First Time • K-pop: Part 1

The Try Guys Try K-pop Idol Makeup • K-pop: Part 2

The Try Guys Try Korean Cooking • K-pop: Part 3

## The Try Guys Recreate Korean Drama Scenes • K-pop: Part 4

## The Try Guys Try K-pop Dance Moves • K-pop: Finale

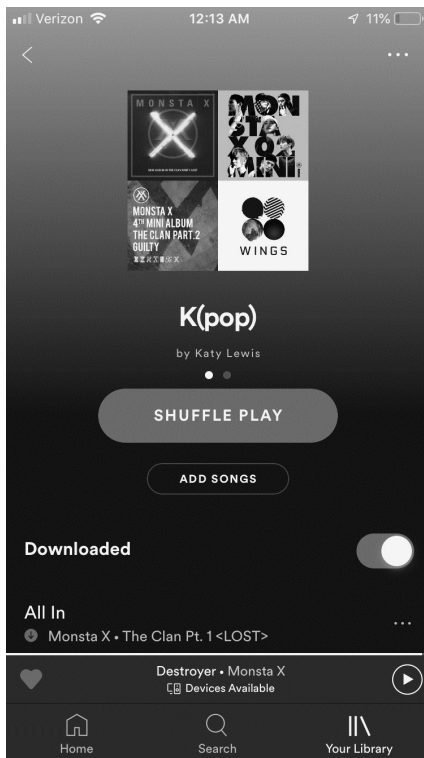


Figure 1: Here's my running playlist of all the Kpop songs I like.

And . . . I was enthralled! I've always been interested in food and culture and just generally wanting to know more about the world around me, so the video series was definitely something I'd be interested in. So, I watched the whole thing (of course), and this one song just kept playing in my head over and over again—BIGBANG's "Bang Bang Bang." And . . . I watched the YouTube video on repeat. (These were before my glorious days of Spotify Premium . . . but I soon fixed that. Feel free to check out my playlist featured in Figure 1, which includes all of the Kpop songs that I think are great—currently up to almost 900 songs!) Then, another one of their songs—"Fantastic Baby"—appeared in the queue. And, of course . . . I listened to it on repeat. And, also of course, I told my best friend all about it. And the following summer of 2016, she asked me to remind her of the songs that we had listened to . . . and that's how I became obsessed with Kpop.

### Wait. Is That Like . . . BTS? Or Psy?

Kpop is more than just Psy's "Gangnam Style" (popularized in 2012 with the "horse" dance) and BTS (a world-renowned Kpop group, recently nominated for a Grammy for the artwork on the cover of their most recent album). And, while I feel like it's a pretty obvious thing to say, Kpop, just like American pop music, has a variety of subgenres, groups, and concepts.

I think Kpop fans get a bad rap because they are pretty fanatical and intense (which I'd prefer to say instead of crazy because crazy reinforces all kinds of things I'm not comfortable with). And, certainly, BTS's ARMY (also known as A.R.M.Y., which stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth) has been super popular on social media for supporting BTS all across the world. But I think stopping there and just writing all Kpop fans

off as problematic or a group of childish fangirls is not OK. So, that’s why I’m writing this article. To better understand (and maybe even explain) what it’s like to be a part of the American Kpop community. Because it’s not just about picking a bias (more on this later!) or buying concert tickets or collecting albums and photocards. There’s a whole bunch to unpack, so let’s start by thinking about where we’re going in this article. My main goals are to

- Introduce you to Kpop and its surrounding genres and literate activities
- Investigate how American Kpop fans work as a discourse community
- Discuss how being a part of a Kpop discourse community impacts the way I think about other things in the world

### Discussing Discourse Communities

So, in 1990, David Swales set out to define the concept of **discourse community**, an idea that I’ll be working with throughout the rest of this article. In particular, Swales was interested in “*how* a particular discourse community uses its discursal conventions to initiate new members” and, even, “*how* the discourse of another reifies particular values or beliefs” (468–469, emphasis in original). Basically, Swales was trying to understand how discourse communities get people involved in their community and how the discourse of that particular community (i.e., the way they talk or write about things) contributes to how they see and understand the world around them. Swales then outlined “six defining characteristics” that he said “will be necessary and sufficient for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community” (471). These were the things that he saw as common across all discourse communities and what ultimately made a discourse community separate from a speech community (which isn’t really important right now but just so you know for future reference). Below are the six characteristics that Swales identifies:

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
3. A discourse community has its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.

4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some special lexis.
6. A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursial expertise. (471–473)

What do these all mean, though, and why are they important for thinking about a group of fans of a really specific kind of music? Well, I think understanding how being in a certain discourse community affects all of your other experiences, especially experiences of other genres and literate activities, is a really important part of being a writing researcher. And, since that's what our program focuses on, I wanted to take time to understand how this music genre that I love so much is more than just an appreciation for music. There are ways that being a part of this discourse community has made me think about my life, who I am as a person, and how my behaviors and personality can impact the world. Not to, like, be melodramatic, but it has.

### **Being in the Know**

One of the things that is really interesting about being an international, American Kpop fan is how there's this super specific way of talking about Kpop, groups, and fandom that, if you don't understand what it means, makes it really hard for you to interact with the community. So, let's try an experiment really quick. I'll write something out down below and let's see if you can figure out what I'm saying.

So, I love Monsta X. They are probably my all-time favorite group. My bias is Wonho, but I think my bias wrecker is Jooheon. (And, I know, Wonho is a visual, and he works out a lot. But he's my bias for more reasons than just being an adorable cutie. He always makes the best songs that make my heart feel really warm and squishy. So, come at me.) Anyway. Monsta X just has such different skills and different knowledge that they bring to the group. Wonho is just fantastic at producing, and Jooheon's got great lyrics. I think Monsta X really stands out for their concepts, too. They're kind of intellectual, more mature, maybe? Like, there are layers to their music, and they're not just performing music produced by random people. It's music from themselves for Monbebe, which just makes my heart really warm. And I'm still

a little mad at myself that I didn’t get the lightstick because that would have been really awesome. But I’m saving up for it and the next album they release because I have no self-control when it comes to collecting things.

So. Could you figure out what I was saying here? Probably? Maybe? Well, the point is that, even if you knew what the words meant in normal, everyday conversation, they take on a different meaning amongst the Kpop community. Like Swales says of discourse communities, the Kpop community “has acquired some special lexis” (473). So, if you’re trying to figure out what all I said, here’s some helpful info:

- When you’re talking about performers in Kpop, you call them *idols*. Idols can be *soloists* (idols on their own), *groups*, and *bands* (people who actually play instruments, not just sing, dance, etc. I personally recommend DAY6 and The Rose. Very good music.).
- There’s a range of groups: normally, they’re all boys or all girls, but there have been some coed groups (KARD is one of my current favorites!).
- Groups can also range in size, from three or four members all the way up to thirteen, fourteen, or even fifteen. Honestly, there have been some that have had even more!
- Idol groups also sometimes have *subunits*, where members from the larger group perform in smaller combinations (like two or three members). Subunits can be formed across groups (so, idols across different groups from the same entertainment company) or, even, across entertainment companies (so, idols from different groups and different entertainment companies coming together to release music). And, even though they’re part of a larger group, it’s completely normal for idols to go solo and release songs or even whole albums, even while still being part of that group.
- Idols work and train under entertainment companies, which range in size (from how many groups they have along with how much money they have to invest in trainees). Before debuting (i.e., performing publicly and releasing official music for the first time), idols are called *trainees* and are very limited in what they are allowed to do and where they are allowed to go.

The Kpop community uses *so many special words*, designated specifically for the Kpop context, and not knowing them—especially when you’re just getting into Kpop—can be confusing and, honestly, even alienating. If I were

to make an official *Kpop Glossary* (which, btw, there are online resources that help out with this), I'd probably include these words:

Company

Bias

Bias wrecker

Fan chant

Comeback

Rookie

Generations (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.)

Photocard

Position—leader, visual, vocal, dancer, rapper

Idol

Trainee

Group (not band!)

I could write pages and pages about all of the specific words that we use when talking about Kpop, but that feeling you have right now, of not knowing what those words are? That's an important way for us to think about how our emotions and our feelings—including our frustrations!—affect our **uptake**, the ways that we take on new information (both knowingly and unknowingly) in a variety of situations.

Because this discourse community relies so heavily on these terms that, for the most part, are defined the same by everyone (in the American Kpop community, at least), knowing that your uptake is being affected because you don't know them and feel the pressure to know them is HUGE. So, I'll include some definitions for these terms in a sort-of glossary at the end of this article (happy reading!). The others? You'll have to find out on your own. And, trust me, you'll need to go look them up 'cause I'm going to keep using them. \*inserts evil emoji here\*

Anyway, uptake is really interesting to think about here because it's more than just taking one idea or knowing how to write in one genre and applying it to another situation. Uptake happens all the time, whether we know it or not, and discourse communities really do influence our uptake and the way we see the world especially because, as Swales points out, any

discourse community “has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members” (471). Kpop fans are constantly communicating with each other (and the world) in a variety of ways and through a variety of genres, with social media, of course, being a way for fans to interact with each other and their fave groups. So, in the next section we’ll talk a little about the kinds of genres that Kpop fans use.

### “Intercommunication” and the Genres of Kpop Fandom

Certainly, the whole point of a community is to talk about things, and Kpop fans are always doing that. Popular platforms for communication include Tumblr, a popular site for fandoms; Twitter; YouTube; and Instagram. Many Kpop groups and idols have accounts across these platforms, while lots of fans create fan accounts dedicated to sharing pictures and videos of performances; discussing Kpop idols’ fashion and clothing; and translating Korean into a variety of languages so that international fans can access what everyone’s saying.

Moreover, Swales points to how “a discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims” (472). But these platforms aren’t genres themselves since there are so many different kinds of literate activities happening on these platforms. YouTube videos are certainly an **umbrella genre** (that is, a larger category of literate activity that lots of other genres fall under) that can help expose international fans to Kpop. Like many musical artists, lots of Kpop groups maintain a YouTube account, where they post teasers, comeback information, music videos, and dance practice videos. Alongside this, fans often use YouTube to support their favorite idols or create funny content as an expression of their appreciation for the hard work of these idols. And fans will often make YouTube compilations of favorite songs or favorite performances, while other videos might challenge viewers to guess the correct Kpop song in a number of seconds or see how many second generation songs they know (versus first or third generation songs, for instance). Fans also interact with Kpop through reactions to music videos or comebacks, while also posting content about unboxing albums (where they show you what the album looks like and what’s included, such as photocards and other goodies).

While these are all examples of the intercommunication that Swales was talking about, they certainly serve different purposes. For instance, videos where you can quiz your knowledge of Kpop from different generations of idols help us think more about the sixth observation that Swales makes about

discourse communities: “A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise” (473). Here, Swales means that some members of a discourse community might know a lot (i.e., people who have been listening to Kpop for a long time know a lot about different groups, idols, and/or songs) while others are still learning. Swales notes that this is because “Discourse communities have changing memberships; individuals enter as apprentices and leave by death or in other less involuntary ways. However, survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between novices and experts” (473). And, yeah, reading that certainly sounds dramatic, so please know that I’m not trying to say Kpop is a life or death sort of thing. Instead, I want you to pay attention to the fact that people enter and leave the communities for varying reasons and at varying rates, and there are always going to be people producing genres and communicating with them in order to fill in the knowledge gaps that new members of the community might have.

Even though YouTube provides a space where Kpop, Kpop idols, and Kpop fans can reach a wide variety of audiences, these different genres provide different kinds of information and interactions, allowing the community to change, grow, expand, discuss, etc. As Swales notes, “a discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback” (472). These participatory mechanisms are key to how Kpop fans interact with Kpop, including the music and the artists, because, in my experience, Kpop is especially effective when groups and idols continually establish and reinforce their relationship with their fans. And there are a variety of literate activities that American Kpop fans value and use to reinforce the relationship between themselves and their groups. One major way that fans and groups can do this is through the Korean app V LIVE, where fans can “discover live videos of your favorite star!” (“About V LIVE”). The site says that “you can interact with your stars in real time around the world” and “you will get to know them better” (“About V LIVE”). On this platform, Kpop idols often go live, read fan comments, and speak directly to fans, as well as post specially produced videos or shows only available on V LIVE. Fans have the ability to add subtitles in their own languages, increasing interactions and opportunities for interactions with everyone. By participating in these aspects of Kpop culture, Kpop fans and Kpop idols continue to build their unique discourse community.

Even the lexis of Kpop helps do this: Kpop groups and idols tend to have special names for their fans (Monbebe, VIP, Universe, and Inner Circle are some that I personally identify with). Kpop fans participate in fan chants during performances. And then there are also the physical objects that come with being a Kpop fan, including using lightsticks during concerts, collecting



albums and photocards, and making goodies for concerts. Speaking of which . . .

### The Ultimate Kpop Literate Activity??

(OK. That may have been a sudden transition. Bear with me.) I know you might not consider concerts to be a genre, but I want to encourage you to appreciate them for the hugely complicated literate activity that they are. Certainly, there are so many genres used to put on a Kpop concert (or any concert for that matter), but where do the fans come in?

Whether you’ve been to one concert or a million, the thing that makes American Kpop concerts really special for Kpop fans is that it means they’re actually getting to see their favorite idol here, physically, in the US, rather than through a (relatively) small screen. These concerts often come with opportunities to meet their favorite idols, with perks like hi-touch (when you get to say hello and high five the group, which usually lasts for, like, five seconds); group photos; fan signs (where you can talk to the group and have them sign notes or albums); or send offs at the end of the show. But securing these tickets is . . . hard. Most of the venues are fairly small, and tickets are always expensive. Just think of all the things they have to do in order to prepare for a large group of people to travel, prepare for a performance, and actually complete the performance to the standards that everyone has . . . and to do it internationally.

I’m one of the lucky ones. I’ve been able to go to eleven concerts since 2016. (Don’t give me that look. I’m good at budgeting. Sort of. I also have a best friend who goes with me on the trips, so they’re less expensive.) I mentioned before that becoming a part of the Kpop discourse community involves special terms, and I also pointed out that there’s also a pressure (often unspoken) to learn those terms.<sup>1</sup> That means that, if “a discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise” (Swales 473), then we can’t ignore how one of the first questions other fans ask each other is, “How long have you been listening to Kpop?” or “When did you get into Kpop?” Sometimes it’s a way to bond, and sometimes it’s a way of proving yourself.

In fact, relaying your history and how you got into Kpop has been a part of every Kpop concert I have ever been to, and it often comes up when you’re waiting outside the concert venue in order to get into the show. In

1. And, honestly, sort of live them. Like, use them so much that they’re just a part of your daily vocabulary. Language is so interesting.

2016, for instance, when my friend and I saw CL in Los Angeles, we met three people, sharing our stories of how we got into Kpop, discussing how this was me and my best friend's first Kpop concert, and listening to other concert experiences they shared. They also gave advice on where to go to buy Kpop albums because they're difficult to find in America since they have to be imported.

And Kpop concerts also provide interesting opportunities for those “participatory mechanisms primarily [working] to provide information and feedback” to those who are a part of that feedback loop (Swales 473). Kpop artists often perform all across the world—obviously in Korea, but also in Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and so forth—and, while they do come to the US, broader international tours (to South America and Europe) are rare (even though they're becoming increasingly more common).

Does this make this the ultimate literate activity for Kpop fans, since it's usually the only chance they get to appreciate their groups' music live? And what about all of the genres that Kpop fans make for the concerts: headbands with their bias's name written on; light up signs; posters; notes; banners to be held up during specific songs; photocards to pass out before the concert; fan projects to create a rainbow of lightsticks across the venue during the encore? In many ways, it's the opportunity that all Kpop fans wait for—the moment to show their idols that their music is meaningful and impactful and so, so appreciated.

### **Thinking about Language, Translingualism, and How We Communicate**

As I've explored throughout this article, being a Kpop fan and being a part of this community has had a huge impact on my life. And all of the literate activities in this discourse community reach across countries, time zones, and languages to connect people from all over the world. With that said, though, as an American, I can really only speak to the American experience. And I'm speaking to a very specific American experience. All of this becomes even more interesting when thinking about how Kpop works as an international phenomenon. So, certainly, Korean fans have totally different experiences than American fans who have totally different experiences than Brazilian fans. (So, don't think that my experience is the best one or the right one or anything like that. Do some digging before you decide what's right, and don't just take my word for it.) We have to pay attention to these differences because of the fact that Kpop is primarily in Korean and because of its international

reach. While the thing that brings many Kpop fans together is the love of the music and their fave groups, language, culture, identity, social issues—all of these get wrapped up in our experiences, making this conversation much more complicated than simply liking a song and bopping along to it in your car even though you’re not sure you’re singing the right syllables because you don’t know Korean and your mouth isn’t used to making those consonants. (No? Just me? Cool . . .)

Being a part of this community has made me reflect on how I use language and how I understand other languages. I certainly have a great appreciation for translations now, much more than I had before. That also means that I’m more aware of how communicating in different languages involves negotiation, something we talk about in our program when we discuss **translingualism**, a way of understanding how speakers and writers use languages in different ways for different purposes across different genres in ways that are fluid and ever-changing. As Learning Outcome #9 states, translingualism helps us think about “the nature of language as a life-shaping force” (“Learning Outcomes”). I don’t know if I would have been willing to admit this before I started listening to music in a language that isn’t my native language, but I definitely wasn’t thinking about how English surrounds me all the time and that I generally didn’t (and still don’t) find myself in situations where I have difficulty communicating or using language.

With Kpop (and, later, Korean dramas as well as Korean food and recipes), I had to learn all sort of new ways of learning about and interacting with genres that I could tell were really important to this community. I became more comfortable with finding information myself. For instance, some videos weren’t always translated immediately into English, so I either watched them without the subtitles or tried to listen along and find words I understood. One time the only translation was in Spanish, so I tried my best to remember what I had learned in my past Spanish classes to understand the video. I’m learning Korean, too, first trying to at least know the writing system so I could translate things myself if auto-translate through Google doesn’t work. (Hint: It often doesn’t and creates very weird captions. Don’t just trust an automatic translation. Do a little research to be sure!) This experience has also just made me more generally aware of all of the languages existing around me all the time, not just English. I pay more attention to signs and menus and comments on Twitter and posts from my friends that incorporate other languages.

All of this is to say that even though Swales says discourse communities are about having a specified goal and specified ways of reaching a goal, I know from personal experience that discourse communities open you to

new ways of seeing and using genres, language, and literate activity. And I wouldn't change that for the world.

정말 감사합니다.

## Some Words You Should Know

### *Bias*

This person is your favorite from the group. Maybe you like them best because of their style or their voice. Maybe their dance moves are the best in your eyes . . . or you just think they're really, really cute. Regardless, your bias is the person you look at the most, the one who always catches your attention.

### *Bias Wrecker*

This person is the person who, as I have said to my friends before, makes you swerve out of your lane, so to speak. They essentially make you stop paying attention to your bias (whether that's for a moment, for a month, or forever . . .).

### *Photocard*

Think collectible cards, like Pokemon cards or baseball cards. I would go as far to say that all albums come with at least one photocard, and many albums now contain multiple photocards, with pre-ordered albums receiving an extra, pre-order exclusive photocard. They're completely randomized and come in lots of different versions. For one album I got not too long ago, there are fifty-two different photocards you can get. That's a lot of albums to buy if you're trying to collect them all . . .

### *Position—leader, visual, vocal, dancer, rapper*

Like sports, every member of a Kpop group has a very special job to do within their group. The leader is just that—the leader of the group; they're typically the person who knows most about the Kpop industry or music production, and they'll often speak for the group at awards show or during interviews, for instance. The visual is the member who is designated the most attractive member; they'll often sport the most interesting fashion choices, and their job, simply put, is to look fantastic. Vocals are the singers of the group: they're job is to sing really well, which differs from rappers, who primarily rap. (While singers and rappers can sometimes do both, they

typically stick to what they were primarily trained for.) Dancers are pretty self-explanatory—they’re the best at dancing and can often be in charge of choreography or can be found as the focus of the choreography.

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**Katy Lewis** can't believe she's a third-year PhD student, but here she is. She makes her return to the *Journal* for the first time since 2016 when she wrote an article about note-taking. As you can probably tell, she loves to listen to music and go to concerts, but she also enjoys adventuring with friends, eating food, and finding all of the little bits of happiness that she can.